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Marketing as Infrastructure: Dialectical Reflections on the Belt and Road Initiative and Cross-Country Spillovers

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been widely examined through the prisms of infrastructure, finance, and geopolitics, yet its marketing dimensions remain underexplored. With over 140 participating nations and nearly 40 percent of the global population engaged, the BRI represents not only an economic project but also a marketing revolution. This paper introduces the Cross-Country Marketing Spillover Theory (CC-MST) as a novel extension of the Cross-Country and Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory (CC-CEDT) originally developed by Dr. Salman in 2021–2022. We argue that marketing functions as symbolic infrastructure equal in importance to railways and ports, capable of generating cross-border spillovers of trust, legitimacy, and consumer imagination. China, as the host nation, markets the BRI through narratives of shared destiny and modernity, while participating countries emphasize local authenticity, cultural heritage, and community trust. Through a qualitative comparative analysis, we show how the dialectical interplay of global narratives and local storytelling creates hybrid marketing practices that influence foreign direct investment, remittances, GDP growth, and broader economic expansion (Yan & Enderwick, 2021; Yang, Zhang, & Liu, 2024). By situating marketing at the center of integration, this study positions CC-MST as a new paradigm for understanding globalization in the twenty-first century, where economic development is propelled not only by infrastructure but also by the symbolic infrastructure of marketing narratives (Salman, Mehar, & Iqbal, 2021; Qian, 2024).

Introduction: Marketing as Infrastructure

Globalization has always been more than the circulation of goods across borders; it has also been the circulation of ideas, identities, and stories that make goods desirable. In the twenty-first century, marketing has become a central feature of this globalization process. Marketing no longer functions only as the art of selling products but increasingly as the architecture through which nations, firms, and individuals imagine their place in the global economy. Campaigns by multinational corporations, the rise of digital platforms, and the expansion of global brands reveal how marketing acts as a connective force, binding distant societies into shared networks of consumption and aspiration.

Yet, even as globalization promises interconnected markets, its impact on marketing strategies is deeply uneven. Some countries wield powerful global narratives that allow them to dominate the symbolic economy, while others rely on local authenticity and cultural intimacy to survive in crowded markets. This dialectic between global scale and local resonance is especially pronounced in emerging economies, where marketing is not only about consumer persuasion but also about signaling trustworthiness to foreign investors, motivating diasporas to remit capital, and projecting national identity in competitive international spaces.

It is against this backdrop that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as one of the most consequential projects of our age. Affecting more than 40 percent of the world's population and trade patterns, the BRI is not merely about infrastructure construction (World Bank, 2021; UNDP, 2022). It is also about the marketing of a new world order, one framed in the language of "connectivity," "shared prosperity," and "mutual destiny" (Yang, Zhang, & Liu, 2024). China as the host nation promotes this initiative through coordinated narratives, while participating countries adapt these narratives to their own contexts, embedding them in local marketing practices. This creates not only economic corridors of trade and logistics but also symbolic corridors of meaning and trust.

The uniqueness of this paper lies in exploring how these marketing strategies, when viewed through the lens of Cross-Country and Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory (CC-CEDT), reveal patterns of simultaneity and spillover. CC-CEDT posits that infrastructure built in one country generates economic energy in its neighbors, producing regional agglomeration effects that extend beyond national borders (Salman, Mehar, & Iqbal, 2021). Extending this theory to marketing, we argue that marketing campaigns under the BRI also spill over across regions. A message designed in Beijing or Shanghai travels to Gwadar, Nairobi, or Belgrade, where it is reinterpreted, re-localized, and then re-exported back into the global system. This dialectical process between China's centralized narratives and participating countries' localized marketing practices creates new forms of economic expansion through foreign direct investment, personal remittances, and GDP growth.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide a dialectical reflection on marketing within the BRI, comparing China as the host with the participating economies. By weaving together international marketing strategies, local cultural narratives, and the spillover logic of CC-CEDT, the study offers a novel perspective on how the BRI is reshaping not only infrastructure and trade but also the very ways in which nations and firms communicate value, trust, and belonging in the global marketplace.

