

## Optimising Social Media Branding for Customer Engagement: A China-Malaysia Framework

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### ABSTRACT

Online marketing plays a crucial role in worldwide branding. This writing aims to explore and determine how social and cultural dimensions affect customer engagement (CE) in online brand design in an intercultural setting and, in turn, affect brand loyalty and brand equity, further advancing the theory development of intercultural marketing in brand design and brand management. While intercultural branding activities increase, major problems around negative online engagement, digital inequality, miscommunication across cultures, and ethnocentric perspectives remain. These highlight the need to improve intercultural competence, sensitivity, and communication to enhance mutually beneficial CE in the digital era. Not only do successful online marketing strategies effectively utilize social media platforms and digital technologies, but they also understand how social and cultural dimensions influence brand design and customer engagement, particularly across cultures. Darla Deardorff's intercultural competence model (ICM) provides a basic framework to promote in a multicultural setting; further, the expected outcomes suggest that the mediating effects of branded content experience, cultural and contextual factors, and the moderating influence of digital literacy are statistically significant. This conceptual framework can permit brands and marketers to improve CE and guide their management of assets and marketing activities through brand design; additionally, this writing provides novel perspectives on the relevance and significance of social and cultural dimensions in brand design.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by presenting a new framework for optimizing social media branding through social and cultural dimensions to maximize online customer engagement between Chinese and Malaysian consumers. It focuses on intercultural competence, brand content experiences with brand design, and digital literacy as critical predictors.

## 1. Introduction

The global spread of information and communication technology has intensified worldwide interactions of goods, services, and information. While cultural convergence has been seen as a facilitator of globally standardized marketing activities, cultural and social differences still play a crucial role in international marketing. As a result, various strategies are needed to adapt or localize marketing efforts (Hermeking, 2006). One such strategy is for brands to establish an intimate and personal relationship with consumers through brand personality. By acting as "friends" and integrating themselves into their fans' and followers' social networks, brands can influence customer engagement, encompassing communication and behavior (Tsai & Men, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013).

ICM, consisting of attitude, knowledge, skills, and internal and external outcomes, measures individuals' intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) and can also be applied to measure a brand's intercultural competence within a shared social system emphasizing cultural diversity; moreover, Hofstede's (2011) Cultural Dimensions Theory (HCDT) gives us a reliable reference for the cultural characteristics of various countries to measure brands in cross-cultural settings. Despite the importance of cultural differences in international marketing, there is a lack of cross-cultural studies comparing brands' intercultural competence by combining these two theories, particularly between China and Malaysia, which have contrasting cultural origins.

China is a multi-nationality country unified under a central state and national identity with a majority Han Chinese population, and 55 officially recognized ethnic minority groups considered integral parts of the "Chinese nation" through regional autonomy policies. Internet culture is informed by technological changes and language affordances that software development directly impacts user-generated interactional practices as well as patterns of action and government censorship. Platforms like Weibo, Taobao, Alipay, Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), TikTok (Douyin), Kwai, DingTalk, and Bilibili have become integrated parts of daily life. WeChat, a super-app, enhances cross-platform engagement by integrating other digital platforms. Bilibili, with its Danmu comments, enables fans' engagement by drawing upon cultural resources related to on-screen action (Fitzgerald et al., 2022).

In contrast, Malaysia presents an intriguing intercultural context with its multicultural society shaped by colonialism and race-based politics with a distinguishable political system and approach to diversity management. Ethnic groups with distinct cultural values and norms may influence CE and customer behaviors in this emerging digital economy (Lai et al., 2010). Therefore, the two countries have sufficient similarities and differences in diversity, such as ethnic composition, religion, language, and values, to reveal insights into the relationships between intercultural competence in brand strategies and customer engagement. Overall, this research aims to contribute to theory development in intercultural marketing by exploring the interactions among social and cultural dimensions of online marketing, brand design, customer engagement, and online customer behavior in China and Malaysia.

Previous studies have determined that CE is a complex concept involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. However, research tends to rely heavily on visible social media metrics, capturing only the behavioral aspect. Usually, brand involvement can be a precursor to engagement, while usage intent is an outcome. However, considering the engagement procedure, there are gaps in understanding negative

engagement and disengagement. Recently, customers have played an active role in co-creating brand meaning through their diverse interpretations; also, structured brand perceptions boost engagement for utilitarian brands, while unstructured perceptions boost engagement for hedonic brands. Moreover, attracting new customers drives growth in emerging markets like China and Malaysia. Therefore, more cross-cultural research is needed to understand variation, not only confined to the comparison of Eastern and Western cultures, and diversifying research methodologies beyond surveys and social media metrics could provide deeper psychological insights into consumer brand engagement.

