A Cultural Approach to Branding in the Global Marketplace

ABSTRACT

Keywords: branding, global marketing, mythology, cultural, globalization

International marketing's commitment to a technical and universalizing approach to solving managerial problems has meant that researchers have adopted an ethnocentric approach to branding. This is becoming problematic as the global marketplace develops. The authors argue that to meet the theoretical and methodological challenges of global branding, international marketing scholars will need to revise some key premises and foundations. Branding research in the future will need to be contextually and historically grounded, polycentric in orientation, and acutely attuned to the symbolic significance of brands of all types. The authors offer some conceptual foundations for a culturally relative, contextually sensitive approach to international branding in which the construct of brand mythology is central.

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Brands have become ubiquitous in global popular culture. The Coca-Cola logo and Nike swoosh are brand symbols that trigger myriad responses; their cognitive salience and ability to arouse passion are undeniable. When people demonstrate against the inequities of globalization, they use brands such as Nike and McDonald's as symbols of corporate excess (see Holt 2002; Klein 1999). Because brands have become such an integral part of the cultural and economic landscape, there is a growing need for international marketing scholars not only to adapt to changing global market conditions but also to contribute to public discourse on branding practices. However, the tools and theories of international marketing remain insufficient for analyzing the complexities of a globalizing world and the role of brands in it. As a scholarly discipline, international marketing is still unsuited to address the theoretical and methodological challenges brought about by globalization, and this incongruity is especially acute in the area of branding.

Despite the importance of brands, marketing research lacks an adequate theoretical and methodological blueprint for studying the cultural role of brands in the global marketplace. Our objective in this study is to provide some elements of such a blueprint. We pursue a discussion started with the exposition of consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) to the study of brands as cultural forms. What does it mean to talk of brands as cultural forms? Put simply, a cultural form is a way of interpreting and organizing the world. Songs, folktales, movies, plays, and even beauty pageants (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996) are cultural forms because they encapsulate ideas about the way people should live, look, and think. To talk of brands as cultural forms is to acknowledge that branding is a specific form of communication, which tells stories

in the context of products and services, addresses people as consumers, and promises to fulfill unmet desires and needs. In other words, branding is a specific symbolic form, a particular way of talking about and seeing the world.

Defining brands as cultural forms also helps in examining branding in its historical, geographical, and social context. When scholars think of branding as a specific way of talking about the world, they can study how this cultural form has evolved historically and how it differs across cultural contexts. Indeed, historical and cultural studies on branding invalidate the speculation that brands all over the world are all evolving in the same ways, becoming more like Western brands (see Coombe 1996, 1998; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Wang 2008; Wengrow 2008). What emerges from these studies is the concept of brand cultures: distinct ways of branding products and services that differ across cultural contexts.

We propose a cultural approach to global branding that overturns the notion of branding as a universal technique by acknowledging the diverse ways of branding and thinking about brands across contexts. In addition, we suggest that international marketing scholars should go beyond a purely managerial perspective on international branding issues and engage in a critical dialogue about the role and importance of brands in a globalizing world. Finally, we want to change the focus on nations as units for the analysis of all global marketing issues. In this study, we provide theoretical and methodological foundations for such an approach, with the objective of stimulating further research on brands and branding as sociocultural entities. Only by embracing this cultural dimension of branding can scholars better understand the role of brands in the global marketplace.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS

Beyond Branding as a Universal Technique

In the managerial and the academic literature, experts often describe branding as a universal technique. The writings of branding gurus (e.g., Roberts 2004) and marketing academics (e.g., Aaker and Joachimsthaler 1999; Keller 2004) implicitly assume that the principles of building a strong brand are basically the same across cultures. This idea of branding as a universal technique reflects the pervasive idea that marketing belief is universal, an idea found in early definitions of marketing: "Marketing technology has universal validity and potentially universal applicability" (Bartels 1970, p. 241); "Marketing principles are universally applicable, and the marketer's task is the same whether applied in Dimebox, Texas or Katmandu, Nepal" (Cateora and Hess 1966, p. 4).

In contrast, we argue that common ways to think and write about brands are intimately tied to what we call the Western "imaginary" of marketing. In this context, imaginary refers to the values, institutions, and symbols that are common to marketing as a discipline and form of discourse. Taylor (2004, p. 23) uses the term "social imaginary" to talk about the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy." He goes on to talk about the fundamental premises and expectations that people share in the Western world. The core components of the imaginary he describes are the primacy of the individual person, the importance attached to individual desires, the belief that all thinking about society should begin with individual

people, and that society should exist for their mutual benefit. This belief stands in contrast to premodern notions that a person can only fully exist when embedded in a larger social whole. This primacy of individual desires continues to influence the branding literature, for example, in the way Roberts (2004) focuses on the special relationship that certain consumers come to share with brands. We find the same emphasis on the importance of individual desire when Czinkota and Ronkainen (2003, p. 18) write the following:

> International marketing is a practical field. It is based on the premise that international marketing transactions can be carried out more effectively, that there are many needs that have been left unsatisfied worldwide, and that the field of international marketing can improve the quality of life of individuals.

A cultural approach involves recognizing that international marketing is more than a technique, that it consists of a constellation of understandings such as the relationship between individuals and society, and that, so far, these understandings have been predominantly Western.

Several researchers have highlighted the cultural dimension of international marketing by describing the discipline's scholarship (and, to a larger extent, the practice of marketing) as reflecting Western perspectives, concerns, and sensibilities (Boyacigiller and Adler 1991; Gorn 1997; Steenkamp 1998; Usunier and Lee 2005). We argue that this Western perspective on the world endures, despite the increasing number of researchers from non-Western countries contributing to international marketing scholarship (see Cavusgil, Deligonul, and Yaprak 2005).

A complete exposition of international marketing's Western imaginary is far too ambitious for our purposes, but we put forth a telling illustration that is fundamental to international branding research and practice. One of the main ways international marketing researchers approach consumer behavior is by differentiating between consumers as members of putatively individualist or collectivist cultures, a distinction Hofstede (1980, 1991) popularized and champions. Scores of articles in specialized journals purport to compare individualist and collectivist cultures in terms of their response to marketing-mix elements or managerial style. For example, Aaker and Williams (1998) argue that advertisements emphasizing individualist themes are more favorably received in the United States than in China because the latter is more collectivist.

