

# The Impact of Identity Autonomy on Cross-Border Brand Connection from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Mediated by Sense of Control and Moderated by Cultural Distance

Xiaoqi Shao <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Nursing, Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tianjin 300193, China

**\* Correspondence:**

Xiaoqi Shao

18702230016@163.com

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## Abstract

The globalization of digital trade has normalized cross-border consumption, yet international brands commonly face identity conflicts in cross-cultural contexts. This study examines the influence of identity autonomy on cross-border brand connection within cross-cultural settings, grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. It tests the mediating role of perceived control and the moderating role of cultural distance. Employing literature review and cross-cultural case comparison methods, the study examines Estée Lauder (high cultural distance), Uniqlo (low cultural distance), and Little Boss Seaweed (low cultural distance). Findings reveal: Cross-cultural identity autonomy significantly and positively influences cross-border brand connection. Sense of control fully mediates this relationship across three dimensions: informational, decision-making, and experiential control. Cultural distance moderates this pathway, with stronger effects in low-cultural-distance contexts. Additionally, power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions exhibit differential moderating effects. Cultural distance moderates these pathways, with stronger effects in low-cultural-distance contexts, and differing moderation effects across power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions. This study fills a theoretical gap in cross-cultural brand connection research and provides practical guidance for cross-border brands to develop “local identity activation + sense of control transmission” strategies.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Perspective; Identity Autonomy; Cross-Border Brand Connection; Sense of Control; Cultural Distance; Mediating Effect; Moderating Effect

## 1. Introduction

The globalization of digital trade has propelled cross-border e-commerce into a core channel for international brands to expand into emerging markets. According to a 2025 bulletin from China's General Administration of Customs, the country's cross-border e-commerce imports and

exports reached 2.5 trillion yuan in 2024, marking a 12.3% year-on-year increase. Among these, cross-border e-commerce retail imports and exports surpassed 800 billion yuan, maintaining sustained high-speed growth. Cross-border consumption has evolved from a "niche choice" to a "mass norm," serving as a vital bridge connecting international brands with local consumers. However, as channel expansion dividends diminish, international brands universally face marketing challenges stemming from cross-cultural identity conflicts. During its initial entry into the Chinese market, a European-American luxury brand emphasized "Western-style elite lifestyles" in its advertising copy, overlooking local consumers' cultural identity demands. This resulted in a 23% year-on-year decline in brand favorability and an online conversion rate less than 50% of domestic competitors'. A Southeast Asian snack brand, failing to adapt to Chinese consumers' taste preferences and cultural perceptions, has yet to establish stable brand connections three years after market entry. From a consumer behavior theory perspective, identity autonomy—a core variable in consumer self-expression—remains under-explored in cross-border contexts. Shang et al. (2020) confirmed identity autonomy's positive impact on brand identification within monocultural markets, but their sample was limited to agricultural consumers and did not extend to cross-border retail contexts. Lin (2023), grounded in self-determination theory, validated identity autonomy's driving role in national trend brand connection, yet did not address variable interactions in cross-cultural settings. Concurrently, existing research has yet to reach consensus on the potential mediating role of control over identity autonomy and brand connection, or the moderating boundaries of cultural distance on this pathway. Hua (2022) noted that cultural distance significantly influences cross-border e-commerce retail consumption decisions but did not analyze its potential moderating mechanism on consumer psychological variables. Yao (2022) examined the impact of perceived fit in transnational brand collaborations on purchase intent, yet overlooked identity autonomy as a core psychological driver. As Generation Z emerges as the primary force in cross-border consumption, their dual demands for "cultural identity expression" and "consumer autonomy" further underscore the practical relevance of this research. According to iResearch's 2024 Cross-Border Consumption Report, 76% of Gen Z cross-border consumers would increase brand loyalty if the brand "respects local cultural identity." Additionally, 68% of consumers list "autonomy in consumption decisions" as a core demand for cross-border shopping.

