Fashion Systems and Historical Culture in the Development of Chinese Global Branding

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Contemporary Chinese brands often lack the privileged positions of prominent global brands. This project sheds light on Chinese cultural resources with the potential to address this problem by presenting three case studies: Jay Chou, the Chinese musician, the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony and the fashion brand Shanghai Tang. It further investigates the possibility and process of understanding Chinese global branding strategy through a lens of fashion systems developed from an engagement with these three cases. Through a multi-sited study and ECM for data collection, it will develop a new framework for brand globalization and better understand global consumption practices.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15016/volumes/v37/NA-37

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Global market trends move toward increasing global cultural convergence and, at the same time, a need for local cultural differentiation. To address these contradictory forces, the research investigates processes and practices of marketers and consumers in three related cases: Jay Chou (a well-known Chinese music artist); the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony; and Shanghai Tang (a global fashion brand). The studies reveal strategic processes and mechanisms involved in the creation of a series of texts and codes from Chinese cultural resources. The theoretical and practical significance of studying historical culture, fashion systems and integrating current branding theories in a more holistic manner contributes a new approach to apparent contradictions that clearly must be dealt with simultaneously.

Methodology: multi-sited ethnography studies and ECM Data collection
Multi-sited ethnography is suited for interdisciplinary cultural studies on global and local areas and expresses the diffusion and circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in different time and space (Marcus 1998). Interviewing global consumers and marketers in different locations and observing consumption environments and consumers’ consumption behaviours, as well as websites and other media resources, reveal the possibility and process of understanding, and engaging, Chinese global branding strategy. An extended case method, a mode of “logical analysis on the data interpretation of field observation, interviews, primary source materials, archived texts” (Holt 2002, p. 73), is employed to illuminate recent global brand culture initiatives from China.

Historical Culture in Branding
From a cultural branding perspective, retro activities and aesthetic fashions, including reproduction (Pearman 1999), retro-servicing (Alexander 1999), retro-styling (Brown 1999), retro retail stores (Maclaran and Stevens 1998), and heritage marketing hybrids, recognize the past’s use in brand development. In other words, historical culture is employed to develop brands. Indeed, the presentation of historical culture, or the past, in marketing has been investigated for several decades. Some researchers contend that the prevalence of retroactivities is motivated by consumers’ nostalgic desire (e.g. Lowenthal 1985; Belk 1991; Borgerson and Schroeder 2003: Holak and Havlena 1992; Stern 1992; Holbrook 1993; Holbrook and Schindler 1996, 2003).

Others claim that marketing the past is a way of secularizing the sacred historical, cultural, and religious elements and beliefs to enhance marketing activities (e.g. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; O’Guinn and Belk 1989). As Eckhardt and Bengtsson suggest in the Chinese case, it may be valuable to engage the past as a strategic brand-signifying practice (2007). Moreover, they demonstrate Chinese branding’s emergence in imperial China, marking a long history of attention to these processes.

Brand Development Culture and Fashion Systems
Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling discuss the roles that history and culture play in understanding the cultural codes of branding, expanding recognition of research that taps into what they call brand culture (2006). They write, “If brands exist as cultural, ideological, and political objects, then brand researchers require tools developed to understand culture, politics, and ideology…” (2006, p. 1). Thus, we understand the importance of social, cultural, and historical resources in undertaking branding, marketing, and consumer research.

For purposes of this research, a fashion transformation process model (Cholachatpinyo et al., 2002) allows us to recognize fashion as a system that influences global brand development, engaging fashion branding processes from macro-subjective (economic values/assumptions that legitimize particular activity); macro-objective (marketplace and economic activities); micro-objective (interaction between individual and variety of fashion objects); and micro-subjective perspectives (psychological phenomena of individual and of the interaction among individuals).
Symbolic production and consumption

Arnould and Thompson (2005) indicate that studies of symbolic production and consumption mainly “draw from semiotic and literary critical theories to analyze the symbolic meanings, cultural ideals, and ideological inducements encoded in popular culture texts and the rhetorical tactics that are used to make these ideological appeals compelling”. Studies on symbolic consumption mainly focus on the critical augments about “sign domination” and “sign experimentation.” Derivation of sign meaning draws from “sign domination,” relying on the social structure and “sign experimentation,” focusing on consumers’ agency. The notion of symbolic production and consumption in brand culture is grounded in the assumption that non-linguistic sign systems, including aspects of advertising or traditional rituals, are structured like language by means of codes or conventions, yet may demonstrate both aspects of sign derivation.

Global Brand Culture

Cayla, Julien, and Giana M. Eckhardt (2008) adopt a cultural approach to branding in the global marketplace based on different attempts to develop an informed historical and cultural “analysis of brands” (p. 13). Global myths might be targeted to build international brands. Put simply, global brands arouse a global myth and “the global myth of the independent, self-actualizing, decision-making consumer is simultaneously a participant in and citizen of a modernizing world” (p. 102). Holt (2004) posits that a cultural branding approach can “identify the most valuable type of myth for the brand to perform at a particular historical juncture, and then provide specific direction to creative partners on how to compose the myth” (p. 218).

Moreover, Cayla and Eckhardt (2008) evoke the modernity of Asian branding. They found that Asian brand managers highlight universal practices of globalization that simulate “a generic, hyper-urban, and multicultural experience… infused with diverse cultural referents, and therefore contribute to the creation of an imagined Asia as urban, modern and multicultural” (p. 216). For example, Singapore-based fashion brand 77th Street, and Hong Kong–based fashion brand Giordano respectively emphasize and demonstrate the modernity and fashionableness of Asian brands and its brand development.

Brand culture goes further than recognizing the roles that culture, in various guises, can play for brands and in branding processes. Rather, brands and branding participate in processes of co-creating culture (Schroeder 2009). This research offers a framework to better understand global and local brands’ development, exploring consumption and management discourses related to historical culture and fashion in the Chinese context. The findings also address the lack of privileged positions for contemporary Chinese brands in competition with more prominent global brands.

References