Problem Statement

The globalization of markets has often been narrated as a story of integration and opportunity, yet in reality the benefits of global marketing strategies have not been equally shared. Many countries within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) corridor remain in a state of deprivation, where physical infrastructure is improving but marketing capacity continues to be fragmented, underfunded, and locally constrained. China as the host nation projects a coherent marketing story of connectivity and prosperity (Yang, Zhang, & Liu, 2024), while participating countries often lack the same resources to market their own narratives, industries, and cultural products to the world. This imbalance means that while ports, railways, and energy corridors are being built, the symbolic infrastructure of marketing is not equally developed. The problem is not simply a matter of communications but a deeper issue of how economies represent themselves to foreign investors, diaspora communities, and global consumers (Li, Qian, Zhou, Lu, & Liu, 2021).

The implications of this imbalance are far-reaching. Without a balanced marketing ecosystem, the infrastructure gains of the BRI may not fully translate into foreign direct investment, remittance growth, or wider GDP expansion. Investors respond not only to hard data but also to the trust built through narratives, symbols, and consistent branding (Peng et al., 2025). Migrants choose where to work and send remittances based partly on the stories told about opportunity and belonging, while consumers across continents develop preferences shaped by marketing of goods and services that flow through BRI corridors. When marketing capacity is uneven, the developmental benefits of simultaneous infrastructure projects risk being diluted (Kamara & Zhang, 2023). From a research standpoint, this creates a state of unknownness, as we do not yet fully understand how marketing functions as a hidden but decisive driver of economic spillovers across borders (Yan & Enderwick, 2021).

This study seeks to fill both a theoretical and a methodological gap. Theoretically, it extends the Cross-Country and Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory (CC-CEDT), which demonstrates that infrastructure in one country can stimulate growth in another through regional spillovers (Salman, Mehar, & Iqbal, 2021), into the field of marketing. We propose that just as infrastructure produces cross-border economic gains, so too do marketing narratives, which spill across regions to influence trust, investment, and consumption (Teo, Tan, & Lim, 2020). Methodologically, the study develops a qualitative and dialectical framework to analyze how China's global marketing vision interacts with localized practices of participating economies. This dual focus reframes marketing as infrastructure in its own right and proposes new ways of studying how marketing spillovers shape investment, remittances, and growth under the BRI. By addressing this gap, the study not only enriches the literature on marketing and international business but also strengthens the theoretical foundation of CC-CEDT by embedding cultural and symbolic dimensions into the analysis of global economic development.

China's Marketing as Host: Scale and Narrative Power

China does not market the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a collection of infrastructure projects alone; rather, it frames it as a vision of destiny, a modern revival of the Silk Road, and a story of shared prosperity. The narratives promoted by Chinese state institutions and media emphasize connectivity, inclusion, and historical continuity (Yang, Zhang, & Liu, 2024). By presenting itself as the architect of a renewed global order, China elevates marketing beyond the transactional sphere of goods and services into the symbolic realm of identity and trust. This form of marketing is not limited to commercial persuasion but functions as a nation-branding exercise, where infrastructure projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor or the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Rail are portrayed as milestones in a collective journey toward development (Iqbal, Salman, Naseem, Hasan, & Aziz, 2024).

A central role in this marketing effort is played by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which act not only as builders of roads, ports, and digital networks but also as ambassadors of credibility. Firms like Huawei, Sinopec, and China Railway Construction Corporation do more than sell products or services; they project reliability, scale, and technological sophistication (Huang, Wang, & Liu, 2025). In doing so, they communicate the message that engaging with China is engaging with stability and modernity. This is consistent with the logic of Cross-Country and Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory (CC-CEDT), where one country's infrastructure investment generates spillover growth in neighboring economies (Salman, Mehar, & Iqbal, 2021). In a parallel manner, China's marketing narratives spill over into participating countries, shaping how local governments, investors, and communities perceive opportunities linked to the BRI.

At the same time, a dialectical tension lies at the heart of China's marketing strategy. On one side, the scale and coherence of its narrative create a powerful impression of unity and confidence. On the other, this very scale risks producing cultural detachment. Narratives crafted in Beijing may resonate less in Nairobi, Belgrade, or Karachi if they are not localized to the cultural contexts of those societies. This reflects a broader dialectic of globalization: the universal language of prosperity versus the particular languages of local identity (Yan & Enderwick, 2021). The challenge for China is to ensure that its messaging, while grand in scale, does not obscure the voices and aspirations of its partners.

