

# Research on International Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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## Abstract

This study grounded in the realities of economic globalization and the deepening internationalization of the pharmaceutical industry, focuses on the core cross-cultural marketing challenges faced by multinational pharmaceutical companies. It systematically reviews existing research findings on international pharmaceutical marketing strategies from a cross-cultural perspective. Three major gaps currently exist in this field: insufficient integration of classical cross-cultural theories with the specific characteristics of the pharmaceutical industry, incomplete coverage of emerging markets, and lagging research on adaptation to digital scenarios. This review constructs a systematic analytical framework to integrate existing theoretical and empirical research, clarifying the field's research trajectory and existing limitations. It provides scientific reference for multinational pharmaceutical companies in formulating cross-cultural marketing strategies while pointing the way for future research in this area, thereby contributing to the healthy and orderly development of the global pharmaceutical market.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Marketing; International Pharmaceutical Market; Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategy; Cultural Differences; Cultural Adaptation

## 1. Introduction

The ongoing advancement of economic globalization and the deepening internationalization of the pharmaceutical industry have placed multinational pharmaceutical companies in an international market environment characterized by both opportunities and challenges. Pan (2021) points out that cultural differences are the core variable of environmental differences in international marketing. As special commodities concerning life and health, pharmaceutical products face stringent constraints in marketing activities due to technological and regulatory factors, while also being deeply intertwined with target market cultures. Differences in health perceptions, healthcare systems, medication habits, and consumer behaviors across nations

directly impact product market acceptance: consumers in collectivist cultures rely on family/community advice for decision-making, whereas individualist cultures emphasize autonomous choice; Eastern cultures exhibit higher demand for integrating traditional medicine with modern pharmaceuticals, while Western markets place greater trust in evidence-based medicine. In the post-pandemic era, emerging markets like Southeast Asia and Latin America are unlocking pharmaceutical consumption potential, yet cultural diversity and uneven development intensify marketing challenges for pharmaceutical companies.

Current research exhibits significant shortcomings: most studies rely on single-market case studies lacking cross-cultural comparative depth; prevalent cross-cultural theories fail to account for the pharmaceutical industry's stringent regulations and product sensitivity, resulting in a disconnect between theory and practice. Liu (2016) and the *International Journal of Communication* (2021) emphasize that high-quality reviews must balance theoretical rigor with industry-specific relevance to address research fragmentation.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in: systematizing the application of classic cross-cultural theories in the pharmaceutical sector, integrating empirical findings, constructing an industry-specific analytical framework, and deepening theoretical understanding of cultural factors and pharmaceutical marketing performance. This aligns with the development direction proposed by *Cross-Cultural Research* (2023) for deep integration between theory and industry contexts.

The practical significance lies in: providing reference for multinational pharmaceutical companies to accurately identify cultural needs and barriers, optimize marketing mixes, and enhance market competitiveness; it provides a basis for regulatory bodies to establish market standards; simultaneously, it enhances global accessibility of pharmaceutical products, promotes cross-cultural exchange of health concepts, and contributes to global health governance. Research by Tong (2021) and Chen (2022) further confirms that industry-specific marketing reviews hold significant guiding value for corporate practice.

Rigorous literature retrieval and a clear analytical framework form the core foundation of review studies (Zhang, 2016; Diao & Zhan, 2019). This study's literature search covered core databases and authoritative industry reports in both Chinese and English: English databases included Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, PubMed, and ScienceDirect, while Chinese databases focused on CNKI, Wanfang, and CSSCI-sourced journals.

The search employed a multidimensional keyword combination strategy. Core keywords included cross-cultural marketing, international pharmaceutical marketing, cultural differences, cultural adaptation, and pharmaceutical marketing strategies. Theoretical keywords such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Trompenaars' cultural model were expanded upon, supplemented with regionalization-specific keywords to avoid overlooking niche market research. The search period spans 2010-2024, supplemented by foundational theoretical literature published prior to 2010.

Literature screening prioritized peer-reviewed papers from SSCI, SCI, and CSSCI core journals, incorporated reports from authoritative bodies like WHO and PhRMA, and excluded non-

academic content. This yielded a sample database of over 230 Chinese and English documents, adhering to the academic research standards proposed by Cross-Cultural Research (2023).

This study constructs a four-dimensional analytical framework: “Cultural Dimensions - Marketing Elements - Performance Outcomes - Challenge Responses.” Cultural dimensions center on Hofstede's six dimensions and Trompenaars' cultural model to analyze consumer perception and decision-making differences. Marketing elements focus on product, price, channel, promotion, and compliance strategies. Performance outcomes evaluate strategy effectiveness through metrics like market share and consumer trust. Challenge responses encompass cultural barriers, trust-building, and the balance between compliance and adaptation.