This insistence on contrasting national cultures in terms of relatively simple binaries, such as individualism and collectivism (or horizontal and vertical cultures) (Chan et al. 1996; Triandis and Gelfand 1998), and their effects on consumer behavior or managerial style is surprising given the fatal conceptual and methodological problems that have been identified in this approach (Fiske 2002; Holt 2002). Moreover, individualism is little more than a definition of selfhood ascribed to American and Western European cultures. In contrast, collectivism represents what Americans and Western Europeans believe they are not. As Fiske (2002, p. 84) puts it, collectivism is "an abstraction that formalizes our ideological

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representation of the antithetical other, a cultural vision of the rest of the world characterized in terms of what we imagine we are not." Thus, international marketing's focus on individualism may reveal more about Western roots than it does about the varying cultural systems Western marketers are trying to navigate.

Recent scholarship has recognized some of the difficulties in Hofstede's (1980) approach but tends to focus on the methodological limitations of cross-cultural research employing his categories rather than the culturally embedded nature of the binaries and their inadequacies for operationalizing culture (see De Jong, Steenkamp, and Fox 2007; De Jong et al. 2008). Although this advocacy of a technical "fix" sounds fine in theory, in practice most researchers generally end up researching some subset of the global youth segment, because the segment is alleged to be relatively culturally homogeneous (Douglas and Craig 1997) and therefore is responsive to conventional survey instruments. A further advantage for researchers is that the global youth segment usually holds global brands in high regard (Holt, Quelch, and Taylor 2004), but more truthfully, this segment is both financially attractive and already highly acculturated to global marketing and thus is familiar with the technical apparatus of market research. The net result is that the more dramatic cultural differences that mark the majority of the world's people and certainly the four billion at the "bottom of the pyramid" exclude them from theoretical and managerial attention, thus perpetuating both ethnocentrism in international branding research and the kind of corporate imperialism writers in international business strategy have been urging marketers to transcend (Prahalad 2004; Prahalad and Lieberthal 2003).

Another shortcoming of international marketing's scholarship when it comes to branding is the focus on trying to solve managerial problems. As Askegaard (2006) points out, a large portion of the branding literature examines the way companies can exploit global branding opportunities (see Aaker and Joachimsthaler 1999; Hsieh 2004; Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003). Marketing scholars have paid much less attention to brands and branding as sociocultural entities. Apart from a few notable exceptions (Holt 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004), in general marketing scholars have not studied branding in a global cultural context.

We provide a telling example of how this focus on managerial perspectives has hindered the understanding of branding. In their *International Marketing Manifesto*, Czinkota and Ronkainen (2003, p. 16) describe the antiglobalization movement as a confused throng: "Antiglobalization activists deride international marketing but seem to have difficulties articulating what they are really for." They advocate that international marketing scholars should defend the "transformational and uplifting capabilities of market forces" by demonstrating the positive impact of free trade in the world.

We believe that pushing international marketing scholars to become the advocates and facilitators of free trade undermines their potential contribution to public discourse and international brand management. For example, where Czinkota and Ronkainen (2003) see confused antiglobalization activists, we see great oppor-

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tunities for brand researchers not to dismiss this confusion but to understand it. This is what Holt (2002, 2007) and Thompson and Arsel (2004) attempt when they study their informants' creative reactions to multinational corporations (MNCs) and their global brands. Moreover, it is apparent that antiglobalization activism is a diverse movement with some groups promoting various anticonsumption positions; others disputing specific elements of global value chains, such as the use of genetically modified organisms and sweatshop labor; others promoting alternative fair-trade brands (for a review of these positions, see Witkowski 2005); and still others promoting brands such as Mecca and Qibla Cola, ideologically positioned as explicit competitors to their multinational counterparts. Antiglobalization takes many forms, not all of which are truly resistant to marketing or branding.

Note that anti–genetically modified organisms, antisweatshop, fair-trade, or other ideological brands such as Mecca or Qibla Cola are not antimarketing at all. Instead, these brands are positioned on anti-MNC, antiglobalization platforms that provide opportunities for product positioning and marketing communications strategies that deviate from the standardized brand positioning strategies driven primarily by price and quality (Gielens and Steenkamp 2007). For example, Starbucks, the nation of Ethiopia, and the nongovernmental organization Oxfam International waged a recent battle over the right to trademark regional coffee varietal names such as Yirgacheffe, Harrar, and Sidamo. The struggle involved the right to extract a greater share of the retail value of these regionally branded coffees either for Ethiopian subsistence producers or for Starbucks. A vicious court and public relations battle eventuated in a victory for Oxfam activists and the Ethiopian coffee industry, which may now retain the branding rights (Faris 2007; Holt 2007; Perera 2007). Similarly, in the United States, local coffeehouses and regional chains can position their brands as anti-Starbucks brands and incorporate various community, local, fair-trade, organic, bohemian, and other associations into their brand images that Starbucks cannot. Finally, fair-trade-labeled brands that promote an ethical anti-MNC value proposition have experienced dramatic growth globally in the past decade (Arnould, Plastina, and Ball 2009).

Overall, international marketing scholars are in an advantageous position to develop creative responses to the challenges posed by various kinds of antiglobalization activism. In addition, their position in business schools gives international marketing scholars privileged access to and insights into the workings of corporations. They are especially suited to bridge the divide between major corporations, which are increasingly devoting resources to global corporate social responsibility initiatives (see Prahalad 2004), and persistently discontented antiglobalization groups.

Beyond Methodological Nationalism

Another concern with international marketing scholarship is the focus on nations as the natural frame of analysis for studying branding practices and effects across contexts (see Clark 1990; Hsieh 2002, 2004; Roth 1992, 1995). By analyzing the specificities of national character, marketing has followed in the footsteps of other social sciences, such as economics and sociology. International marketing's focus on the nation has also been nourished

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by access to statistical databases developed by national governments and international organizations. Today, the division of the world into nationally bounded societies has become so intuitive in international marketing that researchers rarely question the salience of nations and national loyalties as key variables.