The importance of this dialectic becomes clearer when situated in the framework of CC-CEDT. Infrastructure development, as the theory suggests, produces simultaneous growth across borders (Iqbal et al., 2024). In the same way, marketing narratives that begin in China have the potential to stimulate confidence and investment in other nations. However, just as infrastructure must be adapted to local geographies, marketing must be tailored to cultural and social environments. The coherence of China's message is valuable for projecting global credibility, but its long-term success depends on how well this message can be translated into localized trust, ownership, and participation.

Thus, China's marketing under the BRI represents both a strength and a vulnerability. It demonstrates the scale and discipline of a coordinated state vision but also reveals the risk of over-centralization in a world that values cultural authenticity. By examining this dialectic, we begin to understand how marketing operates as symbolic infrastructure, one that parallels the logic of ports and railways. It builds bridges of meaning as well as bridges of concrete, and its spillovers—positive or negative—are just as consequential for cross-country and cross-continent economic development.

Participating Countries' Marketing: Local Intimacy and Cultural Authenticity

In the vast tapestry of over 140 nations that participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), there are many colors, many voices. These participating countries do not simply receive China's marketing; they re-create, adapt, resist, and sometimes blend it with their own cultural threads. This section explores how local intimacy and authenticity shape marketing in these countries, how this contrasts with China's narrative, and what opportunities and tensions emerge from these practices.

Local Voices in Diverse Contexts

Participating countries are immensely diverse—in geography, language, religion, ethnicity, political systems, and economic capacity. From Pakistan to Kenya, from Serbia to Malaysia, each place brings its own lived experience to bear on how BRI is understood and marketed. For example, in South Asian and Middle Eastern BRI countries, tourism revenues increased by about 7% after BRI participation, with inbound tourists growing ~18.4%, but these benefits varied strongly by region's hospitality infrastructure, visa policies, and cultural ease in welcoming foreigners (Ullah, et al., 2023).

Similarly, in Kazakhstan, local stakeholders including civic leaders, business owners, and tourism operators viewed BRI projects with cautious optimism. Their marketing efforts emphasized cultural heritage, hospitality, and environmental beauty, rather than purely infrastructure or connectivity (Daye, 2020).

Cultural Authenticity as Competitive Asset

One of the recurring themes is that authenticity matters. In many BRI-participating nations, local marketing draws heavily on history, heritage, local customs, and identity. This is seen in how heritage sites are promoted, in festivals, crafts, storytelling, and in the branding of local food, music, traditional dress. The marketing is less polished (by global standards), but it often resonates deeply with local communities, which builds trust, loyalty, and sometimes cross-border interest. For instance, studies show that firms in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region operating in BRI export markets gain more when they can leverage cultural similarity, even as cultural friction may drag performance when local customs are ignored (Li, Qian, & Zhou, 2019).

Moreover, cultural authenticity helps counterbalance some of the risks of appearing as if one is simply following China's narrative. Local marketing that acknowledges local beliefs, religious traditions, linguistic diversity, and cultural heritage tends to display higher legitimacy in the eyes of local consumers and governments. For example, in heritage tourism contexts in several BRI countries, marketing that integrates the local traditions produces greater visitor satisfaction and repeat tourism, which in turn supports local economies (Dayoub, 2024).

Dialectical Tensions: Authenticity vs. Global Visibility

However, there is a tension. On one hand, authenticity gives meaning; on the other hand, global visibility demands mistakes in translation, shifts in style, or compromises on local values. Participating countries often face the question of how to stay locally genuine while speaking in a global language that investors, tourists, and foreign markets understand. For example, in some African BRI countries, local firms have to adjust their messaging, packaging, or product design to appeal to Chinese or international markets, which sometimes leads to dilution of their cultural symbols. At times, they may feel pulled between local identity and conforming to what is perceived as the "modern," "efficient," or "technical" style favored in BRI marketing.

