Cultural Brand Engagement: the Roles of Brands in the Construction of Cultural Experiences

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This research explores cultural brand engagement for sojourners. We show that sojourners actively and purposefully use brands when constructing their cultural experiences. Specifically, our findings showcase how different experiential motives influence how sojourners engage with brands as temporary residents of a culture.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Without question, consumers and brands continue to be an important focus of consumer researchers, particularly in a global world, as consumers move across countries and encounter different culturally dependent meanings of products and brands. Notably, consumers’ usage and involvement with brands vary across cultures (Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008) and individual brand meanings may evolve or morph across time and place (Bengtsson, Bardhi, and Venkatraman 2010; Ligas and Cotte 1999; Kates and Goh 2003). Brand engagement, defined as “cognitive, emotional, behavioral activity in direct brand interactions” (Hollebeck 2011, 790), includes both experiential and instrumental activities with brands (Brodie et al. 2013) that may be influenced by the cultural context in which such brand activities take place. In this research, we explore cultural brand engagement; that is, how consumers engage with brands within a new cultural space, to shed light on the experience-dependent and contextual nature of consumer-brand engagement. In contrast to previous research, our work provides a nuanced understanding of how consumers react to, and negotiate, cultural brand meaning differences. In particular, we show that cultural border crossers purposefully and proactively use brands as part of experiencing a new cultural context.

We explore cultural brand engagements using an interpretive approach. Our research focuses on a specific border crosser; the sojourner, defined as a temporary resident of a culture. Specifically, we explore how cultural brand engagement is embedded in the specific cultural experience of international students studying at an American college; a microcosm within the broader American culture with specific culturally anchored activities (Moffatt 1991) where American students provide the idealized scripts for participation in college activities. Thus, the American college context provides us with an opportunity to fully explore the instrumental and experiential roles of brands in the construction of a temporary cultural experience.

We purposefully recruited international students from countries with different cultural, political, and economic environments (United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Iran, Turkey, China, Taiwan, India). An all-female sample was selected to focus on cultural differences in experience construction and instrumental and experiential brand use. Our sample included 16 females, age 20 to 30 who had resided in the United States for 3 months to 3 years before the first interview. With an objective to capture informants’ emic perspectives (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) of cultural exploration and brand use, we conducted two semi-structured interviews, three to four months apart, with each informant (Lincoln and Guba 1985; McCracken 1988). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Cultural brand engagement themes were uncovered by using an iterative process (Spiggle 1994), moving back-and-forth between informants and across the entire data set to uncover specific categories, concepts, and contextual influences which were subsequently compared to extant theory. Specific instrumental and experiential aspects of brand use were coded and compared both within informants and across informants to capture different types of brand engagement and the relationship between participation in specific cultural activities and brand usage.

Our findings document that sojourners’ cultural brand engagement is embedded in (1) the desired cultural experience, (2) participation in cultural activities, (3) the instrumental and experiential role of brands in cultural participation, and (4) the reliance on brand-related semiotic cues for assessment and judgment of brand relevance to cultural participation. In particular, our findings highlight the importance of considering the sojourner’s desired cultural experience as a driving force behind the degree of participation in cultural activities and the use of brands as part of the experience construction. For sojourners who desire cultural discovery, full cultural immersion is necessary and, as a consequence, these sojourners search for brands that can facilitate cultural insider status. In contrast, for sojourners who desire the realization of a specific and pre-determined cultural experience (often inspired by home culture media), participation is cultural activities is primarily focused on dramatically enacting their experiences according to expectations by using brands that are presumed to have cultural significance. Finally, for those sojourners who desire an exciting cultural experience that differs from what can be experienced in the home culture, participation in cultural activities is superficial and selective, and brands are seen as vessels for novelty exploration. Overall, these findings contribute to our understanding of consumer-brand engagement by showcasing the relationship between experiential motives, participation in cultural activities, and brand use.

Our work offers a theory of cultural brand engagement, making significant contributions to research on consumer-brand engagement and the role of brands in the construction of cultural experiences. First, we explore the experience-dependent nature of consumer-brand engagement. Specifically, we examine the importance of cultural immersion to consumers’ instrumental use of brands within a temporary cultural context. Second, by relying on sojourners’ emic understanding of what is “cultural” about their experience, we gain an understanding of the different types of cultural brand meanings and cues that are deemed as relevant by consumers when engaging with brands within a temporary cultural context. Our findings reveal that the meanings of brands not only morph across cultural contexts, but also that sojourners purposefully alter their interpretation of brand meanings to suit their pursuit of a rewarding cultural experience. Thus, our findings shed light on the importance of understanding how the cultural meanings (i.e., usage, representativeness, symbolism) associated with a specific cultural context influence how consumers engage with brands. Finally, we contribute to extant research on border crossers (i.e., tourists, global nomads, immigrants) by showcasing how sojourners use brands when constructing their cultural experience and how temporary cultural residence influences brand engagement.

REFERENCES