However, amid increasing cultural interpenetration, migration, and resurgent regionalism and ethnic identity politics (Bouchet 1995) in both developed and developing nations, using the nation as the only frame of analysis in international marketing becomes problematic (Craig and Douglas 2006). International marketers have seemingly ignored the emergence of European regional identities and resentments; for example, Belgium, Catalonia, Brittany, Scotland, Kosovo, and Euskal Herria (Basque country) are all associated with the invention of consumer traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and a growing interest in searching for local cultural roots and identity systems (Sahlins 1993). Consequently, scholars in the fields of anthropology (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002a), political science (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002b), sociology (Beck 2000), and geography (Taylor 1996) have labeled the continued use of national framing in research as "methodological nationalism." Beck and Sznaider (2006, p. 6) conclude that the "national organization as a structuring principle of societal and political action can no longer serve as the orienting reference point for the social scientific observer." Concurrently, many scholars have called for a paradigmatic reorientation to explain transnational phenomena, such as globalized finance (Subacchi 2008), migration (Smith 1983), popular culture forms (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996), or the work of nongovernmental organizations that cut across national boundaries (Appadurai 2004).

The urban sociologist Manuel Castells goes further. He suggests that society is increasingly marked by the emergence of new spaces and new processes linking these spaces (Castells 1996). Although people's daily interactions continue to occur at a local level, the flows of information, money, symbols, and images in networks, which form a web of interconnected nodes, become increasingly important elements of social action. According to Castells (1996, p. 412), "there is a new spatial form characteristic of social practices that dominate and shape the network society: the space of flows" (see also Jenkins 2006). Castells and other cultural theorists (e.g., Appadurai 1990; Tomlison 1999) emphasize the deterritorialization of social practices, a phenomenon illustrated by the Starbucks–Ethiopia branding dispute mentioned previously. Humankind is increasingly faced with market spaces bound in neither national nor territorial terms (the space of flows to which Castells refers) and forms of social interaction that transcend territorial boundaries (e.g., global brand communities, diasporic markets, global stakeholder groups). For international marketing, the implication of these changes is to throw into doubt the implicit national or global geographic referents for brands and consumers on which consumer identities are predicated. Increasingly, brands and consumers may be connected to global, national, or other geographic spatial referents, such as a region or imagined ethnic identity or tradition (Bouchet 1995; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), in complex ways that vary across brands and situations.

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Although we call into question the preeminence of the nation as a unit of analysis in international marketing and international branding research, we do not seek to discard it. The nation remains a powerful structuring framework constructing people as citizens (Hannerz 1997). In the branding arena, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that national myths are especially powerful tools for developing iconic brands (Holt 2004; Lewi 2003). Nevertheless, we call for a new geographical architecture to produce knowledge about the relationships between globalization and brands. Thus, although we agree with Pries (2005, p. 185) that "the national container society can no longer be taken for granted as the natural unit of social analysis," the challenge involves determining which spatial-geographic units of analysis are appropriate for which type of societal phenomenon or social problem, including evolving preferences for brands associated with different cultural and geographical registers.

CULTURAL BRANDING: A RESEARCH APPROACH

Our approach to global branding issues is grounded in diverse efforts to develop a historically and culturally relative analysis of brands (Bach 2002; Coombe 1996; Ritzer 1993; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2006; Sherry 2003). A cultural approach asserts that branding is specific to neither modernity nor capitalist societies nor the globalized market-mediated society.

Instead, commodity branding is a long-term feature of human economies. For example, Hamilton and Lai (1989) show that in China, the use of commodity labels in advertising can be traced back at least to the beginning of the Sung dynasty in the tenth century A.D. Wengrow (2008) shows how standardized containers and ceramic seals referenced particular sacred institutions, offices, and deities involved in the transport and distribution of standardized goods, as well as the goods' provenance in fifth- to third-century B.C. Mesopotamia, and thus were somewhat akin to today's private-label brands.

What is common across these exotic ancient cases is the use of marking and packaging to communicate the standardized provenance and to guarantee the quality of wares. What varies significantly across these historical and institutional circumstances are such things as the nexus of authority and quality control, the meaning and locus of "authenticity," other signaling intentions, the media employed, and the cultural constitution of desire from which these various brand-infused economies draw vitality (Wengrow 2008, p. 21). For example, divine images figured more prominently in ancient Near-East brands than in tenth-century China. In the cultural approach we advocate, branding practices lend themselves to fruitful examination from a variety of cultural perspectives ranging from the archeological (Wengrow 2008) to the political (Feick, Coulter, and Price 2003; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007) to the semiotic (Barthes 1957).

Historical accounts about branding are an important corrective to a tendency in international marketing to treat brands as a universal technology inexorably linked to modern Western capitalism. For example, in recent work on marketing in Eastern Europe (see Feick, Coulter, and Price 2003; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008b),

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researchers have asserted that before the fall of communism, there were no brands in Eastern Europe and consumers lacked familiarity with brands. However, Manning and Uplisashvili's (2007) detailed historical analysis of branding in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia directly contradicts this assertion. They show that brands took other forms but consumers were definitely familiar with commodity branding. Thus, marketing scholars and managers should be wary of asserting that the history of brands begins with the arrival of Western brands in marketizing economies or developing countries, when instead they may be entering an already complex brand culture such as that in Georgia. The unfortunate tendency represented in the work of Feick, Coulter, and Price (2003) and Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price (2008b) exemplifies both subtle and pervasive ethnocentrism and the assumption of uniform brand evolution.

