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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Transnational organization and symbolic production: Creating and managing a global brand**

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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been sustained debate pertaining to how global markets should be conceptualized, enacted, and addressed. The purpose of this study was to expose the pivotal managerial thought processes and practices of senior managers at Guinness and the actions of symbolic workers involved in the reconciliation of trends towards increasing global cultural convergence and a need for local cultural differentiation within the 'global culture industry.' Our findings reveal the strategic processes and mechanisms involved in the creation of a series of polysemic, multi-vocal texts positioned to allow multi-level interpretation of the brand in ways that permit simultaneous engagement with, and negation of, local idiosyncrasies.

**Keywords:** Transnational corporatism; MNCs; Guinness; global strategy; cultural intermediaries; global brand management

## **Transnational organization and symbolic production: Creating and managing a global brand**

According to popular and indeed academic rhetoric, our existence in a global age can be characterized by increased interconnectivity, an array of national and supranational bodies operating within common organizing frameworks, and increasing debate as to how to compete across different geographic spaces (e.g., Hardt & Negri 2001; Leung et al. 2005). We contend that within such discussions, the role of culture, and cultural objects, must assume a central role. Indeed, we argue that cultural objects are not just a part of this conjunctural moment, they are both constituent parts, and constitutive of, the economy and everyday life. As Lash and Urry (2007, 4) have argued, “cultural objects are everywhere; as information, as communications, as branded products, as financial services, as media products, as transport and leisure services; cultural entities are no longer the exception, they are the rule”. Further, following Askegaard (2006), with the growing impact of market institutions on almost all aspects of our lives, the branding of cultural objects has emerged as part of an increasingly dominant market economic and commercial ideoscape. This is carried by supranational organizations such as the World Trade Organization, institutionalized in the marketing and management practices of organizational actors, and exemplified by the contemporary sovereign status of the liberal market economy. Coming to terms with the ubiquity of what Lash and Urry (2007) term a *global culture industry* requires academic foci on a variety of areas including various forms of consumption, social identity, and the flow and transformation of cultural products (see, e.g., Elliot & Davies 2006; Lash & Urry 2007; Pettinger, 2004). As part of garnering understanding on the circulation of global cultural products, our focus lies with making theoretical and practical sense of the operation of organizations and institutions engaged in the concomitant creative production and conceptualization of symbolic products directed towards the exploitation of new and emergent markets.

Of significance for us in this changed spatial landscape are the multinational corporations (MNCs) that have played a defining role in the emergence, operation, and, machinations of the global culture industry. The economic, social and political impacts that such organizations have renders an understanding of their management and operation of vital importance to those interested in gaining an holistic understanding of the precursors for, and consequences of, corporocentric global forces. While much has been written on MNCs, it

has become glaringly apparent that our theoretical and practical understanding of top management teams, more often assumed than empirically investigated in the wider organization studies and strategic management literatures, is at a distinctly nascent state when it comes to uncovering the influences on, and actions of, global corporations (Athanassiou & Nigh 2000; Leung et al. 2005). Against this backdrop, our particular interest here lies in the strategies used by top management teams to reconcile apparently contradictory forces that on the one hand point to a growing cultural convergence, but on the other require a detailed understanding and embracing of local mores and norms (see, for example, recent discussions in Hitt et al. 2006; Leung et al. 2005). While clearly central to the management and operation of MNCs, our understanding of the ways in which competing globally- and locally-oriented cultural pressures intersect is poorly developed (Leung et al. 2005). The corresponding impact on senior managers as they craft strategies to articulate a presence around the world is similarly ill understood.

Consequently, our purpose in this paper is to examine the ways in which the contrasting pressures inherent in the positioning of a global brand, Guinness, are interpreted and acted upon by senior managers. Specifically, our intent is to illuminate the practices and rationales of key decision-makers as they contend with and reconcile changes in the dominant institutional and cultural logics inherent in global competition. While the specific nature of such logics will somewhat vary across different industry sectors, and result in variations in the emphases on, for example, global and local positioning, we contend that our findings will resonate across different industries. Most notably perhaps, our focus on the understandings, routines and practices of actors reveals the sophisticated production of multi-vocal, polysemic discourses that, at one and the same time, negate and engage with the idiosyncrasies of particular markets. We reflect upon the mechanisms by which senior managers must work to reconcile competing, even paradoxical, global and local values (e.g., de Mooij 1998; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 2000; Lewis 2000) in a coherent and compelling manner to point to a need to reconsider how firms compete in divergent global markets.

To this end, the paper is structured in the following way. In the next section we develop the theoretical background to our ideas. We then move on to detail the methods that we used to collect and

analyse the data before presenting and interpreting our findings. The paper is concluded with an assessment of how our work helps to move forward our understanding of the global culture industry.

### **Transnational corporatism**

Given the increase in symbolic regimes of production and consumption that underpin the late capitalist economy (Jameson, 1990), the global cultural industries—broadly made up of the media, advertising, popular music, film production, and design—have come to play a key role in (re)constituting the geographic boundaries of markets and in the internationalization of consumer culture (Castells, 1996; Hardt & Negri 2001; Lash & Urry, 2007; Leslie, 1995; Moor, 2007; Robins, 1997; Thrift, 2004). Exacerbated by a neoliberal market economy that has promoted privatization, deregulation, and the removal of trade barriers (Harvey, 2007), there has been a concomitant weakening of the nation and associated strengthening of various global processes that have transformed cross-border trade and marketplaces: global economic processes have become characterized by the increasingly prominent role played by MNCs in the establishment of a global culture industry (Frenkel 2001; Lash & Urry, 2007).

While the prominent role of MNCs in global trade is widely acknowledged, less understood are the concerted actions of senior managers in response to, or anticipation of, changes to the dominant industry logics. In recent years we have seen significant alterations to these logics. Far from the “borderless world” (Ohmae 1990) rhetoric heralded by Levitt’s (1983, 22) treatise that senior managers should act “as if the entire world (or major regions of it) were a single, largely identical entity” and supply the “same things in the same way everywhere”, the logics of a truly global marketplace (Bartlett & Ghoshal 1989) came unstuck when faced by the “warm appeal of national affiliations and attachments” (Robins 1997, 20). Rather than strategic global uniformity, many corporate leaders realized that securing a profitable global presence necessitated negotiating with the local: “and by negotiate I mean it had to incorporate and partly reflect the differences it was trying to overcome” (Hall 1991, 32). Thus, to operate with the language of the local, in multiple locations, senior managers co-opted what had been a “radical slogan of an earlier day, “Think globally, act locally” (Dirlik 1996, 34) and thereby assimilated *the* local as part of the *modus operandi* of transnational corporatism.

