

ROLE OF CULTURE IN SHAPING BRAND POPULARITY

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Abstract

Brands were originally developed as labels of ownership: name, term, design, and symbol. However, today it is what they do for people that matters much more, how they reflect and engage them, how they define their aspiration and enable them to do more. Powerful brands can act as drivers of success in competitive and financial markets, and indeed become the organization's most valuable assets. Researchers have pointed out that culture plays a crucial significant role in shaping consumer behavior and brand popularity. In international business scenario, understanding the cross-cultural differences is imperative for developing effective branding strategies for the consumer population from multi-cultural backgrounds. In the above context, the present paper attempts to address the role of culture in shaping Brand Popularity. Methodology of the paper includes primary data collection from the public domain, and secondary data collection from available literature review on the relevant area.

Key words: *culture, brand, India, consumer behavior*

Introduction

Brands were originally developed as labels of ownership: name, term, design, and symbol. However, today it is what they do for people that matters much more, how they reflect and engage them, how they define their aspiration and enable them to do more. Powerful brands can act as drivers of success in competitive and financial markets, and indeed become the organization's most valuable assets. Researchers have pointed out that culture plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior and brand popularity. In international business scenario, understanding the cross-cultural differences is imperative for developing effective branding

strategies for the consumer population from multi-cultural backgrounds. In the above context, the present paper attempts to address the role of culture in shaping Brand Popularity.

Culture and Consumer Behavior

Taylor (1891) defined culture as, 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals and law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of that society'. According to Sergiovanni and Corbally (1984), a standard definition of culture would include the system of values, symbols and shared meanings of a group including the embodiment of these values, symbols and meanings into material objects and ritualized practices. Culture is learned by the members of the society and it is also shared simultaneously. Cultural values are principle determinants to how people see themselves and others, and how they treat each other. Past researches routinely examined the role of culture behind purchase decision of consumers. Bell (1976) identified some of the historical and cultural transformations and contradictions that led to the emergence of a consumerist society. According to Bauer et al (1965) and Hirschman (1983), consumers' perceptions of a product's attributes are based upon its abilities to satisfy cultural values. The relationship between cultural values manifesting themselves through consumption of products is well documented, with material goods being important to individuals due to their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning (Belk, 1984, Foxall & Goldsmith, 1994). Over time, values, beliefs and practices of a society are shared by all of its people and these to a large extent influence individual decision-making.

Consumer behavior is the central aspect of human behavior. Consumer behavior includes not only purchasing products, but also consuming products and leisure activities; not only fulfilling daily needs, but also realization of long-term life values. Thus, consumer behavior can be regarded as a utility and value-producing activities (Kojima and Baba 2001). As a field of academic practice, consumer behavior has emerged nearly sixty years ago (Hogg 2005). It is "the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires" (Solomon 2003). Consumer behavior focuses on how consumers decide what to buy, why to buy, when to buy, where to buy and how often they buy, how frequently they use it, "how they evaluate it after the purchase and the impact of such evaluations on future purchases, and how they dispose of it" (Schiffman and Kanuk 2004). Consumer behavior plays a significant effect on decisions which help in achieving the organizational objectives and further, consumers influence the economic and social conditions within a society (Loudon and Bitta 2002). There are various factors, like social and economic factors which influence the consumer behavior, but culture is the "fundamental determinant" of consumer behavior (Kotler 2003). In international business, understanding the cross-cultural differences is imperative for developing effective marketing strategies for the diverse foreign markets with a variety of cultures (Loudon and Bitta 2002; Perreault and McCarty 2002; Schiffman and Kanuk 2004). The research on cross-cultural consumer behavior has, therefore, gained importance and kindled the interest among the researchers (Venkatesh 1995).