### 1.1. Research Background

CE can indicate branding effectiveness through behavioral measures in online marketing across four stages, namely “point of engagement,” “sustained engagement,” “disengagement,” and “re-engagement,” and cognitive and emotional engagement also play a role in it (O’Brien & Toms, 2008). Previous research has reported that attitude factors like respect (Seraj, 2012), openness (Marbach et al., 2019), and curiosity (Dodoo & Youn, 2021); knowledge and skill factors like cultural self-awareness (Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2010), deep cultural knowledge (Koller, 2007), sociolinguistic awareness (Rennekamp & Witz, 2021), skills to Listen, observe, and evaluate (Yu, 2020), and skills to analyze, interpret, and relate (Holt, 2010, 2016); and internal outcome factors like adaptability (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010), flexibility (Davis et al., 2019), ethno-relative View (Nair & Little, 2016) and empathy (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019) influence CE in online marketing through brand design. Additionally, cultural and social factors such as contextual, individual cultural profile (Nair & Little, 2016), and brand experience (Chen et al., 2021) have been found to mediate the effects on online customer engagement. Furthermore, digital literacy has been identified as a moderator that impacts CE in social media (Munger et al., 2021).

### 1.2. Problem Statement

The growing trend of intercultural digital brand marketing faces critical challenges that could undermine its tremendous potential if not adequately addressed. One primary risk is that online backlash could damage brand reputation when marketing campaigns contradict the cultural values of consumers, as heated engagement and comments, such as the damaging debate-based spillover effect of online comments toward brands (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019), escalate out of control on social media and online platforms. Accordingly, there is a lack of understanding of how culturally aware marketing affects positive online intercultural interactions and curbs damaging debates.

Another challenge is that digital divides related to consumer age and digital literacy can exclude target demographic segments from engagement, limiting the ability to reach and interact with diverse audiences (Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019). Hence, there is a gap in understanding online disparities in gender, age, education, and experience, widening the digital divide and reflecting social and economic inequality. Additionally, insufficient intercultural competence poses threats of miscommunication, conflicts, and inappropriate marketing communication strategies stemming from unbridled cultural differences across organizations, communities, and nations (Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019). Hence, there is a gap in understanding cultural differences, including language barriers, diverse values, and behavior norms, and limited intercultural understanding, which can create misunderstandings; intercultural skills in promoting sensitivity to diversity are

needed.

Finally, an ethnocentric perspective that glosses over profound cultural distinctions in values and behaviors, favoring a homogenizing view of global consumers, can severely constrain effective marketing outreach and resonance (Nair & Little, 2016). Hence, there is a lack of understanding of how ethno-relative views can improve online CE and reduce hegemony harms across cultures. Accordingly, further gaps are displayed. (1) Limited understanding of how contextual factors shape consumer behavior in Eastern cultures, especially high-context ones. (2) Applying HCDT to understand Eastern cultural values and communication patterns. (3) There is a lack of investigation of how online visual brand design drives engagement via perceptual experiences across cultures. (4) Need to study if improving digital literacy can reduce techno-anxieties, bridge divides, and increase customer happiness. In summary, bridging divides through cultural awareness, digital inclusion, communication competence, and a more ethnic-relative perspective focused on universal human values represent key imperatives to unlock the promise of intercultural brand marketing while avoiding pitfalls.

### 1.3. Research Objective

This conceptual paper aims to create and propose a comprehensive framework to optimize social media branding to boost customer engagement in the different cultural contexts of China and Malaysia. This paper attempts to contribute theoretical insights and follow-up mechanisms by synthesizing existing literature on cultural influences, brand design, and customer engagement to offer practical guidelines to brands intending to articulate their social media strategies tailored to these two markets. The framework identifies theoretical gaps and proposes areas for future research that will provide a starting point to make sense of how cultural nuances shape social media branding and engagement and could provide a helpful anchor required for pursuing empirical research and future brand management practices.

## 2. Research Methods

This conceptual paper analyses the relationships between customer engagement and social media branding elements in the Chinese and Malaysian markets. Unlike empirical studies which draw from quantitative data collection, this research uses a theory-building process where existing literature and frameworks are synthesized. The objective is to build a theoretical model for these potential relationships between constructs and provide a new understanding of cross-cultural social media engagement (Hair et al., 2022). Conceptual modeling thus opens the opportunity for integrating cultural dimensions and branding strategies within social media and thus proposing hypotheses, which can be tested by future empirical studies.

