The Global Surf Narrative: Using Narratives in Global Market Strategy

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We offer narratives as a strategic global positioning tool. We conducted a six year ethnography in Brazil and US (California and Hawaii) around the surf market. Our results demonstrate the effective, explicit use of a strikingly similar narrative by local and global brands in their retailscape and marketing communications.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Twenty years ago, Appadurai (1996) presented us with dimensions of globalization: ideoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes and finanescapes. Stressing the opportunities that companies should consider in this globalized world, Alden, Steenkamp and Batra (1999) further the concept of Global Consumer Culture (GCC) to Global Consumer Culture Positioning (GCCP). Contexts and paths to such positioning remain elusive. Following Consumer Culture Theory CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) tradition, extant research identifies how local or “glocal” characteristics are integral to consumer behavior. Coffee consumption in Denmark (Kjeldgaard and Askegard 2006) highlighted resistance to the Starbucks global brand. Cova, Pace and Park (2007) identify important differences between French and US customers of the Warhammer brand, leading the authors to suggest different strategies to attract customers in those countries. We posit that cultural approaches could add value to global market strategy, specifically, how companies could act globally in a “glocalized” world.

Penaloza (1998) finds that, more important than the product display, is the story that is told to the consumer as they enter Nüetown. Action and adventure are some of the meanings created by texts, high ceilings and memorabilia (Penaloza 1998). Kozinets et al (2002) notice that, through the use of lavish décor and sleek finishes, consumers are presented with a stage behind the storefront of ESPN zone in Chicago.

Narratology, the study of narratives, addresses the fundamental role narratives have in our daily lives (Josselson and Lieblich1999). To narrate something is to tell a story (Miller 1999), and people give meaning to their experiences by telling stories. As Abma (1999) claims, “Storytelling is a socially and situated language performance. Stories imply actions toward others” (Abma 1999, p. 170). Mediascapes (Appadurai 1996) have global reach, and can be carriers of storytelling, imagination and action.

We employ an ethnographic approach to investigate the reigning surf narrative and identify meanings and symbols used within surf retail environments and advertising. We use a mix of techniques (participant observation, naturalistic observation, and in depth interviews) to collect data in Brazil and the US (California and Hawaii) from 2009 to 2016. Our data consist of in excess of 458 photographs from 18 stores observed, combined with more than 30 in depth interviews (store and brand managers, consumers) and field notes from on site observation. Each element of the data set contributes unique insights to the surf retailscapes (retailer tactics, brand strategies and consumer perceptions). Together they weave a narrative tapestry that scaffolds the surf market.

Our data reveal counter-intuitive findings around the surf market. We find that actually non surfers are the main consumers of the surf-related products, being responsible for between 50 to 90% of all consumption, according to brand and store managers from all locations observed. This consumption relates basically to apparel (shorts, hats, t-shirts). A specific narrative is created to attract this consumer.

Central to the narrative of surf retail is selling California. Managers from all locations mention that a “Californian scenario” is constructed in their stores, and that the Australian major global surf brands (Rip Curl, Quicksilver and Billabong) are perceived by buyers as originally from this US state. Importantly, it is not only contemporary California that is sold by surf companies, but an imagined California of the 1960s. Our data shows that movies such as “The Endless Summer” (1966), magazines (Surfer) and music (The Beach Boys) were some of the carriers of this imagined reality. This association is perceived in surf stores “scenarios” in pictures of old woodies (wood-paneled station wagons) and VW vans on t-shirts, photographs and ads in all locations observed. This means that California’s imagined reality was spread through mediascapes and is reimagined, accepted and accessed in different parts of the world.

Within this scenario, executives reveal that selling surfing is also selling an idealized lifestyle. This story involves a good life around the beach, with majestic beachescapes, everlasting summer and beautiful people. These images are presented on storefronts and inside the stores.

Local and global stores use the surfboard merely as a symbol to obtain credibility, to be recognized as a surf store. All surf store and brand managers interviewed claim that the sporting goods (surfboards, wetsuits) are not a significant source of revenue. They make far more profit selling any variation of apparel.

Having surfboards, “the Californian scenario” and photographs of surfers performing extreme practices is a strategy openly realized and developed by surf stores and brand managers to attract non surfers. Consumers (from both countries) clearly articulate that buying apparel is a way of living this great life suggested by surf companies. One consumer (who does not surf – has never tried, nor wishes to) opened his wardrobe and pointed out to all of his items, saying that came from different surf brands. He revealed that all of these brands connected him to a cool, easy going lifestyle, which he always felt related to.

Summarizing our contributions, the narrative around surf retailing is not attached to a single brand or location. Local and global brands, as consumers from different countries engage in the surf narrative in a similar way. Previous work around GCCP(Alden et al 1999) and CCT stressed brand or glocal related phenomena (Kjeldgaard and Askegard 2006; Penaloza 1998; Kozinets et al 2002). Within our multi-brand, multi-national context, we offer Global Narrative Positioning as a possible intersection between GCCP (Alden et al 1999) and glocal realities addressed in CCT (Arnould and Thompson 2005) studies.

We introduce the global narrative as way for companies to position in the market. If the story has meaning and global reach, the narrative could be attached to any brand, local and global. The main advantage of the global narrative is that is not related to a specific brand or place, e.g., surf-related companies do not face local resistance to their products. We suggest that managers identify possible narratives that have global meaning, that is, consumers from different locales find the narrative resonating. Tattooing, fitness programs and farmer’s markets seem to carry such characteristics.

**REFERENCES**