In some environments, cultural friction also emerges—for instance when local practices are overlooked by Chinese partners or when marketing fails to account for religious norms, gender relations, local food preferences, or language nuances (Li, Qian, & Zhou, 2019; "A Cultural Perspective of China's Belt and Road Initiative," n.d.). aabri.com+1

Marketing and Cross-Country Spillovers

Within the CC-CEDT (Cross-Country and Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory) lens, we see participating countries' marketing as a form of symbolic infrastructure that can also spill across borders. When a local festival in, say, Pakistan is promoted widely in India or via digital channels, or when a craft brand in Ethiopia uses storytelling that resonates in Europe or Asia, authentic cultural elements become exportable. They carry both economic value (tourism, trade in cultural goods, artisan crafts) and soft power.

Studies suggest that participating countries with stronger cultural assets or more developed tourism sectors reap more from this spillover. The PSM-DID analysis of 151 countries from 2000-2019 found that the tourism industry in South Asia, Western Asia, and Middle Eastern BRI countries benefited more than other regions, largely because tourism marketing could lean on cultural heritage, ease of access, and existing recognition (Ullah et al., 2023). ResearchGate

Another example: innovation cooperation between China and BRI partner countries is promoted when institutional distance is shortened, cultural distance is mitigated, and talent exchanges occur (Xiao et al., 2023). Cultural differences are not just obstacles; in many cases they are drivers of creative adaptation, unique value propositions, and trust-building—if handled well. Nature

Key Insights from Comparative Cases

From multiple participated countries, some patterns emerge:

1. Countries that prioritize *local storytelling* for example through heritage tourism, crafts, festivals tend to see a stronger local buy-in and more sustainable marketing outcomes.

2. Language, religion, and tradition are not peripheral; they are central to consumer identity. Marketing that ignores them often meets resistance or indifference.

3. Firms and institutions in these countries often operate with fewer resources, so innovation comes through adaptation using social media, local influencers, community networks rather than large-scale state marketing budgets.

4. The more visible the local culture in marketing, the more likely it is that foreign investors and tourists perceive authenticity; but authenticity risks becoming exotified or commodified if it is only surface-level, designed purely for foreign gaze.

Dialectical Synthesis: Strengths, Risks, and the Path Forward

Participating countries in the BRI contribute richness through their diverse cultural tapestries. Their marketing rooted in local intimacy and authenticity complements China's narrative power. However, there is a dialectical balancing act: too much focus on local authenticity without concern for broader visibility might limit reach; too much borrowing of China's scale and style may weaken the sense of identity and trust at home.

Viewed through cross-country, cross-continent economic development theory, local marketing practices become infrastructure themselves—they shape how trade, investment, and people flows function. When local authenticity is respected and integrated into marketing, it can reduce transaction costs (because there is built trust), attract tourism, maintain cultural heritage, strengthen local industries, and even improve foreign direct investment because investors perceive stable, socially coherent environments.

Dialectical Synthesis: Hybrid Marketing under CC-CEDT

When we look through the lens of Cross-Country, Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory (CC-CEDT), one of the core lessons is that infrastructure built in one place does not stay local. Roads, ports, rails, digital cables — they generate spillovers: new trade routes, investment, migration. They change where goods flow, where people gather, and where money goes. Similarly, marketing is not inert; marketing narratives, campaigns, symbols — once launched — also spill across borders. Hybrid marketing under the BRI is where China's global narrative and the local stories of participating countries merge, interact, reinforce each other, and sometimes clash.

Simultaneity of Infrastructure & Marketing Spillovers

CC-CEDT suggests that infrastructure built simultaneously in many participating countries not only increases physical connectivity but also inspires expectations about growth, stability, and opportunity across the region. Empirical studies show that real economic variables in BRI countries respond to China's shocks in income, trade openness, and monetary sector (Lee, Karim, Khalid, & Zaidi, 2022), indicating that what happens in China radiates outward. MDPI

Marketing acts similarly. China crafts large-scale global narratives about "shared prosperity," "connectivity," "revival of the modern Silk Road," "modernity through technology." These are disseminated through state media, diplomatic channels, SOE-led branding, infrastructure opening ceremonies, and global forums. Meanwhile, local stories in Pakistan, Kenya, Serbia, Malaysia (for example) pick up these narratives, adapt them, localize them: framing the same connectivity not just as trade corridors or logistics paths but as employment opportunities, cultural integration, small business growth, or even preservation of local heritage. These localized narratives then are shared again — with diaspora, with foreign investors, with tourists — creating a cross-border marketing spillover.

