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Author names: Kipnis, E. and Broderick, A.J.

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Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies: An Alternative Approach to Analysing Consumers' Perceptions of Foreign and Domestic Brands

Abstract

Proliferation of research on what is the impact of globalisation on consumption remains ongoing. Varying, at times polar, evidence exists on whether a unique homogenous global consumption culture has emerged or whether, on the contrary, fear of uniqueness loss drives societies to resist alternative cultural systems. Similarly, a variety of theories of consumer response to foreign products have emerged, registering notably different attitudes and behaviours projected by consumers to foreign products, from complete rejection to irrational aspiration. The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework designed to integrate the existing theoretical knowledge and address the analysis of cultural transformations' consequences systematically. Consumer response to brands is conceptualised as an outcome of ones' identity transformation in response to multiple cultural influences. A conceptual model of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies is introduced that enables to account for diverse consumer responses towards own and foreign cultures and consumption alternatives. The proposed framework contributes to knowledge by providing marketing researchers and managers with an alternative approach, which facilitates cross-cultural consumer behaviour research and brand positioning in a more inclusive, integrative manner.

Keywords: International Marketing; Consumer Social Identity; Brand Image; Acculturation

Tracks: International Marketing; Consumer Behaviour

Introduction

Academic debate on what are the consequences of ongoing globalisation for international marketing continues apace. Researchers have argued for various theories along the continuum ranging from the emergence of an increasingly homogenous ‘global consumer culture’ (Ger & Belk, 1996) to local consumption cultures remaining resilient against globalisation influences (Kearney, 1995; Dietz, 2004). Merz et al (2008) note that the debate is endless, with one phenomenon remaining consistent throughout – the dramatically increased inter-exchange and points of contact between different nations and cultures through global media, trade, travel and migration.

Extant literature indicates the need for an integrative approach to analysing the consumption cultures’ transformations with a notion of diverse consumer responses to intercultural influences (Steenkamp and Burgess, 2002; Merz et al, 2008). To date, the field of international marketing remains fragmented: despite a developed body of knowledge on the topic of consumer response to foreign cultures and products (e.g., consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma, 1987); consumer xenocentrism (Mueller and Broderick, 2008); cosmopolitanism (Thompson, 1999; Cannon, 2002), it is interesting to note that these theories have been generally developed in isolation from one another and neglect the interplay of behavioural traits occurring alongside the phenomenon observed in the same consumer group. Arguably, this makes the task of consumer research and brand positioning strategies development difficult as the risk to get a limited understanding of consumer response to foreign/home brands is high.

This paper presents a conceptual model of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies (CIAS) which integrates and accounts for the vast diversity of previously developed foreign/local culture bias theories. Defined as “*changes that happen over time when two or more cultures come into continuous contact*” (Berry, 1980 p.9), the acculturation concept may explain the drivers for consumers developing differing behaviours and attitudes toward foreign and local cultures and brands more parsimoniously. As acculturation approaches one’s identity transitions through intercultural contacts, it addresses how consumers adapt to changing cultural norms and why different, at times contradictory, behavioural and attitudinal traits are developed. The study extends the existing acculturation theory, which traditionally has been applied to immigrant contexts, into a new context of ‘migrating’ cultures and develops an integrative approach to systematic analysis of consumers’ identity transitions from a social identity–brand image congruence perspective. The presented framework enables to simultaneously capture attitudes and behaviours projected toward foreign and domestic products, thereby, offering an alternative approach for developing tailored brand positioning strategies.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity and Consumer culture

