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Attitudes toward American brands and Brand America

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ABSTRACT

A study of 556 students at colleges and universities in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore explored the relationship between attitude toward the United States and brand attitudes and preferences. Singaporean student attitudes toward both the U.S. government and U.S. people were higher than were those of the Australia and Hong Kong students. Coke, Nike and McDonald's were among both the most liked and disliked U.S. brands among the international students, a finding which suggests that brands may possess both "lovemark" status, as described in the literature, and its opposite -- "loathemark" status -- within the same demographic group. U.S. Brand Preference scores did not offer support for the belief that international consumers 'vote with their pocketbooks' by refusing to purchase U.S. brands if they have a negative attitude toward the United States. Among Hong Kong and Singaporean students, favorable attitudes toward the purchase of U.S. brands was found to be positively related to favorability toward the U.S. government.

Attitudes toward American brands and Brand America

International polls since 9/11 reveal continuing high-levels of anti-Americanism among citizens of other countries (Pew, 2006), including U.S. allies such as Japan and Spain. Anti-Americanism not only affects the U.S. government's foreign policy and international interests, but also presents specific concerns for American business. Some industry leaders fear that foreign citizen's increasingly hostile attitudes toward America may hurt U.S. businesses' bottom lines (Reinhard, 2003), while others assert that American brands have not been affected by the recent declines in US favorability (Guyon, 2003, Romero, 2004).

This paper explores the relationship between American brands and "Brand America" through the comparative analysis of survey findings from college students in three Pacific Rim countries – Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. The paper attempts to discover how anti-Americanism may be impacting U.S. global marketers by investigating international young people's U.S. brand attitudes and preferences.

Background

Attitude Toward America

International public opinion polls conducted since 9/11, most notably the Pew Center for the People and the Press Global Attitudes Project, have revealed an increase in anti-Americanism. The Global Attitudes Project measures the values and attitudes of people in countries worldwide (Pew, 2006). The most recent Pew study reports "U.S. global image has slipped again" (Pew, 2006).

The first project was released in December 2002, with updates in March 2003 (before the Iraq war), May 2003 (after the Iraq war was declared over by the United

States), March 2004, May 2005 and June 2006. The Pew Global Attitudes Project does not include Australia, Hong Kong or Singapore in its worldwide survey, but attitudes from other Asian countries were measured. For example, in 2002, favorability ratings in Indonesia were 61% and then fell to 15% in May 2003. After the tsunami and the outpouring of U.S. aid, favorability ratings in Indonesia increased to 38%, but slipped to 30% in June 2006 (Pew, 2006). Japan, a traditional U.S. ally, holds a favorability rating of only 63%, down from 72% in 2002. In a separate study Pew reported that more than 71% of young South Koreans (18 to 29-year-old age group) hold an unfavorable view of the United States (Robertson, 2006).

A closer examination of the polls reveals that the negative feelings toward America among people in other countries are often tied to U.S. policy, not the U.S. people or American values (Telhami, 2003). A Zogby poll, for example, revealed that when asked about “American freedom and democracy,” “American education,” “American products” and the “American people,” Arabs were overwhelmingly positive. However, when asked about American policy toward Palestinians, Iraq or the Arab world in general, they were harshly negative (Zogby, 2003). Polls in Europe show that people dislike American foreign policy, particularly with regard to the war in Iraq, but that they separate those feelings from American products, people and business, which they like (Guyon, 2003).

Anti-Americanism and U.S. Brands

Overwhelming negative attitudes toward America among international audiences has caused concern for American business executives who fear that anti-Americanism will affect their sales and profits (Guyon, 2003). Recognizing that they have little direct

influence on international policies, some business leaders have come together to restore America's image on their own. Most notably in this effort is Business for Diplomatic Action (BDA), headed by Keith Reinhard, former chairman of advertising giant DDB Worldwide. BDA aims to "improve the standing of America in the world" (Business for Diplomatic Action, 2006) through actions not ads. Reinhard believes that much of the hostility toward America can be traced to a type of cultural imperialism that results from "US global business expansion" (Reinhard, 2003).