Hybrid Marketing: Narratives, Reinforcement, and Tension

To make this concrete, imagine Gwadar Port in Pakistan. In Chinese marketing and official discourse, Gwadar is often presented as a strategic hub in the maritime Silk Road, a node in China's connectivity network to the Gulf and beyond. But local Pakistani marketing adds another narrative: that Gwadar brings jobs for fishermen, construction workers, and logistics staff; that local businesses will supply services; that infrastructure will bring educational and health benefits to nearby communities. These two stories — strategic infrastructure plus local human benefits — reinforce each other. The strategic narrative attracts foreign investment, Chinese capital, international attention; the local narrative builds legitimacy, trust among local populations, and reduces social friction. The hybrid marketing does not simply layer these messages; it interweaves them.

However, dialectical tension arises. The strategic/global narrative sometimes risks overlooking local voices, local concerns: environmental effects, displacement, unfair contracts, or cultural dissonance. The local narrative, powerful as it is, might struggle to reach beyond national or regional capacity if it lacks scale, or the channels to speak to global audiences. The hybrid marketing must balance coherence (so that China's global vision remains credible and consistent) with authenticity (so that local experiences are recognized, valued, and included).

Evidence from Spillover and Hybrid Marketing Literature

Although few studies have yet documented exactly these hybrid marketing spillovers in the BRI, there is related empirical support:

- Lee, Karim, Khalid, and Zaidi (2022) find that shocks to the Chinese real sector such as income growth have positive spillovers on GDP, trade openness, and other macro variables of BRI countries. While this is about economic variables, it suggests that confidence, expectations, and by extension perceptions (which marketing helps shape) travel from China outward.

- Studies of cross-regional cooperation under BRI (for example in financial technology regulation) show that participating countries often adopt marketing, institutional practices, or regulatory frameworks inspired by China but adapt them locally (e.g., regulatory spillovers) (Exploration of the Spillover Effects of Cross-Regional Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, 2025)

- In “Hybrid Marketing Best Practices” (Kanojiya, Kumar, & Jhalani, 2023), though not specific to BRI, the idea that combining traditional and digital channels amplifies reach, allows messages to travel across different demographies and geographies, is strongly supported. Such hybridity is essential when audiences in participating countries may access different channels.

Hybrid Marketing as Symbolic Infrastructure

Under CC-CEDT, infrastructure is more than steel and concrete, it is also symbolic: it changes how people imagine their future, believe in possibilities, and decide where to invest or migrate. Hybrid marketing is part of that symbolic infrastructure. It shapes narratives about how BRI will affect you locally and how you are part of something larger globally. When done well, hybrid marketing creates simultaneous spillovers: trust, legitimacy, investment flows, consumption patterns.

For example, when a Pakistani business owner sees Gwadar’s connectivity narrated as strategic, she may also believe that her trucks will have new business. When a youth in Kenya watches a documentary of BRI rail corridors, she might imagine job opportunities or diaspora remittances. When local heritage in Serbia is promoted alongside China’s infrastructure investment in tourism marketing, it may attract foreign tourists while reinforcing local pride.

Towards a Theoretical Extension: Cross-Country Marketing Spillover Theory (CC-MST)

Taking all this together, we propose an extension of CC-CEDT: Cross-Country Marketing Spillover Theory (CC-MST). The core of CC-MST is that marketing narratives and practices — when they are hybrid, containing both global scale and local authenticity — behave similarly to physical infrastructure in producing spillovers across borders and continents.

Key propositions might include:

1. Hybrid marketing amplifies the impact of infrastructure investments by reducing perception risk for investors, increasing local acceptance, and accelerating consumption spillovers.

2. The coherence of global narratives (e.g., China's strategic vision) plus the authenticity of local stories (e.g., job creation, heritage, local culture) form a dialectic that can enhance economic growth (GDP), foreign direct investment, and personal remittances more than either narrative alone.

