Special Session Summary    Global Consumption: (How) Does Culture Matter?

Cristel Antonia Russell, San Diego State University
Ana Valenzuela, Baruch College

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The marketplace has become a global playground: Global products, brands, and symbols are part of the everyday life of consumers around the world. Nevertheless, consumers’ reactions and evaluations towards these global entities are not always the same... or are they? Cultural identity and values may affect the perception, judgment and choice of global consumption offerings. Thus, the situational and often ritualized performance of reflexive cultural identities becomes a critical mechanism of homogenous “global consumer”.

Although there is a growing interest in global consumption issues in the 21st century, relatively little is known about the generalizability of consumer behavior theoretical frameworks across diverse cultures. With the growing trend in the globalization of marketing activities, there is a pressing need to explicitly address whether existing frameworks are universal or laden with assumptions derived from Western cultures. The recent spurt of cross-country research in both marketing and social psychology supports the need to examine the role of cultural orientation in judgment and choice. The cultural psychology literature, for example, highlights the differential influence of cultural orientation on persuasion processes (e.g., Aaker and Maheswaran 1997), decision making (e.g., Briley, Morris, and Simonsen 2000), causal attributions (e.g., Choi, Nisbett, and Norenzayan 1999), and social perception (e.g., Triandis 1995).

Despite the practical impetus and the growing theoretical interest in cultural psychology, relatively little work examines the effect of cultural variables on the acceptance of global products, brands, and symbols. The three papers in this session constitute a step forward in that direction. All three papers not only explore how culture affects consumer perceptions and choice of global brands and products but also how consumer choices may influence cultural identity as well. Despite their reliance on diverse methodologies, the papers are complementary and share a common focus on examining the relationship between cultural identities, consumer choices and, in general, consumption practices.

In the first paper, Askegaard discusses the changed role of the concept of culture in an age of cultural reflexivity. He argues that cultural reflexivity is increasingly prevalent as a social phenomenon, and that this has important consequences for the way in which consumer researchers must deal with processes of globalization. In the second paper, Erdem, Swait and Valenzuela examine cross-national cultural differences in consumer behavior in regard to brands as global signals. Their cross-cultural empirical analysis reveals that cultural dimensions impact the extent and the type of global brand effects. In the third paper, Russell and Russell draw upon the notions of cultural acceptance and resistance to articulate and test different mechanisms by which consumers respond to offerings in the global entertainment industry. The moderating effect of country of origin and cultural salience are tested experimentally in a cross-cultural setting.

Russell W. Belk briefly summarized the overlapping points across the three papers. Together, these three papers highlight the important influence of cultural orientation and cultural salience on consumers’ responses to global products and symbols and begin to account for whether and how culture affects and is affected by consumers’ consumption practices. To extend the discussion, Russell Belk showed some Chinese-based videos that provided examples of global consumption symbols. To finalize the session, the audience participated in a discussion of areas of future research in the topic of global consumption and of the role that culture plays in influencing marketing effectiveness and choice decisions.

“Culture as the Water Fish Swim In? Consumption, Reflexivity and Globalization”
Søren Askegaard

The current accelerated phase of globalization refers to a period with changing and increasingly rapid global flows in which boundaries across national cultures are dissolving and the landscapes they demarcate are transgressed by new virtual “culturescapes” of technology, media, finance, mixed ethnicities and ideas (Appadurai 1990). Cultural encounters proliferate, which has led to an increasing interest in the identity-constructive processes in the globalising world, not least through processes of consumption (Friedman 1994). Various studies have addressed the specific marketing and consumption issues of this multicultural world (Costa and Bamossy 1995, Howes 1996) and the term “consumptionscapes” has been suggested to indicate the role of consumption as a global flow on top of those proposed by Appadurai (Ger and Belk 1996).

These, and related studies have brought the theoretical debates far beyond the discussions of the process of globalization centered around the themes of homogenization and heterogenization, standardization and adaptation so prevalent within the marketing literature. Especially intriguing in bridging the gap between such dichotomies has been theories of ‘structures of common differences’ (Wilk 1996) and ‘the globalization of fragmentation’ (Firat 1997), both essentially incorporating homogenization as well as heterogenization processes in order to provide a more satisfactory explanation of the societal changes occurring as a result of the globalization process. Consequently, simplistic dichotomous explanations must be eschewed and classificatory systems such as global-local, East-West, and foreign-domestic must be used with some caution. This clearly has methodological implications for consumer and marketing research in relation to globalization.