A number of political, economic and technological transformations of the last two decades of twentieth century (for example, breakup of the Soviet bloc and development of the World Wide Web) have led to a rapid increase of international trade, further development of global economy and significantly enhanced intercultural contacts. These contacts lead to exchanges of social and cultural information between societies, with consumers acquiring new information about alternative sets of values, beliefs, preferences and lifestyles. Moreover, these alternative lifestyles are then offered to consumers by foreign brands through media and

trade, provoking consumers to evaluate cultural propositions and decide whether to integrate them into their own cultural environment. Culture's influence on behaviour is substantial. Child and Kieser (1997, p.2) define culture as "*patterns of thought and manners which are widely shared*". Social identity theory (e.g. Turner, 1982; Triandis, 1989; Hogg et al, 2000) posits that to maintain and project a positive self-concept individuals identify themselves with the groups they would like to be associated with (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Rosenberg, 1989; Hogg et al, 2000). Conversely, culture provides individuals with a self-identification reference. Identity is crucial for understanding of a cultural system: Carspecken and Cordeiro (1995) argue that for positive sense of identity to be constructed and regard of others to be deserved "*the cultural milieu through which actors claim and maintain identities will reflect broad social relations and the economic and political inequalities of these relations*" (Carspecken and Cordeiro, 1995). Understanding identity transformations as a result of intercultural exchange is therefore important.

The effects of globalisation upon consumption cultures have been explored by a number of cross-cultural researchers, with the following cultural processes in consumption identified:

Type of culture	Definition	References
Global consumption culture	Common models of social order authoritative in many different settings.	Levitt, 1983; Zhou and Belk, 2004; Alden et al, 2006.
Local consumption culture	Dominant cultural authority of one's home country.	Wilk, 1995; Holt, 1997.
Glocal culture	Interpretation of the global and the local, i.e. a hybrid blend.	Appadurai, 1990; Sandikci and Ger, 2002; Kjelgaard and Askergaard, 2006.
Consumer alienation	Individuals' failure to accept the doctrine of consumption or to find fulfilment in the offerings of the marketplace.	Zaichkowsky, 1985; Park and Moon, 2003; Steenkamp and De Jong, 2009.

Table 1. Summary of consumption cultures

Recent contributions note that all these processes exist within and across societies, and calls for frameworks that will integrate the complex nature of cultural transformations have been made (Steenkamp and Burgess, 2002; Alden et al, 2006; Merz et al, 2008).

Brands as material objects and symbols of culture. Social identity – Brand Image congruity.

Objects and brands as material manifestation of pursued values, beliefs and lifestyle play a significant role in identity construction. This link between self and consumption (McCracken, 1990; Dittmar, 1992; Belk, 1988) has important implications: not only are goods regarded by consumers as a means to express cultural values and beliefs and construct and cultivate lifestyle, but, more importantly, they are used to "*create and survive social change*" (McCracken, 1990 p.11). Reed (2002) extended the self-concept – brand image congruence paradigm by applying social identity theory to consumer behaviour. He posits that consumers desire to maintain a positive self-image by identifying themselves with the group they would like to be associated with and using symbolic benefits offered by brands to project perceived common image characteristics of this group. Furthermore, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) note that although there are variations of identities across cultures, they appear to be universally expressed through objects. For international marketing, identifying diverse types of identities transformations influenced by contact with other cultures will allow to produce

more tailored positioning strategies by creating brands that would reflect the common image characteristics for each identity type.

Current theories of consumer response to foreign brands

A variety of theories on behaviours and attitudes projected by individuals toward foreign countries, cultures and products have been documented and applied in marketing to investigate consumer response to foreign and domestic brands. Examples of these concepts are: consumer xenocentrism – aspiration for foreign products and consumption styles (Mueller and Broderick, 2008); consumer ethnocentrism – emotional favouritism of domestic products and consumption style (Shimp and Sharma, 1987); cosmopolitanism – willingness to engage with the other cultures and consumption styles (Yoon et al, 1996; Thompson, 1999; Cannon and Yaprak, 2002).

Although validated independently in a number of markets, behaviours and attitudes towards foreign products were explored in isolation from one another and are perceived to be mutually exclusive. Findings that consumers are not ethnocentric do not suggest de facto that these consumers are xenocentric and vice versa as both these behavioural phenomenon are measured by applying autonomous instruments developed specifically to research a particular phenomena in response to a particular cue. Therefore, it is not always possible to combine these research approaches and draw generalisable conclusions.