Similarly, Tim Love, vice-chairman-international of Saatchi & Saatchi, another international ad agency, called for global marketers to be sensitive to the cultures of countries in which they do business and help improve the lives of the people who live there. Love believes that in some cases, people are more "in touch with icons like Coca-Cola and McDonald's than with their own government" (Love, 2003). Certain brands, according to Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts, are so personally revered by consumers that they attain the enviable status of "Lovemarks" both in the U.S. and abroad (Roberts, 2004).

As anti-Americanism grows, some global marketers have redesigned their logos and brand names to shed their "all-American" image (Elliott, 2003). Recent international advertising studies have shown that connecting products to America, once a brand asset, may now be a negative strategy (Avraham & First, 2003; Elliot, 2003).

Other studies have denied that anti-Americanism is hurting U.S. brands, citing economic effects rather than political effects as a source of declining sales (Romero, 2004). *Business Week's* ranking of the top 100 most valuable brands worldwide showed that American brands still hold 62 of the top spots. Among the strongest were Coke,

Microsoft and IBM. The study quoted a South Korean engineer as saying “calling for political independence from the U.S. is one thing and liking American brands is another. Of course I like IBM, Dell, Microsoft, Starbucks and Coke” (Kermouch, Brady, et. al, 2003). A recent empirical study conducted by researchers at Princeton and Cornell showed no relationship between rising anti-Americanism and sales of top U.S. brands (“Stars & Stripes,” 2005). The researchers concluded, “reports of consumer anti-Americanism damaging sales of U.S.-based firms in Europe are highly exaggerated” (Gross, 2006).

Australia

Australia is the sixth largest country in the world, equal in size to the 48 mainland states of the United States and 50 percent larger than Europe. Populated by only 20.6 million Australians, it has the lowest population density in the world. This affects the lifestyle and values of its inhabitants and the structure and the function of its government and business.

Australia has a stable, democratic government, which guides a strong economy. The Gross Domestic Product was up 2.3% in 2005 to \$A 859,192 million. Retail sales also grew by 4.3%, encouraged by a rise in the average annual wage of 4.8% to \$A 1,032 per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Advertising is an important business in Australia with \$A 4.5 billion invested in mainstream media in the six months to June 2005 (Australian Federation of Advertising, 2006).

Australia is a popular tourist destination, attracting 5.5 million visitors in the year ended July 31, 2006. Of these, 451,100 came from the United States, a 1% increase on the previous year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Hong Kong

Hong Kong, located on the coast of southern China, was a former British colony that was returned as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China in 1997. Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated territories in the world with 7 million people residing in about 1100 sq. km. of land. The society is dominated by Chinese (94.9%), Filipino (2.1%) and Indonesian (0.8%). Chinese and English are the official languages, with English used mainly in the government and by the legal, professional and business sectors. Cantonese (often with English words embedded) is the major medium of daily communication.

Hong Kong is the world's 11th largest trading economy and Asia's second largest stock market. It is one of the world's top exporters of clothing, watches, toys, electronic products and light industrial goods. Hong Kong is a serviced-based economy, with services sector contributing 87 percent of the territory's GDP in 2002. The Hong Kong SAR government is proud of its laissez faire policy, press freedom, established legal system and the entrepreneurial flair of its citizens.

Hong Kong people generally have favorable attitudes toward people from Western countries, including American and Europeans. American popular culture prevails in Hong Kong through movies and drama series occurring on the English channels of local television. Expatriates are perceived as knowledgeable, open-minded, modern and friendly. Due to the relatively small expatriate population in Hong Kong, most of the Hong Kong people have not had personal contacts with Americans.

Singapore

Singapore is a tiny, island nation located in Southeast Asia between Malaysia and Indonesia – two of the world’s largest Muslim countries. Singapore is about three times the size of Washington DC with a population of 4.4 million. The multi-racial society is divided into three main segments: Chinese (76.7%), Malay (14%) and Indian (7.9%). English is recognized as the common language for all Singaporeans. Because Singapore is located in the diverse region of Southeast Asia, the government encourages social harmony and racial cohesion.

