Cultural Meanings of Brands and Consumption: A Window into the Cultural Psychology of Globalization

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Abstract

With globalization, the number of individuals with knowledge about multiple cultures is on the rise. This article illustrates how studying consumer reactions to brands that are loaded with cultural meanings can contribute to developing a cultural psychology of globalization. Our review demonstrates that brands can be considered cultural ‘products’ – they are tangible, public representations of meanings and ideas shared in a culture. As such, incidental exposure to culturally symbolic brands can spontaneously evoke its attendant cultural meanings and trigger culturally appropriate behavioral decisions. Because globalization makes these brands readily available in diverse cultural contexts, consumer reactions to culturally symbolic brands often reflect people’s views about the cultural effects of globalization. Consumers would respond favorably to these brands when the associated cultural meanings reinforce the consumers’ cultural identity. In contrast, consumers would react negatively toward these brands when they are perceived to be a threat to the local culture. We identify the factors that promote one type of reaction over the other, and discuss how this line of research can further contribute to building a cultural psychology of globalization.

Attracted by a youthful, growing population of 70 million, Mango, the Spanish clothing iconic brand whose ads feature Penelope Cruz, opened its first store in central Tehran in April 2009. Although wearing a Mango mini-skirt in public is grounds for being arrested, the aisles were crowded soon after the store opening and the venture is anticipated to quickly become profitable (Nasseri & Mulier, 2009). The sudden success of the Mango store stands out against an apparent negative sentiment toward Western fashion brands doing business in Iran – seen by politicians as a bad influence on women – which has resulted in the torching of a Benetton store during anti-Western demonstrations earlier the same year.

On the surface, the question of why the Mango store succeeded shortly after the torching of the Benetton store in Tehran may seem relevant only to the owners of the corresponding brands, and perhaps also to those marketers attempting to tap into the Iranian or other Middle Eastern markets. However, situations like the ones just described illustrate the mixed cultural impact of globalization. Globalization – the acceleration and intensification of economic interaction among the people, companies, and governments of different nations – has tremendously increased the frequency and intensity of intercultural contacts (Levin Institute, 2011). This has brought about cultural changes to which people often exhibit contrasting reactions. On the one hand, globalization enthusiasts envision the rise of cultural cosmopolitanism marked by a zest for wide international experience and acknowledgements of the otherness of those who are culturally different (Appiah, 2006). Under this view, the success of the Mango store in Tehran may reflect an embrace of a global identity by some segments of the Iranian society. On the other
hand, increased cultural exposure may incite nationalistic, parochial, and exclusionary resistance against foreign cultures, which could even lead to clashes of civilizations (Barber, 1996; Huntington, 1996), as reflected in the torching of the Benetton store in Tehran in response to the fear that the store is contaminating traditional Iranian culture.

Although the dominant perspectives in cultural psychology have deepened our understanding of cultural variations in a variety of psychological phenomena, they have been largely silent on the cultural impacts of globalization (Chiu & Cheng, 2007). This article aims to fill this gap by studying how people’s reactions to cultural ‘products’ can help to build a cultural psychology of globalization. Drawing on the notion that cultural ‘products’ are tangible, public representations of meanings and ideas shared in a culture (Markus & Hamedani, 2007; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008), as well as on findings showing that some consumer brands can be regarded as cultural products (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Torelli, Keh, & Chiu, 2010), we argue that people’s reactions to culturally symbolic brands often reflect their views about the cultural effects of globalization. The global presence of some culturally symbolic brands (Coca-Cola or McDonald’s – symbols of global capitalism) is often cited as a key aspect of globalization (Chiu & Cheng, 2007). Indeed, for many consumers in developing markets, who have limited direct global experience due to the lack of Internet access or opportunities of international travel, these brands could be a primary source of foreign cultural exposure.

