Cross-Cultural Symbolic Consumption and the Behaviour of Chinese Consumers

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Abstract: With the spread of cross-cultural communication and the expansion of multinational brands the semantic boundaries of signs is being transcended in various ways. The contemporary global and transnational construction of signs has a different impact on consumer behaviour across the world. Easter consumers have some unique national psychology and purchasing behaviour to Western consumers. This study explores different the characteristics and motivations behind the cross-cultural exchange of signs, their reception, the specific symbolic value, and consumer behaviour in China.
Keywords: Cross-Cultural Symbolic, Consumption Behavior, Chinese Consumers, Motivations, Communication Strategy

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Consumer Society: Myth and Structure* French cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard indicated that the labour value may be very small in comparison to the market value in capitalist consumer societies. (Baudrillard, 1998: 47) If a product can convey a certain social status and prestige of its owners and users, its symbolic value rises. Symbolic value refers to the value that can represent personality, characteristics or social status of consumers, in addition to the use value (Levy, 1959: 120). Individual consumption behaviour refers to only to the use value of goods, but also to their symbolic properties.

Consumers who grow up in certain cultural backgrounds adapt to the corresponding cultural values, beliefs and cognitive processes (Zang Lina, 2009:106). Cross-cultural symbol consumption reflects the consumption behaviour of people with different values, ways of thinking, social customs, and language rules. In the case of foreign goods and their symbol recognition, consumers may belong to a different cultural background. Thus, it is important to explore the diverse needs under these different culture backgrounds and how product reception operates in cross-cultural situations.

World globalization is a process that affects many countries which are continuously opening to the outside world. This is the case of China. Cross-cultural symbol consumption is present in Chinese daily consumption behaviour. Specific consumer behaviour in China is namely the result of a dialogue between the foreign products introduced in the Chinese market and containing non-native symbols, and the Chinese cultural particularities. Consumers no longer regard design and quality as the sole standard of a product. In China, more weight is placed on the question of whether or not the product meets their psychological needs, following individual or social values as well as fashion. The reception of cross-cultural symbols of foreign brands by Chinese consumers is mostly based on the advantages of brand itself on the basis of its advanced technology, excellent quality, exquisite design and first-class marketing.

CHINESE CONSUMER'S CROSS-CULTURAL SYMBOL CONSUMPTION STATUS

During the 20th century, Chinese' products were mostly considered of lower quality, and thus of lower symbolic value than those of the United States, Japan or other developed countries. Even in the 1970s, after China adopted an opening up policy, the psychology of Chinese consumers established their own culture and the symbolic value of their products as relatively backward in comparison to those of foreign cultures which were viewed as more advanced. This panorama is slowing changing as China places greater emphasis on quality and design, and not only on making cheaper products.

China's current consumption culture contains both traditional cultural factors, such as advocating frugality, and plain-living, but it is under the influence of global consumer culture with characteristics like overspend and hedonism. (Hai-zhong Wang, 2012: 151) Indeed, the market culture formed during the transition from planned economy to market economy is both government-led and marketisation. (Zhao Xin& Russell Belk, 2008: 239).

Nowadays, Chinese consumer culture contains more and more cross-cultural symbolic consumption behaviour. When Chinese consumers compare local products and foreign products, they would rather buy foreign products if foreign products are cheaper or equal. When domestic and foreign products are at the same price level and have no

obvious difference usage, they also think that using foreign products can feel "more advanced" and get more quality assurance. When shopping for luxuries, Chinese consumers tend to choose foreign products with higher prices. In the opposite, higher prices will not make these Chinese consumers switch to domestic products, but push them to chase foreign products instead. Foreign goods use people's cultural symbol consumption psychology, which leads to these phenomena. Chinese consumers believe that the higher prices of foreign products represent their high quality.

As a result, large numbers of Chinese consumers are highly identified with foreign products that contain cross-cultural symbols. When consuming luxury goods and even certain basic necessities, they worship foreign goods; particularly North-American products such McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut, Coca-Cola. Drinking Evian mineral water or Lafite wine, and wearing Pierre Cardin, Valentino, Nike, or Adidas is a symbol of higher status. The same occurs with Apple computers and mobile phones. Among cars, Cadillac, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Audi, etc., are high ranking brands.

Therefore, if China wishes to go beyond the psychology of cross-cultural symbol consumption, it should stop overemphasizing the symbolic value of foreign products (Gao Yongchen, 2012: 123) and market its own brands.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE CONSUMER'S CROSS- CULTURAL SYMBOL CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOUR

In the study of consuming behaviour in China, we must attend to three aspects: its special cultural characteristics, consumers' purchasing decision, and brand consciousness.