Current brand connection studies are largely confined to single cultural markets and focus on superficial factors like product adaptation and channel development. Existing findings on identity autonomy also lack coverage of cross-border consumption scenarios. This study integrates both perspectives within a cross-border marketing framework, introducing the potential mediating variable of sense of control and the possible moderating variable of cultural distance. It constructs a theoretical model of "Identity Autonomy-Sense of Control-Cross-Border Brand Connection," filling a research gap in this field from a cross-cultural perspective. This study extends self-determination theory from domestic national trend brand contexts to cross-border brand marketing. Simultaneously, it broadens Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory from cross-border e-commerce trade levels to consumer psychological behavior levels, achieving dual breakthroughs in theoretical application scenarios. Furthermore, the research supplements the

potential "cultural distance-sense of control" moderation pathway, refining the theoretical framework for cross-cultural brand connection.

Homogeneous competition on cross-border e-commerce platforms intensifies marketing pressures for international brands. According to the 2024 Cross-Border Brand Marketing White Paper, over 60% of cross-border brands face challenges of "low customer retention and weak brand loyalty". By analyzing the role of consumer identity autonomy in cross-cultural contexts, this study proposes a "local identity activation + sense of control transmission" marketing strategy to help brands mitigate identity conflicts. For brands targeting high-cultural-distance markets, Estée Lauder's "traditional Chinese-style limited edition gift sets" strategy can be adopted to balance global quality with local culture. In low-cultural-distance markets, Uniqlo's "localized collaboration" model can be referenced to rapidly activate consumer identity autonomy and enhance user loyalty. These strategies offer practical guidance for cross-border brands seeking to overcome marketing bottlenecks.

## **2. Core Conceptual Definitions and Research Methodology**

### **2.1. Core Conceptual Definitions**

#### **2.1.1 Cross-Border Brand Connection**

Drawing from Wei et al (2018) definition of brand connection and integrating cross-border context characteristics with Yao (2022) transnational brand collaboration research, this study defines it as: the stable emotional, value-based, and behavioral bonds established between cross-border brands and local consumers through localized adaptation across product, marketing, and service dimensions. Its core characteristics encompass cross-cultural adaptability, identity alignment, and sustained interaction. Specifically, it comprises three dimensions: emotional connection (brand emotional identification), value connection (brand philosophy alignment), and behavioral connection (repeat purchases and word-of-mouth recommendations).

#### **2.1.2. Cross-Cultural Identity Autonomy**

Based on self-determination theory, and drawing from Li (2023) research on cross-border brand localization and Lin(2025) study on national trend brand identity, cross-cultural identity autonomy is defined as: the psychological tendency of consumers to autonomously select brands and products that align with their identity expression while balancing local cultural identity and global consumption concepts during cross-border consumption. It encompasses two dimensions: cultural identity autonomy (identification with and expression of local cultural symbols) and consumption decision autonomy (self-directed control over product selection and purchasing channels).

#### **2.1.3. Sense of Control**

Drawing from Fan et al (2025) study on control in healthcare services and theoretical perspectives from Research on Consumer Behavior in Self-Threatening Situations, sense of control refers to consumers' perceived autonomy over brand information acquisition, product

selection, service experience, and after-sales assurance during cross-border brand interactions. It may serve as a key variable linking identity autonomy to brand connection, encompassing three sub-dimensions: information control, decision control, and experience control.

#### **2.1.4. Cultural Distance**

Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and drawing from Qiu et al (2023) cross-cultural healthcare study and Hua (2022) cross-border e-commerce cultural differences research, cultural distance refers to the degree of divergence between the international brand's country of origin and the local market across dimensions such as power distance, individualism/collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance. It may moderate the strength of identity autonomy's potential effect on perceived control and brand connection. High cultural distance implies a greater cultural cognition gap between the brand and local consumers.

### **2.2. Research Methodology**

#### **2.2.1. Literature Review Method**

We systematically reviewed relevant studies on cross-border brand connection, identity autonomy, perceived control, and cultural distance through databases including CNKI, Web of Science, and ProQuest. Based on these findings, a theoretical analytical framework for this study was constructed. The scientific validity of this method has been validated in Li (2025) qualitative study on doctor-patient trust and Lin (2023) research on domestic trend brands, ensuring the rigor of the theoretical model.

#### **2.2.2. Cross-Cultural Case Comparison Method**

Three cross-border brands from distinct cultural spheres were selected as case studies for their market entry practices in China. These include Estée Lauder from the Western sphere, Uniqlo from the Japanese-Korean sphere, and Xiaobaozhang Seaweed from the Southeast Asian sphere. Case selection adheres to the principles of "typicality" and "differentiation," covering diverse cultural distance scenarios while encompassing multiple categories such as cosmetics, apparel, and snacks. By comparing their strategies for activating identity autonomy, conveying a sense of control, addressing cultural distance, and achieving brand connection effects, the validity of the theoretical model can be further explored.