Building upon and extending previous work on bicultural priming and globalization (e.g., Alter & Kwan, 2009; Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2005; Y.-Y. Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Ng, 2010), this article illustrates how studying people’s interactions with culturally symbolic brands can help to uncover the effects of globalization on both sociocultural environments (i.e., public representations of local and foreign cultures) and psychological processes – the two central aspects of cultural psychology (Markus & Hamedani, 2007; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). More specifically, we first review the evidence for considering brands as cultural symbols, or as public representations of cultures. As such, culturally symbolic brands can embody the distinctive characteristics of the associated culture and exposure to these brands can automatically activate its associated cultural meanings. We then review recent research showing the different ways in which people engage with the cultural meanings in brands, and discuss how the psychological processes triggered by these engagements can help to build a cultural psychology of globalization. We close by suggesting avenues for future research.

**Brands as Public Representations of Cultures**

People buy products not only for what they do, but also for what the product means (Levy, 1959). To establish certain desirable and distinctive brand meanings in the minds of consumers, marketers strategically select brand logos and spokespersons that align with these distinctive meanings, and carefully choose elements in advertisements, websites, or retail stores to reinforce such meanings (Keller, 2007). Because brand meanings are the product of social consensus building (Krauss & Fussell, 1996), not all attempts at creating intended abstract brand meanings succeed (Keller, 2007). Rather, consensual understanding of what a brand represents is achieved through a collective effort – marketer’s delivery of meaningful brand messages through mass communication and consumers’ interpretation of the abstract brand meanings carried by these messages (McCracken, 1986). Unlike other cultural symbols, such as a national flag or a commemorative monument (e.g., the Statue of Liberty), brands are commercial entities that are not created to carry cultural meanings. Nevertheless, through the process just described, brands can
acquire cultural meanings (Aaker et al., 2001) and become associated with the abstract characteristics that define a cultural group (e.g., Mango is associated with the defining quality of sensuality in Spanish culture).

A brand’s cultural symbolism can be defined as perceived consensus of the degree to which the brand symbolizes the abstract image of a certain cultural group (Torelli, Keh, et al., 2010). People with some direct or indirect experiences with a certain culture will develop a cognitive representation of it – a loose network consisting of a central concept (e.g., American culture) and its associated attributes (e.g., individualist values of freedom and self-reliance) (Chiu & Hong, 2006). As part of this loose cultural network, a culturally symbolic brand not only connects to the central concept (e.g., Coke’s symbolism of American culture), but also to the various elements in the knowledge representation of the culture (e.g., American cultural values of freedom and independence) (Torelli, Keh, et al., 2010). For this reason, a culturally symbolic brand embodies consumers’ abstract, consensual view of the cultural group the brand symbolizes (McCracken, 1986), and hence becomes a tangible, public representation of the meanings and ideas shared in the culture (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). As such, exposure to culturally symbolic brands should produce cultural priming effects similar to those documented in past research using other cultural products (e.g., national flag; Y.-Y. Hong et al., 2000). We review the empirical evidence supporting these ideas next.

Culturally symbolic brands embody abstract cultural characteristics

The notion that consumer brands can symbolize the abstract characteristics that distinguish a culture was first suggested by Han and Shavitt (1994). They demonstrated that magazine advertisements in the U.S. (an individualist culture) and Korea (a collectivist culture) varied predictably according to the corresponding cultural value priorities. That is, appeals to individual benefits and preferences, personal success, and independence were more common in the U.S., whereas appeals emphasizing ingroup benefits, harmony, and family integrity were more common in Korea. Similarly, Aaker et al. (2001) found that some brands in the U.S. are associated with ruggedness (i.e., strength, masculinity, and toughness) and some brands in Japan are associated with peacefulness, and ruggedness and peacefulness are dimensions characteristic of American and East Asian cultures, respectively. Torelli, Chiu, and Keh (2010) further show that cultural symbolism of a brand is positively associated with its embodiment of culture-distinctive values. When asking American (individualist culture) and Venezuelan (collectivist culture) participants to rate brands with varying degrees of cultural symbolism (for the corresponding culture) in terms of their embodiment of individualist and collectivist values (Torelli, Ozsomer, Carvalho, Keh, & Maehle, 2009), it was found that Americans rated brands that symbolize American culture to embody individualist values (power, achievement, self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism), whereas Venezuelans rated brands that symbolize Venezuelan culture to embody collectivist values (universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security). These findings are consistent with a view of brands as cultural ‘products’, or as external representations of meanings and ideas shared in a culture (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008).

