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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
Branding Across Cultures: The Role of Analytic and Holistic Thinking
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Understanding how consumers in different parts of the world respond to branding activities is an important issue in marketing today. However, most of the existing research on branding has been conducted with only American consumers. There are indications that culture may influence how branding activities are interpreted. Bottomley and Holden (2001) used existing data sets to suggest that brand extension evaluations may vary across countries. Roth (1995) showed that individualism and power-distance, two of the key dimensions of culture, can influence whether a functional or a social brand image positioning is successful. As these studies suggest, culture may influence branding in many ways.

In this session, cultural differences in responses to brand extension were examined using a recent framework from cultural psychology. Specifically all three papers adopted a framework proposed by Nisbett et al (2001), which suggests that Western cultures tend to engage in analytic thinking, while Eastern cultures tend to engage in holistic thinking. Holistic thinking is defined as “involving an orientation to the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field.” Analytic thinking “involves a detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object to assign it to categories.”

Each paper addressed a different aspect of the analytic-holistic thinking process and its impact on brand extension evaluations. The first paper, by Alokparna Monga Basu and Deborah Roedder John, used the analytic-holistic thinking framework to hypothesize that differences in styles of thinking influence the way in which consumers from an Eastern culture versus a Western culture evaluate brand extension fit. They proposed that Westerners focus on attributes of the extension whereas Easterners take a broader view. Findings from two studies found that, under certain conditions, consumers from an Eastern culture (India) perceived a higher fit between the brand and the extension than did consumers from a Western culture (United States), leading to more favorable brand extension evaluations for Easterners.

The second paper, by Sharon Ng and Michael Houston, expanded on the theme of cultural influences on branding by addressing how consumers in different cultures vary in the accessibility of brand exemplars versus brand attributes. Drawing upon the analytic-holistic and the independent-interdependent frameworks, the authors found that brand attribute information is more accessible among westeriners, whereas brand exemplars are more accessible among easterners. In addition, they found that when evaluating brand extensions, consumers in different cultures differ in the way they perceive fit between the brand and the extension category.

The third paper, by Yeosun Yoon and Zeynep Gurhan-Canli, also used the analytic-holistic framework to examine how consumers in different cultures use diagnostic versus non-diagnostic information in evaluating brand extensions. The authors found that when exposed to low and moderate fit brand extensions, East Asians (compared to Westerners) provided more favorable brand extension evaluations because they took into account a variety of non-diagnostic information.

The session concluded with a discussion of conceptual and methodological issues in studying cultural differences, lead by the session discussion leader, Durairaj Maheswaran. Topics included experimental methods for examining processes responsible for cultural differences, issues in applying the analytic-holistic thinking framework in consumer behavior, and questions regarding sample selection and composition.

References