Is Multi-Ethnic Advertising a globally viable strategy for a Western luxury car brand? A mixed-method cross-cultural study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Advertising
Global brand management
Multi-ethnic
Multi-cultural
Migrant
Inclusiveness

ABSTRACT

While Multi-Ethnic Advertising is increasingly used by non-luxury brands, global luxury brands still almost exclusively use Caucasian models in their global brand communication. We suggest that this is due to inconsistency in meaning and valence of Multi-Ethnic Advertising across and within countries. In qualitative interviews with 145 young consumers in Japan, China, Austria, and Canada (recent Japanese and Chinese immigrants, and Caucasian Canadians) we find that Multi-Ethnic Advertising stands for “brand globalness” in ethnically homogeneous markets, but for “brand inclusiveness” in ethnically diverse markets. In line with Optimal-Distinctiveness Theory, ethnic-majority consumers in Japan and China prefer All-Caucasian Advertising over Multi-Ethnic Advertising for a Western luxury car brand, while recent Japanese and Chinese immigrants to Canada show a relatively stronger appreciation for Multi-Ethnic Advertising. A quantitative study among 370 Chinese consumers in China and recent Chinese immigrants to Canada confirms these patterns and the mediating role of Need for Differentiation.

1. Introduction

Global luxury brands show a high degree of global advertising standardization (Gram, 2007; Harris & Attour, 2003). A growing importance of globally accessible websites and social media sites in addition to the exposure of travelers to branded stores and brand communication abroad make a global standardization of key visuals mandatory for high-profile global luxury brands. But how do global luxury brands choose their advertising models in implementing globally standardized communication? Given the positive effects of Global Consumer Culture positioning and brand globalness among many young consumers in the world (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 2006; Rieffer, 2012; Steenkamp & De Jong, 2010), one would expect Multi-Ethnic Advertising (MEA) to be a prime candidate for globally standardized brand visuals of luxury brands. Furthermore, MEA would appear to be a logical reflection of the increasing importance of non-Western markets for luxury brands and the increasingly multi-ethnic middle and upper-class in cities like New York, London, Hong Kong, Toronto, or Paris. Yet over time, while non-luxury brands like Chevrolet, GAP, UNIQLO, Diesel, or IKEA use MEA globally, luxury brands in general have been shown to almost exclusively use Caucasian models around the globe across a wide variety of product categories, both in emerging countries such as China and India, and in developed countries such as Japan, Australia and the U.S. (Chang, 2008; Dong & Tian, 2009; Gram, 2007; Harris & Attour, 2003; Hung, Li, & Belk, 2007; Khairullah & Khairullah, 2005). A longitudinal study in Japan (Martin, 2012) and a recent investigation of global websites of luxury fashion brands (Strebinger & Rusetski, 2016) offer little evidence of a decline in the use of Caucasian models over time.

Why do many global luxury brands show a preference for Caucasian models rather than multi-ethnic ones? Are they failing to grasp new opportunities and markets? Are they racist, as some would conclude (Wilson, 2013)? Or is there an inconvenient, but compelling business rationale behind the nonuse of MEA by many global luxury brands? To the best of our knowledge, no published scholarly study so far has investigated MEA from a cross-cultural perspective. Also, no published scholarly study has addressed the assessment of MEA among non-Caucasian immigrant populations to a Western country. This is...
particularly relevant in the context of luxury brands and follows a call for more research on multiple cultures within a country (Seo, Buchanan-Oliver, & Cruz, 2015). In two studies using qualitative and quantitative methodology and a Western luxury car brand as the stimulus, we compare the advertising strategies of MEA, All-Caucasian Advertising (ACA), and All-East Asian Advertising (AEA) among consumers in China, Japan, Austria, and Canada, including Chinese and Japanese immigrants to Canada. Based on Optimal-Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991), we propose that there is an ethically unsettling, but managerially compelling, logic behind the very limited use of MEA by global luxury brands.

In doing so, we contribute to existing literature in four ways. First, we deepen the understanding of “brand globalness” by contrasting a newer multi-ethnic globalness with a more conventional “Western” globalness. Second, we provide a new lens to understanding the motivational processes underlying changes in the decoding of advertising cues like MEA by migrant consumers. At the same time, we extend the application of Optimal-Distinctiveness Theory by taking a dynamic and comparative perspective (Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010), and provide a better understanding of “distinctiveness” and how it mediates the responses from consumers as ethnic minorities versus majorities (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Due to their aspirational nature, luxury brands provide a particularly promising context for this (Shukla & Purani, 2012). These findings add knowledge in Ethnic Marketing. Third, we enrich the strategic literature on global marketing standardization (Laroche, Kirpalani, Pons, & Zhou, 2001; Zou & Cavusgil, 2002) by exploring conditions of global usability of MEA as an important visual. Last, we contribute to the ethical discussion surrounding the limited usage of MEA by global luxury brands and demonstrate ethically troublesome correlates of ACA in the perception of non-Caucasian consumers in multiple countries.