Based on globalization theory, it is argued that reflexive culture is an idiom for the expression of a new type of consumer agency potential, a cultural response in a time where national and transnational political-economic entities no longer hold the same legitimacy and power to socialize through the provision of integrating values with which citizens can affiliate. Cultural reflexivity and its attendant consumption patterns may be turning into a general claim to integration and differential identity in an increasingly homogenized (marketized) global political economy. One of the most striking features about contemporary transnational consumer subculture is the fact that it is constructed through a process of marketplace bricolage. In other words, the essence of reflexive culture is that it produces and sustains new cultural identities through consumption of marketized and commodified cultural forms: food, attire, art, music, dance, architectural environments, and so forth. Thus, the situational and often ritualized performance of reflexive cultural identities becomes a critical mechanism of
cultural (ethnic, historical,...) boundary formation and maintenance. Hence it can be argued that in a globalizing consumer society, culture increasingly becomes something that is resulting from and hence explained by consumption practices rather than the inverse.

Identification through cultural reflexivity and ethnically bounded consumption may be the sign of a generalized wavering between affiliation with some future post-national world community as yet unformed, or the acceptance of homogenized mass consumption, or the development of (consumer) counter-cultures of resistance. Robertson proposes that we speak of "glocalization" since both homogenizing (globalizing) and heterogenizing (localizing) processes are part and parcel of globalization. Some of the manifestations of glocalization have been conceptualized as instances of 'creolization' or 'hybridization' which are essentially new cultural forms that emerge as the global is incorporated within the local (Pieterse 1995). The new cultural forms are seen as mixes of different often seemingly incompatible cultural symbols and practices but which nevertheless are considered local in meaning in the conduct of everyday life.

Glocalized consumption practices can be typified around two dimensions—scope and compatibility. Scope basically is a geographical dimension—i.e., whether the consumption practice is logically available on a global scale or whether it is logically tied to a specific geographical locality. Compatibility refers to the ‘fit’ of certain consumption practices with other consumption practices, that is, which practices can and cannot be changed, added to, fused etc. The decisive difference is the practice’s dependence on what is considered a pre-existing script describing the essentially culturally correct way of conducting it.

Based on ethnographic, observational and interview-based studies, the impact of cultural reflexivity on consumption practices is illustrated by the globalization process of yoga culture. This includes both reflections on how this ancient tradition is adopted into modern, Western consumer cultures, as well as how processes of glocalization and modernization are simultaneously changing the image of yoga in one of its cultures of origin: Nepal.

“Brands as Global Signals: A Cross-Country Study”
Tulin Erdem, Jeffre Swait, and Ana Valenzuela

Brands potentially play many roles in consumer decision-making and choice behavior. Underlying many of the brand effects is consumer uncertainty about product attributes, and/or benefits, which arises from the existence of imperfect and asymmetric information that characterizes many product markets (i.e., firms are more informed about their own products than consumers). Thus, brands can play an important role in how consumers learn, encode and evaluate product information (e.g., attributes), and can influence consumer evaluations of both relative values of attributes/levels and decision strategies or combination rules.

Past research has already attempted to link consumer choices to a number of cultural dimensions. Particularly, Hofstede’s (1980) influential work on cross-cultural value systems identifies three aspects of cultural identity that can be related to brand choice, in general, and brands as credible signals, in particular: collectivism/individualism, uncertainty avoidance and power distance. Although Hofstede’s research was conducted in organizational settings, the values he identifies have been widely associated with consumer behavior. For example, Hofstede’s values have been associated with consumer’s tipping behavior (Lynn, Zinkhan and Harris 1993), country of origin effects on product evaluations (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000), value-attitude relations (Gregory, Munch and Peterson 2002), persuasion effects (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997), consumer innovativeness (Steenkamp, Hofstede and Wedel 1999) and behavioral intention models (Lee and Green 1991).

The individualism–collectivism dimension relates brand usage to social motivations (Hofstede 1980; Triandis 1995). Cultures high in individualism tend to seek variety and hedonistic experiences, whereas cultures high in collectivism correlate more with conformity and group behavior. Roth (1995) found support for the hypotheses that collectivist cultures find brands that reinforce group membership and affiliation more attractive, whereas individualistic cultures favor brands that reinforce their independence and provide individual gratification. Besides, collectivist societies value consensus and that makes them loyal to the dominant brand (Robinson 1996). Finally, research into the symbolic meaning of brands indicates that brand names have a higher symbolic meaning in collectivistic societies (Johanson, Ronkainen and Czinkota 1994).

Another cultural dimension, power distance, describes the extent to which a culture fosters social inequality. If one relates the aspects of cultural power distance to consumer needs, then it appears that social brand images should be the best fit for high power distance cultures since people are highly motivated by social status and affiliation norms. On the other hand, when power distance is low, social brand images will not match the cultural norm because consumers would not be motivated by group-related needs. In other words, products with recognized, exclusive, relatively expensive brand names will tend to have higher levels of social status attached to them than more generic, less exclusive brands. Given the relationship between brand name and social status, past research shows that consumers in cultures rating high in power distance attach more importance to the brand names of products than would consumers in cultures rating low in power distance (Bristow and Asquith 1999; Roth 1995; Robinson 1996).

