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# National Consumer Acculturation: A Conceptual Framework

## Abstract

Rapid advancement of technology, international trade, media and travel have resulted in continuous intercultural exchange and produced a diverse range of theories on consumer response to foreign brands and cultures. This study investigates the underlying drivers that influence consumers developing significantly differing perceptions and attitudes towards own and foreign cultures and consumption alternatives. Consumer response to brands is conceptualised as an outcome of ones' identity transformation in response to multiple cultural influences. A model of National Consumer Acculturation is introduced that provides a unified approach to systematic analysis of consumers' social identity evolution from a social identity-brand image congruence perspective.

**Keywords:** *acculturation; cross-cultural marketing; Social identity; brand image*

**Track:** *International and Cross-Cultural Marketing*

# National Consumer Acculturation: A Conceptual Framework

## 1. Introduction

The academic debate on the impact of the globalisation processes on consumption cultures remains ongoing: some observe the emergence of an increasingly homogenous 'global consumer culture' (Ger & Belk, 1996) whereas critical commentators of globalisation point out that cultures transform global meanings into unique local meanings and consumer behaviour is "*inscribed in local, historically constituted cultural discourses*" (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006, p.231). Extant literature suggests a need to focus on the transformation of local cultures influenced by 'imported' cultures and their influence on consumer behaviour (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2007; Steenkamp & Ter Hofstede, 2002). Although there is a developed body of knowledge on the topic of consumer response to foreign products (Cannon & Yaprak, 2002; Dietz, 2004; Shimp & Sharma, 1987), these constructs 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. Recent marketing literature indicates the need to further develop international marketing theory taking into account all diverse consumer responses to global intercultural exposure (Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002). Calls are made for drivers of consumer attitudes toward the joint forces of 'imported' and local consumer cultures to be explored with a notion of the interplay between these forces (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 2006). For international marketers, a systematic approach is imperative to develop a broader insight into possible behavioural outcomes of consumers' perceptions of 'imported' and local cultures, lifestyles, and, consequently, products.

When considering the role of cultural differences in behavioural and attitudinal variations among groups of consumers the concept of acculturation, defined as "*changes that happen over time when two or more cultures come into continuous contact*" (Berry, 1980 p.9) may be used. This construct may explain the impact of cultural exchange on consumer behaviour more parsimoniously than previously developed theories of consumer response to foreign cultures and products. This paper proposes a conceptual model of national consumer acculturation that approaches research of consumer response to foreign brands from the perspective of transformations of one's identity through intercultural contacts, brands serving as material representations of these transformations. Existing acculturation theory is extended, within a social identity – brand image congruence framework, into a new context of identity transitions of individuals residing in their home countries as a result of 'imported' cultural influences through global media, trade and travel.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. *Current theories of consumer response to foreign brands*

A number of radical political, economic and technological transformations of the last two decades of twentieth century have led to a rapid increase of international trade, further development of the global economy and significantly enhanced intercultural contacts.

A wide stream of research has investigated and documented a variety of behavioural and consumption patterns, attitudes and preferences developed by individuals towards foreign countries, cultures and products based on their beliefs and stereotypes (e.g., consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987); consumer patriotism (Han, 1988); consumer animosity (Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998); consumer xenocentrism (Mueller & Broderick, 2008). Also, theories of global homogenisation and consumerism (Wilk, 1998), cultural hybridisation (Dietz, 2004), cosmopolitanism (Cannon & Yaprak, 2002; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999) on one hand suggest that local cultures are blending with a global consumption culture producing a different culture for the global society to relate to and on the other hand highlight the resilience and “*culture clash*” (Dietz, 2004, p.1087) the societies project towards the globalisation processes due to a fear of national/ethnic identity loss (Mueller & Broderick, 2008; Dietz, 2004; Ger & Belk, 1996; Kearney, 1995).

However, although validated independently in a number of markets, these behaviours and attitudes towards foreign products were explored in isolation from one another and are not 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.

When considering consumer behaviour research in emerging markets, important differences in behaviour are indicated (Keller & Moorthi, 2003; Steenkamp & Ter Hofstede, 2002). Indeed, existing consumer behaviour knowledge largely is derived from empirical studies of consumers in Western countries (Essoussi & Merunka, 2007) and calls are made for the theories and models that were developed in the Western cultural settings to be validated if not extended in the emerging markets (Broderick, 2007; Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002). This is well illustrated by observations of consumer behavior changes in Eastern Europe.

