Branding beyond prejudice: Navigating multicultural marketplaces for consumer well-being ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Today's marketplaces are increasingly multicultural as more individuals negotiate complex cultural identities. Brands play a role in materializing individual identities—however, little is known about how culture-based brand appeals might affect consumers' identity dynamics, positively or negatively. The paper provides a framework and a model that examines the interaction between three different types of multicultural marketplaces (assimilation, separation, and mutual integration) and different voices that brands might use in their cultural appeals (Branding Ignorance, Branding Tolerance, and Branding Engagement). The model identifies how these different voices (strategies) might exacerbate consumer vulnerabilities in different types of marketplaces and provides recommendations for how to use culture-based branding appeals in a benevolent manner.

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1. Introduction and Motivation

"I can speak differently as a psychologist, a man, a Catholic, a member of conservative Dutch family, but I can also speak as an American…" (Hermans & Kempen, 1998, p. 1118).

Today's multicultural marketplace (MCMP) includes consumers from diverse cultural groups (groups that form and share common beliefs, values, attitudes and/or ways of life around a distinguishable aspect such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, residence in particular geographic regions or disability, sexual orientation, etc.—Broderick, Demangeot, Adkins et al., 2011a). Some aspects of culture and identity are constructed and shared transnationally (Appadurai, 1996). Concurrently, intensive inter-cultural exchange in MCMPs also brings to light the differences in the unique features of cultures (Bauman, 2000). Adding to this complexity, cultural identity dynamics in MCMPs extend beyond demographic indicators such as race or ethnicity, with a large number of individuals negotiating self-identities between multiple cultural frames (Clark & Maas, 2009; Holliday, 2010).

Brands emerge as "cultural, ideological and sociological objects" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 124) used by marketplace actors (companies and consumers) as referents for the establishment and performance of identities. Brands materialize ideas on global standards of living and, at the same time, depict meanings unique to different cultural groups (Strizhakova, Coutler, & Price, 2008; Yang, 2011). When lacking sensitivity to the complexity of cultural identity formation, these ideas and meanings may have detrimental effects on consumer self-evaluation and well-being. More pointedly, perceived failure of a given brand to

recognize or be sensitive to individuals' cultural identities may create or intensify prejudicial and discriminatory cognitions towards particular persons and/or exacerbate their vulnerability, that is, a sense of identity threat from the actors (social institutions, other consumers) this brand represents (Broderick, Demangeot, Kipnis et al., 2011b). Threat perceptions harm individual consumers and fuel societal tensions by generating radical identity dynamics. These dynamics can range from measures to change or conceal identity (such as skin whitening) to withdrawal from or revolt against actors perceived to pose a threat (Maalouf, 2000). Conversely, careful alignment of brand identity with MCMPs' realities can create symbolic experiences of positive dynamics between (culturally) different groups.

In general, the need for frameworks that integrate managerial concepts of brand identity and image with the sociocultural processes shaping consumer identities is growing (Schroeder, 2009). One perspective pertinent to address is that of consumer well-being and identity dynamics in situations when portrayal of cultural similarities and differences in brand identity may (intentionally or unintentionally) not align with the social meanings of (cultural) similarity and difference in MCMP contexts.

This paper addresses this gap by developing a conceptual framework that integrates literature on branding and on consumer cultural identity formation within MCMPs differing in sociopolitical and inter-cultural dynamics. The proposed model of Cultural Branding Voice—Marketplace Alignment considers the effects on vulnerability and identity tensions of different voices that brands may adopt when using cultural appeals and provides recommendations to maintain balance between benevolence and effectiveness when developing brand identities in each type of MCMP. By considering the impact of different cultural branding voices on consumer well-being, the model makes an important contribution to the branding literature while identifying means of enhancing consumer well-being.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Brand identity and brand image: a dynamic relationship informing brand management

Brand identity and brand image are two distinct yet interrelated dimensions of brand building. Brand identity entails the strategic efforts of firms to assign a brand with unique characteristics in a bid to achieve positive perceptions by target consumers (Nandan, 2005). Brand image refers to the "brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993 p.3) derived from decoding and interpreting the brand's positioning messages. Positivity of brand associations stems from functional and self-congruence. Functional congruence stems from perceptions of the extent to which a brand's performance attributes (e.g., taste, quality, durability) match expectations from an ideal product in a given category (Sirgy & Johar, 1999). Self-congruence encompasses the extent to which perceived symbolic meanings associated with a brand's image match one's perception of self (Belk, 1988). When decoding the symbolic meanings of brands, a consumer assesses whether a given brand "is me", "is what I want to be" or "is not me". Consumers utilize these meanings to create or engage with imagined worlds or communities (Cayla & Arnould, 2008).