The potentially most relevant cultural mechanism (given our focus on brands as signals) is uncertainty avoidance. This concept captures the cultural pattern of seeking stability, predictability, and low stress rather than change and new experiences. People in high uncertainty avoidance cultures are risk averse and resistant to change and variety seeking (Hofstede 1980). When cultures are high in uncertainty avoidance, consumers focus greatly on risk aversion and problem solving. As a consequence, consumers in cultures high in uncertainty avoidance favor credible and consistent brands more than consumer in cultures low in uncertainty avoidance (Robinson 1996; Dawar and Parker 1994).

A final cultural dimension that may moderate the effects of brands as signals is the value of time across cultures: Time constraints and the motivation to save time have been associated with the preference for brands with clear and credible positions (Wind 1977). For example, the consumer behavior literature has advanced the proposition that consumers under time pressure adopt brand loyalty as a strategy for avoiding the risks and demands associated with trying new brands (Howard and Sheth 1969). At the same time, there is some evidence that a time orientation based on the value of past-time and continuity (as in the case of eastern cultures) tends to make consumers very brand loyal (Yau 1988).

This review reveals that cultural dimensions may indeed impact the extent and the type of brand effects but given the many (sometimes counteracting) considerations, it is an empirical question whether overall such cultural dimensions lead to significant differences in behavior towards brands in general and the mechanisms through which the signaling effects of brands materialize in particular. We conduct our analysis using survey and experimental data on orange juice and personal computers. Data was collected from subjects in the U.S., Spain, Turkey, Germany, Brazil, India and Japan. We chose these countries to represent a wide range of
Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (1980). The results obtained provide strong empirical evidence for brands as signals of product positions across countries that vary widely along various cultural dimensions. However, some differences emerge that are further discussed in detail.

“One Part Salience, One Part Origin, Stir, Sprinkle with Acceptance and Resistance, Bake for One Century and Voila: A New Cultural Casserole!”

Dale Russell and Cristel Antonia Russell

This paper presents the results of several cross-cultural investigations of consumers’ reactions to entertainment products in an increasingly global entertainment industry. It is motivated by increasing concerns, particularly in Europe, over the Americanization of the global entertainment industry (Cowen 2002) and the potential power of US movies to instill local cultures with American ideals and values (Silj and Alvarado 1988). The research identifies and tests the processes by which global audiences respond to domestic versus foreign movies.

The acceptance proposition suggests that foreign movies may seem exotic and attract local audiences’ interest. Consuming stories and fiction from other cultures has indeed been shown to increase openness to other cultures (Fox 2003), which in turn leads to greater acceptance of foreign products (Suh and Kwon 2002). This phenomenon is especially pertinent in the experience of TV series and movies, which are, by nature, contextually interpreted and culturally mediated (Salomon 1985; Abu-Lughod 1997). Alternatively, audiences may resist cultural products from other cultures simply because they cannot relate to them or are not familiar with the cultural schemas being depicted. In particular, non-American audiences may reject overpowering US movies, especially when reminded of the presumed cultural colonization of the US through film and television (Mathy 2000).

Based on an extant review of the literature, we propose that making the other culture salient should have opposite effects in the US and in Europe: by increasing acceptance of foreign products in the US and increasing resistance to American products in Europe. These propositions, and the moderating role of country of origin and cultural salience, were tested experimentally in a cross-cultural setting, comprised of American and French samples. Study 1, a cross-sectional survey, served to establish a baseline of cultural differences in movie consumption between France and the US. Study 2 experimentally manipulated country of origin of a movie and cultural salience in both countries to further understand the acceptance and resistance processes.

Cross-sectional data from study 1 confirmed that the ratio of domestic to total movies watched was greater in the US than in France. They also showed that ethnocentrism is associated to resistance to foreign movies whereas global openness is positively related to consumption of and desire for watching foreign movies. They also confirmed that animosity exists in both countries toward the other one, a situation that justified manipulating country of origin in Study 2.

Study 2 relied on a 2 (respondent country: US vs. France) X 2 (cultural salience: self or other) X 2 (movie origin: domestic or foreign) between-subject experimental design to test the effect of cultural salience and country of origin of a movie cross-culturally. Participants were asked to react to the synopsis of a new movie from their own or another country. Cultural salience was manipulated by making respondents aware of their own or of another culture before exposing them to the movie information (Briely and Wyer 2002). The experiment showed that reactions to the movie were affected by cultural salience but in different ways: prompting US respondents about French culture made them more likely to recommend the French movie; however, prompting French respondents about the US culture made them less likely to recommend the US movie. These results were confirmed by the pattern of animosity scores across conditions: animosity was greater overall in France than in the US but exposure to a US movie further increased animosity among the French.

The studies’ findings confirm that US movies dominate the global cinema scene commercially and this domination clearly affects consumers’ movie choices. US respondents, though rarely aware of non-US movies, responded positively to foreign films when another culture was salient. French respondents have culturally diverse movie experiences but appear to resist the invasion of US movies only when prompted to think about the US culture. Implications for the global intertwining of cultures and entertainment products’ role in shaping consumers’ cultural repertoire and self identity were discussed.

REFERENCES