3. Methodologically, to study these spillovers, we must look at multi-sited qualitative comparative data (e.g., Pakistan, Kenya, Serbia etc.), media content analysis, discourse analysis, and how narratives are received by different stakeholders (locals, investors, diaspora).

Economic Outcomes through Marketing Spillovers

Marketing under the Belt and Road Initiative does not only tell stories — when done well, it becomes a force that shapes investment, migration, consumption, and growth. In this section, we explore how marketing spillovers generate real economic outcomes: foreign direct investment, remittances, GDP growth, and broader economic expansion. Through the dialectic between global narratives and local authenticity, marketing transforms from persuasion into infrastructure of trust.

Foreign Direct Investment: Marketing as Assurance

One of the clearest ways in which marketing spillovers lead to economic outcomes is through foreign direct investment (FDI). Investors are risk sensitive; they look for more than just data about returns, interest rates, or resource availability. They look for legitimacy, stability, narratives that assure them that their capital will be protected, their contracts respected, and that the country is part of a wider trusted network.

Under the BRI, China's narrative of connectivity, shared destiny, and modern infrastructure communicates to global investors that participating countries are not isolated or unpredictable. When China builds modern ports, high-speed rail, or digital-logistics hubs, those physical investments are accompanied by branding, media stories, diplomatic signaling. Together, they reduce perceived risk. Empirical studies show that improved infrastructure (which enables marketing narratives to be credible) correlates with increased FDI in BRI countries (Qian, 2024). For example, "The Influence of the Belt and Road Initiative on Cross-Border E-Commerce" finds that infrastructure improvements under BRI not only facilitate trade but help attract investment by enhancing logistics and reducing barriers. Darcy & Roy Press

Another supporting piece of evidence: productivity spillovers from FDI across industries are stronger when institutional trust is higher and when narratives of modernity are well communicated (Ahn, Aiyar, & Presbitero, 2024). In other words, marketing that projects reliability and modernity enhances the effectiveness of FDI. Bruegel

Remittances: Narratives of Belonging Shape Money Flows

Remittances are another domain where marketing spillovers matter. Migrant workers and diasporas often send back money, but the amount, formality, and regularity of remittances are influenced by narratives about homeland opportunity, safety, and identity. When participating countries are marketed (both by themselves and by China) as safe, improving, connected, there is a stronger sense of belonging. People abroad feel their home country is part of something positive and invest emotionally as well as financially.

For instance, in Asian countries vulnerable to remittance flows (such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka), recent studies find that narratives and news about investment in infrastructure, improved trade corridors, and assurances of stability have increased confidence among migrants to send remittances via formal channels. Trust reduces the use of informal channels. One econometric study has shown that remittances, FDI, and inflation interact dynamically to affect GDP growth in these nations; when narratives are strong (through marketing or news coverage), remittances more positively contribute to growth. PMC+1

GDP Growth: Tourism, Consumer Brands, E-Commerce & Local Culture

GDP does not grow just from factories and ports. It grows also from the movement of people, ideas, brands, and culture. When marketing bridges global platforms (for instance Alibaba, e-commerce marketplaces, or digital Silk Road initiatives) with local culture, the result is amplified.

The rise of cross-border e-commerce under BRI is a good example. Infrastructure improvements and policy facilitation make it easier for goods made in a local participating country to reach international consumers. Studies show cross-border e-commerce export volumes to BRI countries have been rising consistently. These export increases not only add trade value but also stimulate related sectors: packaging, logistics, digital payments, marketing services, and local manufacturing for export products. Taylor & Francis Online+2SpringerLink+2

Tourism similarly benefits when local culture is marketed authentically but visible globally. Heritage sites, cultural festivals, local crafts, when promoted via hybrid narratives, draw international visitors, which boosts service industries, hospitality, local employment. These sectors often have high multiplier effects in local economies.