Attending to the local element within the ranks of transnational corporatism then actively affirmed the continued relevance of national cultures as firms placed great emphasis on acceding to demands for local differentiation (Robertson 1995; Yoon 2001). That said, the 'local' produced under a global system of common difference (Wilk 1995; see also Askegaard 2006) is liable, though not preordained, to be routinely little more than a commercially inspired inflection of what is perceived to be stereotypically representative of local culture. In this sense, "the recognition of the local in marketing strategy... does not mean any serious recognition of the autonomy of the local, but is intended to recognize the features of the local so as to incorporate localities into the imperatives of the global" (Dirlik 1996, 34). According to this line of thought, the "old structures and boundaries of national states and communities" (Robins, 1997, 12) have not been dissolved; rather, we are ensconced in an historical moment wherein symbolic analysts (Reich, 1991) play an ever more significant role in the constitution of contemporary, market-oriented, cartographic boundaries.

More recently, it has been suggested that the "global brand" is making a comeback (Holt et al. 2004; Quelch 2003). However, this revised understanding of a global brand is, of course, promulgated in a technological, social, political and economic context that is very different from when Levitt (1983) was making his observations. Indeed, the global-local logics of the market point to the transnational production of localized spaces, identities, and experiences that facilitate the "continuity of flow" (Harvey 1985, 145) between global production and local consumption. In this regard, and despite the global cosmopolitanizing efforts of many involved in multinational corporatism, 'geography still matters' in a very real sense as local and national specificities continue to shape production and consumption processes in many sectors in different ways (Preston & Kerr 2001; see also Caves 1998).

While we may abstractly theorize the strategic importance of reconciling competing understandings of culturally convergent and divergent spaces and places into managerial practices, related empirical evidence is, at best, mixed. Indeed, if Lash and Urry (2007) are correct in their argument that products no longer circulate as fixed, static and discrete identities, but instead regularly spin out of the control of producers, transposing, translating, transforming and transmogrifying as they move through a range of territories, then the management of movements becomes central to the effective circulation of cultural products. This shifts



the emphasis of transnational managerial understanding to the practices of global control: the work of producing and reproducing, and the organization and management of, global economic production systems and marketplaces (Sassen, 2000; 2001).

As managers deal with the dynamics of the global marketplace, understanding the ways in which these competing simultaneous pressures for cultural and managerial convergence and divergence are reconciled and enacted has become a topic of significant theoretical and practical import (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 2000; Leung et al. 2005). It is clear that narratives of production and consumption do not emerge from nowhere nor exist in a vacuum. They are, rather, produced, interpreted and spread by actors who operate in heavily institutionalized contexts (de Cillia et al. 1999). Despite a recent interest in the operations, structure and practices of the advertising and marketing armatures of organizations, the activities that individuals engage in to negotiate changing institutional requirements and symbolic spaces of production and consumption have received sparse empirical engagement (e.g. Athanssiou & Nigh 2000; Lawrence & Suddaby 2006; Leung et al. 2005; Pettinger, 2004). Scholarship that has been conducted in this area has been theoretically driven and focussed on a narrow conceptualisation of cultural intermediaries, those actors who inhabit the pivotal space between production and consumption, which privileges a small cluster of occupations (Bourdieu 1984; Cronin 2004; Negus 2002).

Scott (1999) proposed that the creativity of workers is mobilized and channeled by the manner in which the apparatus works, including the ways in which specialized but complimentary workers come together in the tasks of cultural production. Collaboration among workers in the cultural industries is common. For instance, the producers of commercials depend on an orchestrated collaborations of writers, art directors, actors, set designers, costume designers, model makers, photographers, illustrators, typographers, photographers, stylists, models and model makers, musicians and animators (Soar, 2000, 431). In this sense, the creatives' work is reified both in the routines of the agency around them (Soar, 2000) and in the cultural field within which they operate. Such cultural fields, like most modern economic systems, almost always take the form of complex intra-firm networks, linked together by tightly wrought inter-firm networks of transactions, through which many different hands are brought to bear on products as they go through the

process of conception, fabrication and final embellishment (Scott, 1999). Thus, to truly address the global symbolic cultural production, following the work of Robins (1997), requires a comprehension of both the worldwide organization of creative production and the exploitation of new and emergent markets by the “eruption” of significations (Soar, 2000) created and conceptualized by symbolic analysts.

This contention closely mirrors Sassen’s (2000) call for an examination not only of the communication capacities and the power of transnationals, but also of the infrastructure of facilities and work processes necessary for the implementation of global economic systems. In the balance of this paper, we offer a consideration of the practices, decisions, structures and strategizing developed within the promotional armatures of transnational corporate entities. For Negus (2002, 504), this conceptualisation has afforded a pivotal role to advertising executives, designers and magazine journalists, a conceptualisation that fails to encompass the multitude of other occupational groups that are “crucial to processes of cultural mediation or the linkages which might connect consumption with production.” Negus (2002), Pettinger (2004) and Cronin (2004) open up considerations of those occupations that bridge the processes of production and consumption. Negus (2002) importantly proposes that we think about the “ties that bind” creative work to structures of production. This study is one attempt to do just this. As we consider the ways in which senior managers bridge the space between production and consumption within the strictures of a dynamic organizational settings, a set of practices emerge that are crucial in understanding the mediations that take place between production and consumption. Just as Pettinger (2004) managed with her research on workers in the fashion retail industry, by addressing the role of actors in the context of the late capitalist organization, we can critically interrogate and demystify the organization, management and production of advertising and brand images that parade before our eyes in our everyday lives—an area of research that has yet to receive adequate academic consideration (Jhally 1995). In order to reveal and systematically analyze such practices, we present a case study of a group of actors engaged in global management and production practices at Guinness.