Singapore is considered a thriving economic success story in a volatile part of the world. However, it is also seen as an authoritarian state that limits free speech and political choice. Though the Singaporean government discourages Western values, the nation of Singapore has enjoyed good relations with the United States over the years and has been a strategic military ally (Cohn, 2002).

According to Kløver and Fu’s (2004) Cultural Globalization Index, Singapore is the most globalized country in the world, based on its consumption of mass communication products from overseas. Therefore, Singaporeans are heavily exposed to American popular culture, especially Hollywood movies, music and television.

Research Questions

To better understand the relationship between anti-Americanism and U.S. brand preference, a survey of college students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore was conducted. Specifically the following questions were investigated:

1. What are the prevailing attitudes toward America among students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore?

2. Which American brands do students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore like most? Least?
3. What is the degree of preference for U.S. brands among students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore?
4. Is there a relationship between U.S. brand preference and attitude toward America?

Methodology

Pencil-and-paper surveys were administered in English by local professors in a classroom setting in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. One hundred sixty-one undergraduate students at Queensland University of Technology in Australia, 67 students enrolled in senior-level (bachelors) and masters programs at Hong Kong Baptist University and 328 advanced diploma and bachelors students in the Management Development Institute of Singapore completed the surveys in July 2005, March 2005 and March 2004, respectively.

The same instrument was used in all countries and consisted of a 13-page questionnaire that first measured attitude toward the U.S. government and the U.S people on a 4-point scale from very favorable (4) to very unfavorable (1). Degree of preference for U.S. brands was then measured on a 5-point scale with 5 indicating strong preference for U.S. brands and 1 indicating refusal to purchase U.S. brands.

Open-ended items had students name U.S. brands that they liked and disliked and words that described America and Americans. Several demographic questions, including age, gender, native language, ethnicity, religious preference and country of citizenship

also were included. Students were asked if they knew anyone in the United States, whether they had visited the United States, and if they would like to visit some day.

Findings

Respondent Profile

Australia. Seventy-two percent of the students who participated were female, and 28% were male. Average age of the participants was 20.4 years, with a range of 17-37. Seventy-eight percent said English was their native language. The rest indicated several native languages, including Chinese (6%) and Cantonese (4%). Ninety-four percent said they spoke English fluently.

Most participants were from Australia (92%), followed by China (6.0%). Asked if they knew anyone in the United States, 65.4% said yes, and 31.4% said they have regular email contact with friends, co-workers or relatives in the United States. One-third (36.5%) had visited the United States and 92.5% said they would like to do so.

Hong Kong. Seventy-five percent of the students who participated were female, and 25% were male. Average age of the participants was 24 years, with a range of 20-51. None claimed English was their native language, though 72% said they spoke English fluently and all were studying in an English-language university. Native languages were Chinese (53.8%) or Cantonese (46.2%).

Most participants indicated that they were citizens of China (55.2%), though some listed Hong Kong as their “country” of citizenship (39.7%). One student was from the United Kingdom. Asked if they knew anyone in the United States, 72.7% said yes, and 45.5% said they have regular email contact with friends, co-workers or relatives in the

United States. About one-fourth (27.3%) had visited the United States and 94% said they would like to do so.

Singapore. Seventy percent of the students who participated were female and 30% were male. Average age of the participants was 23.5 years, with a range of 16-43. Fifty-five percent claimed English was their native language. The rest indicated several native languages, including Chinese (25.9%), Malay (7.9%) and Tamil (4.6%). Ninety-five percent said they spoke English fluently.

Most participants were from Singapore (87.0%), followed by China (6.0%) and Malaysia (4.1%). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of students were Chinese (70.9%), followed by Indian (11.5%), Malay (10.5%), Indonesian (2.0%) and Eurasian (2.0%). Asked if they knew anyone in the United States, 70.6% said yes, and 49.2% said they have regular email contact with friends, co-workers or relatives in the United States. One-third (35.4%) had visited the United States and 95.8% said they would like to.