Expansion of Economy: Trust-Driven Marketing Reducing Uncertainty

Finally, perhaps the most subtle but powerful outcome is how marketing spillovers reduce uncertainty. Uncertainty is a cost. Investors, consumers, and diaspora often demand a “risk premium” when they are unsure: higher interest rates, informal channels, or low investment. When marketing narratives (backed up by infrastructure projects, transparent policies, visible development) assure them that the risk is managed, trust is built.

This trust expands the economy by allowing wider trade, more investment, lower cost of capital, more formal remittance flows, better integration into global supply chains. Thus what starts as marketing becomes part of the symbolic and institutional infrastructure that underpins economic development.

For example, studies of cross-border e-commerce (Jiang, 2023) highlight that as logistics, tariffs, customs, digital payments improve, marketing messages about “Made in X country” or “Quality assured” gain credibility, thereby attracting new markets and further investment and consumption.

Dialectical Reflection: Strengths, Risks, and Balance

It is not that marketing spillovers are universally positive. There is a tension. Over-promising can lead to disappointment; if infrastructure does not deliver on the promises made in marketing, trust can be lost. Local uncertainty (political instability, regulatory risk) can undercut the narrative. Some stakeholders might feel excluded if the narratives do not resonate with their culture or values.

But the dialectical synthesis suggests that when global narrative power (China's role, connectivity, scale) is balanced with local authenticity (jobs, culture, heritage, trust), then the economic outcomes achievable through marketing spillovers are far greater and more sustainable.

Summary of Economic Outcomes

In summary, marketing spillovers under BRI manifest in:

- Higher FDI triggered not only by physical infrastructure but by assurances of credibility, narrative trust, and being part of a global network.
- Increased remittances, as migrants respond to narratives of belonging, stability, and opportunity, and choose more formal, productive channels.
- Stronger GDP growth in sectors such as tourism, consumer goods, e-commerce, and cultural industries where marketing bridges global platforms and local culture.
- Broader economic expansion as trust reduces transaction costs, lowers uncertainty, enhances formalization of trade and capital flows, and invites deeper involvement in global value chains.

Towards a Marketing-Centric CC-CEDT

What if marketing were not just the echo or afterthought of infrastructure and policy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but a primary thread weaving the fabric of integration itself? In the traditions of Cross-Country, Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory (CC-CEDT), we have seen the power of roads, ports, rail, and digital channels to connect, uplift, and transform. These physical infrastructures generate spillovers: trade increases, investment flows, migration patterns shift, economic value spreads. But in many cases, the narratives that accompany these infrastructures — the marketing stories, the symbols of modernity, trust, belonging — travel too, sometimes farther than the steel.

Marketing under the BRI is not merely incidental. It is a core driver of integration, an equal partner to railways and ports in shaping how countries, firms, and communities imagine their futures together. Infrastructure may promise roads and rails, but marketing gives those infrastructures meaning. If roads connect, marketing persuades people to use them, to trust in them, to invest along them. If ports are built, marketing invites trade, tourism, and collaboration around them. Without stories of credibility, authenticity, and promise, even the best infrastructure remains under-used or viewed with scepticism.

Proposal of Cross-Country Marketing Spillover Theory (CC-MST)

In light of this, we propose extending CC-CEDT with a new theory: Cross-Country Marketing Spillover Theory (CC-MST). CC-MST holds that marketing narratives and practices act like symbolic infrastructure: they generate spillovers across borders, shape perceptions, reduce uncertainty, and thereby facilitate economic connections much as physical infrastructures do. More precisely:

1. Narrative Scale + Local Authenticity: When global narratives (for example, by China's central agencies) are delivered in coherence and scale, but are adapted, reinterpreted, or complemented locally, they become more credible and potent.

2. Simultaneity: Marketing campaigns in multiple nodes (China, Pakistan, Kenya, Malaysia, etc.) that emphasize both the strategic connectivity of BRI and the local human, cultural, or economic benefits can reinforce one another.

3. Spillover Effects: These hybrid marketing narratives spill beyond their origin. A narrative built in one country or node can influence investor perceptions, diaspora attitudes, consumer choices, and even policy in neighbouring or connected countries.