## Methods

In order to gain the rich data necessary to access the complexities inherent in strategic decision-making processes, we adopted an interpretive approach based on predominantly qualitative data. This allowed us to unveil individuals' understandings of the organizational contexts in which they operate, and their rationales for particular courses of action in ways that would not be possible with other approaches (Yin 2003). As Gephart (2004) argues, this approach has great utility in uncovering the human interactions, meanings, and processes that constitute, and are constituted by, organizational settings. In line with this, our intent was to complement the quantitative data sets that have dominated the international business literatures by providing detailed insight into the rationales for, processes of, and outcomes from the strategies that underpin a global operation.

Typical of case study research, the organization studied was purposively selected based on its theoretical and practical suitability of permitting access to the issues under examination. Guinness, headquartered in London and with brewing operations in more than 50 countries and product sales in over 150, provides an archetypal site from which to address the structure, practices and management of symbolic production in a MNC. Further, the profitable participation of the firm in the highly competitive global beer industry, an arena characterized by a reliance on, and creation of, distinctive symbolic production, cemented its appeal. Through a gatekeeper, the Global Brand Director (GBD), who subsequently proved to be an invaluable internal sponsor of the research, access was gained to the key actors in the organization.

While we entered the field with several questions to explore, derived from our interest in the practices of senior managers and their roles in the strategic positioning of the brand, and the use of cultural signifiers to locate it, we were very much open to the emergence of themes that would allow appreciation of the ways in which those at Guinness accommodated various global processes. In this respect, we followed Denis, Lamothe and Langley (2001) in adopting a partly deductive and partly inductive research design.

Data were collected in a number of ways. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the individuals responsible for the strategic positioning, articulation and management of the Guinness brand. Those interviewed consisted of representatives of the Global Brand Executive (GBE) and the three largest

Guinness markets, Ireland, Great Britain and Africa. These markets were selected because they are large enough to warrant significant brand activity and culturally diverse enough to expose the nuances of transnational cultural production practices.<sup>1</sup> Each interview was, with the consent of the participant, taped and fully transcribed to allow a more comprehensive analysis than would have otherwise been possible. Extensive field notes were taken during the interviews, primarily to record linkages between emerging concepts and to highlight potentially useful insights. In this respect, preliminary data analysis began as soon as data collection commenced (Miles & Huberman 1994; Johnson et al. 2004).

The veracity of the interview data were checked by returning the interview transcripts to the interview participants in a process of member checking (Lincoln & Guba 1985). This allowed the opportunity for the identification of any inaccuracies or misinterpretations; no such queries were raised. While the interview data were important, we also gathered extensive amounts of archival data from official Guinness and parent company Diageo publications, internal presentations, employee orientation information, videos of advertising campaigns, consulting reports, and various electronic communications; popular press and academic articles reporting on Guinness' global strategies were also analyzed. This resulted in several hundred pages of very rich data.

Data coding initially involved the assigning of descriptive codes to particular blocks of data to identify the emergence of particular themes. As familiarity with the data increased, so more inferential and interpretive codes were added to identify particular conceptual linkages (Miles & Huberman 1994; Johnson et al. 2004). The consistency of emergent themes across different data sources gave us confidence as to the robust nature of the data set and its utility in allowing us to draw credible conclusions (Amis & Silk, 2008). Further, while acknowledging the inevitable partiality of our interpretations, a process of peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba 1985) and scrutiny of our initial and final interpretations by the GBD supported our belief that we had identified the major themes inherent in the conceptualization, (re)construction, and management of the Guinness brand, and also uncovered an inherent logic connecting and underpinning them.

## **Transnational management and the realization of global markets**

The Guinness brand can be traced back to 1759 when Arthur Guinness paid £100 for a 9000 year lease on St. James's Gate Brewery in Dublin. While originally a brewer of traditional ale, Guinness decided that the future of his company lay with a black beer, porter, imported from England. Consequently, by the end of the eighteenth century Guinness had turned his back on ale and was brewing only the distinctive 'stout' that would make the firm famous. Extensive expansion meant that by 1886 Guinness had become the largest brewery in the world with an annual production of 1.2 million barrels and established overseas markets in North and South America, Africa, the Far East and Australia (The Brand Map 2001).

The twentieth century saw continued expansion, largely as a result of a series of technical innovations that radically improved product quality and allowed casked, canned and bottled beer to be sold all over the world. However, despite its evolution into a highly recognizable global brand, Guinness ended the twentieth century with a disjointed approach to brand management and some quite indifferent financial results. A concomitant series of mergers and takeovers ultimately resulted in Guinness becoming a "premium global brand" in the Diageo stable rather than an independent company. The time was thus appropriate to reconsider Guinness' strategic positioning.

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the GBD informed us, Guinness was moving from a strategy of "growth, growth, growth" to one that was underpinned by the philosophy that "it's not only about pure growth, it's about how you grow". Central to this was the crafting of a transnational brand strategy in line with a revised consideration of how to engage with the changing logics of the global marketplace. As such, in the following sections we address the organization and decision-making of those responsible for Guinness, the spatial reach of the brand, and the symbolic production integral to this revised enactment of the global context in which Guinness competes. Clearly these processes are not discrete; in fact their coherent integration is seen as a necessary feature of Guinness' transnational strategy.

It is also worth pointing out at this stage that our interest lays firmly in the ways in which various global cultural signifiers have been utilized within circuits of production and consumption. Such a strategy of course does not take place in isolation to the broader industry or societies within which Guinness is located.

Thus, while the specific components of Guinness' strategy will necessarily be temporally bounded, the underlying theoretical insights that can be gained from studying the use of cultural objects remain applicable. While Guinness has used many of the components that we discuss below for several years, and will no doubt continue to do so, others are more ephemeral. In this respect, whether Guinness sponsors a hurling league, bankrolls a film, supports a rugby competition, or underwrites a music festival is almost irrelevant, the underlying link to, and use of cultural objects, remains of interest. Similarly, as industry norms ebb and flow, so those involved in symbolic production will emphasize different attributes of the brand. For Guinness, these have included, among others, 'Irishness', 'Premiumization', irreverence, inner strength, and heritage. Within these varying non-mutually exclusive emphases, cultural symbolism retains a constant presence, even if at different times particular cultural vehicles will be accorded greater or lesser prominence.