Also, cross-cultural psychology, sociology and marketing studies have continuously made researchers aware of the limitations posed by a myopic view of simply transferring consumer behaviour ideas, knowledge and frameworks derived from studies in the West into consumer research in emerging markets (Essoussi and Merunka, 2007; Steenkamp and Burgess, 2007; Broderick, 2007). Frameworks are needed that are grounded within global and local cultural contexts and incorporate a diversity of consumer responses to foreign and domestic products and account for specifics of emerging market at theoretical conceptualisation stage (Keller & Moorthi, 2003; Steenkamp & Ter Hofstede, 2002).

The proposed conceptual framework of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies integrates and resolves theoretical issues outlined above to explain and systematically analyse the underlying variations in consumer culture and behaviour resulting from intercultural encounters.

Acculturation

Acculturation was defined by the Social Science Research Council as “*culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems*” (SSRC, 1954, p.974). While applying the acculturation theory in the context of individuals migrating into a different country, Berry (1980, 1997) distinguished four acculturation strategies (also called modes) that individuals select to negotiate their identity in new host culture: assimilation (abandoning home cultural values and beliefs systems and adopting the systems of the host society); integration (maintaining both own identity and integrating into the host society); separation (maintaining own identity and rejecting relations to host society) and marginalization (rejecting both culture of origin and the host culture and possibly developing a third, hybrid culture (Penaloza, 1989).

That previous researchers have focused predominantly on immigrants’ cultural transitions is understandable: up to the last decade individuals’ contacts with cultures other than their own in their own countries of residence could not be described as continuous, on the contrary, it was rather episodic or non-existent for the vast majority. Nowadays the technological progress, international trade and media intensify cultural interchanges between societies with

people not necessarily migrating physically. Therefore, acculturation theory appears a logical choice for international marketing to explore identity evolutions in response to cultural interactions and self-identification with home/foreign brands as material representations of cultural systems the individuals are exposed to.

Towards a conceptualisation of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies

It is important to note that original definitions of acculturation do not limit acculturation processes to cultural transitions of immigrants (Penaloza, 1989). However, Berry's model of acculturation strategies (1997) requires modification to analyse acculturation of home nationals to migrating cultures.

While it may be tempting for researchers to fall into a trap of simply replacing the identity strategy choice described previously in immigrant acculturation literature as own/host culture choice with a choice between own and global culture, the modern worldwide cultural environment appears to be a more complex case of globally migrating multiple cultures. An increasing number of cultures aim to distinguish themselves within a global culture. As a large proportion of global culture is based on American cultural systems, these cultures start competing for popularity of their own systems in other societies. Particularly, new "sojourners" to global society thrive to manifest to the world their nations' achievements and develop a reputation of an influential player in the modern world. A most recent example is the China Olympics. Therefore, global culture, as an increasingly heterogenic mix of Western values, beliefs and lifestyle, should be considered alongside with other cultural systems with strong identification (like, for example, Chinese, Indian or French) which are increasingly being exported across the globe.

We propose that individuals in home countries are faced with selecting identification strategies within the following cultural systems:

1. Global culture (GC) – homogenic set of values, beliefs, lifestyle and material objects and artefacts.
2. Foreign culture (FC) – a system of values, beliefs, social norms and material objects/artefacts coming from a definable cultural source (country) through global media, trade and voluntary or involuntary migration.
3. Local culture (LC) – unique local ways of life and systems of values, beliefs and material objects.

As both global and foreign cultures can be identified as external cultural systems, we introduce a term 'imported cultures mix', which encompasses the multiple cultural expansion approach discussed above. The 'imported cultures mix' is defined as a mix of global culture and foreign cultures with a strong presence.

Identity Acculturation Strategies

Having established the need to distinguish external cultural influences between GC and FC when considering consequences of these multiple influences for identities and behaviour of home nationals, we extend Berry's model (1980) and introduce the Multidimensional Matrix of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies. The Matrix in Figure 1 below details strategies that may be selected by home nationals negotiating their identity in multiple cultural settings (for a full version of the Matrix and definitions of strategies see Appendix 1).