In the early stages of economic growth in this region, Western brands were embraced by consumers as a mean of declaring a much-desired belongingness to the modern world (Cunliffe, 1995; de Abreu Filho, Calicchio, & Lunardini, 2003). More recent observations of consumer attitudes in these markets suggest that consumers are developing a more complex set of requirements to brand image that go beyond country-of-origin stereotyping and integrate individuals’ thrive to manifest through consumption their countries acquiring an equal status in the globalizing world. Although recognizing that the West still represents quality, status, security and success, at the same time consumers are keen to manifest their nations’ recent achievements and egalitarianism by developing “Westernized” home brands. The success of domestic brands with a Western image (like Wimm-Bill-Dann dairy and drinks in Russia) as well as the popularity of local brands built by multinational companies (Omnia coffee introduced by Douwe Egberts in Hungary) are recent examples of this evolving trend. It appears that these observations do not fit in with traditional definitions of foreign-brand bias theories discussed above.

The concept of acculturation addresses the discrepancies mentioned above by bringing together two streams of foreign brand bias (in-group/out-group orientation) research. Also, it provides a new insight into identity and consumption transitions of consumers in emerging markets.

## **2.2. *Defining acculturation within social identity theory***

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 (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).

Whilst acculturation theory has been previously applied to explain and classify cultural transitions of immigrants and the transformation of their sense of identity, consumption habits and preferences (Berry, 1980; Penaloza, 1989; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983), little attempt has been made to consider from this perspective the identity and behavioural evolutions of nationals within their own countries. This gap in the knowledge is somewhat surprising, taking into account the increased significance of cultural influences on consumer behaviour (De Mooij, 2004; Schuh, 2007; Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002). Researchers (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Levy, 1959) have generally identified that brands serve individuals as symbolic reflections of their extended self-image, social status and culture (Belk, 1988). As such, they are used to “*create and survive social change*” (McCracken, 1990, p.11). It is important for international marketers to explore identity evolutions in response to cultural interactions and self-identification with home/foreign brands as material representations of these cultural systems. Acculturation theory provides the necessary tools for this analysis: due to its’ approach of psychological and sociocultural transformation of the self at an individual and group level (Berry, 1980, 1990, 1997; Penaloza & Gilly, 1999) acculturation theory defines and classifies how individuals negotiate interactive aspects of new culture and lifestyle (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) and maintain positive self-esteem. For the purpose of this paper the social identity – brand image congruence paradigm (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Hogg, Cox, & Keeling, 2000; Reed, 2002; Triandis, 1989; Turner, 1982) was selected. This approach incorporates the interplay between one’s personal and group selves and posits that consumers maintain a positive self-image by using symbolic benefits offered by brands to project perceived personal image and common image characteristics of the group they identify themselves with. Social identity levels may also vary from peer-group level to ethnic or national level, based on the criteria one chooses for group identification.

### 3. Towards a Conceptualisation of National Consumer Acculturation

It is important to note that original definitions do not limit acculturation processes to cultural transitions of immigrants (Penaloza, 1989). It may be tempting for researchers to simply replace identity strategy choice described previously in immigrant acculturation literature as own/host culture choice with a choice between own and a global culture. However, the modern worldwide cultural environment appears to be a more complex case of globally migrating multiple cultures. Whilst global culture is considered to be an increasingly heterogenic mix of Western values, beliefs and lifestyle, it should be considered alongside other cultural systems with strong identification (for example, Indian or French) which are increasingly being exported across the globe.

The proposed concept of National Consumer Acculturation 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*”. Drawing upon the traditional acculturation theory the model proposes understanding the consumers’ foreign-brand perceptions from a multi-layered social identity 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 ‘imported cultures mix’ is defined in the model as a mix of global culture and other cultures with a strong presence. Lifestyle, values and beliefs communicated through global media, international business, employment, education and travel, in combination with brands’ image and values communicated through global trade form the ‘imported’ cultural mix. Figure 1 details the conceptual model proposed.

