Global Brand Culture

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This roundtable proposes to gather researchers interested in global brand culture to discuss current developments, research methods and interdisciplinary insights into how brands, consumers, and culture interact. Key issues that drive this discussion include: 1) conceptual and perhaps ideological tensions between global brand management and research into global brand culture, 2) theoretical issues of brands from interdisciplinary perspectives, 3) intense interest in how brands and consumer culture are evolving in transition economies, such as China, India, and post-Soviet Russia, and 4) debates over consumer agency, co-creation, and ‘working consumers’ within global brand culture.

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ROUND TABLE

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Chair:
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There is a growing number of Journal of Consumer Research papers that have advanced our understanding of the cultural context of brands, in particular, within China, as well as a burgeoning literature on brands in Consumption Markets and Culture, Journal of Consumer Culture as well as in anthropology, geography, and sociology journals, among others. How do consumer researchers utilize and benefit from such interdisciplinary research? What is our distinctive perspective? Now is a good time to take stock of this literature, and make connections to emerging concepts of co-creation, social media, and working consumers. The focus was on how researchers have approached global brand culture, how to make a contribution, and what to do about “everyone else” who is publishing in the area, often without notice of consumer researchers’ fine work.

A brand culture perspective reveals how branding has opened up to include cultural, sociological, and theoretical enquiry that both complements and complicates economic and managerial analysis of branding. An emphasis on brand culture forms part of a larger call for inclusion of cultural issues within the consumer research canon, reinforcing a basic CCT premise that culture and history can provide a necessary contextualizing counterpoint to managerial and information processing views of branding’s interaction with consumers and society.

If brands exist as cultural, ideological, and sociological objects, then understanding brands requires tools developed to understand culture, ideology and society, in conjunction with more typical branding concepts, such as brand equity, strategy, and value. A brand culture perspective acknowledges brands’ representational and rhetorical power both as valuable cultural artifacts and as engaging and deceptive bearers of meaning, reflecting broad societal, cultural, and ideological codes. Within this framework, brands are not only mediators of cultural meaning—brands themselves have become ideological referents that shape cultural rituals, economic activities and social norms. For example, strong brands constantly develop prescriptive models for the way we talk, the way we think, and the way we behave–our goals, thoughts, and desires. Furthermore, brands may pre-empt cultural spheres of religion, politics and myth, as they generally promote an ideology linked to political and ideological models that equate consumption with happiness.

Brand culture can be seen to constitute a third arena for brand research–in conjunction with traditional research areas of brand identity and brand image, brand culture provides the necessary cultural, historical and political grounding to understand brands in context. Brand culture research occupies the theoretical space between strategic concepts of brand identity and consumer interpretations of brand image, shedding light on the gap often seen between managerial intention and market response.

To name just a few recent examples, Cayla and Arnould adopt a cultural approach to branding in the global marketplace based on informed historical and cultural analysis of brands, and discuss how global myths might be targeted to build global brands. Cayla and Eckhardt’s research evokes the modernity of Asian branding, emphasizing how brands help construct “imagined communities.” Working with anthropological concepts, Askegaard has discussed brands as global ideoscapes, and Holt draws upon cultural history to provide an explication of how American cultural branding targets market mythology. Zhao and Belk have traced the cultural genealogy of Chinese branding, and Dong and Tian have shown how Chinese consumers engage with Western brands in complex ways, informed by particular cultural histories.

Greater awareness of the associations between the traditions and conventions of culture and the production and consumption of brands helps to position and understand branding as a global representational system issue. Furthermore, a cultural perspective highlights the materiality of brands—their non-symbolic, non-rhetorical, non-discursive tangible presence. Studies that extend brand research into cultural and historical realms may provide an essential bridge between our understanding of, on the one hand, value residing within the product or producer intention, or on the other, wholly created by individual consumers or brand communities, thus building potential bridges to Service Dominant logic concepts, for example. In other words, along with brand identity and brand image, the realm of brand culture serves as a necessary complement to understanding branding as a global representational system issue.

The 2010 EACR conference offered a nice opportunity to reflect on what we know about global brand culture, dissect (possible) underlying tensions between US and “rest of world” perspectives, and prepare researchers to engage with “hot topic” interdisciplinary scholarship about brands. We gathered researchers in the area to discuss how consumer research contributes to a growing interdisciplinary conversation, and how brand culture research sheds light on basic issues of consumer agency, consumer behavior, and consumer culture. Stefano Pace opened up the discussion with the provocative idea that new media forms may create new brands—automatically. Other researchers discussed how brand research interacts with practice (Elliott), and how brands operate as “ideoscapes” in global culture.
(Askegaard), how brands intersect with trust (Gustafsson), how brands and identity interact within culture (Borgerson, Cava, Davis, and Giesler) and how non-Western perspectives enhance brand research (Eckhardt, Wattanasuwan, and Zhao).

**Selected Bibliography**