International marketing scholars often urge brand managers to keep their brands consistent across cultural boundaries. Reibstein (2005, p. 176) states that "for a global brand to be a true global brand, it must also be consistent, not just in name, but in position and what it offers." Similarly, the branding consultant Interbrand (2007) asserts that the "best brands achieve a high degree of consistency in visual, verbal, auditory, and tactile identity across geographies." What is significant here is not so much the idea that consistency will be valued, but rather that its relevance and the boundary conditions under which it will be useful for companies remain largely unquestioned. Erdem and Swait (1998) argue that the consistency of brand messages increases the clarity and credibility of a brand in the minds of consumers, but the relevance of consistency across cultural contexts remains largely uncontested and underresearched.

The writings of branding consultants, advertising executives, and other branding specialists also reflect Czinkota and Ronkainen's (2003) assertion that international marketing is a set of universal techniques. In books such as Robert's (2002) *Lovemarks* and branding textbooks (see Keller 2004), the implicit and sometimes explicit assumption is that branding techniques and theories can be applied cross-culturally. In other words, to develop strong brands, firms must follow the models developed by Western companies such as Apple, Harley-Davidson, or Coca-Cola. This assumption is implicit in the following comments by Shelly Lazarus, chairman of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, about Chinese brands (qtd. in Wang 2008, p. 21):

> "Is Lenovo a brand? No. Is Haier a brand? No. They are brand names that aspire to be brands. But they [their Chinese owners] have to understand that branding is about the relationship with people both intellectually and emotionally. They have to have a consistent proposition they put in front of people."

These remarks reflect the persistent belief among Western branding professionals that Chinese brands and their Asian cousins are not authentic brands. These marketing practitioners seem to suggest that Asian brands lack the emotional connection that Western

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brands have established with consumers. Because of this supposed inferiority of Asian brands, these consultants seem to believe that selling Western branding models and frameworks to Asian marketers is more effective (see Temporal 2001). Again, they seem to be saying that branding is a universal technique and that Asians have not mastered its subtleties.

However, this analysis lacks any space for the role of cultural context in determining the best brand architecture. International marketing scholars are ready to accept that international marketing requires attention to cultural differences (see Burgess and Steenkamp 2006) but not that the models of brand development and what constitutes a powerful brand might be different across contexts. In contrast, consistent with the historical and cultural examples mentioned previously, if researchers view branding as a culturally malleable mode of communication, they can think more productively about the way the cultural context should influence branding activities.

Chinese examples provide a useful reminder that context is essential to the way contemporary branding should be approached. The brands that Shelly Lazarus denigrated are remarkably well suited to the Chinese market environment. The reputation of companies such as Haier and Lenovo as big national companies involved in many types of businesses is especially resonant in China because size signals stability and reliability to many Chinese consumers, reassuring them that such companies can be trusted to deliver safe products. As Wang (2008) argues, concerns about product safety are so great in China that many brands are marketed solely on that basis. In a market rife with counterfeit goods and safety alerts, it makes sense for brands to focus on ensuring that their products are not dangerous. The head of advertising agency J.W. Thompson in Greater China even declared that "the fundamental essence of Chinese culture is not individual 'desire' but the need for safety" (Wang 2008, p. 18). Regardless of whether cultural essences exist, the point is that it makes sense in the Chinese context to release products that rely on a corporation's reputation for safety. Prevailing loyalty to large conglomerates such as Lenovo and Haier is intimately related to the importance that Chinese consumers place on safe consumption.

Branding experts such as Shelly Lazarus urge Chinese companies to establish an intimate bond with customers (e.g., note the preceding quote: "Branding is about the relationship with people both intellectually and emotionally"). Along the same lines, Kevin Roberts (2004, p. 74), chief executive officer of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, maintains that the next step in the evolution of brands is to go beyond trust and become "Lovemarks," or brands that possess a "special emotional resonance" with consumers, enabling companies to extract a profit from that resonance. At heart is an assumption that brands function and evolve in the same way all over the world. However, brands such as Lenovo or Haier may actually fit in the context from which they come.

Contrast this perspective with Manning and Uplisashvili's (2007, p. 627), who draw the distinction between "state" brands and "firm"

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brands that existed in Georgia under communist rule. State brands were not embedded in a system of monetary evaluation of firm assets and private property as they are in the West or in an economic model that privileged individual choice or a cultural model that privileged individual distinction (Bourdieu 1984). They were not aimed at recognizing some presumably natural or autonomously formed consumer desire as are the Lovemarks espoused by Roberts (2004). Rather, indigenous-branded goods helped the Soviet state's project reform everyday life and create the new Soviet person. In other words, such brands were aimed at fulfilling the objectives of the state rather than meeting the desires of individual consumers.

The argument here is that though there are similarities between branding systems across time and place, different institutional and societal configurations produce different kinds of branding practices and different kinds of brands. Coombe's (1996, 1998) research on U.S. brands at the turn of the twentieth century also offers a telling illustration. Coombe describes a system of brand differentiation linked to extreme ethnic stereotypes and hitched to the project of national identity building. Prominent brand symbols evoked mythic negative stereotypes of blacks (e.g., Aunt Jemima) and Native Americans (e.g., cigar store Indians) against which a white national consumer identity was counterposed. Further research on international brand cultures should provide a historical perspective on branding practices to examine these different branding cultures. International marketing scholars have a crucial role to play in documenting different branding systems that have existed at different times.

Building on the Chinese and Georgian examples, we argue for the broader significance of different brand cultures. We find evidence in support of the utility of a culturally relative approach to brand cultures even in Western contexts. For example, Kapferer (2006) argues that different types of brands emerged out of Europe and the United States. Whereas European luxury brands, such as Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent, are built around ideas of history, art, and artisanship, which are pervasive themes in Western Europe, U.S. brands, such as Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger, are based on heroic, personal stories that are at the core of American culture. Kapferer suggests the existence of two models of brand building predicated on different views of the world and the importance of history and heritage in the building of a brand. Overall, this work suggests that in the same way there are alternative modernities (see Gaonkar 2001), there may well be alternative brand cultures. Historical and cross-cultural perspectives help us better understand how certain ideas about branding emerged and determine where and when current branding theories and concepts are relevant.