Given that this is a conceptual study, no primary data collection is conducted. Oppositely, the research is based on previous studies on consumer perception, cultural dimensions, and social media branding, while being based on the researched framework of Hofstede (2011) cultural dimensions and customer engagement theories (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). Based upon these frameworks, a conceptual model that explains how cultural variables can affect customer engagement with social media branding in China and Malaysia is developed.

The theoretical constructs from previous research are used to define key elements of social media branding including brand design, content strategy, and consumer interaction pattern, which support the overall proposed framework. This paper utilizes structural equation modeling (SEM) as a theoretical tool and illustrates how the relationship between these constructs could be tested on software such as SmartPLS, (Hair et al., 2022). This paper makes a theoretical contribution to the literature with a new theoretical perspective on cross-cultural engagement in digital marketing leveraging this approach.

Continuing, the analysis inherent in this paper is still conceptual pertaining not only bringing the theoretical underpinnings of the model development but the methodology it entails. This research identifies key variables and relationships in relevant literature and integrates these into the model. Finally, the proposed model is intended to offer a comprehensive comprehension of how diverse social media branding and engagement are contingent on distinct cultural contexts and lay the foundation for future empirical work (Hair et al., 2021).

### 3. Branding

Branding concepts have significantly evolved in the digital era to prioritize experiential, cultural, and societal considerations amid changing consumer expectations. Foundational concepts like brand equity, loyalty, and brand image require redefinition as dynamic, multidimensional constructs (Parris & Guzman, 2023). Financial valuation metrics are insufficient; branding must incorporate social and environmental impacts through ethical, transparent positioning (Hunt, 2019). Strategies emphasize customized digital engagement, leveraging technologies like social media for emotive storytelling that fosters connections (Barreda et al., 2020). Cultural symbolism and authenticity are increasingly crucial for brand resonance, though consumer cultural involvement moderates the effects (Jian et al., 2019). Branding now centers on stakeholder-inclusive values based on co-created experiences and emotional connections enabled by digital technologies and social media rather than transactions.

Brand design and branding are fundamentally interconnected concepts in marketing strategy (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Effective brand design encompasses the logo, color palette, typography, and other visual elements that form the brand's identity and recognition. This visual brand identity is a crucial component of the overall branding, which refers to the strategic development and management of the brand image, positioning, equity, and loyalty. In this way, brand design directly contributes to and enables the development of solid branding.

Specifically, Parris and Guzmán (2023) systematically reviewed academic literature on brand equity, brand loyalty, and brand image, arguing that branding concepts need reconceptualization for the digital era. Brand loyalty significantly contributes to brand equity formation, which comprises dimensions like associations, perceived quality, brand associations, and awareness (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). However, metrics focused on customer mindset and economics are insufficient today. Branding must incorporate social and environmental responsibilities, enabled by technologies that provide holistic, real-time brand equity analysis across financial, consumer, and societal impact dimensions (Dwivedi et al., 2019).

Digitally-enabled strategies prioritize immersive, interactive brand experiences. Social media activities like engagement and rewards increase brand commitment by fostering

emotional connections (Barreda et al., 2020). User-generated content shapes brand narratives through cultural co-creation (Wang & Chen, 2020). Influencers extend their reach, requiring cultural authenticity in collaborations (Sabella et al., 2022). Individualised messaging and omnichannel integration enhance digital engagement (Hajli, 2014).

Furthermore, branding now necessitates localization and cultural targeting. Brands that embody cultural values build resonance and authenticity (Jian et al., 2019). Culturally involved consumers scrutinize brand authenticity based on behaviors rather than just symbolic associations. Social media provides insights to tailor branding to nuances in target markets (Shen, 2022). Branding also has societal influence and obligations, with social norms shaping consumer behavior and preferences (Licht, 2008). Brands must represent values ethically to build equity. Nonetheless, gaps remain around comprehensively measuring brand equity across financial, consumer, and societal dimensions (Parris & Guzman, 2023). Overall, contemporary branding requires reevaluating strategies and concepts to align with evolving digital contexts. By embracing transparency, cultural authenticity, and social consciousness, brands can foster stakeholder connections.

#### 4. Social Media

Social media has rapidly become a vital platform for branding, enabling diverse consumer-brand interactions and relationships (Barreda et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Shen, 2022). Social media's role in shaping brand image and associations through curated self-presentation and engaging users through interactivity is highlighted. However, perspectives on the nature and dimensionality of consumer-brand engagement diverge, focusing on brand community integration and commitment (Barreda et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2017) versus cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of CE (Hollebeek et al., 2014); similarly, models of brand-related social media perceptions range from relational constructs like connection and interaction (Clark et al., 2017; Wang & Chen, 2020) to evaluative impressions of esteem and quality (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Despite such conceptual variations, social media content and activities are positioned as influential in forming consumer-brand perceptions and relationships.