Examples of Marketing Spillover Between Nodes

One concrete illustration comes from Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Vietnam have, in recent years, seen surges in manufacturing exports and foreign direct investment partially because global supply chains are diversifying (often away from or in conjunction with China), which is accompanied by marketing of trade routes, logistics advantages, and stability of investment climate. Investors looking beyond China see Southeast Asia as more than a cost-alternative; it is being marketed as a complementary partner in regional networks. McKinsey & Company

Another example is Singapore's role as a regional hub or launchpad for firms from neighbouring countries. Singapore is increasingly serving as a gateway for Vietnamese SMEs to expand abroad, both because of its financial infrastructure and because of how Singapore's reputation (its marketing) amplifies credibility, regulatory standards, and access. This influence spills over to Vietnam: local firms leverage the credibility and spillover trust associated with Singapore's brand when seeking foreign investment or entering global supply chains. Vietnam Investment Review - VIR

Additionally, studies of economic consequences of policy, trade, and financial shocks from China show that BRI-partner countries' real sector variables (GDP, trade openness) respond significantly to Chinese shocks. While many of these works focus on material variables, the fact of "shocks" suggests that perceptions and expectations travel too: confidence (which is shaped by marketing/narratives) is part of what is shocked. MDPI

Theoretical & Methodological Dimensions of CC-MST

Under CC-MST, we can make several theoretical propositions:

- Proposition 1: Hybrid marketing narratives (global + local) will lead to greater foreign direct investment than either narrative alone, because they reduce perceived risk and increase perceived legitimacy.

- Proposition 2: Countries that share cultural, linguistic, or historical ties with heavily marketed nodes (China, Singapore, etc.) will receive larger marketing spillover effects.

- Proposition 3: The strength of spillover depends on institutional quality, media reach, digital connectivity, and absorptive capacity of local firms and communities.

Methodologically, studying CC-MST calls for qualitative comparative designs: discourse analysis of media and marketing materials across countries; interviews with local businesses, government, diaspora; content analysis of narratives in multiple languages; and tracing how perceptions (e.g., local investment climate, trust) shift over time alongside infrastructure developments.

Creating a Foundation for Integration Through Marketing

In sum, by placing marketing at the centre rather than the periphery of CC-CEDT, we propose CC-MST: a way to understand how marketing spillovers become engines of economic connection. This theory does not supplant physical infrastructure but complements it: roads and rails connect the places; marketing connects the imaginations, the trust, and thus the flows of investment, remittances, trade, and culture. Just as an economic corridor is not only built of concrete but also of shared belief in its value, CC-MST suggests that nations rising together under the BRI do so not just through building, but through storytelling, representation, and the symbolic infrastructure of trust.

Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates that globalization is not only built in steel and railways but also imagined in stories. This study has shown that China's narrative scale and coherence, when combined with the cultural authenticity and intimacy of participating countries, create hybrid marketing practices that travel across borders as symbolic infrastructure. These practices influence foreign direct investment, remittances, consumer trust, and GDP growth, illustrating that marketing is not a side-effect of development but a core driver of integration (Yan & Enderwick, 2021; Qian, 2024).

The originality of this paper lies in the proposal of the **Cross-Country Marketing Spillover Theory (CC-MST)**, which is directly inspired by and builds upon the **Cross-Country and Cross-Continent Economic Development Theory (CC-CEDT)**, a framework developed by Dr. Salman in 2021–2022. CC-CEDT demonstrates that infrastructure investments in one country can generate economic spillovers across borders. Extending this logic, CC-MST argues that **marketing narratives and practices function as symbolic infrastructure**, producing similar cross-country spillovers of trust, perception, and opportunity. Just as a port in one nation can stimulate trade in its neighbors, a compelling marketing narrative in one hub — such as Singapore or Beijing — can elevate investor confidence and consumer sentiment in connected economies like Vietnam or Kenya.

By situating CC-MST as a theoretical extension of CC-CEDT, we highlight that the future of globalization will not be defined solely by the movement of goods, but also by the circulation of meaning, trust, and cultural imagination. Policymakers and firms must therefore recognize marketing as symbolic infrastructure, capable of shaping not only trade flows but also the legitimacy of development itself. This dialectical synthesis of CC-CEDT with CC-MST provides a novel paradigm for international business, development studies, and global marketing, reframing the BRI as both a material and symbolic project.

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