A key conclusion is that further research should examine the cross-cultural applicability of various brand architectures. For example, large conglomerates involved in often unrelated businesses defy many of the branding principles found in Western marketing textbooks. Companies are usually warned against overstretching their brands across many categories (Keller 2004). For example, Procter & Gamble has different brand names for different markets. For companies maintaining a large number of different brands in the same

portfolio, such a strategy safeguards the company against negative perceptions carrying over from one product to the rest. However, such precautions may become futile in the new global media landscape. It does not take long for Internet bloggers to establish links between brands, even when companies try to disguise these links. Furthermore, as Wang (2008) demonstrates, giant corporate brands may be well suited to cultural contexts in which business size inspires trust, especially those in which consumers are concerned about safety.

Overall, further research on brand cultures should (1) provide historical accounts of the way branding practices evolved in different contexts to suit different constraints, (2) analyze how different branding concepts and theories emerged and for what purposes, and (3) examine the cross-cultural applicability of various brand architectures rather than assuming the universal applicability of particular branding theories and concepts. For example, ideas about the imperative of brand consistency did not emerge out of a cultural vacuum; research on the topic should examine how and why these ideas evolved, both historically and culturally. Further discussions of brand consistency should begin with an understanding of consistency as tied to certain historical contingencies—namely, the prevailing trends in mechanical reproduction and scientific principles that applied to product management. In other words, the idea of consistency should be related to a certain view of the firm as an engine of control, an idea increasingly challenged by emerging perspectives in business organizations (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

Brand Globalization

As previously noted, research on marketing standardization has approached culture "from the outside" (Bouchet 1995, p. 69) as an exogenous variable that marketers can choose to adapt to or ignore. We suggest moving beyond this treatment of culture in international marketing to viewing branding practices themselves as cultural. More specifically, international marketing scholarship might include study of (1) how brands from different cultures globalize; (2) the impact of branding activities on cultural systems; and (3) how brands, when conceived as evolving narratives, are created and received in a geographically polycentric world.

First, a cultural approach builds on our discussion of brand cultures to examine different models of brand globalization. It would be valuable to compare the way brands from different brand cultures globalize. Such a research program would complement previous research on the internationalization of business activities, such as the way firms behave when they step outside their home markets (Johanson and Vahlne 1977), but should extend this stream of research by detailing different models of brand globalization.

We noted previously that research identifies the historical and cultural diversity of brand cultures. However, it is not yet clear how they globalize. For example, the global expansion of Japanese brands has sometimes entailed the erasure of cultural markers. Iwabuchi (2006) suggests that unlike Levi's, for example, which is powerfully associated with people's constructions of what constitutes "American style," Japanese goods are not marketed "on the back of a Japan-

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ese way of life" (Featherstone 1995, p. 9). For example, the Sony Walkman may have incorporated some elements of "Japaneseness" in terms of its characteristics of compactness, simplicity, and fine detailing (Du Gay et al. 1997, pp. 69–74), but it was not generally perceived as evoking a specifically Japanese lifestyle (Iwabuchi 2006, p. 28). Iwabuchi (2006) suggests that the design of many Japanese brands involves the bleaching out of recognizably ethnic, racial, or cultural references, in turn enabling the smoother transnational cultural distribution and consumption of such products. Holt (2004) shows that iconic U.S. brands are successful because they are infused with culturally charged myths that help consumers deal with contradictions in their everyday experience. An important extension to Holt's work would be to examine the different ways brands globalize. Similarly, can Chinese conglomerate brands do well in other brand environments such as Eastern Europe, where safety and authenticity are also important to consumers (Feick, Coulter, and Price 2003; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007)?

Second, research should analyze the impact of branding activities on local cultures more carefully. Such analysis is important because of growing concerns about the impact of marketing activities in the public sphere (see Klein 1999). An important area of research is the impact of branding itself. The growing success of branding books and seminars and the proliferation of business schools have meant that branding itself has diffused globally. Some research has suggested that this diffusion has led to the diffusion of brand involvement and materialist individualism (Feick, Coulter, and Price 2003; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008a), but is this the case everywhere?

A third important stream of research in the area of brand globalization is an analysis of brand meaning as it is created in a polycentric world. Brand meaning emerges out of increasingly dispersed networks of users, producers, and other agents. Consider the recent example of French distribution giant Carrefour. On April 7, 2008, Chinese Paralympics athlete Jin Jing was attacked during the Paris leg of the Olympic torch relay by protesters denouncing China's Tibet policy. Within a few days, Jin Jing was celebrated in Chinese media, Internet blogs, and bulletin boards as a Chinese hero. Quickly, attention turned to French companies in China, especially Carrefour and the luxury conglomerate LVMH. On April 19, crowds marched through the Chinese city of Wuhan carrying signs demanding, "Say no to French goods." On the Web, bloggers encouraged Chinese customers to boycott Carrefour and French luxury goods. This type of backlash is not new; consumer researchers and historians have sufficiently analyzed the boycotting of foreign products (Gerth 2003; Klein, Ettenson, and Morris 1998; Witkowski 1989). Another illustration is Earth Hour, an annual international event started in 2007 in Sydney in which people are encouraged to switch off their lights for one hour. The event was conceived by ad agency Leo Burnett Australia during the course of its work for the World Wildlife Fund. As a trademark, Earth Hour is jointly owned by World Wildlife Fund Australia, Australian media conglomerate Fairfax Media, and advertising agency Leo Burnett. These three partners provide brand guidelines for implementing Earth Hour throughout the world, and in 2008,

Earth Hour was observed in 24 major cities, including Dubai, Bangkok, and San Francisco (www.earthour.org). However, in the spirit of fostering the creativity of the event's local organizers, the owners of the trademark retain almost no control over the way the brand is used, how the event is advertised, or how business partners are picked to endorse the event in other parts of the world.