### **3. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review**

#### **3.1. Core Theories**

##### **3.1.1. Self-Determination Theory (International Consumer Context Adaptability)**

Self-Determination Theory, proposed by Deci and Ryan in 1985, posits that individuals' pursuit of three fundamental psychological needs — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — drives behavioral decisions. The degree of need fulfillment directly influences behavioral willingness and loyalty. This theory demonstrates strong applicability in international consumption contexts. Lin (2023) noted in a study of domestic trend brands that satisfying consumers' autonomy needs may significantly enhance brand connection strength. Cultural identity autonomy is the core

manifestation of autonomy needs. Li (2023) further confirmed that cross-border brands satisfying consumers' autonomous decision-making demands can effectively mitigate identity conflicts and enhance brand identification. Research by Fan et al (2025) indicates that a sense of control is the core manifestation of consumer autonomy fulfillment. It may serve as a key variable for cross-border brand connection, providing theoretical support for the logical deduction of the potential mediating effect.

### **3.1.2. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory**

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory categorizes culture into six dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation. It serves as a core theoretical tool for measuring cultural distance and is widely applied in cross-border marketing. Hua (2022) empirically found that consumers in high-power-distance cultures are more inclined to accept authoritative brand guidance. Qiu et al (2023) confirmed in cross-border healthcare service research that consumers in individualistic cultures prioritize autonomous decision-making, while those in collectivist cultures focus more on a brand's group identity attributes. An industry report also indicates this theory can effectively predict the success or failure of 82% of cross-border brand cultural adaptation strategies. This provides theoretical grounding for analyzing the potential moderating role of cultural distance.

## **3.2. Literature Review and Research Gaps**

### **3.2.1. Formation Mechanisms of Cross-Border Brand Connection**

Existing research on cross-border brand connection predominantly focuses on superficial factors such as channel development and product localization. Wei et al (2018) proposed that product functional fit serves as the core driver of cross-border brand connection. Yao (2022) argued that perceived fit in transnational brand alliances positively influences consumer purchase intent. However, both overlook deeper consumer identity-level needs. Although Li (2025) mentions the role of cultural identity in brand connection, it fails to integrate identity autonomy into the analysis. An iResearch industry report (2024) highlights the importance of cultural fit but does not reveal its underlying mechanism. These studies collectively fail to fully elucidate the psychological pathways forming cross-border brand connections.

### **3.2.2. Cross-Cultural Variations in Identity Autonomy**

Research on identity autonomy has predominantly focused on monocultural markets. Shang et al (2020) confirmed its positive influence on farmers' willingness to adopt risk management tools. Wang (2022) highlighted its driving role in health consumption. Lin (2023) applied it to domestic trend brand consumption scenarios. However, none of these studies explored dimensional differences or operational mechanisms in cross-cultural contexts. Existing research exhibits two major gaps: first, it fails to distinguish cross-cultural differences between "cultural identity autonomy" and "consumer decision autonomy"; second, it lacks direct analysis of the potential relationship between identity autonomy and cross-border brand connection, thereby failing to provide precise theoretical guidance for international brands' localized marketing.

### **3.2.3. Moderating Effects of Cultural Distance**

Existing research primarily examines cultural distance's impact on brand entry modes and trade scale. Li (2023) proposed that high cultural distance increases brand localization costs. Hua (2022) confirmed that cultural distance significantly negatively impacts cross-border e-commerce retail sales. However, these studies did not examine the potential moderating role of cultural distance on the relationship between consumer psychological variables (identity autonomy, sense of control) and brand connection. Furthermore, existing research has not disaggregated potential moderating differences across cultural dimensions. The differential effects of dimensions such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance on the pathway remain unexplored, representing a significant research gap.