Branding in International Market

There are essentially two approaches in branding in international market (Sheth and Sethi 1977). They are as follows:

The first approach considers that basic needs and behavior are universal everywhere and hence, the same products can be sold similarly in every market; while the second approach considers that every country has its own unique set of problems and culture. This group contends that universal marketing theory is inapplicable in different regions and hence, there should be unique marketing decisions, specific for each culture. The proponents of first school of thought argue that the globalization of markets is causing the convergence of customers' needs and so cross-cultural differences will have minimal effect on the consumer behavior, thus, calling for standardization of products and other marketing mix elements (Levitt 1983). The concept of this approach is based on the theory of learning on human behavior, but doesn't take into account culture which can affect behavior. This can be substantiated by giving example of branding of Sony LCD Television in India, which emphasizes the quality of the product more than considering the cross-cultural issues.

The second school of thought argues that culture has significant effect on the behavior of individuals (Henry 1976; Applbaum and Jordt 1996; Steenkamp, Hofstede and Wedel 1999; Usunier 2000; Mesdag 2000; Luna and Gupta 2001; Steenkamp 2001; Kau and Jung 2004; Ogden, Ogden and Schau 2004). Henry (1976) provides evidence that culture is an underlying determinant of consumer behavior. Culture has "profound implications on the psyche of the consumers" (Kumar 2007) and adaptation to cultural values leads to marketing effectiveness (Mooji and Hofstede 2002). Steenkamp, Hofstede and Wedel (1999) recognize the effect of culture on consumer innovativeness. Usunier (2000) lists the selected aspects of consumer behavior on which the culture may have possible impact: perception, motivation, learning and memory, age, self concept, group influence, social class, sex roles, attitude change, decision-making, purchase and post-purchase behavior. Luna and Gupta (2001) recognize the effect of cultural values on the consumer behavior. Denis (2006) analyses the impact of culture on marketing mix decisions. Lysonski and Durvasula (1996) recognize the effect of culture on consumer decision-making styles. Edgett and Cullen (1993) opine that culture affects the various levels of consumer involvement in decision making. Lam and Lee (2005) suggest that brand loyalty might be influenced by cultural values. Aaker and Williams (1998) examine the persuasive effects on emotional appeal across cultures. They find that appeals relying on "other-focused emotions" (e.g. empathy, peacefulness) lead to more favorable attitudes in individualistic cultures while appeals relying on "ego- focused emotions" (pride, happiness) lead to more favorable attitudes in collectivistic cultures. Aaker (2000) identifies the cross-cultural effects on the persuasion appeals and finds that cultural differences in consumer preferences exist. Briley and Wyer (2002) posit that calling individuals' attention to their cultural identity may induce feelings of group membership in the same way as it would have by actually participation in a group, which would have analogous effects on decisions in both group and consumption situations. Briley, Morris and Simonson (2000) provide insights into the role of reasons in decision- making and contend that knowledge and differences are activated when the individuals are asked to give reasons for their decision or purchase decision. This can be

substantiated with the Lay's Potato Chips, where an effort is made to popularize this brand by introducing new flavors of chips, typically considered delicious for Indian the tongue (eg; Mango Masala). Effective branding involves working on four important dimensions (Grad, 2001) which shape consumer's decisions. They are as follows:

- ✓ The Functional Dimension: It concerns the perception of benefit of the product or service associated with the brand.
- ✓ The Social Dimension: It concerns the ability to create identification with the group.
- ✓ The Spiritual Dimension: It is the perception of global or local responsibility
- ✓ The Mental Dimension: It is the ability to support the individual mentally.

The above can be exemplified by an example of a extremely popular Indian brand "*Lijjat*". It is a company of the women, by the women for the women. *Lijjat* was one of the first true community-based brands and women produce bread for the company every day, following strict guidelines set by the brand. When a consumer choose *Lijjat pappad* from the supermarket shelf or a local kirana shop, he /she is ensured of the quality. Therefore, the functional dimension for buying the product is satisfied. The *pappad* is also associated with the underlying feeling that it is made by an Indian woman, with care and love and dedication. This serves the purpose of social dimension of the product. Buying *Lijjat pappad* brings a satisfaction to the consumer of promoting Indian product and in turn helping the women who are making it. Thus, the spiritual and mental dimensions also get achieved.