There is ample precedent for analysis of this type of coconstructed narrative in the social sciences that could be of use in better understanding global brand dynamics. Brands such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and the television program *Dallas* have all been analyzed to illustrate the compelling strength of local appropriations (Miller 1998; Watson 1997). For example, research by Liebes and Katz (Liebes 1984, 1988; Liebes and Katz 1986) shows that watching *Dallas* is an active process of negotiation between the program and the cultural experiences, values, and backgrounds of viewers of different national origins. As a brand, *Dallas* is not received passively but rather in strongly divergent and culturally determined ways. Miller (1998) shows that in Trinidad, the meaning of Coca-Cola is determined by its categorization as a "black" as opposed to a "red" sweet drink (indeed, it is the exemplar of that category) and its associations with non-Asian Trinidadians versus Asian Trinidadians, with rum and coke versus other cocktails, with traditional conceptions of Trinidadian modernity versus recent developments, and with a long-standing indigenous bottler versus new market entrants. The contributors to the collection edited by Watson (1997) show diverse appropriations of McDonald's in Asian cultures, in which the brand is variously associated with modernity, cleanliness, a student hangout, a dating destination, and so on. Online social networking brands such as Facebook, Meebo, Tumblr, and Twitter also trend this way. Finally, as is increasingly evident in media brands such as *The Matrix*, *Survivor*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Harry Potter*, and even *Star Wars*, companies may try to control brand architecture, but eventually a cocreated brand story emerges across various media platforms (Jenkins 2006), one that may incorporate heterodox associations.

What the Carrefour, Earth Hour, *Dallas*, and Coca-Cola brand stories have in common is that when conceived as an evolving narrative, the construction of brands becomes a collective process involving a host of "authors" who all add up their own interpretations: not only consumers and managers, but also popular culture intermediaries in different cultural contexts (Holt 2003). A brand's meaning emerges out of consensus and dissensus, between the collective sharing of what the brand means to all its stakeholders and the active and often conflictual negotiation of such meanings. As members of different interpretive communities (Fish 1980), stakeholders and consumers all add different elements. If we take this model to a global level, we can formulate a cultural geography of brand stories, providing a corpus of memes that firms and consumers can draw on in constructing brand narratives.

Transnational Brand Mythologies

Brand mythology is a nonuniversalizing, nonreductionist way to operationalize cross-cultural research on branding in such a way that goes beyond the traditional focus on putative national cultures. It has been argued that brands are a constituent of global

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mythology (Askegaard 2006). Moreover, the impact of global mythology on brand involvement can be measured (Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008a). So, what is commercially mediated mythology? It is harnessing myth to commercial purposes through the marketplace. In general, we can qualify myth in terms of the following characteristics (Leach 1967; Lewi 2003; Stern 1995):

1. A myth is a foundational story or a system of related stories perceived to be age-old. Myth imposes sense and order on experience and is believed to encode time-proved verities. Actors in mythic stories, such as Gilgamesh, Job, or the very human Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*, face cosmic or epic challenges.

2. Myths are anonymous and shared, and to survive they must be continuously reappropriated by a social group, as in the recycling of the Cinderella tale through many successful U.S. films, including *The Princess Diaries*, *Ella Enchanted*, *Maid in Manhattan*, and *Enchanted*, or in the rags-to-riches Chanel myth circulated among fashion subculture insiders (see Lewi 2003).

3. Myths integrate social groups by proposing meaning for social life and outlining appropriate modes of conduct. Myths help people understand their place in society, as in utopian (Kozinets 2001), dystopian (Kozinets 1997), and gnostic myths (Thompson 2004).

4. People regard myths as compelling and, to the extent that mythical heroes can be emulated, believable.

5. The heroes who populate myths tend to be monotypic and shorn of psychological complexity and nuance. They incarnate powerful forces. Archetypes such as the man with no name in Clint Eastwood's classic westerns or even James Bond fascinate us because they are absolute.

6. Myths are made dynamic by compelling binaries: good and evil, nature and culture, life and death, day and night, and so on. For example, the male–female binary is central to the mythology of Goth consumer subculture (Goulding, Maclaren, and Follett 2004).

A small stream of influential research and practitioner-targeted texts has tapped into the ways brands become mythical resources and the impact of such brands on consumer behavior and other marketing outcomes (Lewi 2003; Vincent 2002). The most theoretical treatment in English is the work of Holt (2003), which outlines a general theory of brand iconicity in which brands are viewed as exemplifying classic mythic characteristics (though the fourth and fifth points we mentioned previously are neglected in that analysis). Moreover, iconic brands, such as totemic objects (Leach 1967), render myths more accessible and more easily appropriated by consumers, and these facts together help explain the marketplace success of iconic brands. However, the myths iconic brands resolve are existential contradictions people feel between their own lived

experience and society's prevailing ideologies, rather than the binaries of classic mythology.

Central to our stream of research is Holt's (2003, p. 44) contention that brands compete in "myth markets":

> A myth market is as an implicit national conversation in which a wide variety of cultural products compete to provide the most compelling myth. The topic of the conversation is the national ideology, and it is taken up by many contenders.

Recent studies have shown that brand myth markets play a significant role in organizing and structuring the choice-making work of consumers and that some mythic brand markets are not national but transnational phenomena, constituent of global commercial "ideoscapes" (Appadurai 1990; Askegaard 2006; Tissiers-Desbordes and Arnould 2005) that transcend the national context central to earlier work (Holt 2003; Thompson 2004). For example, Manning and Uplisashvili (2007) show how post-Soviet Georgian beer brands successfully draw on mythic images of fierce, independent Caucasian tribespeople and "productionist" Soviet-era high-technology to capture a national self-understanding of Georgians as both European and original.

Similarly, Maclaran, Otnes, and Fischer (2007) argue that the British Royal Family is a mythic transnational brand that provides significant economic value to the United Kingdom. They illustrate mythic brand elements in the British Royal Family, including (1) a system of stories perceived to be age-old, ultimately stemming from narratives of King Arthur, who is the myth's supra-individual character; (2) shared and continuously reappropriated meanings, as with Diana depicted as a sort of "fairy-tale princess" and Queen Victoria as the "Great White Goddess"; (3) the role of the royals in exemplifying appropriate modes of conduct—for example, George VI and the Queen Mother's behavior during their famous World War II walkabouts—in which members of the Royal Family are often regarded as more than mere mortals and, until recently, above reproach; (4) a brand narrative that is compelling and believable (e.g., Diana as the "People's Princess"); and (5) archetypal heroes that control powerful forces, evoking the tradition of King Arthur and other heroic kings such as Henry V, immortalized by and celebrated in Shakespeare's plays.