In reflecting on these processes, we develop insights into the contemporary development of global brands. More specifically, our work points to the roles that brands play in our cultural and managerial understandings. These force us to go beyond simple, dichotomous global or local theorizing (see also Lewis, 2000) to consider the nuanced, polyvocal positions that brands, and their cultural signifiers, now occupy in our society.

### ***Structural and managerial transformations***

Senior managers at Guinness decided that global expansion required a pronounced reorganization of the brand management team. Rather than the decentralized structure that had been in place previously, the appointment of the GBD in 2000 precipitated decision-making becoming highly centralized. A Global Brand Executive (GBE), headed by the GBD, was created to craft and manage the Guinness brand. Reporting to the GBE, a Global Brand Team (GBT) had responsibility for the manifestation of the brand through various promotional strategies and campaigns. Within each of Guinness' key markets, Local Brand Directors articulated the global brand initiatives within their particular locales. This revised structure highlights the shift from what had been a decentralized organization intent on following a devoutly locally-oriented strategy to one that encompassed a more coherent global position. It is at this point that we start to see the emergence of

a more nuanced global strategy capable of a more sophisticated engagement with different population segments.

Along with increased centralization was recognition of the need for enhanced cultural understanding of the local markets in which Guinness is sold. The GBD informed us that in order to ensure the seamless integration of the brand within the specificities and peculiarities of particular locales reached by the footprints of “Team Guinness”, each of Guinness’ global brand team members had to be informed by a deep knowledge of local cultural mores and norms. As others have suggested, the ability of managers of a MNC to exploit symbolic and other intangible assets is likely to be contingent on the level of local experience upon which they can draw (Delios & Beamish 2001; Lord & Ranft 2000). With respect to those interviewed for this study, the GBD is English and worked out of the Guinness main office in London; however, he travelled extensively to the major markets and, from his comments in our interviews, thus developed a cultural appreciation of many of the markets in which Guinness is sold. This is significant because effective functioning of MNCs is usually dependent upon a leader exhibiting sufficient cultural awareness to anticipate the strains inherent in the operation of transnational teams (Hambrick et al. 1998). Further, all of the African, Irish and British representatives that we interviewed are citizens of, and predominantly resident in, the regions in which they operate and thus extremely familiar with local norms, values and customs.

In order to better understand the intricacies involved in the management and symbolic production of a global brand, Guinness’ managers looked to organizations perceived to be successful in negotiating contemporary global economic systems. As the Brand Director for Africa (BD-Africa) explained:

We looked at brands like Coke, we looked at some of the Proctor [& Gamble] brands and part of the learning was that real, great global brands are managed as a global brand: global benefit, global identity. And I felt one thing, therefore: ‘was there a potential to run Guinness as a global brand?’ Bearing in mind that previously [Guinness] hadn’t been run like that, even the product itself, the liquid, differed significantly from one market to the other, [and] a different type of packaging [was used].... But the issue was that the brand name is the same and therefore what the brand stands for in the mind of the consumer will be the same thing.

This emphasis on increased homogeneity, superficially at least, takes us back to the mantra of Levitt (1983) and points to a lack of understanding of the variation in cultural consumption that global brands must reconcile. As de Mooij (1998, 5) has pointed out in a pithy, if little simplistic, differentiation of the desires of

consumers and producers, “local markets are people, global markets are products.” However, there is evidence that those at Guinness did recognize the need to construct their engagement with consumers around the world in a more sophisticated way.

In addition to drawing on the experiences of peer organizations, Guinness also introduced a formal internal program of structured organizational learning, known as ‘Share & Spin’. This constituted a formal recognition of the need to draw on divergent practices across different global markets in order to capitalize on the repository of cultural understanding that resides within the organization. Managers in each market are, with the assistance of the GBT, expected to draw upon initiatives that have been successfully implemented elsewhere, adapt them as necessary, and introduce them to their local operations. The utility of this strategy partially resides in understanding that the competitive advantage of MNCs is predicated on the ability of subunits to assimilate knowledge from their external environments and effectively transmit it through the organization, particularly through the use of transnational teams (Andersson et al. 2001; Lagerstrom & Andersson 2003). The ‘Share & Spin’ philosophy is realized in a number of ways. First, open communication among individual market representatives, the GBE, and the GBT is demanded of all relevant actors. Second, any ideas with apparent utility beyond a local market are shared via the quarterly Team Guinness newsletter. Third, representatives of different markets are frequently brought together in cross-market teams to work on key initiatives. The management of these devices is seen as crucial in the realization of effective organizational learning.

A further major component of transnational management at Guinness comprises the extensive meetings held between members of the GBT and those in local markets. A member of the GBT will travel from his/her London base to each major market at least once a month with the GBD himself travelling to most major markets two or three times a year. According to the GBD, the purpose behind this extensive array of face-to-face meetings is twofold. First, it allows the GBT to act as a conduit of learning, transmitting ideas that have proved useful in other markets. Second, members of the GBT are able to collate an extensive array of information that can be modified and reused elsewhere. While establishing the “direct and intimate social relationships” necessary for the effective transfer of knowledge from one subsidiary to another can be a



costly and time-consuming process (Lam 1997, 988), their importance for the competitive positioning of MNCs is difficult to overstate (Athanassiou & Nigh 2000; Hitt et al. 2006). Further, such consultative processes ensure that the strategic direction of the organization, while it may be crafted and controlled by senior executives, is directly impacted by culturally embedded workers scattered across disparate markets.

This philosophy is perceived to fit the dictates of operating in a marketplace that is at once global yet heavily accented by local dialects. According to the BD-Africa:

Somebody has got the key and says this is what this brand is all about and guards that. I mean the brand identity and the brand image has got to be the strongest asset for the brand. And rather than leaving that to be managed at the various levels... we maintain the flexibility but we are strong at the centre.