Creating and Maintanaing Brand Popularity: A Few Strategies

To create and maintain brand popularity, companies follow various strategies in the context of a specific culture. The most common strategies are as follows:

The geographical and cultural spread should be very clearly specified: Companies should be very specific in regard to the geographical and cultural spread to be targeted for the respective brands. If a brand is targeted for a specific region with in a country, then the marketing strategy should be more regional in nature. "Cookme Duta *Masala*" is a brand which targets the eastern zone of India, and therefore, concentrates to promote the brand only in regional newspapers, television channels and uses the regional brand ambassadors (for eg; local film actors). A brand which projects itself as a national brand, may need to maintain consistency in terms of the promotion and branding strategy. For example, BSNL (mobile pre-paid and post-paid connections) is portrayed as a national level brand which works even in the furthest corner of the country by showing the same brand ambassador wearing regional dresses. However, an international brand like "Nike" may use internationally popular basket ball player Mike Jordon to target the international consumers, as well as Indian cricket star M S Dhoni to attract the Indian buyers.

The brand name should be simple: The aim should be to have short names that are easy to read, understand, and recollect. For instance, Pepsi rather than Pepsi Cola, Infosys rather than Infosys Technology, SBI rather than State Bank of India have become more popular to the consumers.

The brand should be distinctive: Brand names, such as, Bharti Airtel, Air India, Fab India, create a presence through the distinctive sound of the letters and the novelty of the word in the Indian context.

The brand should be compatible with the culture and language: 'ITC Sampoorna' Atta forwards a message of product of having nutrition of 100% *aata* and 0% *maida* which is highly appreciated by the Indian household for its quality of a wholesome food. Another example is 'Nimbooz', packaged *nimbu paani* launched by Pepsi co, especially to quench the thirst of Indian consumers with the refreshing quality of lemon. 'Nandini', the brand stands for quality milk-related products, has been named after the wish-granting cow mentioned in Hindu mythology.

The brand name may be unique : Companies may try to innovate unique brand name to catch the consumer's attention, especially in a mature market. Orange offered a dramatic and refreshing alternative in Telecom sector where the tradition of brand naming was built on the suffixes 'com' and 'tel' such as Tata Indicom, Bharti Airtel.

Creating new catch lines for the target consumers: Companies developing catch lines for their brand have to anticipate favorable perception about the products and positive desire to purchase them. Some such catch lines are : "Taste of India" (Amul: to be perceived as India's milk producer), "Dhak Dhak Go" (Hero Honda: to be perceived as a product which will fasten the heart beat of the youth), "Men are back" (Suzuki SX4: to be perceived as a power packed car for today's man), why should boys have all the fun (Hero Honda Pleasure: to be perceived as a product for fun-loving young ladies), "Ghar aai jindegii" (Dish TV: to be perceived as a family entertainer and loving bond between two generations on a family living together in a house).

Develop names, which are nationally and internationally valid: It is essential to establish during the naming process what geographical coverage the brand will assume. When a name is intended for only one nation or one culture, the cultural associations linked to it are immediately evident. Whenever the brand name spans different languages and cultures, it becomes more difficult to forecast customers' responses. Some brands with national and international acclamation are: Loreal, Peter England, Sonodyne, and so on.

Conclusion

The role of culture on shaping brand popularity is already established by a number of researches and company practices. Culture being the underlying assumptions among the individuals' psychological behavior, determines not only the pre-buying behavior and decision-making, but also the post-buying behavior. The earlier sections of the present paper have indicated the success stories of the brands which consciously made an effort to address the cultural issues in terms of region, language, age, gender, country, and so on. However, the globalization of markets which is causing the convergence of customers' needs is also a reality for a brand. Therefore, on one hand, cultural suitability needs to be examined by the companies to popularize the brands, and, on the other hand, standardization of products and their promotions should be maintained to develop and sustain it. In the final analysis, the deeper one wishes to penetrate at local indigenous level, the more one would need to use cultural symbols, that are readily identifiable by the target population who would be allured to respond to a brand favorably.

Therefore, the role of cultural factors would continue to act as a significant element in brand positioning and influencing consumer behavior in multi-ethnic / cultural market.

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