With regards to the first aspect, China belongs to the Oriental culture system, only partially converging and convergent with Western culture. Chinese consumers prefer to maintain their traditions but are beginning to show strong independent traits similar to Western individualism. (Li Qianqian, 2012: 78) The study by Giirhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000: 314) found that the cultural psychology of consumers influenced their attitudes and judgments about domestic and foreign brands. Chinese consumers, especially young people between the ages of 19 and 40, have a stronger tendency to individualism and independence in cross-cultural

symbolic consumption. They are willing to try new things and pay higher-prices. This is also the case with urban consumers in more international cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, where consumers are more familiar with foreign brands. At the same time, Chin's wealthy consumers have also accepted the influence of Western culture and are willing to buy foreign brands as a symbol of status.

With regards to the purchasing decision characteristics of Chinese consumers, their visual culture makes it easier for them to accept cross-cultural symbols because many of their decisions are based on perceptual decision-making. Thus, Chinese consumers pay more attention to the external performance, emotional relationship intuitive judgment, determining product value on the basis of print ads, painted texture symbols content, such as packaging, posters, DM, VI system, newspapers and magazines. They tend to rely on personal experience and direct extrapolation of symbol analogy. As a result, Chinese consumers buy foreign branded products that contain cross-cultural symbols based on the overall good impression and performance, and seldom analyse their choices rationally. That is to say, they use intuitive judgment methods. Some foreign brands, such as Starbucks, are generic in their home country, but to foreign media reports, many Chinese consumers go to Starbucks to experience a lifestyle rather than a cup of coffee. Although prices are higher in China than in the United States, the brand has become a kind of symbol of a different life style and self-indulgence, which is not the same as in the United States.

With regards to consumer brand awareness, Chinese consumers pay more attention to brands with cross-cultural symbolism, especially for clothing and high-end consumer goods. On the one hand, this occurs because famous brand goods are often thought to have better quality. On the other hand, as already mentioned, Chinese consumers only pay attention to the overall impression of goods.

Young consumers with high levels of education and high household income are the main consumers of foreign brands in China. They pursue a different life style, focused on quality, innovation and fashion that famous brand bring, and they are willing to pay the price. Bargains are not attractive to them for they attach greater importance to the intangible value rather than to the functional value.

Overall, this cross-cultural symbol of consumer psychology and the lack of understanding of commodities has also led to the phenomenon of counterfeit foreign brands in the Chinese market.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE MOTIVATIONS OF CHINESE CONSUMERS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL SYMBOL CONSUMPTION

Robert Green and Eric Langeard (1975: 63) have found that consumers from different countries value differently the importance of product attributes, and that consumer behaviour is also influenced by cultural and environmental factors. From the reality of the Chinese market, Chinese consumers prefer to buy cross-cultural symbols in some products. The following lines try to explain the cause of this behaviour.

Sri Ram Khanna (1986: 35) believes that most consumers in developed countries are less impressed by products from the third world. Chinese mother culture focuses on the group and Chinese products contain prominent symbols of communal affect and family orientation in contrast to Western products which focus on individual characteristics. The influence of cultural factors on consumer behavior is subtle and deeply-rooted. However, a growing number of consumers in China are shifting from local to foreign symbolic consumption. If there are no significant differences in the perceived quality and symbolic value between their products and foreign cross-cultural symbol, the maternal culture symbol connotation will get more attention than foreign products feature (quality) information. By the same token, Chinese consumers will pay more attention to their maternal culture when they are engaged in cross-cultural symbolic consumption.

Although maternal culture is an important source of identification with products' quality and labels, we need to inquire to what extent, consumers' cognition and attention is involved in the cross-cultural symbol consumption process, and if country provenience has advantages in product consumption.

As already mentioned, Jean Baudrillard pointed out that the value of people's consumption of things is not the object itself, but its symbolic value. (1998: 29) British sociologist Mike Featherstone also believes that people consume goods in different ways in order to establish social connections or to reflect social differences (2000: 79). Products are involved in social class differentiation and in the diversity of social psychology, associated to socio-economic distinction, symbol status.