Interactivity emerges as a crucial element for CE and positive branding outcomes across several articles (Barreda et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2017; Wang & Chen, 2020). real-time communication and information exchange on social media shape perceptions of brand image, prestige, quality, and connection. However, the relative importance of interactivity compared to content factors remains to be determined. While Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Barreda et al. (2020) describe it as supportive, Wang and Chen (2020) position it as a primary driver of social media perceptions, which represents an area for further examination.

Additionally, the integrative potential of cultural branding on social media surfaces in multiple articles (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Shen, 2022; Wang & Chen, 2020). Associating brands with cultural symbols, narratives, and heritage on social media emerges as an effective differentiation strategy. This cultural framing cultivates brand image, community affiliation, and consumer-brand relationships across various contexts, from fashion to tourism. However, cross-cultural variations in responses warrant deeper investigation through multi-regional research.

Methodologically, quantitative surveys and content analyses predominate. Most studies utilize unidimensional behavioral measures of social media engagement based on metrics like likes and comments; few studies adopt a mixed-methods scale development approach capturing multifaceted engagement perceptions. It reveals a need for qualitative designs to provide richer insights into subjective engagement experiences, which still need to be conceptually developed. Furthermore, the cross-sectional surveys used in most articles preclude determining causal directions between crucial variables; experimental and longitudinal studies could clarify dynamic social media branding processes.

In summary, despite some variations, social media's expansive role in branding processes enables brands to actively craft self-presentation, foster consumer interactions and relationships, and cultivate positive brand images and communities. Cultural content and interactivity emerge as particularly impactful, though additional contexts require study. Conceptualizations of consumer-brand engagement diverge between relational evaluations versus multidimensional experiential models, signaling theoretical development opportunities. Methodological expansion beyond cross-sectional self-reports could provide a fuller understanding of complex social media branding phenomena. Synthesis reveals fruitful paths for scholars to build cumulative knowledge and marketers to position brands strategically through social media.

## 5. Customer Engagement

In social media, CE has been the subject of extensive examination within the academic literature. [Audy Martínek \(2021\)](#) and [Romaniuk et al. \(2018\)](#) shed light on the multidimensional nature of consumer brand engagement, emphasizing its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Notably, however, many studies tend to rely on visible social media metrics, likes, comments, and shares only when measuring engagement to gain only its behavioral aspect of engagement ([Audy Martinek, 2021](#)).

[Romaniuk et al. \(2018\)](#) adopt a behavioral perspective, investigating the correlation between brand penetration, loyalty, and market share growth. Their findings highlight the significance of new buyer acquisition in driving growth, with changes in penetration having a more pronounced impact than shifts in loyalty. In contrast, [Hollebeek et al. \(2014\)](#) introduce a quantitative scale that assesses engagement's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Their research identifies brand involvement as a potential precursor and brand usage intent as a consequential outcome. [Audy Martínek \(2021\)](#) underscores the limitations in measuring multidimensional engagement, particularly underrepresenting non-visible aspects like passive consumption. Furthermore, there remains a noticeable gap in comprehending negative engagement and disengagement, highlighting an area that requires further exploration.

Additionally, the articles provide valuable insights into the relationship between social and cultural dimensions of online brand design and CE in China and Malaysia. [Iglesias et al. \(2020\)](#) employ interviews to examine how various internal and external stakeholders co-create a company's brand identity through a qualitative approach. Their research shows that while a corporate brand identity originates from the founders' values, it changes over time as stakeholders communicate, internalize, contest, and clarify the brand meaning through their actions. Customers play an active role in imprinting brands with their diverse interpretations and understandings.

On the contrary, [Affonso and Janiszewski \(2023\)](#) take a quantitative approach, using

surveys to analyze how visual communications in branding influence inferences about the utilitarian versus hedonic value and subsequent brand outcomes through encouraging “structured” versus “unstructured perceptions.” Their findings indicate that “structured perceptions” enhance utility brands’ interest, choice, and value, while “unstructured perceptions” do the same for hedonic brands, boosting customer engagement.

