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Multicultural, Not Multinational: Emerging Branding Strategies in Culturally Diverse Societies

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Abstract

This paper proposes that approaches to culture-based brand positioning are diversifying in response to increasing complexities of consumer cultural identities, with uni- bi- and multi-cultural identities emerging. Acting as visualisations of consumers' cultural identities, brands represent people's ideas about their membership of cultural groups. Findings from a critical visual analysis of brand communications reveal that the brands' positioning concepts include associations with single cultures, or two or more distinct types of culture that go beyond traditional global-local positioning strategies. This suggests that in culturally diverse marketplaces, coherent branding strategies that create 'multi-cultural' meanings can be used by marketers as a competitive positioning tool, to appeal to consumers that integrate multiple cultures in their identities.

Keywords: *cross-cultural marketing; multi-cultural consumers; cultural branding*

Track: *International and Cross-Cultural Marketing*

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, cultural diversification results in consumers developing complex multi-cultural identities (Holliday, 2010; Askegaard et al., 2005). In light of this phenomenon, this paper considers the implications of this diversification for branding strategies targeting consumer groups that develop varying multi-cultural identities as a result of cultural diversification of societies. The significant role of brands as visual symbols of one's self and identity has been well documented in the marketing literature (Belk, 1988; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Reed, 2002; Broderick, 2007). In particular, a number of studies have focused on the influence of cultural identity on consumer brand evaluations, establishing that consumers seek to visually manifest their cultural identification through pursuing consumption practices and products associated with the favoured cultural group (McCracken, 1986; Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983). Defined as "*the sense of the self derived from formal or informal membership in groups that impart knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life*" (Jameson, 2007 p.200), cultural identity is viewed as one of the key dimensions of social or collective identity (Triandis, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Contributions from social and intercultural psychology, and consumer behaviour literature indicate that consumer identities become increasingly multi-cultural as a result of individuals' affiliations with multiple cultural groups which emerge from long-term and short-term travel, migration, media, trade and mixed-national or mixed-ethnic family upbringing (Aspinall, 2003; Cockburn, 2002). However, the effect of multicultural identification on brand evaluations remains little investigated in branding literature, which is somewhat surprising given the importance of branded goods in visual representations of cultural identity. If consumer identities increasingly integrate membership of several cultural groups, can branding strategies be developed to represent such multi-cultural affiliations and therefore enhance positive consumer response to brands? Thus, the objectives of this paper are 1) to identify whether branding strategies in culturally diverse societies communicate multi-cultural meanings; and 2) to analyse types of multi-cultural identities that are visualised through brand positioning.

2. Conceptual Background

International branding studies have identified that advertising messages and country-of-origin, or culture-of-brand-origin cues used in visual brand representations can create perceived brand associations with a country or culture (Mueller et al., 2001; Holt, 1997). Cultural brand associations have a salient impact on both cognitive evaluations of functional brand attributes such as quality or safety and on the affective evaluations of brands as symbols of countries or cultures that are of emotional significance to consumers (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Considering cultural identification, association of brands' image with cultures emotionally favoured by consumers can create brand value and enhance brand equity and competitiveness in local and international markets (Steenkamp et al., 2003). To date, branding literature focusing on culture-based positioning strategies has identified four key brand building strategies that may be utilised by businesses to capitalise on consumers' cultural affiliations. Table 1 provides a definition of each culture-based positioning strategy and a summary of extant research findings of consumption implications of each strategy. These findings form the basis for the three propositions that were developed to address the research objectives. Table 1 illustrates that consumer interpretations of brands' cultural meanings created through positioning inform visual constructions and manifestation of cultural identities through consumption. For example, Strizhakova et al (2008) establish that those consumers who identify themselves or aspire to be identified as members of global society view global brands as a "*passport to global citizenship*" (p.58). Conversely, consumers who wish to preserve a distinct national identity view local-perceived brands as means to maintain their unique local identities where brands symbolise consumer engagement with traditional consumption practices and lifestyles (Zhou & Belk, 2004; Han, 1988). Affective affiliations with foreign cultures translate into individuals considering the favoured cultures as members of their own ingroups (Oberecker et al., 2008). Specifically, studies on xenophile consumers (i.e., aspiring to identify with foreign outgroups) indicate that these consumers maintain preferences for brands generally perceived as non-local and also for brands associated with particular cultures (Mueller et al., 2009; Batra et al., 2000).