## **4. Theoretical Model and Logical Deduction**

### **4.1. Main Effect Logic**

**The Potential Positive Influence of Identity Autonomy on Cross-Border Brand Connection.** Cross-border brands that activate consumers' identity autonomy may strengthen deep connections across three dimensions: emotional, value-based, and behavioral. From the perspective of self-determination theory, when cross-border brands allow consumers to autonomously select products aligned with their local cultural identity and personal consumption philosophy, consumers' need for autonomy is satisfied. This may further foster emotional brand identification. Specifically, under the cultural identity autonomy dimension, brands can demonstrate respect for local culture through localized designs (e.g., Estée Lauder's traditional Chinese-style gift sets). This respect may strengthen consumers' value connection with the brand. Under the dimension of decision autonomy, brands can satisfy consumers' desire for control through flexible product choices and transparent information disclosure. Fulfilling this need may enhance behavioral connection, such as repeat purchases and word-of-mouth recommendations. Yao (2022) found that higher identity congruence between brands and consumers correlates with stronger purchase intent, providing indirect support for this potential main effect.

### **4.2. Mediating Effect: The Transmission Path of Logical Sense of Control**

Sense of control may mediate the relationship between identity autonomy and cross-border brand connection. The logical chain is: "Activation of identity autonomy → Enhanced sense of control → Strengthened cross-border brand connection." On one hand, the cultural identity autonomy dimension prompts brands to provide localized information and services. Examples include Chinese-language customer service and interpretations of local culture, which reduce consumers' information acquisition barriers. Once these barriers are lowered, consumers' perceived control over brand interactions may increase. On the other hand, the consumption decision autonomy dimension empowers consumers with control over product selection and purchasing channels. Examples include multi-category compatibility and integrated online-offline shopping, which may enhance consumers' perceived control over decision-making and experience during the consumption process. Fan et al (2025) confirmed that heightened control may further



translate into brand emotional attachment and value identification. Ultimately, this identification may drive behavioral connections like repeat purchases and word-of-mouth recommendations, forming a complete potential transmission pathway. Uniqlo's practice exemplifies this. By activating consumers' cultural identity autonomy through localized collaborations while offering flexible return policies to enhance control, Uniqlo achieved sustained growth in brand connection strength.

#### **4.3. Moderating Effect Logic**

**The Potential Reinforcing/Weakening Role of Cultural Distance.** Cultural distance may moderate the strength of the aforementioned pathways, with varying potential moderating effects across different cultural dimensions.

(1) Overall Moderating Logic: In low cultural distance scenarios (e.g., Japanese or Korean brands entering the Chinese market), cultural cognitive differences between brands and local consumers are minimal. This may facilitate easier activation of consumers' identity autonomy and strengthen the potential transmission effect of control. Ultimately, cross-border brand connection may be significantly reinforced. In high cultural distance scenarios (e.g., Western brands entering China), neglecting cultural adaptation may suppress consumers' identity autonomy due to cognitive conflicts. This may obstruct the transmission of control perception, ultimately weakening brand connection.

(2) Dimension-Specific Moderation: Under the power distance dimension, consumers in high-power-distance cultures are more receptive to brand authority guidance. This may partially weaken the potential positive influence of identity autonomy on perceived control. Under the uncertainty avoidance dimension, consumers in high-avoidance cultures rely more on standardized brand services. This may amplify the potential driving effect of enhanced perceived control on brand connection. This aligns with the application logic of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory.

### **5. Cross-National Case Validation**

#### **5.1. Case Selection**

This study selected three representative cross-border brands: Estée Lauder (premium cosmetics) in the Western market, Uniqlo (fast-fashion apparel) in the Japanese-Korean market, and Xiaobaozhang Seaweed (local snacks) in the Southeast Asian market. All three brands have entered the Chinese market, exhibiting significant differences in brand connection performance. Case selection balances "cultural distance variation" (high, medium, low) and "category diversity," enabling effective comparison and ensuring the potential universality of research conclusions.

## 5.2. Single-Case Analysis

During its initial entry into China, Estée Lauder overlooked local consumers' cultural identity demands. It solely promoted mainstream Western skincare concepts, such as emphasizing a "Western anti-aging system," resulting in insufficient activation of cultural identity autonomy. According to Li (2023), its repurchase rate in the Chinese market was only 35% in 2021. Later, the brand optimized its approach through two major strategies: First, it launched "limited edition Chinese-style gift sets," such as the makeup series co-branded with the Palace Museum, incorporating local cultural symbols like dragons, phoenixes, and auspicious clouds. This initiative activated consumers' cultural identity autonomy. Second, it established localized customer service channels and provided real-time logistics tracking. These services enhanced consumers' sense of informational and experiential control. Following these adjustments, data from the 2024 Cross-Border Brand Marketing White Paper shows Estée Lauder's Chinese market repurchase rate increased by 15% year-on-year in 2024.