Furthermore, [Romaniuk et al. \(2018\)](#) use quantitative analysis of consumer panel data to model how brand market share changes in emerging markets like China and Malaysia. Their key finding is that market share growth is driven primarily by attracting new buyers rather than boosting the loyalty of existing buyers. This implies that brands should prioritize expanding their customer base in these markets. [Affonso and Janiszewski \(2023\)](#) also examine the visual marketing of brands, focusing on how perceptual structure influences brand performance. They demonstrate that brands positioning themselves as utilitarian benefit more from structured design elements that reinforce perceptions of functionality and reliability, boosting engagement for utilitarian brands. In contrast, hedonic brands benefit more from unstructured design that supports perceptions of excitement and enjoyment, boosting engagement for hedonic brands.

Upon examining the articles collectively, it becomes apparent that there is conceptual ambiguity surrounding consumer brand engagement. Despite conceptualizing engagement as a multidimensional construct, the focus of measurement and research often remains restricted. Significant questions persist regarding the practical exploration of engagement's cognitive and emotional dimensions and the study of negative expressions, misunderstanding, and disengagement from brands.

Finally, connecting these articles, a common theme emerges around stakeholder participation in shaping brand meaning, especially in non-Western cultural contexts like China and Malaysia. [Iglesias et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Affonso and Janiszewski \(2023\)](#) highlight the role of customer inferences and interpretations in brand image co-creation beyond the control of managers. Markovic et al.'s finding that emerging markets favor customer acquisition for brand growth also implies a need to involve stakeholders. However, gaps remain in understanding cultural variation, as most studies focused on Western contexts. More intercultural research could illuminate how brand co-creation and CE play out differently across Eastern and Western cultures, avoiding brand homogeneity of ethnocentric perspectives. Overall, the studies demonstrate that brands must actively engage stakeholders, understand inferred brand meanings, and adapt strategies - like visual design and market positioning - accordingly.

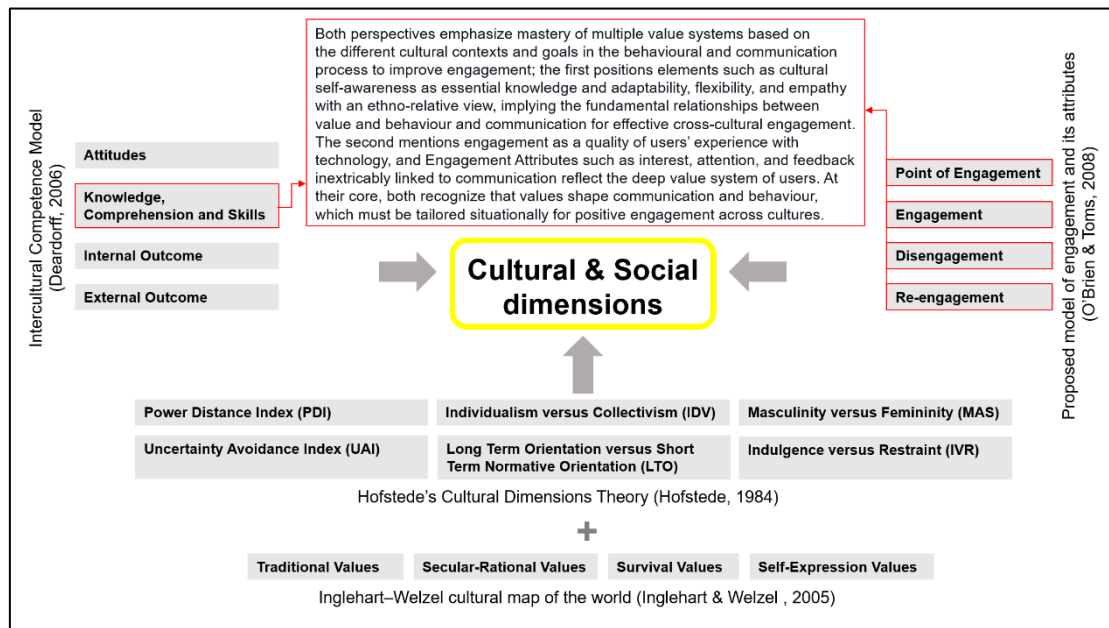
Notably, it must be emphasized that customer participation in co-creating brand meaning through activities like communicating and contesting is linked to brand identity. [Mane and Diop \(2017\)](#) verify that the CE and value co-creation study indicates that brand innovativeness and brand literacy were the drivers of these co-creation activities, along with affinity and customer-based brand equity. Additionally, Visual elements of brand design influence inferences about benefits and identity, subsequently shaping customer engagement. Brands can strategically employ structured or unstructured designs to boost engagement among target customers. Attracting new customers through penetrative tactics is vital for driving engagement and growth in emerging markets.