For Guinness, organizational learning has been widely recognized as a mechanism to improve performance across the global markets in which they compete. This reflects the thoughts of those who have noted that the assimilation of knowledge by subsidiaries can be crucial for MNCs (e.g., Andersson et al. 2001; Luo 2005). However, some writers have urged caution when attempting to formalize programs of organizational learning across MNCs (e.g., Vermeulen & Barkema 2002). It has been argued that the socially embedded nature of knowledge can impede cross-border transfer (Bhagat et al. 2002; Lam 1997), and further, that the ascendance of spatial units based around capital accumulation has meant that expansion is subject to time compression diseconomies whereby rates of return are diminished as the complexity of the organization increases (Eisenhardt & Martin 2000). However, these problems are mitigated at Guinness by the ways in which learning initiatives have become imbued into the “administrative heritage” (Bartlett & Ghoshal 1989) of the organization, something frequently overlooked by international management scholars. Initially developed through the transfer of production and distribution techniques and advertising standards (Simmons & Griffiths 2001), Guinness’ administrative heritage has facilitated more effective transfer of ideas across the organization than might otherwise have been possible. This has resulted in sustained levels of cooperation across geographically dispersed subunits (Luo 2005). For the community of cultural workers at Guinness then, their inventiveness and creativity is collectively defined and spatially enabled towards economic ends (see de Cillia et al. 1999) though not always with predictable results. The major outcomes of this strategic organization towards coherent action are discussed below.

### *Global positioning strategies*

As a manifestation of economic production across a global marketplace, key labor processes at Guinness have been organized around three major strategies—the derivation of an overarching ‘Key Brand Benefit’ (KBB), the shift towards a more centralized global marketing strategy, and the development of common advertising for transmission across global markets. Following a “global study” in 2000 and 2001 of all of its major markets, Guinness’ management announced that

we have a powerful global consumer insight on which we are building our vision: In a world of increasing speed, disconnection and uncertainty, young men need to draw on their ‘innate’ inner strength (Guinness Global Strategy Presentation 2001, 2).

Clearly reinforcing perceived stereotypes of what male beer drinkers value, the gendered narratives that accompany this tag line of inner strength—viewed internally as the brand’s DNA—are justified by the firm’s overt targeting of men aged 18 to 35. In addition to being underpinned by the traditional brand values of power, goodness and communion, the message of “Guinness reflects my inner strength” was perceived to resonate across global markets in a predictable—if stereotypical—way. The GBD told us that,

we know that our brand fulfils this need of inner strength. So whichever market you go into, Africa, the UK, Ireland, ‘Guinness [reflects] my inner strength’...is a commonly held belief and a very motivating belief.

This resonance is expected to overcome the type of disjuncture that has been noted as problematic when it comes to realising global processes across local cultures (Bhagat et al 2007; Leung et al. 2005). However, as we note above, the reinforcing of gendered messages is not problematized, or even seemingly considered.

The primacy of the top management team in the creation and articulation of symbolic resources capable of negotiating multiple cultural inferences to proffer a more consistent global position is significant. Central to this revised strategy has been a shift from using seven advertising agencies around the world to just two, BBDO and Saatchi & Saatchi. This, it was anticipated, would lead to a reduction in the brand fragmentation that many senior managers at Guinness saw as inevitable if the decentralized strategy remained. This was articulated by Guinness’ Brand Manager for Great Britain (BM-GB):

From a parochial point of view, for myself in Great Britain, every time we showed an ad on satellite TV over here, that ad was also shown to everyone in Ireland who was watching satellite TV at the time, which is a fair audience. And when Ireland and ourselves had very different styles of advertising...consumers would be watching satellite one minute, see one

completely different ad with a different strap line and a different idea behind it to when they switched on to their terrestrial TV. And there are more examples...of media starting to cross more countries. Also, the fact that, whether or not it was just consumers in one country or consumers moving around from country to country, they would see a slightly schizophrenic brand because in different countries you would see such a different type of positioning around it. And then thirdly, also an element of cost efficiency by the fact that ultimately we can reach the stage where we can show the same advert in different countries.

Thus, while there is a desire to realise the efficiencies that a global strategy can deliver (Hitt et al. 1997), the decision to develop a common global strategy largely stemmed from the social and technological transformations that have fundamentally altered the industry. This insight demonstrates the need to conceive global strategies that offer broadly consistent value propositions without slipping into a retrenched 'one-size-fits-all' position. Interestingly, the identification of media crossing national borders and its subsequent impact on brand consumption has not always been acknowledged (e.g., de Mooij 1998). Our work points to the ways in which the flow of televisual and electronic images, together with the increased flow of people, across borders has radically altered global brand management strategies. The substantially altered institutional context demands a significantly different strategic response from the top management team towards global brand building (Quelch 2003). The McDonald's "I'm lovin' it" campaign, launched in Germany on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2003 and subsequently rolled out across more than 100 countries is a similar attempt to address the issues inherent in managing this changed spatiality. At Guinness, the first articulation of this attempt to manifest the KBB within a revised understanding of a convergent global marketplace came with the 'Believe' initiative.

### ***Changing spaces: The polysemic logics of 'Believe'***

'Believe' is a symbolic campaign that constitutes a key pillar in the delivery of the KBB within the new institutional logics that have heavily contoured Guinness' global strategy. As other MNCs (e.g., Anheuser-Busch, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Nike), Guinness has drawn upon sport in its efforts to instantiate its brand within specific locales (Amis 2003; 2005). The 'Believe' campaign embraced the supposed gendered logic of sporting capital in an effort to suture Guinness to the ways in which young men can draw on their inner strength, articulated as self-belief, to achieve challenging objectives. It was an overt attempt to carve out

a common global position for Guinness. The first advertisement created for this campaign, 'Free In', was launched in Great Britain in February 2002 and subsequently played out across other major global markets. It depicts an unfurling scenario at the end of a hurling match (Guinness 2008):

Just one minute of injury time left in a knife-edge match and a vicious foul creates a chance. Over the bar and the game is tied, but into the goal and the game is won. Stepping up to take the free as the crowd go wild, our man's mind spins out of control. With a deep breath the player looks down. He sees himself and the coveted silver cup held aloft on the shoulders of exuberant fans, victoriously sipping a well-earned pint of creamy Guinness beer. Inspired by the vision of success he whips the ball up off the ground. If you want it, you've got to believe.