Table 1. Summary of culture-based brand positioning effects on consumption

Positioning strategy	Definition of brand positioning as association with culture type	Consumption implications	Selected literature
Global Culture (GC) positioning strategy	Brands are associated with homogenous models of social order, lifestyle scenarios, meanings and images that are shared across the world.	Consumption of brands positioned to create perceived 'globalness' is regarded by consumers as representation of global village membership.	Alden et al. 1999, 2006; Steenkamp et al. 2003; Levitt 1983.
Local Culture (LC) positioning strategy	Brands are associated with unique models of social order and lifestyle scenarios; authority of one's home country national/cultural norms, meanings and images.	Consumption of brands positioned to create strong association with local culture by using local appeals builds memorable and positively valued brand experiences.	Zhang and Schmitt, 2001; Wilk 1995.
Foreign Culture (FC) positioning strategy	Brands are associated with models of social order, meanings, images and lifestyle scenarios of a particular foreign culture.	Associating advertising appeals (aesthetic, spokesperson, thematic signs) with a specific foreign country that has a positive image among consumers enhances positivity of consumer readings of the brand meanings.	Alden et al. 1999; Leclerc et al. 1994.
Glocal Culture (GLC) positioning strategy	Brands integrate the meanings of the global and the local, i.e. a hybrid blend of global and local norms of social order, values, lifestyle scenarios and images. Global meanings are transferred into unique local meanings.	Integrating global appeals with local specifications enhances positivity of consumer readings of the meaning of brands positioned as international/global and make them more relevant to consumers' cultural context.	Kjelgaard and Askergaard 2006; Hsieh & Lindridge, 2005.

From the perspective of branding strategies targeting multi-cultural consumers, findings on glocal consumer identities, i.e. consumers identifying with global and local cultures (Kjelgaard & Ostberg 2007) have facilitated the emergence of research and practices on the branding strategies of multinational brands. These studies find that multinational brands which, while maintaining their global image, incorporate locally-relevant cultural cues into their image and advertising are perceived to be more valuable by consumers (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). Similar findings emerge from research on bi-national branding and advertising to bi-cultural and bi-lingual consumers. That is, advertising messages that integrate associations with two cultures individuals affiliate with (through inclusion of multiple culturally-specific cues such as images, linguistic messages and social models), evoke interpretations of brands' cultural meaning that are of symbolic importance for bi-cultural consumers and appeal to their bi-cultural knowledge (Luna & Peracchio, 2005; Terpstra & Han, 1988). Branding strategies presented in Table 1 can be categorised in groups that reflect consumers' uni- or bi-directional cultural identities. Uni-cultural identities (i.e., associated with one type of culture) are reflected in LC; FC and GC positioning strategies. Therefore,

Proposition 1: Uni-cultural consumer identities are utilised in uni-cultural branding strategies, such that brand image is associated with a single culture, whether Local, Foreign or Global.

Studies on bi-cultural consumer identities (glocal or bi-national) provide comprehensive foundations for the development of brand meanings that appeal to consumers that identify with two cultures.

Therefore,

Proposition 2: Bi-cultural consumer identities are utilised in bi-cultural branding strategies, such that brand image is associated with two cultures, whether Local and Global or Local and Foreign.

However, the evidence of consumers developing tri- and multi-cultural identities beyond affiliations with global and national cultures calls for further investigation of branding approaches that will assist managers to adapt to diversifying multi-cultural reality and create brands that integrate multi-cultural meanings to appeal to the new types of consumers. Therefore,

Proposition 3: In culturally diverse societies, branding strategies can utilise a multi-cultural branding approach, such that brand image is associated with more than 2 cultures, whether Local and two distinct Foreign cultures or Local, Foreign and Global cultures, to appeal to multi-cultural consumers.

3. Methodology

The study sought to identify whether branding strategies in culturally diverse societies communicate multi-cultural meanings and to analyse the types of multi-cultural identities that are visualised through brand positioning. In view of the exploratory nature of the research objectives a qualitative research approach was adopted. Brand positioning approaches of the market leaders across two food product categories (chocolate and juice) in Russia were analysed. Food and food consumption act as "a carrier

of cultural symbols” (Kniazeva & Venkatesh 2007, p.421). Analyzing social meanings assigned by individuals to food enables a de-construction of identity and exploration of cultural change (Marshall 2005; Wallendorf & Arnould 1991). The choice of Russia is based on two considerations. First, with Western markets saturating, the attractiveness of emerging markets for international companies increases, Russia being one of the largest emerging markets with a 5.53% forecast GDP growth rate for 2011 (Datamonitor 2008). Second, Russia is an attractive field for research on multi-culturalism: at least 15 ethnic groups co-reside in this country (Curtis 1996).