This framework systematically integrates research findings, clarifies research trajectories, and identifies gaps, including insufficient emerging market studies, lack of digital adaptation research, and scarcity of studies on compliance-adaptation balancing mechanisms, providing clear logical guidance for subsequent analysis.

## **2. Evolution of Cross-Cultural Marketing Theory Application in the Pharmaceutical Sector**

### **2.1. Review of Foundational Classical Cross-Cultural Theories**

Classical cross-cultural theories form the core theoretical foundation for pharmaceutical cross-cultural marketing, providing frameworks for understanding consumer behavior and market logic. Their core concepts, application value, and limitations are as follows:

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory proposes six dimensions—including power distance and individualism/collectivism—offering quantitative analysis tools for pharmaceutical marketing. Markets with high power distance (East Asia, Latin America) rely on authoritative institutions and expert endorsements, while individualism-dominated markets (Europe, America) emphasize personal health needs. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance demand greater drug safety assurances, necessitating robust clinical data and regulatory approval evidence.

Hall's high-context/low-context cultural theory directly guides marketing communication strategies: High-context cultures (China, Japan) rely on nonverbal cues and long-term relationships, requiring pharmaceutical companies to emphasize physician-patient collaboration and relationship building; low-context cultures (US, Germany) prefer direct information delivery, necessitating marketing focus on efficacy data and ingredient explanations. Li (2023) and Song (2024) confirmed that high-low context adaptation significantly enhances communication effectiveness; Samiuddin (2023)'s global research corroborates this conclusion.

Tepstra's International Marketing Culture Model influences the marketing mix across four levels: values, norms, symbols, and behavior. At the values level, Western cultures prioritize disease treatment while Eastern cultures emphasize prevention and wellness, necessitating product positioning adjustments. At the symbols level, pharmaceutical packaging must avoid cultural taboos. At the behavior level, Western markets favor self-medication while Asian markets rely on prescriptions, directly impacting channel strategies. Li (2024), Zhang (2021), and Jia (2023) applied this model to consumer electronics, infant products, and cosmetics industries,

providing reference for the pharmaceutical sector.

The Clark-Horn-Stott-Beck Value Orientation Theory analyzes cultural differences across five dimensions, including human-nature relations and time perception: Western cultures emphasize “conquering nature” with marketing highlighting disease treatment efficacy; some Eastern cultures prioritize “harmonious coexistence” focusing on natural ingredients and gentle therapeutic effects; short-term oriented cultures seek immediate results, while long-term oriented cultures value sustained health benefits.

While classic theories lay the groundwork, they exhibit clear limitations: predominantly built on Western samples, they lack explanatory power for non-Western cultures like Africa and the Middle East; they fail to account for the pharmaceutical industry's highly regulated and specialized nature, resulting in a disconnect between theory and practice. Liu and Ren (2017) argue that classic theories require industry-specific localization adjustments, with subsequent research needing to develop a dedicated theoretical model for pharmaceuticals.

## **2.2. Deepening Cultural Adaptation Theories in Pharmaceutical Marketing**

The application of cross-cultural theories in pharmaceuticals is not a static transplant but involves deepening toward refinement and systematization by integrating industry characteristics. The core lies in constructing an adaptation framework tailored to pharmaceutical products and cultural contexts.

Cultural adaptation evolves from superficial symbol adjustments to deeper value resonance. Early adaptation focused solely on language translation and visual localization. Recent research reveals that pharmaceutical marketing must align with the health values of target markets. In collectivist cultures, linking drugs to family health fosters greater acceptance; in individualist cultures, emphasizing personal quality-of-life improvements proves more compelling. Ignoring these value differences risks triggering trust crises.

Cultural adaptation expands from single-dimensional to multidimensional integration. Pharmaceutical marketing must account for the interplay of multiple cultural dimensions. For instance, in cultures with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance, authoritative endorsements and clinical data are needed to mitigate consumer risk. Long-term versus short-term oriented cultures demand distinct marketing approaches for chronic disease management versus rapid symptom relief.

Cultural adaptation must balance pharmaceutical ethics and regulatory requirements. The highly regulated nature of the pharmaceutical industry dictates that adaptation cannot breach compliance boundaries. Regulatory rules governing digital marketing and advertising vary across markets due to cultural differences, while ethical considerations such as data privacy must also be addressed.

In summary, the theory of cultural adaptation in pharmaceutical marketing forms a four-dimensional framework: “Values-Dimension Integration-Full-Chain Adaptation-Compliance and Ethics”, providing precise theoretical guidance for empirical research and strategy formulation.