The commercial was seen, particularly by the Irish brand team, as being a natural progression from the sponsorship in Ireland of the 'Guinness All-Ireland Hurling Championship', a partnership that has been described by an independent consulting firm as the most effective sport sponsorship in Irish history (Sponsorship Strategies 2000). The Head of Sponsorship for Guinness in Ireland (HS-Ireland) denoted the close match between the values that underpin the Guinness brand and the sport as being crucial.

We looked at the DNA of both hurling and Guinness and they are so remarkably similar...it's 9.9 out of 10. It's...perfect. So when we...heard the concept behind the new 'Believe' campaign was going to be around hurling, we said 'sure, it's so obvious'. We've tested it, and it's proven over the last eight years to be a perfect fit.

While the comment above is clearly susceptible to local bias and *ex post* justification, there is no doubt that hurling holds an iconic association with Ireland in much the same way as Guinness, particularly among the Irish diaspora. Indeed, one essayist has described hurling as a sport "nourished by [Irish] history and culture and the Irish sense of place" (Humphries 2003, 44). In this respect, a local sporting practice has been mobilized as a major cultural signifier of Ireland, one that effectively resonates with the Guinness brand and national sensibilities, identities and experiences.

It is at this point that we see the movement beyond previous conceptualizations of global and local orientations to a much more nuanced engagement with consumers. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) noted the ways in which "value dilemmas", such as emphasizing universalism or particularism, become reconciled across different cultures. We find here that such dichotomous thinking is no longer useful. Rather than attempting to present either a standardized or localized message, hurling was seen as a sport that would operate at multiple levels when 'read' by culturally diverse consumers. At one level, the local sporting practice

would be surpassed; hurling would thus be coterminous with the key global attributes of the brand. At the same time, however, hurling provided a link to the rich cultural heritage of the Irish nation, a heritage and tradition that Guinness managers could draw upon and employ, however superficially, as part of their global strategizing. As the GBD stated:

In some markets where [an Irish population] exists, like Great Britain, Ireland obviously, the USA, Australia, it tends to be our draught markets [the Irish heritage of the brand is exploited]; in Africa and Asia, it means nothing.

This polyvocal position helps us to move beyond one of the key managerial paradoxes confronting those involved with the presentation, and research, of global brands, namely the value proposition of global *or* local brand positioning (e.g., de Mooij 1998; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 2000; Lewis 2000). Rather, here we point to the ways in which brands can engage different populations in different ways. Given the fragmented nature of consumer groups, created by social and economic migrants, and the ability of electronic and televisual images to cross national borders, the global brand landscape has changed in ways that render previous ‘either-or’ arguments anachronistic. Thus, we side with Lewis who argued that managing apparently paradoxical situations (e.g., ‘think global, act local’) requires “rethinking past perceptions and practices”, going beyond simple linear and rational problem solving to recognize the tensions and contradictions that can lead to creative solutions of managerial problems. In other words, we can no longer think simply in terms of black or white, we must construct our understandings in shades of grey.

While the ‘Free In’ advertisement employs common imagery that will be differentially interpreted at multiple levels in different places, it is positioned to carry the generic KBB, ‘Guinness reflects my inner strength’ across cultures. However, through an interweaving of simulacra, Guinness also becomes overtly attached to, and works to (re)create, a heritage as an Irish sporting brand. In this respect, Guinness has created a global campaign that seeks to draw affiliations with particular lifestyles and values, and at the same time, through a multi-levelled, polysemic text, is located within the tradition and heritage of a national territory. This is an important observation because a common contention in the international business literature is that managers of MNCs decide on promotional campaigns that have either a local *or* global emphasis (Melewar & Saunders 1999). In fact, as we uncovered here, such conceptualizations are no longer

sufficient. Instead, we must consider the theoretical and practical implications of culturally embedded brands that can simultaneously realize multiple objectives across different markets.

***Revised logics of production and consumption: The appropriation and management of culture***

Our theorizing above regarding the need to engage with multiple brand interpretations across different markets should not be seen as a call to abandon all local marketing initiatives. In fact, local cultural appropriation retains a significant role in the Guinness brand platform. Notably, in line with the acknowledged potential of sport to reaffirm national cultures within corporate discourse (e.g., Silk & Andrews 2001), Guinness has an established tradition of using sport in various ways across the world. In fact, it has become so important to the global positioning of Guinness, as several other MNCs, that it is worthy of detailed examination. The 1999 Rugby World Cup allowed Guinness to utilize a property in an effective manner across several global markets (Rines 2001). While no other sporting property with such a global reach has since been acquired, local sports initiatives have played a significant role in the delivery of the KBB in different locales. This is important because advertising assets have traditionally been seen to be less fungible than most organization resources and thus are most in need of local adaptation (Anand & Delios 2002). Consequently, while the 'Free In' advertisement may have utility at raising awareness of the KBB, a local component that effectively negotiates national cultural sensibilities has become a necessary feature of Guinness' strategic position. The BD-Africa explained the rationale for this within an African context:

I am saying the need for self-belief, the need for inner strength is particularly relevant in Africa. The reason for this is that Africans see themselves as coming from a disadvantage. In every way of life, Africa is behind the world. Again, Africans believe, because we are Africans we can overcome all of those obstacles and we can achieve things almost of world standard. It comes through in [soccer] and we've leveraged it, so one good example will be where we begin to say...if you believe in yourself and your ability you can overcome your obstacles and your disadvantages and perform at a first world class. We have leveraged that during the [soccer] World Cup with the [soccer] ad, where we have shown Africans training on sub-standard pitches, without sports equipment and saying 'Well, because we are what we are, because we believe in ourselves, we can overcome' and then we lead on from that showing national teams, African national teams, that have played in the World Cup and have performed well. So again, it is tying that need of Africans to believe that in spite of our disadvantages we can still be reckoned with at the global stage, and tying that to the brand benefit of inner strength, that it reflects your inner strength.

There are three ways in which Guinness has used sport to deliver the KBB in culturally distinctive

ways. The first of these is direct sponsorship. In its three biggest markets, Guinness has sponsored several local properties. In Africa, this has mainly centered on soccer. In Great Britain, agreements are in place with both London Irish Rugby Football Club and the professional league in which the team plays, the Guinness Premiership. In Ireland, in addition to golf and horseracing, the most notable sponsorship is the ‘Guinness All-Ireland Hurling Championship’.