Chinese consumers tend to follow mainstream consumer choices and imitate the consumption patterns of those around them. Compared the

effect of product, they care more about the symbolic capacity to confirm, maintain or improve social status and importance in front of others. While

Chinese consumers prefer brands that contain cross-cultural symbols from Western developed countries such as Europe and the United States, they also focus on their collectivist culture, seeing themselves proudly as a member of their communities. As a result, foreign brand goods are adapted to contain cross-cultural symbols to attract these two tendencies.

Examples of success are the current Mercedes-Benz logo hich represents the mechanization of land, water and air as well as the social status of the driver. Mercedes car owners are commonly regarded as mature, successful, respected, experienced, sedate, and with a sense of responsibility; often imagined as a senior official or a successful professional. Although the prices of domestic automobiles are much lower than those of imported ones, Chinese people prefer to buy foreign brands because the driver is judged in his/her ability to make money, in the strength of his/her connections and so on. In other words, the better automobile a person drives, the better he/she is perceived socially.

Most conspicuous products contain cross-cultural symbols including information such as the consumption idea, lifestyle and fashion. Some also include unique design, high quality, and high price. There is no doubt that modern Chinese consumers are facing a symbol's addiction that places extraordinary value in the visual and aesthetic qualities of products.

Conspicuous consumption is influenced by the competitive gap between national and famous brands. Based on China's luxury consumer market data, China's luxury consumption focuses towards the younger generations and people who present consumption characteristics of conformity. (Meng Lei, 2012: 103). In China, for example, a lot of Chinese people, especially young people, like to buy iPhones. Buying an iPhone has been a sign of conspicuous cross-cultural consumption. What's more, Apple Company has authorized a limited production of 24-carat gold, iPhones with unique product serial numbers, much more expensive than ordinary ones, and Chinese consumers are flocking to it. This conspicuous consumption is ubiquitous in the daily lives of Chinese consumers.

There is also the pursuit of "face consumption". The term refers to decent and vanity. According to prominent North-American Sinologist,

John King Fairbank, for the Chinese, "face" is a social, personal dignity to be obtained from appropriate behaviour and social approval. The concept also embodies features of traditional Confucianism, where people advocate the value of individuals within the community. Thus, in social intercourse, Chinese people tend to pay more attention to the way they are socially viewed, and to other people's opinions and perspectives as well as the effect of personal consumption in the group (Lu Taihong, 2005: 95). Regardless of social or economic status, no matter how rich or poor, in rural and urban areas, Chinese seek to maintain their dignity and relationships so that constant and universal face consumption behaviour has become the basic code of conduct. Compared to the West, Chinese people choose gifts (based on this face consciousness (Jiang Lianxiong, 2007: 121) and in order to give a good impression (save face) they buy foreign brands that contain cross-cultural symbols. This is the case of cars which, as explained above, they can function as a sign of higher socio-economic status that can open up opportunities for the driver.

THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF CROSS-CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN CHINA

Eastern and western cultures intersect in the background of globalization, more and more cross-cultural symbols influence Chinese consumer behaviour. Thus, the communication of cross-cultural symbols in China needs to consider purchasing power, consumption patterns and habits, as well as the character, cognition, attitude and psychology of Chinese consumers. (Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos, 1997: 164). Enterprises need to think globally and act locally while maintaining the international image. Based on symbolic interaction theory, Marcin Ligas has pointed out that the creation of brand meaning is the result of three interacting environmental systems: marketing social and personal environment (1999: 611).

In international marketing, elastic strategies are being adopted in cross-cultural symbolization in order to achieve a balance between globalization and localization. An overall cross-cultural strategy is built firstly, and then the interpretation and application of the symbols is left to the local staff, who adjust it according to local characteristics and customs. For example, in addition o fried chicken, KFC China jointly markets as fried dough sticks, soybean milk, porridge, etc., successfully winning local cross-cultural recognition from Chinese consumers.

Global marketing requires foreign companies to implement different forms of multicultural innovation and cross-cultural symbolic communication, which can only be successfully implemented through interpenetrating and harmonious cultural coexistence.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has analysed the consumptive behaviour of Chinese consumers and explored the impact of cross-cultural symbols in the Chinese market. As discussed, many Chinese consumers, particularly the younger generation and those with a higher household income, accept Western influence and show a strong tendency towards the individualistic values of the West. They also prefer to buy foreign branded products that contain cross-cultural symbols of higher status and 'face' value because the can enhance the identity of the owner. This study is of significance to understand more deeply cross-cultural symbol consumption behaviour in China, and give insights to international enterprises on the choice of elastic brand globalization strategies that highlight cross-cultural symbols in international marketing communication routes.

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