From a marketing and brand positioning perspective, this matrix integrates the diverse potential reactions projected by consumers towards multiple cultural systems and enables the production of more tailored branding propositions by matching the brand image with an identity strategy chosen by the consumer.

Is it of value to maintain or develop relationships with multiple cultural systems?	GC	FC	LC	Identity Acculturation strategy
	Y	Y	Y	Full adaptation
	N	Y	Y	Foreign adaptation
	Y	N	Y	Global adaptation
	Y	Y	N	Imported cultures orientation
	Y	N	N	Global culture orientation
	N	Y	N	Foreign culture orientation
	N	N	Y	Local culture orientation
	N	N	N	Alienation

Figure 1. Multidimensional Matrix of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies

The proposed concept of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies is defined here as “changes in consumer behaviour and consumption manifestation that happen over time when the society comes into a continuous contact with other cultures through international media, travel and trade”. The concept proposes understanding the consumers’ foreign and domestic brands perceptions from a social identity transitions perspective. It maps out the process of an individual negotiating his identity based on consumption knowledge acquired from his own culture and lifestyle and consumption opportunities offered by ‘imported’ cultures.

The model, detailed in Appendix 2, proposes that as consumers interact with the imported cultural systems, their identities are re-negotiated to adapt to a changing environment. An important relationship is established between self-identification strategies selected by individuals and brand image appeal they will be most responsive to, as reflection of their altered self-concept. Consequently, linkages exist between self-identification strategy and brands which image will best reflect consumers’ social identity.

Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

It is important to appreciate identity transformations in the conditions of globalisation, especially given the ongoing academic argument about the potential outcomes of global economic processes. Consumption choices should be regarded as a result of identity transformation within an evolving intercultural environment rather than a response to isolated cues and the proposed concept develops a basis for a careful consideration of the key factors influencing these choices. The Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies (CIAS) framework provides international researchers and brand strategists with a unified approach: rather than limiting foreign brand-bias response research to measuring attitudes to a pre-determined specific cue, types of identity can be explored and ‘matched’ with appropriate brand image appeal. The need for such an approach to explore consumers’ foreign brands evaluation, particularly in the emerging markets is clearly indicated in recent research findings (Alden et al., 2006; De Mooij, 2004; Schuh, 2007; Steenkamp, 2001; Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002). CIAS is able to integrate and account for distinct, at times contradictory, streams of past research and allows for a more sophisticated comprehension of consumption cultures, while overcoming the weaknesses of the dichotomous ‘globalisation versus localisation’ approach. The concept requires empirical testing and cross-cultural validation. Also, it would be interesting to analyse the relationships between identity strategies and established theories of consumer response to foreign brands and culture (e.g. ethnocentrism, cosmopolitanism etc). However, an important conceptual framework has been proposed, within which linkages between social identity transformation and foreign-brand perceptions influenced by globalisation processes can be explored in a more inclusive manner.

Multidimensional Matrix of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies

<p>Is it of value to maintain or develop relationships with multiple cultural systems?</p>	GC	FC	LC	Identity Acculturation strategy
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Full adaptation: a hybrid blend of local, global and defined foreign culture(s)
	No	Yes	Yes	Foreign adaptation: a hybrid blend of local and defined foreign culture(s)
	Yes	No	Yes	Global adaptation: a hybrid blend of local and global cultures, with no other defined foreign cultural system present
	Yes	Yes	No	Imported cultures orientation: aspiration to global and defined foreign cultural systems
	Yes	No	No	Global culture orientation: aspiration to global homogenic cultural system
	No	Yes	No	Foreign culture orientation: aspiration to a defined foreign cultural system
	No	No	Yes	Local culture orientation: favouritism of local cultural system and rejection of imported cultures mix
	No	No	No	Alienation: rejection of the doctrine of consumption or failure to find fulfilment in the offerings of the marketplace

Conceptual Model of Consumer Identity Acculturation Strategies

