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## NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL DRAGON: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF KOL MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR THAI BEAUTY BRANDS IN CHINA

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### Abstract

This study provides a cross-cultural analysis of the Key Opinion Leader marketing strategies employed by Thai beauty brands in the Chinese market, using Mistine as a primary case. Employing a mixed-methods approach, it combines content analysis of KOL promotions (2020-2024) with a quantitative survey of 423 Chinese female consumers. This research refines cross-cultural marketing theory by repositioning cultural adaptation not as a standalone strategy, but as a crucial component within the overarching construct of "Perceived Authenticity," which emerged as a single dominant factor explaining 69.64% of the variance. Furthermore, "Consumer Engagement" and trust in micro-KOLs were the strongest predictors of purchase intention. The results underscore that successful cross-cultural marketing in China's digital ecosystem requires moving beyond superficial localization to foster genuine, culturally resonant connections.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Marketing, KOL, Perceived Authenticity, International Business

### Introduction

The globalization of beauty markets has intensified competition, making cross-cultural marketing competence a critical asset for international brands. China's unique digital landscape, dominated by social commerce and KOLs, presents both a challenge and an opportunity for foreign entrants. Thai beauty brands, particularly Mistine, have achieved notable success, suggesting an effective cross-cultural strategy. However, a systematic analysis of how these strategies navigate cultural differences is lacking. This study addresses this gap by investigating how cultural elements integrate into and influence the effectiveness of KOL marketing for Thai beauty brands in China, offering evidence-based insights for international managers and educators.

### Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the cross-cultural dimensions of KOL marketing strategies used by Thai beauty brands in China. It aims to:

1. Evaluate the role of cultural adaptation within the broader framework of consumer perceptions.
2. Identify the key factors that drive consumer engagement and purchase intention in a



cross-cultural context.

3. Develop strategic recommendations for effective cross-cultural digital marketing.

### Scope of the Research

1. Population Scope: Chinese female consumers aged 18–50, who are active users of beauty-related social media platforms and represent the primary purchasing group for cosmetics in China.

2. Variable Scope: Key variables include KOL type (micro/macro), content strategy, cultural relevance, perceived authenticity, consumer engagement, and purchase intention.

3. Time Scope: The study analyzes data from January 2020 to December 2024, covering the most recent trends in KOL marketing and cross-cultural consumer behavior.

### Literature Review

The success of cross-cultural marketing hinges on a brand's ability to adapt its strategies to resonate with local values and communication styles (Chen, 2023; Wang & Kim, 2023). In China's digital ecosystem, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) act as pivotal cultural brokers, interpreting brand messages for local audiences. The KOL landscape is diverse, with micro-influencers often boasting higher perceived trust and niche engagement compared to macro-influencers (Veirman et al., 2019). The effectiveness of these strategies is fundamentally linked to Perceived Authenticity—a perception constructed through consumer experiences, not an inherent brand property (Morhart et al., 2015). In high-involvement categories like beauty, consumers intensely seek genuineness. Furthermore, authentic communication aims to foster Consumer Engagement, a psychological state leading to emotional connection and loyalty (Brodie et al., 2019; Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

While existing literature establishes the importance of these elements independently, a gap exists in understanding their interconnection in a cross-cultural digital framework. This study synthesizes these concepts to propose that the success of cultural adaptation is contingent upon its contribution to perceived authenticity, which in turn drives consumer engagement and purchase intention.

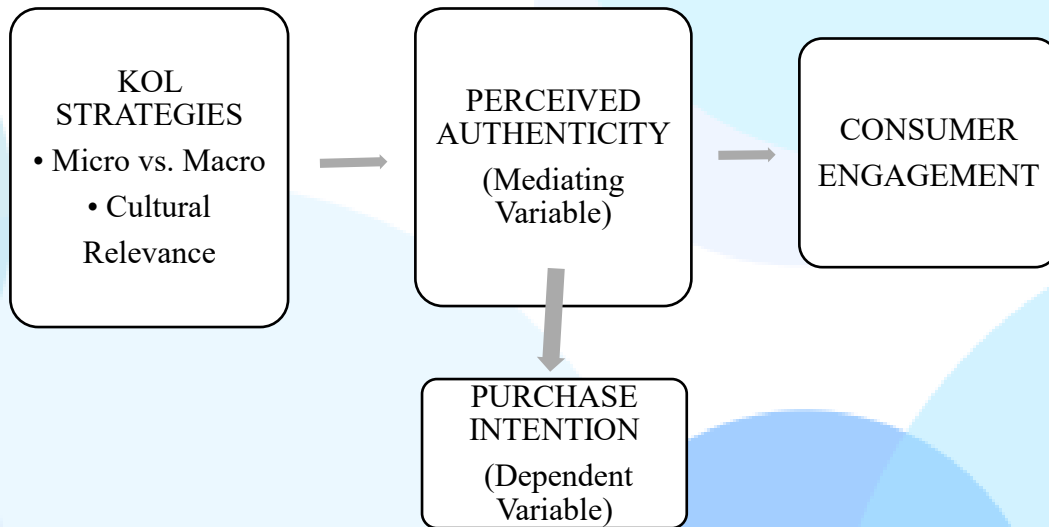
#### Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model:

While Western marketing paradigms often emphasize standardized global campaigns, East Asian contexts—particularly China—require a more nuanced, culturally embedded approach (Wang & Kim, 2023). This distinction is critical in KOL marketing, where Western models prioritizing reach may clash with Chinese consumers' demand for relational authenticity and cultural congruence.

Building on this East-West contrast, we integrate social influence theory, brand authenticity theory, and customer engagement theory. We propose that Perceived Authenticity serves as the central mediator, through which culturally relevant KOL strategies influence Consumer Engagement and ultimately drive Purchase Intention. This integrated framework challenges the conventional view of cultural adaptation as a direct, independent driver of success.

The following conceptual model illustrates these hypothesized relationships:

Conceptual model diagram



## Research Methodology

### 1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. A quantitative survey identified key factors influencing perception and purchase intention, while a qualitative content analysis of KOL campaigns provided cultural context for the statistical findings, enabling methodological triangulation.

**Sampling Justification:** A purposive sampling technique was employed to deliberately target Chinese female consumers aged 18-50 who actively engage with beauty KOLs. This non-probability method was chosen for its effectiveness in reaching a specific, information-rich population relevant to the research phenomena.

**Reliability and Validity:** The survey instrument demonstrated high internal consistency in a pilot test ( $n=30$ ), with a Cronbach's Alpha exceeding 0.85 for all multi-item constructs. For the Exploratory Factor Analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure verified sampling adequacy ( $KMO = .973$ ), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ( $p < .001$ ), confirming the factorability of the correlation matrix.

**Ethical Considerations:** Informed consent was obtained from all survey participants at the beginning of the online questionnaire. All data were anonymized and aggregated for analysis, ensuring confidentiality and adhering to standard academic research ethics.

### 2. Data Collection

Data were collected from August to October 2024 through two streams. A structured online questionnaire distributed via professional survey platforms and beauty communities yielded 423 valid responses from Chinese female consumers aged 18-50. Simultaneously, a systematic content analysis was conducted on Mistine's KOL collaborations (2020-2024) across key Chinese platforms (Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Taobao Live), focusing on content that demonstrated cultural adaptation techniques.

### 3. Data Analysis

A suite of analytical techniques was employed:

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software, employing Exploratory Factor



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Analysis (EFA) to uncover latent constructs, Multiple Regression Analysis to test predictors of purchase intention, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to identify demographic differences. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring strategies in KOL narratives regarding cultural fusion and authenticity.

### Research Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) yielded a single-factor solution, "Perceived Authenticity," accounting for 69.64% of the variance. Both items related to cultural relevance (e.g., "KOLs who create content that aligns with Chinese culture and values are more effective") and other trust-building factors (e.g., expertise, interaction) loaded highly (0.802-0.850) on this single dimension. This indicates that consumers view cultural adaptation as an integral part of authenticity, not a separate strategy.

- Regression on Purchase Intention: Multiple regression analysis revealed that "Consumer Engagement" ( $\beta = .460, p < .001$ ) and "Trust in Micro-KOLs" ( $\beta = .348, p = .001$ ) were the strongest significant predictors of purchase intention. "Cultural Relevance" as an independent variable was not a significant predictor ( $p = .698$ ), reinforcing the EFA finding that its influence is mediated through the broader authenticity construct.

- Cultural Nuances in Content: Qualitative analysis showed that Mistine's effective KOLs did not merely translate messages but integrated Thai "tropical efficacy" into Chinese beauty narratives, such as linking sweat-proof sunscreen to humid southern Chinese climates, demonstrating deep rather than superficial cultural fusion.

- Demographic Differences via ANOVA: The influence of demographics was further investigated. Perceptions of KOL strategies showed no significant differences across age groups (Table 4.3). However, income level proved to be a stronger differentiator. As shown in Table 4.4, consumers with the lowest monthly income ( $\leq 5,000$  RMB) demonstrated significantly higher trust in both micro- and macro-KOLs compared to some higher-income cohorts. This identifies budget-conscious consumers as the most receptive segment for KOL-driven campaigns, guiding efficient resource allocation.

