The Creolization of Global Brands

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Abstract

Multinational firms routinely modify global brand strategies in individual country markets to balance cost-reducing standardization and relevance-maximizing localization (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Rigby and Vishwanath 2006; Schuling and Kapferer 2004). Such actions suggest that many international managers have embraced the concept of hybridized or glocalized global branding, which highlights both global and local brand attributes (Kapferer 2002). Examples of global brand hybridization abound, for example: Tiger beer features exotic, sexually-charged imagery in its UK advertising and confident, modern Asian men in its own region (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008); Cadbury chocolates offers Cadbury Kiwi Royale in New Zealand (Rigby and Vishwanath 2006); BMW plays up its status appeal in most markets but, in New Zealand, emphasizes engineering quality to be more consistent with that country's egalitarian norms (Wethey 2002). In short, "top down" global brand hybridization has become standard practice and the integration of global and local is fairly well-understood by researchers and brand managers.

At the same time, recent evidence indicates that consumers build stronger brand connections when they are able to infuse their own meanings and uses into the brands they encounter. This emerging "bottom up" perspective is found in several literatures: 1) research on self-generated attitudes versus externally-modified attitudes (Leone 1994; Tesser 1979); 2) work on value ‘co-creation’ and consumers’ roles in deriving and determining value (Vargo and Lusch 2004; 2008); 3) studies of how consumer/brand interaction leads to a greater integration of the ‘self’ and brand (Ahuvia, Bagozzi and Batra 2009; Holt 2002, 2004; McCracken 1988); 4) ethnographic analysis of ways that consumers integrate iconic brands into their life stories to communicate family history and norms to younger generations (Diamond, Sherry, Muniz,
McGrath, Kozinets and Borghini, forthcoming); 5) research on brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009) suggesting that consumers develop relationships with brands, resulting in communities characterized by unique brand meanings and uses; 6) the growth of "open source" software and hardware (Pitt et al. 2006); and 7) the study of *creolized* forms of indigenized music, fashion, food, film and literature (Cohen 2007; Cowen 2002; Kajeldgaard and Ostegaard 2006).

Whereas traditional global brand management perspectives center on the firm’s "top down" use of marketing research to develop hybridized brand communications, these alternative streams of research suggest that value creation occurs (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Vargo and Lusch 2004), and branding effectiveness (Berthon et al. 2007; Holt 2002) is enhanced, when consumers contribute their *own* meanings and uses to the brand (Berthon et al. 2007). Indeed, the creolization of brand meanings and uses across international cultures has been studied in-depth for global brands such as Coca-Cola and McDonald’s (e.g., Foster 2008; Watson 2006). Such studies indicate that consumers find ways on their own to infuse hybridized global brands with local meanings, often beyond those intended by brand managers. Because a clear characteristic of strong brands is their possession of self-relevant meanings (e.g., Holt 2002, 2004; McCracken 1988), global managers would benefit from a deeper understanding of proactive ways to enhance infusion of positive cultural meanings from local consumers to global brands.

While academic interest in creolization is evident (Ger and Belk 1996), it is not clear that global firms have moved beyond an emphasis on top-down hybridization to active management of bottom-up creolization. Although multinationals are hybridizing their global brand strategies to maintain cost savings while increasing local relevance, whether they are doing this as part of a larger strategy designed to encourage, manage and benefit from positive brand creolization
remains unknown. Thus, based on the extant literature, one cannot conclude that adaptation of
global brand name, logo, positioning, communication and/or packaging alone is sufficient to
optimize positive meaning transfer through creolization from consumers to the brand.

In our current research, we develop a new nomological net that includes traditional top-
down hybridization but seeks to identify additional bottom-up strategies that will enhance
creolization. At the center of this framework is a construct we label the Flexible Brand Platform
(FBP). Based on past research and theory, the FBP appears likely to include a cost reducing
dimension that accompanies global brand standardization and a local relevance enhancing
dimension that not only facilitates acceptance, but also encourages positive creolization, for
example, the building of brand communities (Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009). However, before
the nomological net can be constructed, it is critical to investigate global managers' knowledge,
attitudes and practices regarding the creolization process.

Seeking to clarify relationships between managerially directed hybridization and
consumer driven creolization of global brands, this presentation has several purposes. First, a
review of the literature on creolization is undertaken to help inform potential avenues for
developing the new nomological network, which features pro-active management of creolization
processes in addition to hybridization strategy. Second, the results of exploratory interviews with
global brand managers provide insight into the extent to which brand creolization processes are
already considered and managed. Third, preliminary hypotheses and an ongoing research
program are proposed to facilitate development of theory regarding global brand creolization.
Finally, theoretic and managerial implications of the brand creolization stream are discussed.
References


