The Global Brand’S Meaning Melange: Seeking Home Abroad Through Global Brands

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Since global brands are omnipresent, consumers increasingly encounter them in multiple cultural locales. In the brand management literature, it is assumed that it is desirable to implement standardized global brand platforms across markets to generate consistent brand images. Based on an interpretive study of U.S. residing consumers’ experiences of Starbucks and McDonald’s in China, we show that despite perceived standardized platforms, consumers imbue brands with different meanings when consumed abroad. We find that global brands provide consumers with a sense of comfort and familiarity that is reminiscent of home.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The importance of standardizing a brand by using a uniform visual identity and establishing a consistent global brand image has been reinforced as it is recognized that consumers have become increasingly mobile and encounter global brands in markets other than their home culture (Matthiesen and Phau 2005). In the brand management literature, it is generally recommended to use a common marketing platform including consistent brand names and symbols so that the brand and its marketing communication is instantly recognized by consumers who are traveling to different countries (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000, p. 307; Kapferer 2004, p. 402). The conventional wisdom is that when a brand is consistently executed across markets, it evokes a consistent set of brand associations which helps to maintain consistency of brand image (Keller 2003, p. 684).

Although this viewpoint may have intuitive appeal, a review of previous research reveals that the link between a brand’s common marketing platform and a consumer’s development of a consistent brand image for a brand that is consumed in multiple cultural locales has not been empirically studied. As well as assuming that standardized global brands deliver identical values when consumed across markets we could anticipate that consumers value global brands differently in unfamiliar cultural settings because they offer a sense of order and predictability. This suggests that when consumers travel or temporarily cross cultures (Davies and Fitchett 2004), the cultural context has a profound impact on the symbolic meaning evoked by the brand (Eckhardt and Houston 2002; Miller 1998). The purpose of this study is to explore the multidimensionality of global brand meaning and develop an understanding of consumers’ meaning development for standardized global brands consumed in multiple cultural locales.

The empirical data for this study consists of accounts of U.S. residing consumers’ experiences of either Starbucks or McDonald’s both at home and when traveling in China. Our informants are 29 entry and mid-level professionals enrolled in graduate business programs at a university in United States. Data collection took place before, during, and after the informants made a two week trip to Beijing and Shanghai as part of courses in doing business in China. The empirical material was gathered through a number of techniques including personal reflection essays about the brand before they traveled, journals of food consumption while in China, and visits to the study-site documented using photographs taken by the informants, and in-depth interviews using photo-elicitation when they returned (Heisley and Levy 1991). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed using a hermeneutic approach as laid out by Thompson (1997).

The study shows that when consumers cross cultures and experience global brands in milieu different from their everyday consumption context, global brands take on new meanings despite the standardization of the marketing platform as perceived by the consumers. Our findings challenge conventional thinking in brand management and revise the theoretical notion that standardized global brands generate consistent brand images when experienced in different cultural locales. It is apparent that oftentimes the brands take on new symbolic roles helping consumers to cope with the uncertainties of the cultural context. Sometimes, encountering Starbucks and McDonald’s in China triggers a meaning that is diametrical to the meaning ascribed to the brand in the U.S. Thus, the prevailing assumption that consistently executed brands generate consistent brand images does not hold true. When consumed in China, the brands evoke meanings of comfort and predictability and offer an instant symbolic connection to the individual’s everyday consumption context.

Our study lends support to the contention that consumers ascribe contextualized meanings to brands, shaped by the cultural context in which the consumption occurs (Kleine and Kernan 1991). This means that a consumer can be negatively (positively) oriented towards a brand in the everyday consumption context and be favorable (unfavorable) towards the brand when consumed in an unfamiliar cultural locale. It is evident that even when the brand platform is consistently executed across markets, consumers activate multiple meanings for global brands. This meaning discrepancy suggests that global brand images can be construed as a meaning mélange that through its consistent inconsistency captures the different values and meanings consumers seek from a brand in the various cultural contexts in which it is consumed. The role of marketplace cultures and brands for consumer identity projects has been an important avenue in CCT research. We contribute to this line of research by illustrating that brands can provide relief from the uncertainties of unfamiliar cultural contexts and evoke meanings of home. This finding highlights an important, yet unknown role of brands.

References