**Table 1: One-Way ANOVA Results of Trust in KOLs by Age Group**

KOL Marketing Strategy	18-25yrs (n=119) Mean	26-35yrs (n=167) Mean	36-45yrs (n=94) Mean	46-50yrs (n=43) Mean	F-value	p-value	Post-Hoc (Tukey HSD)
Trust in Micro-KOLs	3.38	3.50	3.35	3.49	0.418	0.740	n.s.
Trust in Macro-KOLs	3.28	3.46	3.26	3.44	0.740	0.529	n.s.
Appeal of Livestreaming	3.33	3.43	3.29	3.37	0.287	0.835	n.s.
Appeal of Tutorials	3.22	3.38	3.45	3.30	0.657	0.579	n.s.
Cultural Relevance	3.18	3.43	3.33	3.60	1.495	0.215	n.s.

Source: Developed from this research's survey data (n=423) Note: n.s. = no significant differences between any groups at  $p < 0.05$  level. Mean scores based on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

**Table 2: One-Way ANOVA Results of Trust in KOLs by Income Group (RMB)**

KOL Marketing Strategy	≤ 5000 (n=104) Mean	5001-10000 (n=193) Mean	10001-20000 (n=91) Mean	≥20000 (n=35) Mean	F-value	p-value	Post-Hoc (Tukey HSD)
Trust in Micro-KOLs	3.70	3.39	3.23	3.40	2.552	0.055	1>3*
Trust in Macro-KOLs	3.67	3.32	3.18	3.14	3.161	0.025	1>3*
Appeal of Livestreaming	3.66	3.33	3.16	3.17	3.179	0.024	1>3*
Appeal of Tutorials	3.50	3.34	3.15	3.40	1.225	0.300	n.s.
Cultural Relevance	3.51	3.39	3.20	3.11	1.474	0.221	n.s.

Source: Developed from this research's survey data (n=423) Note:  $p < .05$ ; n.s. = no significant difference; Post-Hoc notation (e.g., 1 > 3) indicates that the mean of Group 1 (≤5000 RMB) is significantly greater than that of Group 3 (10001-20000 RMB).



· Managerial Implications from Quantitative Findings:

The quantitative results provide a clear, actionable roadmap:

1. Target the Receptive Segment: The ANOVA results (Table 4.4) pinpoint budget-conscious consumers as the primary audience for KOL campaigns.

2. Invest in Micro-KOLs to Drive Sales: The regression analysis confirms that trust in micro-influencers is a strong and significant predictor of purchase intention ( $\beta = .348$ ).

3. Design for Interaction, Not Just Impressions: Consumer engagement is the strongest direct driver of purchase intention ( $\beta = .460$ ), positioning it as a primary strategic objective.

These statistical findings, particularly the dominance of the single-factor "Perceived Authenticity," suggest a paradigm shift in cross-cultural marketing. Chinese consumers do not decouple cultural adaptation from their overall assessment of a KOL's genuineness. Instead, they holistically evaluate whether the KOL's portrayal of a foreign brand feels natural and truthful within their own cultural framework. The non-significance of "Cultural Relevance" as an independent predictor in the regression model further reinforces this; its value is not intrinsic but derived from its contribution to the overarching authenticity construct. The qualitative observations of Mistine's success—where "tropical efficacy" was seamlessly woven into relatable Chinese beauty concerns—serve as a practical exemplar of this principle in action.

### Conclusion and Discussion

This study proposes a refined model for cross-cultural KOL marketing, visualized below. The core finding is that cultural adaptation's efficacy is mediated by Perceived Authenticity, which in turn drives engagement and purchase intention. The path to success thus bypasses direct cultural persuasion, funneling strategic efforts through the gateway of authenticity.

This study concludes that the primary challenge is not cultural adaptation per se, but the management of "Perceived Authenticity." The findings suggest that simply inserting cultural symbols is insufficient; they must be woven authentically into the KOL's narrative. The strong predictive power of consumer engagement further underscores that marketing in interactive digital environments must be a two-way dialogue.

#### Theoretical and Managerial Implications:

This research contributes to theory by fundamentally refining the role of cultural adaptation, positioning it not as a standalone goal, but as a key mechanism within the higher-order construct of authenticity. This integrated model resolves the apparent paradox from our regression analysis, where "Cultural Relevance" alone was an insignificant predictor. For practitioners, the findings suggest prioritizing long-term partnerships with KOLs who can authentically bridge cultural differences. Transactional, one-off collaborations are less effective than co-created campaigns that genuinely reflect local consumer needs. For educators, curricula in international marketing should integrate modules on "digital cultural intelligence," emphasizing authenticity, influencer collaboration, and cross-cultural communication in digital ecosystems.





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