## 6. Theoretical Framework

Cultural values and dimensions shape communication norms and engagement strategies

across diverse contexts. As several authors have discussed, applying cultural models allows for more adaptive and effective intercultural communication. Figure 1 shows the relationships between the basic theories proposed in this study. While HCDDT has provided an influential framework for understanding cross-cultural differences, its limitations can be addressed by integrating other sociological and psychological models of cultural values and change over time. By incorporating multiple conceptual tools, communicators can develop greater cultural awareness, empathy, and skills to achieve intercultural competence and engagement according to leading models in the field (Deardorff, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 2010).

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Developed for This Study



HCDDT identifies fundamental values like individualism-collectivism that manifest in societal communication norms and visible cultural artifacts (Hofstede, 2001). However, Ting-Toomey (2010) argues that statically applying individualism-collectivism is too simplistic. Instead, Culture should be viewed as a dynamic spectrum rather than static opposites. Competent intercultural communicators need adaptability, flexibility, and imagination to navigate diverse contexts effectively. While foundational, HCDDT requires integration with other models, capturing cultural change over time and components of intercultural competence. The Inglehart-Welzel (2005) Cultural Map (IWCM) models societal value change along with “traditional” versus “secular-rational values” and “survival” versus “self-expression values” (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This map can be integrated with HCDDT to address flaws in dimensional understanding and show how socio-cultures evolve.

Furthermore, HCDDT indicates differences in values that need to be understood intellectually. However, ICM outlines developing communication skills to apply cultural knowledge effectively (Deardorff, 2009). Deardorff (2009) emphasizes cultivating attitudes like openness, adaptability, and cultural self-awareness. According to Hofstede's (2011) three phases, this cultural self-reflection constitutes the first awareness phase before knowledge and skills application. Thus, HCDDT supplies an essential knowledge framework that supports developing adaptive attitudes and communication abilities for intercultural competence. In addition, ICM contains an informed frame of reference shift (i.e., internal outcome), which involves using cultural knowledge to mentally adopt

another cultural perspective, assess situations through that lens, and adapt behavior and communication accordingly. In other words, effective online branding requires tailoring engagement strategies based on understanding users' cultural values, which implies the fundamental relationships between value behavior and communication for effective intercultural engagement. When integrating ICM with HCDT and IWCM, marketers can assess where their brand messaging may not align with cultural values and adapt appropriately.

Additionally, branding strategies can apply these cultural and communication models to resonate with diverse online users. O'Brien and Toms' (2008) model calms customer engagement into a quality and continuous experience process with technology and outlines the attributes that drive engagement through shaping positive experiences and reflecting the deep value system of users. These attributes are categorized into sensual, emotional, and spatiotemporal experiences, including setting up difficulties, artistic charm, sensory activation, response, originality, interaction, perceived duration, consciousness, drive, interest, and emotion (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). By mapping Hofstede's (2011) and Inglehart-Welzel's (2005) cultural values to these engagement attributes, digital marketers can better understand how to drive sustained engagement among users from diverse cultures and culturally tailor branding. Brands must recognize how cultural dimensions manifest in user behaviors and values. With cultural awareness and adaptability, they can effectively align branding strategies with diverse audiences.

In summary, integrating conceptual tools from intercultural psychology, sociology, and communication allows for a more nuanced application of cultural models. Synthesizing these models gives communicators enhanced awareness, empathy, adaptability, and skills for intercultural competence, as well as aids in developing culturally attuned digital experiences across diverse user values and engagement attributes. As Culture is dynamic, communicators must have flexibility in transforming cultural knowledge to meet situational demands. A multidimensional perspective allows for resonant, ethical, and effective communication across cultures.