Ten leading brands in chocolate and juice categories were selected from portfolios of companies with the largest market shares in Russia. The study incorporated critical visual analysis (Schroeder 2006) of brands’ pack images and analysis of positioning concepts of focal brands as reported by brand manufacturing companies and Russian marketing and advertising agencies¹. Brand packaging is an important communication vehicle and plays a significant role in consumers’ buying decisions (Silayoi & Speece 2007). The analysis of positioning concepts was used to contextualize the strategic positioning vision of the brands’ manufacturing companies.

Key coding categories identified from the literature were as follows: imagery, language and alphabetical features of brand name (Alashban et al. 2002; Mikhailitchenko et al. 2009; Zhang et al. 2003). Brand name and visual representation affect consumer perceptions and elaboration of information received through brand communications (Branthwaite 2002; Mueller et al. 2001).

Language and linguistic systems are considered as culture-specific cognitive and heuristic dispositions held by individuals in a given culture and play a significant role in determining consumers’ processing of brand communications and brand name evaluations (Luna & Peracchio 2001; Zhang & Schmitt 2001). Sophisticated design elements of packaging (such as a prism form of the box), added extras (such as screw-top or ‘Westernised’ images) was determined as an association with Western consumption culture. When analyzing brand names, three coding categories were distinguished: those in English, those in another foreign language and those in Russian. By definition, global culture is associated with the Western and Anglo (specifically, US) culture in particular (Alden et al. 2006). Brand names in English, if no other association was given on packaging to a specific country (such as a flag, or emphasis on the products’ origin, for example ‘finest Belgian chocolate’), were categorised as associated with Global culture. In contrast, foreign non-English and Russian brand names were categorized as those providing a cue to a particular Foreign culture or Local culture respectively.

4. Findings

The results show the emergence of brands integrating varying combinations of multiple cultural cues and generating complex and diverse cultural meanings. The results are presented around the three hypothesized branding strategies. Due to space constraints, detailed findings are presented below in Table 2 only for those brands that are not in line with previous research findings.

Uni-cultural brands: consistent with Proposition 1, brands associated with a single culture communicate association with one type of culture (e.g. Russian: Dobryi, Rossiya; German: Ritter Sport; Global: Rich).





Bi-cultural brands: While the category of bi-cultural brands has been identified in previous research, the findings indicate that besides the ‘glocal’ meanings, other meanings are created by bi-cultural brands, which integrate either Foreign and Local cultural meanings (e.g. Russian and Ukrainian: Sadochok juice) or Global and Foreign meanings (e.g. Global and Japanese: Caprice juice). The former are consistent with Proposition 2. The latter emerged from the data analysis. Sadochok’s traditional Ukrainian name communicates a geographical association with Ukraine, while packaging that is traditional for the Russian market and design that is similar to that of brands that are positioned as local communicate association with the local Russia culture. The design of Caprice is, on the contrary, sophisticated and ‘Westernised’, and differs from the design traditional to the market. The colours used and the writing style of the brand name integrate visual cue to Japanese culture and evoke an association with Japanese origami.

Multi-cultural brands: consistent with Proposition 3, it emerged that some brands integrate multiple cultural cues (more than 2) in their image (e.g. Global, French and Russian: Comilfo; Global, Spanish

¹ References to positioning concepts are available upon request

and Local: Korkunov).