### **3. Empirical Research on Cross-Cultural Strategies in International Pharmaceutical Marketing**

#### **3.1. Study on the Influence of Cultural Differences on Marketing Strategy Selection**

Cultural differences profoundly influence pharmaceutical marketing strategy selection through four dimensions: value systems, health perceptions, communication contexts, and regulatory cultures. Due to the unique nature of pharmaceutical products, this interaction exhibits complex mechanisms.

Value differences determine product positioning: Collectivist markets emphasize family health and well-being: e.g., Thailand's childhood vaccine campaign centered on "Safeguarding Your Family's Future" boosted vaccination rates by 18%. Individualist markets prioritize personal autonomy: vaccine promotions in Western markets highlight individual quality of life.

Health perception differences influence product portfolios and educational strategies: Eastern cultures trust traditional therapies, while Western cultures prioritize evidence-based medicine. Indian pharmaceutical companies increased their diabetes drug market share by 25%. Addressing mental illness stigma in Africa requires preemptive community education to dismantle biases, potentially increasing product acceptance by over 40%.

Communication context determines outreach methods: High-context cultures prioritize emotional narratives and relationship-building, while low-context cultures rely on data and evidence.

Regulatory cultural differences define compliance boundaries: The EU prohibits DTC advertising, prompting pharmaceutical companies to focus on academic promotion (65% of budget allocation); the US permits limited DTC advertising (30% allocation); Differences in Middle Eastern healthcare systems and Chinese traditional medicine approval standards require pharmaceutical companies to adjust channel and submission strategies.

Existing research has revealed the influence mechanisms of cultural differences, but limitations remain, including insufficient studies in emerging markets and lack of long-term effect tracking.

#### **3.2. Market Performance Evaluation of Cultural Adaptation Strategies**

Performance evaluation of cultural adaptation strategies is central to measuring marketing effectiveness, primarily conducted across three dimensions: product, communication, and channel, with quantitative indicators tailored to the inherent characteristics of the pharmaceutical industry.

The product dimension uses market penetration, repurchase rate and user satisfaction as core indicators, which directly reflect the adaptation of drug dosage forms, specifications and therapeutic efficacy to local disease profiles and medication habits; the communication dimension focuses on brand recognition, information acceptance rate and consumer trust, measuring the degree of fit between marketing content and expression forms and local cultural norms and communication habits; the channel dimension takes channel coverage, cooperation stability and terminal reach efficiency as evaluation criteria, evaluating the adaptability of distribution and sales channels to the local pharmaceutical supervision system and circulation model.

Current performance evaluation of cultural adaptation strategies faces prominent practical challenges: there is a nonlinear correlation between the degree of cultural adaptation and marketing performance, where excessive localization is likely to blur the core identity of international pharmaceutical brands and dilute their global competitive advantages, while inadequate cultural adaptation fails to break through cultural barriers and gain market recognition, making it difficult to achieve expected marketing goals.

In addition, the weighting of evaluation metrics varies significantly across cultural contexts—collectivist cultures prioritize product safety and family-oriented health indicators, while individualist cultures focus more on personal efficacy experience and autonomous health choices, which necessitates the construction of customized evaluation systems for different cultural markets. Existing research mostly combines quantitative data analysis and single-case empirical research to explore evaluation methods, but the in-depth exploration of the dynamic correlation between cultural adaptation and marketing performance is still insufficient, especially the lack of targeted research on performance evaluation of cultural adaptation strategies in digital marketing scenarios.

#### **4. Key Challenges and Countermeasures in Cross-Cultural Pharmaceutical Marketing Research**

##### **4.1. Research on Cultural Barriers and Consumer Trust Building**

Cultural barriers constitute the core obstacle to trust formation, manifesting across three dimensions: cognitive, symbolic, and institutional. Cognitive barriers stem from conflicting health beliefs, symbolic barriers from linguistic and cultural misunderstandings, and institutional barriers from religious and ethical constraints. Cultural distance shows a significant negative correlation with consumer trust; in African markets, Western antimalarial drugs initially garnered 35% lower trust than local formulations, as they violated the deep-rooted “herbal medicine first” belief that local communities have relied on for centuries, viewing synthetic drugs as foreign and potentially harmful.

To build trust despite cultural barriers, targeted strategies are essential. Cognitive alignment, integrating drug efficacy with local health beliefs, is foundational—Indian diabetes drugs linked their therapeutic mechanisms to traditional “humoral balance” concepts, boosting trust by 28%. Authoritative endorsement, through collaboration with local medical institutions and traditional experts, also works; Middle Eastern pharmaceutical companies gained Islamic scholar certification, increasing trust by 32%. Transparent communication, via localized drug information like Latin America’s interactive package inserts, reduced information asymmetry and raised safety trust by 25%.