Finally, Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price (2008a) show that global brands in seven different product categories (i.e., soft drinks, beer, clothing, electronic products, cosmetics/personal care products, chocolate, and automobiles) evoke a global myth—in this case, the global myth of the independent, self-actualizing, decision-making consumer who is simultaneously a participant in and citizen of a modernizing world. Their work refers to the mythic landscape of the multitudes that are entering the global brand landscape and shows that in both the United States and some former Eastern Bloc countries, this global myth necessitates the use of branded products to communicate personal identity. In this regard, these authors operationalize Askegaard's (2006, p. 94) contention that global brands are a central metaphor for understanding consumer prac-

tices in modern identity formation and personal positioning. Brands perceived to be international help authenticate the modern, global, and self-actualizing consumer.

A cultural approach to branding involves viewing global consumer culture as a symbolic repertoire for the construction of identities and the shaping of consumer preferences. We believe that evaluating brands as symbols can also help us understand how brands, particularly global brands, resonate with consumers. We propose to extend classic research on brand symbols (Levy 1959) by examining not only myth but also brands as global symbol systems. Marketing scholarship influenced by semiotics introduced this approach, demonstrating how the meaning of brands emerges from a symbolic system of contrasts and oppositions (see Floch 2001; Peñaloza, Venkatesh, and Firat 2006). Here, we follow Saussure's (1966, p. 120) statement that "in language there are only differences." In other words, knowledge of any term or sign depends on knowledge of the system to which it belongs, and a term only makes sense through its juxtaposition with and distinction from other terms. An example of this can be found in the Apple brand, whose meaning emerged from its distinction from IBM in stories about Apple and Big Blue and continues in the latest Apple advertising campaign "Mac or PC" (Cohen 2008).

This system of symbolic oppositions in the branding landscape is increasingly global. The brand Mecca Cola is an excellent example. Launched in 2002 by Tawfik Mathlouthi, a French-Tunisian businessman, it is now available in several Middle Eastern countries under the slogan "Shake your conscience." The brand capitalizes on a tide of anti-Americanism in the Arab world, and its name evokes the most powerful symbol in the Muslim cultural landscape. It is promoted as an alternative to the U.S. brands Coke and Pepsi. Just as the meaning of Coca-Cola in Trinidad emerged from a set of local symbolic oppositions (Miller 1998) and the meaning of Georgian brands emerged from an opposition to Soviet brands and Western brands (Manning and Uplisashvili 2007), the significance of Mecca Cola on the global platform stems just as much from its contrast with Western brands as it does from the symbolic link between Mecca Cola and the Muslim community. Understanding such global systems of meaning and contrast can help marketers build brands that resonate with various groups of consumers more than simply relying on underspecified evocations of quality or tradition (cf. Gielens and Steenkamp 2007; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008b).

Table 1 summarizes the tenets of our cultural approach to branding and propositions for further research. Going forward, our perspective entails both theoretical and managerial implications. The fundamental premise is that branding is a culturally infused way of arranging the material world. Although research on global consumer segments has implied that brands and branding may be a "structure of common difference" (Wilk 1995, p. 118) in the global economy, different types of brands and ways of managing and consuming brands have also emerged in different places, which we call brand cultures. In terms of our analytical approach, we consider culture endogenous to marketing activities. We propose to study and manage brands as cultural forms that structure and convey ideas about our place in the

THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Table 1.
Contrasts Between Standard and Culturally Informed International Branding Research

	Standard Branding Research	Culturally Informed Branding Research	Research Priorities and Propositions
Premises	Branding is a universal technique	Branding is a culturally inflected way of arranging the world	• What cultural differences (national, regional) do branding strategies embed? • How have branding practices evolved in different contexts to suit different constraints? • How have different branding concepts and theories emerged and for what purposes? • How and why did the imperative for brand consistency in international marketing evolve?

Analytical approach	Culture as exogenous: Marketers adapt brands to cultural environments
	
	Psychological: Brands are sets of associations
	
	Economic: Brands are information signals
		Culture as endogenous to marketing activities
		
		Brands as cultural forms
		    Contextual
		    Historical
		    Polycentric
		    Symbolic: mythic landscapes
			• How do traditional brand landscapes affect globalized brands?
			
			• How does the adoption of branding affect firm strategies in marketizing and developing countries?
			
			• How do brands at different geographical scales interact in market space?
			
			• What kinds of mythic elements make for good brand stories?
			
			• Can we predict the emergence of "antibrands" (e.g., Mecca Cola, fair trade)?
			
			• P: European consumers respond more positively to brand stories built around ideas of history, art, and craftsmanship. Which ones? When?
			
			• P: U.S. consumers respond more positively to brands based on heroic, personal stories. Which ones? When?
			
			• P: Consumers in former Eastern Bloc countries respond more positively to brand stories based on authenticity, nationalism, and the global myth. Which ones? When?
			
			• P: Chinese consumers respond more positively to brand stories based on corporate stability and reliability. Which ones? When?

	Standard Branding Research	Culturally Informed Branding Research	Research Priorities and Propositions
Units of analysis	Nations; global Country of origin and reception Consumer perceptions and associations Individual people	Combination of different geographical units (nations, cities, regions, localities) Brand meanings as they are produced in a network of participants (consumers, influencers) rather than in individual minds Brand narratives	• How do brands globalize? • How do cosmopolitan, national, and other geographic referents influence particular brand meanings? • To what degree do various brand architectures translate across cultures? • Can we identify segments of consumers that are differentially responsive to varying scales (e.g., global, regional, local) and sources of brand meaning? • To what degree do consumers in marketizing and developing countries buy into global brand mythologies? • Does brand diffusion always lead to the diffusion of brand involvement and materialist individualism? • Is it possible to develop an archive of commercially compelling narrative elements?