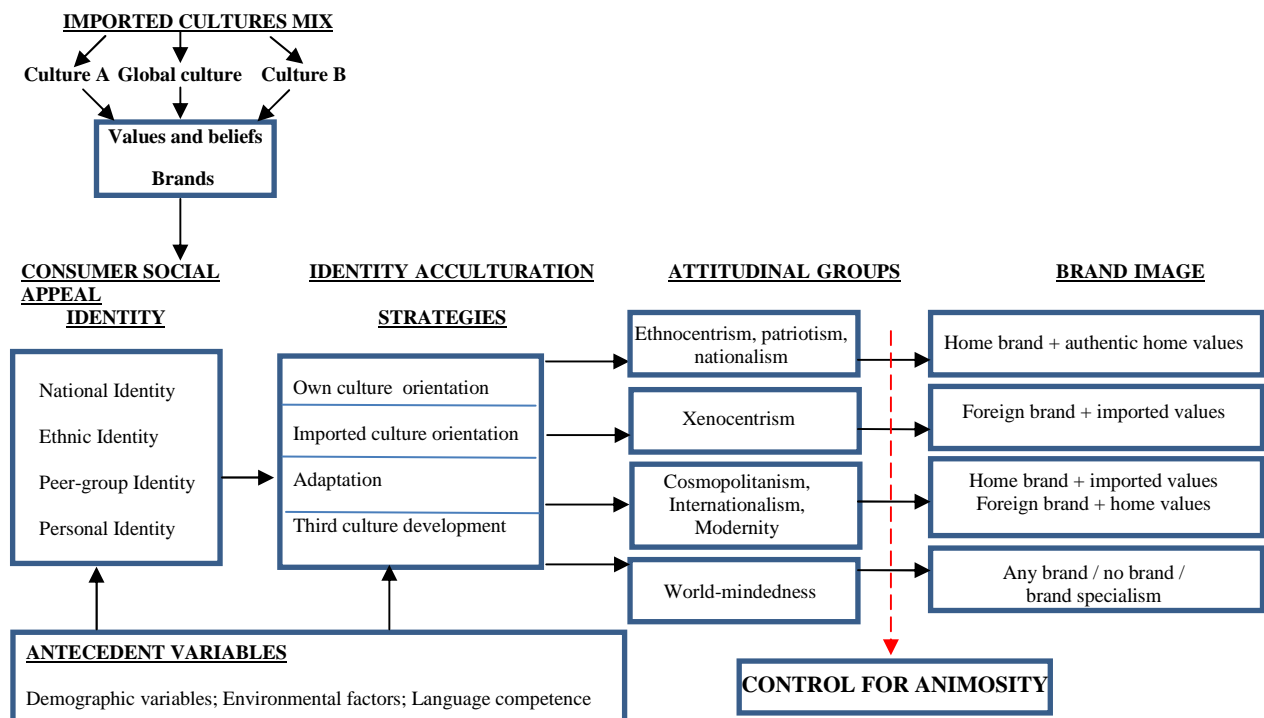


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of National Consumer Acculturation

The model proposes that as consumers interact with the imported cultural systems, their national, ethnic, group and personal self-identification is re-negotiated to adapt to

changing environment. An important relationship is established between self-identification strategies selected by individuals and groups of attitudes these individuals will project to foreign brands. The concepts of consumer response to foreign brands discussed above are organised into four attitudinal groups and are hypothesised to correlate with identification strategies. Consequently, linkages exist between self-identification strategy and brands which image will best reflect consumers' social identity.

Although for own and imported culture orientation strategies brand image appeal reflects the acceptance/rejection of home/'imported' cultures, adaptation and third culture strategies require more careful research and brand positioning. An adaptation strategy explains the emerging trend of consumers in emerging markets willing to declare through consumption their individual and national new competences and advancements in international integration. Hence, brand image should be reflecting ownership of a number of cultural systems and values. Also, active intercultural exchange enhanced penetration of 'new' lifestyles (for example, organic or green consumption). Consequently, individuals developing a third culture orientation may choose these new lifestyle as alternative self-identification criteria and a different brand image appeal will be required to target these individuals' needs.

Consumer animosity (Klein et al., 1998) is incorporated into the model as a control variable due to the very specific nature of this behaviour, as it is very closely tied with a specific nation's history of relationships. Antecedent variables are incorporated into the model to explore their moderating role on self-identification and acculturation strategy chosen. Variables such as geographic location, age, language competence and education will moderate the scope of individuals' competence, awareness and accessibility of the 'imported cultures mix'.

#### **4. Conclusions and Directions for Further Research**

It is important to stress the need 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 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 National Consumer Acculturation 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). National Consumer Acculturation is able to integrate and account for distinct, at times contradictory, streams of past research and allows for a more sophisticated apprehension of consumption cultures, while overcoming the weaknesses of the dichotomous 'globalisation versus localisation' approach. The concept requires empirical testing and cross-cultural validation. 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.

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