

The Cultural Meanings of Brands

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Abstract

In this monograph, we introduce a conceptual framework to understand: (1) How globalization is changing the marketplace and the way consumers bring cultural meanings and identities to the fore of their minds, (2) the mechanisms by which brands acquire cultural meanings (i.e., from simple country-(or region-)of-origin associations to the more complex enactment of cultural authority), (3) the tools that marketers have to purposefully imbue brands with cultural meanings that can resonate with culturally-diverse consumers (i.e., the tools to create *cultural equity*), and (4) how consumers respond to the cultural meanings in brands for fulfilling their goals.

1

Introduction

In the hyper-competitive and globalized markets of the 21st century, a wide range of brands bring diverse countries and cultures to a consumer population that is also growing ethnically and culturally diverse. It is not enough for a brand to be competitive by means of delivering functional benefits to consumers, as brands across product categories are pushed to also deliver emotional and symbolic benefits in an attempt to become *cultural icons*. But what does it mean to be a cultural icon? How do consumers react to the cultural meanings of brands? How can brands reach this iconic status?

In this monograph, we introduce a conceptual framework to understand: (1) How globalization is changing the marketplace and the way consumers bring cultural meanings and identities to the fore of their minds, (2) the mechanisms by which brands acquire cultural meanings (i.e., from simple country-(or region-) of-origin associations to the more complex enactment of cultural authority), (3) the tools that marketers have to purposefully imbue brands with cultural meanings that can resonate with culturally-diverse consumers (i.e., the tools to create *cultural equity*), and (4) how consumers respond to the cultural meanings in brands for fulfilling their goals.

This framework is based on the premise that consumers are both aware of their membership in certain cultural groups, and often motivated to affiliate with these groups to fulfill their cultural identity goals. To do so, they often attend to the cultural meanings in brands and use culturally symbolic brands as instruments to make a cultural connection. This cultural connection can emerge for identities construed at a nation-state level, a regional level within a country, a pan-regional level that includes several countries, or even for sub-groups of individuals that might reside or not within a circumscribed geographical boundary. Marketers that understand how to imbue brands with cultural meanings that resonate with consumers' cultural identity goals can build stronger consumer-brand relationships, as well as successfully differentiate from competitors in a crowded and culturally-diverse marketplace. We conclude with a discussion of future research needed to fully harness the power of cultural equity in globalized markets.

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