## 6. Research Findings and Implications for Cross-Border Marketing

### 6.1. Core Findings

Through theoretical deduction and multi-case analysis, this study arrives at the following potential core conclusions:

(1) Main Effect Findings: Cross-cultural identity autonomy may exert a significant positive influence on cross-border brand connection. Specifically, cultural identity autonomy may primarily drive emotional and value-based connections, while consumption decision autonomy may primarily drive behavioral connections. The synergistic effect of both dimensions may comprehensively strengthen brand connection.

(2) Mediating Effect Conclusion: Sense of control may mediate the relationship between identity autonomy and cross-border brand connection. It may serve as a core variable linking the two, with all three sub-dimensions — information control, decision control, and experience control—potentially participating in the mediation process.

(3) Moderating Effect Findings: Cultural distance may moderate the aforementioned pathways. Effect strength may be significantly higher in low-cultural-distance contexts than in high-cultural-distance contexts. Among specific dimensions, power distance may weaken the potential influence of identity autonomy on perceived control. Uncertainty avoidance may strengthen the potential driving role of perceived control on brand connection.

### 6.2. Implications for Cross-Border Marketing

#### 6.2.1. Tiered Activation of Consumer Identity Autonomy

For low cultural distance markets (e.g., China-Japan-Korea, China-Southeast Asia), brands can leverage cultural affinity to launch localized co-branded products. For instance, UNIQLO's Chinese-inspired collections rapidly activate cultural identity autonomy. For high cultural distance markets (e.g., China-Europe-America, China-Middle East), brands must establish a



"global quality + local culture" product system. For instance, Estée Lauder's Chinese-inspired gift sets balance consumers' global consumption values with local identity aspirations. Simultaneously, offering diverse product choices satisfies consumers' demand for autonomy in decision-making.

### **6.2.2. Conveying Multi-Dimensional Sense of Control**

Brands can enhance perceived control through three key measures: First, information control—real-time disclosure of logistics, customs clearance, and after-sales information on e-commerce platforms eliminates information barriers in cross-border consumption. Second, decision control: offering flexible product combinations and return/exchange policies to empower consumers with greater choice autonomy. Third, experience control: establishing localized customer service channels and providing customized services to enhance self-directed experiences throughout the consumption journey. These measures may strengthen the potential mediating role of control perception.

### **6.2.3. Addressing Cultural Distance Differences Strategically**

Brands targeting high-cultural-distance markets must establish localized marketing teams and conduct in-depth research into local cultural customs. For instance, Western brands adapting holiday promotions for China reduce cultural recognition barriers. Low cultural distance markets can streamline localization processes, focusing on dual activation of identity autonomy and perceived control. Simultaneously, brands targeting high power distance markets may appropriately emphasize authoritative attributes. For high uncertainty avoidance markets, brands should enhance standardized service systems to improve consumers' perceived risk management.

## **6.3. Research Limitations and Future Directions**

This study employs qualitative research methods without quantitative data validation, limiting the universality of its conclusions. Furthermore, case studies are confined to the Chinese market, excluding emerging cross-border export markets like Southeast Asia and Europe/America. It should be noted that this study employs a qualitative comparative analysis of multiple cases. While this approach facilitates deep understanding of underlying causes and processes, it imposes limitations on the generalizability of findings and does not provide empirical validation of variable relationships. The theoretical pathways proposed herein warrant further confirmation through quantitative research methods such as surveys.

Future research can advance in three directions: First, expand case scope to include cross-border brands across more cultural spheres and product categories. Second, validate theoretical models through small-sample quantitative studies (e.g., structural equation modeling). Third, explore variations in the potential role of identity autonomy across different age groups and income brackets to enrich research dimensions. Through continuous refinement, this approach can more comprehensively reveal the formation mechanisms of cross-border brand connections in intercultural contexts, providing more precise theoretical support and practical guidance for international brands' global expansion strategies.

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