1. What are the prevailing attitudes toward America by students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore?

Attitudes toward America were measured on two dimensions: favorability toward the U.S. government and favorability toward the U.S. people. Students in all countries indicated more favorable attitudes toward the U.S. people than toward the U.S. government.

Australian students gave a mean favorability rating of 1.91 to the U.S. government and 2.60 to the U.S. people (on a 4-point scale with 1 being very unfavorable and 4 being very favorable). Students in Hong Kong also rated the U.S. government 1.91

on average and the U.S. people 2.64. Singaporean students rated the U.S. government slightly higher at 2.38 and the U.S. people also higher at 2.82.

2. *Which American brands do students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore like most? Least?*

Favorite brands mentioned by students in Australia included Coca-Cola (12.4%) and McDonald's (9.9%). McDonald's was also the most frequently mentioned U.S. brand that the students in Australia said they disliked.

Favorite brands mentioned by students in Hong Kong included Coca-Cola, Nike (13.4% each) and McDonald's (11.5%). Although students noted McDonald's as a "liked brand," another 7.5% included it on their least-liked brand list. Coca-Cola and "President Bush" tied for the second least liked brand (3.0% each).

Favorite brands mentioned by students in Singapore included Nike and (14.9%) and Levi's (9.1%). The least liked brands were McDonald's (2.7%), Nike (1.8%) and Tommy Hilfiger (1.5%).

A more complete list of most liked and most disliked brands of students from the three countries are listed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

3. *What is the degree of preference for U.S. brands among students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore?*

Five responses on a preference continuum (see Table 3) were averaged to form a 'U.S. Brand Preference' score. It should be noted that the majority of students in the three samples said they 'don't care' whether a brand is from the U.S. when they make purchase decisions, and none said they refuse to buy U.S. brands. Using the five-point scale (with 5 a preference for U.S. brands), a U.S. Brand Preference mean score of 3.09

was found among students in Australia, with only 2% opting for the most positive response that they “preferred to buy U.S. brands.” Students in Hong Kong scored U.S. brand preference at 3.35, with 15% saying they preferred to buy U.S. brands over others. Singaporean students reported a 3.27 mean score, with 11% saying they prefer to buy U.S. brands.

4. Is there a relationship between degree of U.S. brand preference and attitude toward America?

A Pearson Product correlation test on data from the Australian student sample showed no relationship between attitude toward the U.S. government or U.S. people and preference for U.S. brands. However, among the Hong Kong respondents, a statistically significant positive relationship was found between attitude toward the U.S. government and preference for U.S. brands ($r=.301$; $p=.018$), but not between the U.S. people and U.S. brands. A similar relationship was also found in Singapore between the U.S. government and U.S. brand preference ($r=.205$; $p=.001$).

Discussion

This study explored the relationship between attitudes toward the United States and attitudes toward and preference for U.S. brands among college students in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. It is not known to what extent the student groups are representative of their respective countries, or possibly of other students on their own campuses, therefore any generalizations beyond the sample measured as well as any comparisons between students of the different countries should be viewed with caution. Nonetheless, results from the three-country survey can be viewed as pilot data and may signal trends that could be further explored among larger and more representative groups.

In terms of prevailing attitudes among the student groups, the Singaporean students expressed the most favorable attitudes toward both the U.S. government and the U.S. people. In all three countries, as has so often been the case in other surveys (Pew 2002, 2004), attitude toward the U.S. government was lower than attitude toward the U.S. people.

Coca Cola, McDonald's and Nike were among the brands most liked *and* disliked in all three countries, and Levi's factored as a well-liked brand among the Singaporean students. Nike, Coke and McDonald's are among those rare international brands to which Saatchi & Saatchi has assigned the status of Lovemarks (Roberts, 2004).