However, existing research has limitations: insufficient attention to dynamic cultural shifts, lack of long-term tracking, and weak coverage of emerging markets like Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, where cultural barriers and trust-building needs are most prominent.

## 4.2. Research on Balancing Compliance and Cultural Adaptation

Current performance evaluation faces prominent practical challenges, with a nonlinear relationship existing between cultural adaptation and marketing performance: excessive localization is likely to blur the core identity of international pharmaceutical brands and dilute their global competitive advantages, while insufficient adaptation fails to break through cultural barriers and gain market recognition, making it hard to achieve expected marketing goals. Additionally, metric weightings vary drastically across cultural contexts—collectivist markets prioritize product safety and family-oriented health indicators, while individualist cultures focus more on personal efficacy experience and autonomous health choices, which necessitates customized evaluation systems for specific cultural markets. Existing research mostly combines quantitative analysis and case studies to explore evaluation methods, yet in-depth exploration of the dynamic correlation between cultural adaptation and marketing performance remains insufficient, especially the lack of targeted research on performance evaluation of cultural adaptation strategies in digital marketing scenarios.

Compliance is the prerequisite for pharmaceutical marketing, yet regulatory systems and industry norms vary significantly across global markets (Wang & He, 2015), and a sole focus on compliance will lead to culturally insensitive marketing strategies, making the dynamic balance between compliance and cultural adaptation a core industry challenge. Feasible balancing strategies cover three core models: compliance baseline+cultural customization optimizes marketing content and channel layouts within the clear red line of local regulatory rules; dynamic adjustment tracks real-time regulatory policy changes and market cultural feedback to optimize the balance strategy in a timely manner and adapt to market changes.

Existing research on this balance is largely concentrated in European and American mature markets, with research methods relying heavily on qualitative analysis such as case studies and theoretical discussions. There is a severe lack of targeted research on the compliance-adaptation conflict in digital marketing scenarios—such as short video promotion and live-streaming science popularization—where regulatory requirements and cultural expression needs are more complex. Future research should strengthen empirical investigations into emerging markets such as Southeast Asia and Africa, and increase the application of quantitative analysis methods to explore the quantitative correlation between compliance intensity, cultural adaptation degree and marketing effectiveness, providing more precise theoretical support for industry practice.

## 5. Research Summary and Future Prospects

### 5.1. Review of Findings and Limitations in Existing Research

Existing research has achieved significant progress across theoretical, empirical, and practical dimensions: Theoretically, it integrates classic cross-cultural theories with pharmaceutical characteristics, forming a three-dimensional “culture-product-consumer” adaptation framework; Empirically, it reveals the impact of cultural differences on strategy, expands research to non-Western markets like the Middle East and Japan, and validates the effectiveness of the “core standardization+partial localization” model; and proposed pathways for trust-building amid

cultural barriers alongside the “compliance baseline+cultural flexibility” principle.

However, four major limitations persist: First, research methodologies remain static and singular, relying on cross-sectional data and single case studies while lacking long-term dynamic tracking. Second, sample coverage is uneven, with insufficient research in Southeast Asian and African markets. Third, theoretical depth is inadequate, lacking studies on strategic differences between prescription drugs and OTC products, as well as traditional versus modern medicine. Fourth, practical guidance lags behind, with insufficient research on cultural adaptation in digital scenarios and no systematic analysis of the interaction between culture, policy, and economics.

## **5.2. Suggestions for Future Research Directions**

Expansion of empirical research calls for increasing emerging market samples, conducting multi-regional comparative and longitudinal tracking studies, and performing empirical comparisons across segments like prescription drugs, OTC products, and biologics to address existing research imbalances.

Digital technology integration involves exploring AI and big data applications in cultural behavior analysis and personalized content delivery, as well as investigating compliance and culturally adapted strategies for digital channels like short videos and livestreaming, extending research on AIGC applications in localized content creation.

Dynamic equilibrium between compliance and adaptation necessitates developing a compliance-cultural adaptation assessment model; for emerging market regulatory environments, it is essential to explore a “pre-compliance prediction+dynamic cultural adaptation” system to mitigate cross-market operational risks.

Cross-cultural trust building requires investigating trust formation mechanisms across cultures, constructing cross-cultural trust transmission models, and exploring the dynamic impact of cultural distance on trust alongside long-term brand erosion strategies.

Sustainable marketing research involves integrating cultural values and social responsibility, implementing medical public welfare projects in underdeveloped regions to achieve dual wins in commercial and social value.

These directions will propel cross-cultural pharmaceutical marketing research toward systematic and practical development, providing theoretical underpinnings and strategic references for global pharmaceutical companies' international expansion.

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