Recent frameworks recognize the significance of consumers' input into a brand's meaning and conceptualize brand identity management "as a dynamic process to which brand managers and consumers…contribute" (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, in press p.6). Hence, brand identity management encompasses encounters between the two imagination domains: of firms' brand managers and of consumers.

2.2. Cultural identity theory and multicultural marketplaces

Cultural identity entails a person's attempt to self-identify and be identified by others as a member of one or several cultural groups.

Individuals use personal cultural characteristics to delineate the meanings of "who am I" and "who am I not", "what is us" and "what are others" (Tajfel, 1974). The sense of self derived from identifying as a member of a cultural group(s) helps people identify what is acceptable/non-acceptable for members of the group and judge the ideas and behaviors of non-members (Frideres & Goldenberg, 1982).

To understand cultural identity formation, one needs to look beyond demographic indicators. Individuals no longer rely solely on being "born into" a nation, race and/or ethnicity for cultural identity construal (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Phinney & Ong, 2007). MCMPs create "an interactional meeting place" where "multivoiced [cultural] dialogues" take place (Hermans & Kempen, 1998, p. 1118). These dialogues allow individuals to (re)connect to and/or (re)create a multitude of cultural realities through global mediascapes, technoscapes, and consumptionscapes (Appadurai, 1996). In postmodern reality culture becomes a principal entity encapsulating human similarities and differences, including those based on generational and/or gender cohort, sexual orientation, physical ability/disability, body image, and psychological disorders (Lentin & Titley, 2011). Hence, this paper views cultural identity as a sense of self derived from emotional bonds with ancestral (national, ethnic, racial) and/or affiliative (non-ancestral) cultural groups (Jiménez, 2010; Oberecker, Riefler, & Diamantopoulos, 2008). Individuals often develop complex psychological motivations to select, retain, reject and participate in (re)creation of a culture or cultures for self-identity construal. Importantly, living in a MCMP does not necessarily motivate individuals to develop multicultural identities (Berry, 1980).

2.3. Cultural identity threat, vulnerability and coping as drivers of differential identity dynamics in MCMPs

Threat perceptions greatly influence cultural identity dynamics. Perceived identity threat entails the anxiety of being overpowered (excluded), misperceived or misrepresented (ridiculed) on the basis of (cultural) difference (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999). Perceptions of threat may evoke a state of vulnerability which leads individuals to develop coping strategies that alleviate the perceived threat (Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg, 2005).

MCMP coping strategies encompass identity negotiations driven by the need to maintain or improve self-esteem in relation to emotionally significant cultural group(s). Coping strategies may be 1) "additive": addition of certain "emotionally significant" groups while maintaining significance of current in-group(s), driving an integration of competences, ideas and behaviors of all favorable groups as a compromise) or 2) "subtractive": (exclusion of certain "emotionally significant" groups, driving radical measures to oblige favorable groups by negating identification with unfavorable group(s) or to protect identity by either rejecting (avoiding) or overpowering (dominating) groups posing perceived threat (Kipnis, Broderick, & Demangeot, 2011; Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005).

The emotional significance of groups can change over time, as individuals compare sociocultural capital, power, and control held by groups in their MCMPs experiences. Individuals assess 1) the value of a given group(s) to one's self-identity and 2) conditions (i.e., significance of identity reinforcement or change) required to maintain or achieve this enhanced perception. Whilst the former evaluation arises on an individual level, the latter strongly relates to perceived dynamics between the individual and marketplace actors (in-groups, out-groups, media, social institutions, and brands).

Discrepancies between individual attitudes and the perceived attitudes of other society members affect intra- and inter-group conflict and life satisfaction. They drive (re)evaluations of selected coping strategies. For instance, differences in acculturation strategies may increase family or peer tensions within immigrant groups (Waters, 1994); high levels of prejudice towards immigrants affect the evaluation of and attitudes towards socially-acceptable ways in which immigrants should adjust to living in a new society (Kosic, Mannetti, &