Results of this study of student attitudes indicate that the same brand can occupy both lovemark and *loathemark* status among the same demographic group, though the basis for neither was measured herein. Roberts (2004) identifies the hallmarks of a lovemark brand, which include emotional attachment and intense loyalty, yet it is not known what the underlying factors might be for loathemarks, as identified in this study. Might anti-Americanism be among the reasons that a lovemark may also take on loathemark status? Do the same aspects of a brand cause it to be both greatly loved and intensely disliked? Further study among college students as well as other groups of consumers could address this issue.

While it is thought that the ultimate consumer gesture of distaste for a company or brand is not to patronize or buy it, researchers and marketers are not in agreement about whether consumers abroad allow their purchase decisions to be influenced by their attitudes toward the brand's country (Guyon, 2003; Gross, 2006; Reinhard, 2003). The current study does not offer much to support the notion that college students 'vote with

their pocketbooks.’ A large majority of students said they ‘don’t care’ about whether a brand comes from the United States when in the marketplace, and more than one in ten of the students in the Hong Kong and Singapore studies said they actually preferred U.S. products over others.

A significant positive relationship was found in both Hong Kong and Singapore between attitude toward the U.S. government and preference for U.S. brands, while no relationship was found between the two variables among the Australian students. The mixed findings of this study make it difficult to settle the disagreement about whether anti-Americanism impacts U.S. brands. Presumably the impact could differ among countries.

Identifying the reasons for these differences is beyond the scope of this study, but perhaps the U.S. government’s perceived embodiment of democratic ideals and business enterprise plays a stronger role in the Asian countries than in Australia. This perception could result in stronger link being made between the U.S. government and the desirability of U.S. brands. Conversely, Australia traditionally has been more of an outpost of American culture and commerce and perhaps Australians associate the concept of the U.S. government more strongly with the actions of the current administration. Hence Australian attitudes toward the U.S. government are less favorable. This is also supported by the finding in this study of strong U.S. brand preference scores in Hong Kong and Singapore, compared to Australia where only 2% preferred to buy U.S. brands.

More research among larger samples in more countries is obviously needed to fully understand the relationship between attitudes toward U.S. brands and “Brand America.”

TABLE 1: Percentage of Most Liked US Brands
in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore

	Australia (n=161)	Hong Kong (n=67)	Singapore (n=328)
Coca Cola	12.4%	13.4%	6.1%
McDonald's	9.9%	11.5%	4.2%
Nike	9.3%	13.4%	14.9%
Adidas	2.5%	4.5%	0.6%
Oreo	2.5%		0.3%
Bud Light	1.9%		0.3%
Levi's	1.9%	4.5%	9.1%
Microsoft	1.9%	4.5%	2.7%
Ralph Lauren	1.9%		0.3%
Subway	1.9%		0.3%
Gap		1.5%	3.4%
Victoria's Secret		3.0%	3.0%

TABLE 2: Percentage of Most Disliked US Brands
in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore

	Australia (n=161)	Hong Kong (n=67)	Singapore (n=328)
McDonald's	15.5%	7.5%	2.7%
Nike	11.8%	3.0%	1.8%
Coca Cola	3.7%		0.9%
Starbucks	3.7%		0.9%
Microsoft	1.9%		1.2%
Tommy Hilfiger		1.5%	1.5%
President Bush		3.0%	

TABLE 3: Preference for U.S. Brands
in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore

	Australia (n=161)	Hong Kong (n=67)	Singapore (n=328)
I refuse to buy US brands	0.0	0.0	0.0
Most of the time I will NOT buy products with a U.S. brand if I can find another one not from the U.S.	2.5%	3.1%	2.6%
I do not care if the products that I buy are from the U.S. or not, I choose the products that I like best, regardless of the national origin of the brand.	87.3%	73.8%	79.2%
Some of the time I will NOT buy products with a U.S. brand if I can find another one not from the U.S.	8.2%	7.7%	6.5%
I prefer to buy products with U.S. brands.	1.9%	15.4%	11.7%

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