Table 2. Selected findings of brand packaging analysis

Brand name/ Sub-brand name	Package image	Brand/ sub-brand name meaning/ translation	Brand/ sub-brand name writing	Visual cues	Cultures represented in visual brand image
Bi-cultural brands					
Caprice		(No translation required)	Caprice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 'Western' brand name. 2. Visual cue to Japanese culture: brand name writing and packaging design associated with Japanese origami (AdMe.ru, 2006). 3. Sophisticated packaging and design. 	Integrated cues to Global and Foreign (Japanese) cultures.
Sadochok		Little Garden in Ukrainian	Садочок	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ukrainian brand name communicating a language geographical association with Ukraine (Drinks+, 2003). 2. Traditional packaging and design similar to those brands positioned as Local (Russian). 	Integrated cues to Foreign (Ukrainian) and Local (Russian) cultures.
Multi-cultural brands					
A.Korkunov/ Morelia		First letter of name and surname of Andrei Korkunov, Russian company founder/ name of a city in Mexico (sub-brand name)	A.Коркунов A.Korkunov/ Morelia (brand name appears on different packages both in Latin and Cyrillic writing)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Russian brand name (both Cyrillic and Latin alphabet writings used). 2. Packaging designed to appear "familiar and instilling pride for preservation of wholesome traditions...and the drive to produce chocolate that is competitive on the world market" (www.super-brands.ru). 3. Spanish sub-brand name in Latin writing. 	Integrated cues to Local (Russian), Global/Western and Foreign (Spanish) cultures.
Comilfo		Comme il faut (French) – properly; as it should be Brand name is written in Cyrillic and is spelt as it sounds in Russian	Комильфо	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. French brand name written in Cyrillic and spelt in Russian. 2. Sophisticated and modern packaging design, using Belgium postcard representing association with unique technologies of Belgian chocolatiers. (Advertology.Ru, 2006). 3. Emphasis on 'Western-style' product: visuals of sophisticated premium chocolate selection different from chocolates in selection boxes traditional for Russian consumers (Advertology.Ru, 2006). 	Integrated cues to Foreign (French and Belgian), Local (Russian) and Global/Western cultures.

Indeed, it appears that some brands successfully integrate associations with multiple distinct cultures. For example, Comilfo's French brand name is written and spelt in Russian; sophisticated packaging design differs from traditional Russian chocolate selection boxes design and the image used on the box reproduces a Belgian postcard "representing association with unique technologies of Belgian chocolatiers" (Advertology.Ru, 2006). Korkunov is a Russian brand name which uses different versions of the name visual – either written in Latin or Cyrillic alphabet. In this particular case Korkunov is written in Cyrillic, while the name of the sub-brand, Morelia, evokes associations with Spain and is in Latin writing. Brand packaging is designed to appear "familiar and instilling pride for preservation of wholesome traditions...and the drive to produce chocolate that is competitive on the world market" (www.super-brands.ru). The findings suggest that the focus of culture-based branding appears to shift from "multinational vs local" or "standardization vs adaptation" to "multi-cultural" whereby multiple cultural cues are intertwined in brand design and advertising. It is particularly interesting considering that apart from Sadochok all other brands are owned by multinational corporations (Caprice: Lion Capital, UK; Comilfo: Nestle; Korkunov: Mars). However, although the cultural cues evoke associations with Global and/or Foreign cultures, brands' meaning does not include association with a multinational producer. One explanation for this emerging trend can be that in culturally diverse marketplaces culture-based branding acts as a visualisation of consumers' simultaneous participation in multiple cultural groups. This observation corresponds with Cayla and Arnould's (2008) view of brands as cultural forms that encapsulate people's ideas about the way they should live and think. Therefore, by incorporating elements that symbolize the 'global' culture brands communicate their fit with the globally-accepted lifestyle scenarios rather than their multinational operations and availability to consumers worldwide; and by integrating symbolic references to a

Foreign Culture that are localised through use of locally-specific interpretations of the name, usage context etc, brands communicate acceptance of this culture's traditions and ways of life in consumers' own society rather than brand's country or culture of origin.

5. Conclusions

The study provides initial perspectives on culture-based branding in culturally diverse societies. The findings highlight the increasing need for branding theory to be advanced in light of the emergence of diverse uni-, bi- and multi-cultural consumer identities in contemporary marketplaces. Earlier research on culture-based brand positioning argued that by communicating multiple cultural identities negative brand attitudes are created, as “*too much breadth...may confuse consumers*” (Alden et al. 1999, p.84). Yet, all of the brands analysed here are successful players on the Russian market. Although other strategic factors may be contributing to the success of all analysed brands, the multiplicity of cultural cues may be an important factor that creates brand meanings interpreted positively by multi-cultural consumers seeking to proclaim their multi-cultural identities through brand consumption. This study identified new multi-cultural brand positioning approaches that do not fit with the traditional global, local and/or bi-national framework. In culturally diverse societies, these new branding approaches may create cultural meanings that are of more relevance to the new, multi-cultural consumers. Indeed, recent reviews of cultural theory in international marketing assert that globalisation fuels **multi-cultural** interactions, which results in the emergence of new types of consumer cultural identities (Leung et al. 2005; Yaprak 2008). To create brand value and maintain competitive advantage, the symbolic meanings of brands must reflect the evolving multi-cultural consumer realities. Further work is needed in developing coherent frameworks that will assist businesses in culture-based brand building for culturally diverse consumer societies.

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