The second major way in which sport is utilized is through on-trade promotions tied to televised sporting events. In Ireland, there is a carefully orchestrated series of events that are intended to encourage people to congregate and watch televised hurling games in their local pubs. Quiz nights, musical entertainment and local talent competitions are all used to promote Guinness while the games are being played (*Not men, but giants* 2001). In England, millions of pounds have been spent on promotions during the soccer World Cup Finals. The resonance of one promotion with the KBB, articulated here as self-belief, was explained by the BD-GB with reference to England captain David Beckham’s goals that first ensured that England qualified for the 2002 World Cup Finals, and second resulted in a decisive win against one of the pre-tournament favorites and long-time rivals, Argentina:

“David Beckham scoring a free kick in the last minute against Greece in the World Cup qualifiers; scoring a penalty against Argentina in the World Cup. Just look at his face as he goes to take it, and he controls his breathing and he settles himself and it’s all about self-belief. ...there are a huge amount of self-belief moments in sport.”

Such moments, according to the BD-GB, act as direct articulations of the KBB in a locally specific context that help to reify the managerially prescribed essence of the brand to a local populous.

The final way in which Guinness makes use of sport is as a theme in television advertisements. While the hurling ‘Believe’ advertisement is one transnational example, there are other advertisements that more heavily draw on those sports that play well with local sensibilities and thus constitute a critical part of the strategizing of Guinness’ top management team. In Africa, for example, sport has become integrated with advertising campaigns that have featured Michael Power, a fictitious, populist celebrity. In fact, the emergence of Michael Power as a cultural icon in his own right has been attributed to the recent resurgence of the Guinness brand in Africa (Gibbons 2004). The creation of Power is a sophisticated and powerful example of the ‘thingification’ of symbolic representations that Lash and Urry (2007) ascertain is symptomatic of the

global culture industry. Imbuing the brand with human characteristics and traits (Aaker 1996; Kapferer 2004; Faurholt Csaba & Bengtsson 2006), as with Beckham and the anonymous ‘Believe’ hurler, Power literally is an embodied purveyor of the Guinness brand DNA: a powerful bio-pedagogical symbolic ‘thing’ capable of embracing the imagined African marketplace.

Power, “the black James Bond who performs a series of death-defying acts in defence of all that’s good and honourable” (Koenderman 2002), has appeared in several short “mini-adventures” on radio and television. The character has been developed with the launch of Power’s first feature film, ‘Critical Assignment’, a high-budget film that is rare in that it is filmed entirely in Africa with African actors and African crews (Foster 2003), and is essentially an extended Guinness commercial. Remarkably, the film is often presented as an action thriller with a humanitarian message (ironically for clean drinking water), but with no acknowledgement of Guinness as funding the film, or of Michael Power as being anything other than an African actor (see, for example, African Film Festival 2004; *New York Times* 2005). In effect, Power—and by association the Guinness brand—have become institutionalized as taken-for-granted components of an invented African cultural landscape: a corporate-inspired Pan-African cartographic revisionism. This presentation avoids the particularities of specific African markets, offering instead a homogenous cultural, political and economic climate centered on tourism, panoramic vistas, and, a sanitized urban consumerism (for a full length critique, see Amis, Mower & Silk 2009). The reinforcement of the KBB is extensive: in addition to portraying situations in which he draws upon his inner strength to succeed, and extensive product placement, Power is known for his on screen catchphrase “Guinness brings out the power in you” (Obot & Ibanga 2003). The impact of the Michael Power campaigns have been attributed to more than doubling product sales by volume between 1999 and 2005 (*Diageo Annual Report* 2005; Gibbons 2004). Indeed, Guinness’ perception of the success of Michael Power has resulted in the creation of a very similar symbolic entity, Adam King, to play a corresponding role in Asia (Nathan 2002).

The use of sport and corporately created corporeal vehicles of neoliberal market ideology, the masking of the structural dictates of capital spaces of inequality, and the crafted significations of ‘typical’ British, African and Asian lifestyles and values all raise questions over corporately defined (and highly



gendered) geographic norms. In order to create a seamless integration between the firm's position and the (reified) African, Irish and British populace, cultural intermediaries at Guinness have developed a multitude of what Harvey (1990) termed "images, simulacra, pastiche" to artificially create a series of "traditions". These traditions are overtly managed to tie Guinness to prominent local sport teams, events or hyperreal characters in an evocative manner in order to create a manufactured history and thus entrench the KBB as seamlessly as possible within prominent local cultural articulations. In so doing, those at Guinness end up overtly playing to the 'masculine republic' (Ripley & Wood, 1994; Collins & Vamplew, 2002)—the seeming 'natural' embeddedness of sport, gendered norms, and alcoholic consumption as part of a regime for the repetitious stylized acts of (nationalized) gendered performance—that further constitutes, if not brews, gender 'trouble' (Butler 1990; see also Amis et al. 2009)<sup>2</sup>.

### **Concluding comments**

Our intent within this paper has been to provide a case study of the organization and practices of those who are responsible for structuring the spatial dimensions of marketplaces and producing the symbolic images that have become such a prominent feature of our existence. The importance of attaining a detailed understanding of such processes in an age of marked technological and social transformations that have resulted in inherently complex amalgamations of convergent and divergent cultural trends is clear for managers and scholars alike. Furthermore, the financial results achieved by Guinness subsequent to and following the introduction of the strategic approach described here—year on year worldwide sales growth of 3-6% between 2001 and 2006 (*Diageo Annual Report* 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007)—indicate a robustness for a mature and largely stagnant industry. Such results point towards Guinness as an exemplar of effective engagement with the altered institutional logics that managers of MNCs must negotiate. Thus, there are several theoretical and practical insights that emerge from this study that are worth highlighting.