2. Is Multi-Ethnic Advertising (MEA) a viable strategy for globally standardized advertising?

An ideal visual for globally standardized advertising would (a) convey a consistent meaning to consumers around the world and (b) carry a globally positive valence in the context of the brand, that is, be evaluated favorably everywhere (Cateora, Graham, & Gilly, 2015, p. 429). Previous research indicates that Caucasian models in luxury brand advertising convey a fairly consistent and overall positive message to consumers around the world. They are perceived as signals of high quality (Chang, 2008), beauty (Martin, 2012), status and sophistication (Hung et al., 2007), hedonism, individualism, and modernism (Gram, 2007), all of which are traits that fit luxury brands well. As a result, even consumers with non-Caucasian ethnicities respond positively to Caucasian models (Harris & Attour, 2003; Hung et al., 2007; Khairullah & Khairullah, 2005). Multi-Ethnic Advertising (MEA), on the other hand, has a much shorter history in global brand communication and currently is mainly employed by non-luxury brands. We define MEA as advertising with multiple models of at least three different racial ethnicities in spatial or temporal proximity so that consumers perceive them as an ensemble of models representing the brand. This definition includes single ads or webpages that show models of different ethnicities or advertising campaigns with several separate ads that each show one model of varying ethnicities.

We suggest that MEA may pass neither the test of a consistent meaning nor the test for the requirement of a positive valence around the globe. Regarding its meaning to consumers, MEA has been identified as a potential signal of brand globalness (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999). Increasingly, however, non-luxury brands like GAP or IKEA use MEA in North America as a signal of brand inclusiveness rather than globalness (Jones, 2016). We define “brand inclusiveness” as the openness of the brand for everyone, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or age (Zmuda, 2014). We expect that the prevailing meaning ascribed to MEA depends on the ethnic context in a consumer’s country of residence. In countries with a population largely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity (e.g., China, Japan, Austria), MEA is necessarily perceived as relating the brand to other parts of the world and decoded as globalness. In multi-ethnic environments (e.g., big cities in the U.S., Canada, Australia), MEA is, for luxury and non-luxury brands alike, more likely to be decoded as brand inclusiveness:

H1. In ethnically homogeneous markets, MEA elicits more associations with brand globalness than with brand inclusiveness, while in multi-ethnic markets, this pattern is reversed.

Regarding the valence of MEA, we expect Chinese consumers in China and Japanese consumers in Japan to prefer All-Caucasian Advertising (ACA) over MEA for luxury brands, while Chinese and Japanese immigrants in Canada should lean more toward MEA. Rooted in Social-Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Optimal-Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) deals with the question of how people balance their need for inclusion and their Need for Differentiation and what strategies they use to reach their optimal point of distinctiveness on this continuum. One of its central tenets is that members of a majority group, when defining their social identity, focus on comparing themselves to other members of the majority group and strive for greater differentiation within this group. On the other hand, members of minority groups focus on comparisons between groups, particularly on high-status majority groups, and strive for higher inclusiveness (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

Majority-consumers in vertical-collectivist societies like China and Japan focus on “saving and gaining face,” directing their Need for Differentiation toward a high status in society (Monkhouse, Barnes, & Stephan, 2012). We argue that this provides ACA with an advantage over MEA. It is true that previous research found a significant share of young consumers in Asia identify with Global Consumer Culture (Alden et al., 2006) and perceive brand globalness to be positively related to brand prestige (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003). As a global brand cue, MEA should hence be better received by these consumers than advertising with only local models (All East-Asian Advertising, AEA). When comparing MEA to ACA, however, it is unclear whether MEA is a stronger globalness cue than ACA. Previous research indicates that Caucasian models may be sufficient in endowing brands with a “global look” in the eyes of consumers in East Asia (Chang, 2008). And in addition to a “mere globalness”, these consumers associate ACA with high quality (Chang, 2008), status and sophistication (Hung et al., 2007), beauty (Martin, 2012), hedonism, individualism, and modernism (Gram, 2007). These stereotypes match the aspirational nature of luxury brands better than mere globalness. All-Caucasian models, then, are more suitable as a distinctive value-expressive reference group, that is, a group which consumers want to be associated with in order to express themselves and bolster their ego (Park & Lessig, 1977). Also, these stereotypes provide the logical “fit” for the use of All-Caucasian models which, according to research on aesthetic labor, can mitigate the otherwise unfavorable effects which too much uniformity of people representing a brand may have on brand evaluation (Pounders, Babin, & Close, 2015).

H2. In the context of luxury brands with a perceived Western brand origin, consumers of a majority ethnicity in a vertical-collectivist culture evaluate ACA more positively than (a) MEA, (b) AEA, and (c) evaluate MEA better than AEA.

When young Chinese and Japanese move to a Western country, they become a minority ethnicity, facing the difficult and painful task of redefining their identity vis-à-vis the ethnic majority in their new country (Cleveland & Chang, 2009). As their ethnicity is a numerically rare trait, it becomes more salient to them (Elia & Appiah, 2010). This in turn triggers a stronger self-referencing of advertising-model ethnicity among immigrants of the ethnic minority than those of the ethnic majority (Martin, Lee, & Yang, 2004). Hornsey and Jetten (2004)
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