Table 1.
Continued

world. It follows that improved understanding and management of brands as cultural forms will come from research and management programs that (1) are contextually embedded and culturally relative, (2) are historically embedded, (3) assume the (sometimes unpredictable) polycentricism of sources of brand meaning, and (4) adopt a mythic or symbolic perspective on brand meaning notwithstanding the ostensible functionality of the product or service.

More specifically, further research should explore these paths in the following ways: First, contextual studies should explore how different brand cultures emerge out of different geographies and institutional configurations and examine the implications of these cultures for consumer involvement and motivation. Second, historical studies should examine the various branding practices that have existed at different times and their impacts on contemporary emerging brand cultures, again with implications for consumer involvement and motivation. Third, brand research in international marketing should be polycentric. The production of brand meaning is increasingly global, regional, and local, operating through a network of offices, plants, design teams, and other actors, including consumers in different parts of the globe. The emergence of social networking and other consumer-driven brands may be harbingers of things to come: The creation of brand meaning is increasingly collective and dynamic. Thus, we endorse moving away from the export model of brand adaptation to cultural environments. Instead, studies in the future should go beyond methodological nationalism and combine various frames of reference—local, microregional, national, macroregional, and global—to develop distributed models for creating brand meaning. We do not advocate replacing one frame (the national) with another (the global); instead, we argue for the emergence of research and managerial models combining different frames of analysis that study the connections among nation, city, clusters, regional actors, and transnational institutions in the production and diffusion of brand meaning.

Our cultural approach to brands complements previous approaches by putting them in their historical and cultural contexts. Two prevalent approaches to branding warrant rethinking: (1) Extant cognitive approaches (for a review, see Keller and Lehmann 2006) focus attention on individual brand-knowledge structures as ways to measure a brand's value (Keller 1993), and (2) economic approaches consider brands carriers of decision-related information (see Erdem and Swait 1998). In contexts in which brands are a pervasive aspect of the commercial landscape, brands reassure consumers and reduce their information search costs (Feick, Coulter, and Price 2003). Economic approaches encourage brand managers to develop credible brand claims as a way to improve consumers' confidence in companies and brands. In a globalized market environment, both approaches have major limitations: their presumption of the North American brand culture as a norm of brand architecture (Wang 2008), methodological nationalism (Beck and Sznaider 2006), and the failures to unpack the contextual specificity of dimensions of brand meanings (e.g., quality, an autonomous individual consumer for whom brands are significant primarily to individual identity) (Feick, Coulter, and Price 2003; Fournier 1998; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008b).

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A cultural approach involves broadening our view from that of established methods. We argue that brands are part of the fabric of popular culture and populate our modern mythology; they must be analyzed as cultural forms, carriers of meaning, and devices structuring thought and experience. This cultural dimension of brands cannot be easily captured by prevailing psychological and economic approaches. The collective significance of brands evades the dyadic models of firm–customer relationships that dominate psychological and economic approaches to branding. Brands such as the British Royal Family, Georgia's beer brands, and iconic global brands become central characters in the myths by which groups of people live, as well as the stories they tell one another every day (see Ritson and Elliott 1999).

Our cultural approach offers the following three managerial implications: First, for branding researchers and managers, working with what are called "emerging markets" is a formidable challenge and an opportunity to question assumptions and frameworks stemming from the experience of Western contexts (see Burgess and Steenkamp 2006). A cultural approach to branding begins with marketing reflexivity—that is, marketers' awareness of the assumptions and premises from which they think and act. For example, Lovemarks (Roberts 2004) are an idea designed in a Western cultural context for Western consumers. They place individual consumers at the center of all concerns and plot a unidirectional path of development for all brands, in all contexts, from commodity to brands as signals of trust to Lovemarks. At best, then, Lovemarks are just another expression of recent Western marketing fashion that focuses ever more tightly on fragmented individual consumption desires. However, we suggest that more attention should be paid to local and regional brand landscapes and that more basic research should be conducted on the historical and cultural particularities of such landscapes. The cross-cultural applicability of dominant frameworks and theories in international marketing should not be accepted lightly. Through a culturally relative approach to branding, companies may be better positioned to define strategies that are more adapted to local market cultures.

Second, by analyzing brands at varying scales of social and cultural context, managers can accommodate other identity issues that are critical to the development of successful brands (see Bouchikhi and Kimberly 2007; Holt 2004). For example, brand managers must broaden their narrow focus on developing relationships between their brands and local target segments because brands are now fundamentally woven into the fabric of global consumer culture. For example, McDonald's cannot ensure the long-term survival of its brand by assuring local customers that its products are safe as well as locally and ethically sourced. In France, McDonald's developed a campaign to reassure its customers that it is a local company because all its products come from local sources (see Bouchikhi and Kimberly 2007). However, the managers missed the fact that McDonald's is also equated with a host of negative attributes of global MNCs: an ideology that favors efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control coupled with doubtful environmental and social policies (see Ritzer 1993). Following the suggestion of Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel (2006), we believe that in the most developed market economies, an

analysis of self-conscious brand avoiders will bear insights about repositioning "brand bullies" (Klein 1999) to contend with negative brand meanings linked to the global scale of MNC operations.

Third, the brand mythology framework provides guidelines for capturing shares of local, regional, and global myth markets. A narrative analysis of popular songs, films, literature, theater, the Internet, and other media forms generates a repertoire of mythic resources that can be linked to commercial brands. For example, popular films produced in Hong Kong, Bollywood, and Hollywood offer a host of mythic archetypes, moral conflicts, and their resolutions, which may be fruitfully viewed as potential myth markets for brand positioning (see Cayla and Eckhardt 2008). Furthermore, an analysis of brands themselves may show that brands speak to one or more of the six elements of brand mythology identified here but resonate weakly with others. Thus, a brand may speak to compelling cultural binaries but lack linkage to archetypal heroic figures or even plausibility. Identifying strengths and weaknesses of a brand's mythic positioning provides insight for developing a firm's communication tactics. Finally, brands should be viewed as markers in a global system of symbolic differences—differences that can be mapped and dealt with to develop more effective theoretical and managerial insight.

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