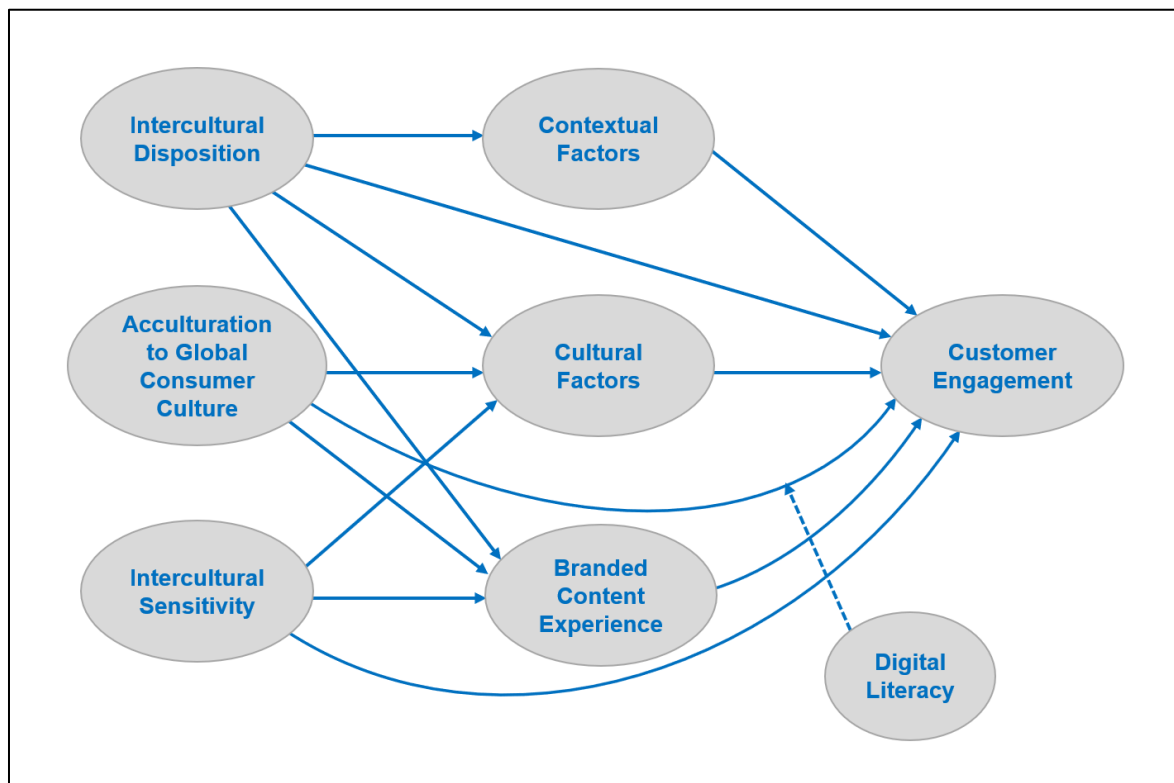
## 7. Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework developed for this study, which aims to analyze intercultural competence considered a potential antecedent to online CE in cross-cultural brand design. This framework, based on the ICM, comprises various aspects; internal outcomes such as adaptability, flexibility, empathy, ethno-relative perspective, attitudinal factors including respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery, and knowledge and skill sets encompassing cultural self-awareness, extensive cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness and the ability to listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, interpret, and relate (Deardorff, 2006). In prior studies, attitude, knowledge skills, and internal outcome were regressed directly to the external outcome; however, there is a lack of understanding of whether those factors referred to customer engagement in online cross-cultural marketing in China and Malaysia.

Bush et al. (2001) clarify that intercultural disposition (ID) assesses one's general "cross-cultural attitude", which facilitates intercultural communication and includes empathy, world-mindedness, ethnocentrism, and patriotism, attributional complexity so that ID can supersede attitudes in the new BICCE model. Additionally, acculturation in the context of consumer culture is known as consumer acculturation; the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and behaviors required for consumer culture. This provides a basis for

international market segmentation and strategic decisions as a result of acculturation to the global consumer culture (AGCC) and local ethnic identification or affiliation (EID) (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007). Due to the exact correspondence between these two parts, AGCC, including global-mindedness, interaction with multinational corporations' marketing activities, involvement with and use of English, social interactions, access to international media, willingness to adopt and viewing oneself as part of global consumption culture, is used to measure knowledge and skills. Moreover, according to Chen and Starosta (2000), intercultural sensitivity (IS) refers to the ability to transform one's perspectives affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally from an initial denial of cultural differences to an integration and appreciation of those differences. It involves moving beyond defending one's worldview to developing empathy and adaptability to achieve dual cultural identity and enjoy cultural diversity and is consistent with the concept of internal outcomes; thus, IS, including engagement in communication, valuing and appreciating cultural diversity, confidence in social interactions, enjoyment in interactions, attentive communication, can replace internal outcomes in the new BICCE model.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Branding Intercultural Competence for Customer Engagement (BICCE) Developed for This Study



In addition, cultural, contextual, and perceptual variables related to social and personal relationships are examined as potential mediators of online engagement. HCDT, as an essential cultural supporting theory, comprises the power-distant index, individualistic versus collectivistic, masculine versus feminine traits, uncertainty-averse index, long-term versus short-term normative oriented, and indulgent versus restrained (Hofstede, 2001). Kotler et al. (2024) conclude that marketers closely analyze cultural and social factors because these strongly influence consumer thinking, behaviors, and consumption habits. Tafesse (2016) states that customer brand experience drives brand engagement, making engagement a result of experience, so their interaction is a sequential process

where experiences lead to engaged meaning and relationships. To sum up, the absence of significant variables, such as contextual factors, cultural factors, and brand content experience, could have a crucial influence on customer engagement in online cross-cultural marketing in China and Malaysia.