In line with Leung et al.'s (2005) call for theories of international business that better account for simultaneous cultural convergence and divergence we can point to a revised conceptualization of the institutional logics of the global marketplace. In an age of technologically advanced communications,

widespread neoliberal market ideology, and heightened national awareness, it can be meaningless, and even harmful, to create mutually exclusive categorizations of ‘local’ and ‘global’. Rather, effectively straddling the complex and ambiguous logics of the global marketplace involves managing the movement and flow of symbolic products in the global culture industry that in turn requires imagining nuanced and sophisticated (re)conceptualisations of place and space. At Guinness, this led to a restructuring of the firm’s promotional strategizing, labor processes, managerial structure, and practices. The complexity of such organization is accentuated by the need for tight centralized control that will permit global coherence. However, to imbue the world’s marketplaces with the consciousness of the necessity of special symbolic (and material) attributions to consumer goods (Askegaard, 2006)—that is, to bring even the most disparate places in line with the neoliberal market logics of the global culture industry—requires management structures, processes and symbolic creations that enable deeper local engagement than ever before.

This push to enhance consumer-brand experiential connections has thus led to attempts to capitalize on the enduring cultural resonance of experiences of belonging within specific imagined ‘national’ markets. Operating under a global system of common difference (Wilk, 1995), the senior managers at Guinness recognize the central and prefigurative importance of the local, routinely incorporating difference and particularity within their strategizing (Dirlik 1996; Morley & Robins 1995). Yet, in “achieving a real equidistance, or equipresence, of perspective in relation to the whole world of their audiences and consumers” (Morley & Robins 1995, 113), we point to the capitalization on and redefinition of (national) belongingness in which the locus of control in influencing the manner in which epistemological spaces of identity are represented becomes exteriorized through, and internalized within, the cognitive and emotive promotional strategies of MNCs.

For Guinness, necessary integration among spatially disparate subunits was attained primarily through the establishment of highly effective networked and collaborative communication mechanisms. While these embrace electronic, telephonic and video technologies, senior managers placed great emphasis on face-to-face meetings in order to develop the cultural understanding required for coherent global and multi-local articulation of the brand. Further, the greater the richness of interaction among members of

organizational subunits, the greater the likelihood that distal structures and processes will be assimilated across the organization (Andersson et al. 2001). In fact, it may well be that the ability to absorb such accumulated expertise will be among the most critical of the capabilities needed for a MNC to prosper (Hambrick et al. 1998; Lagerstrom & Andersson 2003), primarily, it seems from our work, because of the complexities involved in creating an infrastructure capable of facilitating the engagement with consumers at multiple levels across different markets.

This study also highlights the need to understand the multiple ways in which symbolic texts are interpreted in different locales, and among different groups. This requires paying close attention not only to the nuances and complexities of producing, organizing, and managing a global cultural product, but to its movement, flow and modification (see Lash & Urry 2007). This in turn necessitates giving attention to corporate efforts to manage movement and the subsequent symbolic and material efforts made to tie products back to the world of production. The likely result will be a greater comprehension of how an array of sophisticated, multi-level texts, and ‘things’, resonate, reflect, revise, and perhaps outright refute the presumed logics of the global culture industry. Of particular interest to us in these dialectical dynamics are how local cultural manifestations, often, it seems, in the form of sporting practices, are proffered as symbolic representations that can operate polysemically to negotiate global markets. At Guinness, sport is used as part of an apparently contradictory, yet mutually reinforcing, strategy to exploit the brand’s link with Irish culture, to surpass the constraints of an association with a single nation, and as a locally sensitive practice that could allow for the seamless integration of the brand within specific geographic spaces. While a limitation of our study may be that we draw these conclusions based upon a single organization operating in a single, mature industry, this has allowed us to access the nuances and complexities of global symbolic cultural production in a way that others have often not. However, developing insights from other industries would be helpful in testing the robustness of our ideas.

Furthermore, and inherently intertwined within this debate, the Guinness brand itself also has a currency that varies depending upon the ontological constitution of particular consumer groups. Thus, in Ireland, and among the Irish diaspora, the brand enjoys an iconic status as a symbol of ‘the homeland’. In

other areas, 'Guinness' is simply another brand of beer. This requires going beyond the global-local debates that describe an apparent paradoxical managerial situation to engage in a much more detailed way with the varied cultural resonance of brands across different, often imagined, consumer groups (Lewis, 2000). Practically, the need to develop structures and strategies that allow a brand to engage with global audiences at multiple levels (e.g., through the varying interpretations of the 'Free In' hurling advertisement in multiple markets) and also be positioned in locally 'sensitive' ways (e.g., the use of locally resonant sports and development of cultural icons such as Michael Power) is of paramount importance. The need, therefore, to account for this multi-level interpretation adds to the inherent complexities and articulations between the structure of organisations within a dynamic global marketplace and processes of symbolic production. This in turn must be a central task of any scholarly attempt to make sense of the authorship and practices of those disparate groups that bridge the 'enduring distance' between production and consumption (Negus 2002). The relative dearth of studies that have explored the relationships between production and consumption at a global level point to the need for further work in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Each of the three regions examined here do, of course, have varying degrees of cultural diversity within them. Ireland consists of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; Great Britain has England, Scotland and Wales; the African region includes Cameroon, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Kenya, and Nigeria. While there are local initiatives within each region at the country level that reflect local cultural inflections, these initiatives must cohere around the broad strategies in place in each region. Given that senior managers at Guinness consider these three regions as distinct, each with their own brand management teams, we chose to do the same. The cultural diversity among the three regions, the size of the markets, and the well-developed marketing and management strategies in each of them meant that they offered rich bases for comparison.

<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer anything more than a cursory treatment of the politics of alcohol advertising. However, we are grateful for a reviewer's commentary on an earlier draft of this paper that directed us to consider this. Despite the key brand benefits that Guinness claim, it would be remiss were we not to point towards literatures that expose alcohol's ability to cause medical, psychological and social harm through (1) physical toxicity (2) intoxication and (3) dependence. Further, and with specific regard to legislation surrounding alcohol advertising, and despite industry claims that members adhere to codes of responsible advertising, the detrimental influences of marketing practices are not addressed adequately by industry self-regulation (see Babor et al. 2003). It is thus of no surprise that such campaigns, especially those that engage the affective synapses of local sensibilities, through sport or corporeal representative subjectivities such as Michael Power, are deployed by Guinness. This is certainly an area that warrants further investigation.