According to [Kotler et al. \(2024\)](#) cultural factors include enduring values of the broader culture and subcultures and shifting perspectives on the self, others, organizations, society, and nature ([Kotler et al., 2024](#)); therefore, national culture, subculture, and cultural tightness-looseness should be measured. First, [Beugelsdijk and Welzel \(2018\)](#) recommend that cultural change is significant; updating [Hofstede's \(2011\)](#) framework allows for a more comprehensive understanding of evolving national cultural differences, i.e., Collectivism–Individualism, Duty–Joy, and Distrust–Trust. Secondly, [Hunt \(2008\)](#) suggests using scales or indexes, i.e., ideological embeddedness and behavioral/relational involvement, to measure the involvement of subculture as a continuum rather than a binary category. Third, [Ge et al. \(2023\)](#) investigate how national and individual cultural tightness affects consumer attitudes toward a brand, including Cultural tightness-looseness and Personal cultural tightness. Therefore, combining these aspects can lead to a more comprehensive measurement of cultural factors.

As for contextual factors, [Kotler et al. \(2024\)](#) maintain that consumer behavior is also shaped by social contextual factors like social groups, networks and influencer marketing, family, and social roles and status. Additionally, [Waqas et al. \(2021\)](#) explored dimensions of customer experience with brand-focused content in social media, including images, videos, and text posts related to the brand, which elicited engagement on social media, develop a "branded content experience" scale to cover concepts like self-identification, social bonds, utility, humor, aesthetics, awe, and discernment. Finally, three mediators are established.

Furthermore, digital literacy is examined as a potential moderator in online customer engagement, which encompasses skills in information retrieval, critical evaluation, digital utilization, content creation, digital communication, critical thinking, collaboration, safety assurance, and problem-solving, i.e., visual interpretation skills, replication skills, information management skills, multitasking literacy, social awareness skills, and real-time cognitive abilities ([Eshet, 2012](#)). The absence of a moderator effect (digital literacy) could have a powerful contingent effect on the relationship between knowledge and skills (or AGCC) of intercultural competence and customer engagement in online cross-cultural marketing design in China and Malaysia. [Zahoor et al. \(2023\)](#) describe how managers' digital literacy impacts the adoption of digital innovation through tech solutions. This includes three constructs; proficiency in using digital tools, application of digital tools, and adoption of digital innovation, which expand digital literacy to data management literacy, the ability to Effective teamwork, producing digital material, secure usage, efficient challenge resolution, digital technologies, and digital transformation.

Finally, online customer-engaging experiences derive from interactions between user and technology attributes that sustain attention, interest, involvement, needs fulfillment, emotional resonance, motivation, and human connections ([O'Brien & Toms, 2008](#)). Subsequently, its measurement dimensions decreased from six to four: aesthetic attractiveness, concentrated engagement, user-friendliness, and incentive value (combined with long-lasting quality, newness, and personal involvement) ([O'Brien et al., 2018](#)). However, measuring CE in online brand marketing design was not comprehensive enough from the visual design disciplines in a cross-cultural setting in China and Malaysia.

Therefore, popularity, virality, and exposure from the PULEV model (Eyal, 2014), a framework for evaluating user engagement with digital products like apps and websites, are enrolled. In summary, the BICCE conceptual model proposes that intercultural disposition, acculturation to global consumer culture, and intercultural sensitivity (independent variables) influence customer engagement (dependent variable) through cultural factors, contextual factors, and branded content experience (mediator variables). Digital literacy moderates the relationship between AGCC and CE.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are definite gaps in the knowledge of how CE can be successfully and efficiently achieved by online intercultural branding, which is undeniable. Such problems include the need for more understanding of different cultures and the resulting negative social media comments, significant digital gaps removing certain social groups, lack of intercultural competence resulting in conflicts, and ethnocentric views leading to a lack of resonance across cultures. Closing the inclusion gaps demands further research on the influence of cultural values, contextual attributes, digital literacy, and cross-cultural communication skills in creating suitable online branding, engagement, and interactions. Researchers should highlight the components that can ensure mutual understanding, bring promising constructive changes, and facilitate the adoption of problem-solving approaches that consider diversity in values and culture. To achieve this, marketers and designers should consider these research priorities as a way to unleash the power of intercultural digital branding while preventing those pitfalls that hinder its effectiveness. The framework presented serves as an initial reference point in the envisioned research path for realizing these crucial objectives.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

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