Cultural priming effects triggered by exposure to culturally symbolic brands

Priming with cultural icons induces cultural frame switching because icons of a culture are like ‘magnets of meaning’; they connect many diverse elements of cultural knowledge.
(Betsky, 1997; Ortner, 1973). When activated, these icons automatically spread activation to other constructs in the cultural knowledge network and increase their cognitive accessibility (Y.-Y. Hong et al., 2000). Cultural priming effects are evident in research with bicultural individuals—those having internalized two cultures, either by being of mixed racial heritage (e.g., Asian Americans born in the U.S.) or born in one culture and raised in a second (e.g., Asian immigrants living in the U.S.) (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Lau-Gesk, 2003). For these individuals, exposure to symbols of one culture can prime them to adopt its associated cultural frame to the exclusion of the other (also known as ‘frame switching’, e.g., Briley et al., 2005; Y.-Y. Hong et al., 2000; Ng, 2010). For instance, Chinese American biculturals primed with American icons (e.g., American flag) exhibit judgments and behaviors aligned with implicit theories of American culture (e.g., lower attribution of behavior to external social pressure), whereas priming with Chinese icons (e.g., Chinese opera singer) leads them to align with Chinese culture (e.g., higher attribution of behavior to external social pressure) (Y.-Y. Hong, Chiu, & Kung, 1997). With globalization, the number of individuals with direct or indirect knowledge about two (bicultural) or more cultures (multicultural) as opposed to a single culture (monocultural) is rapidly on the rise (Lau-Gesk, 2003; Maheswaran & Shavitt, 2000), and cultural priming effects similar to the ones just described have also been reported among monocultural individuals residing in large cities (Alter & Kwan, 2009).

Like other cultural icons, a culturally symbolic brand can activate the cultural knowledge to which it is connected (Chiu, Mallorie, Keh, & Law, 2009; Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2009; Torelli, Chiu, Keh, & Amaral, 2009a). Furthermore, this can occur outside of conscious awareness, or without conscious deliberation about cultural knowledge (Alter & Kwan, 2009; Y.-Y. Hong et al., 1997). This is illustrated in a cued recall study (Torelli, Chiu, Keh, & Amaral, 2009b). European Americans who read a list of important and unimportant values (for American culture) recalled a greater number of culturally important values in a subsequent surprise recall task when shown, as recall cues, images of brands high (versus low) in cultural symbolism (for Americans). The effect occurred presumably because culturally symbolic brands automatically spread activation in the cultural knowledge network and hence facilitated recall of culturally important values encountered earlier (e.g., Uleman, Winborne, Winter, & Shechter, 1986; Winter & Uleman, 1984). The extent to which the brands used as retrieval cues symbolized American culture did not influence recall of culturally unimportant values.

Exposure to iconic brands or products can also induce culturally appropriate behaviors. When knowledge about a culture is activated, people are more likely to act in a culturally consistent manner. Prior studies have shown that Hispanic American women presented with an advertisement in Spanish (versus English) were more likely to endorse self-sufficient descriptors of behavior that reflect what is appropriate among modern Latinas (Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008), presumably because the advertisement in Spanish activated Latin culture but the one in English did not. Consistently, Hong Kong Chinese participants presented with a McDonald’s advertisement (versus an advertisement containing Chinese symbols) were more likely to prefer an individualist message over a collectivist one (Chiu et al., 2009), presumably because the iconic American brand activated American cultural values (i.e., individualist values) and thus elicited culturally consistent judgments.

In combination, the findings described in this section indicate that: (a) brands can become public representations of a culture, and (b) incidental exposure to culturally symbolic brands can spontaneously activate its associated cultural knowledge, which can in turn trigger culturally appropriate behaviors. Because globalization makes culturally
symbolic brands readily available in diverse cultural settings, the ways in which people engage with the cultural meanings in these brands should reveal people’s views about the cultural effects of globalization. We turn to this issue next.

**Engaging the Cultural Meanings in Brands**

Cultural psychology is concerned with how thoughts and feelings in people’s heads engage with external meanings (Markus & Hamedani, 2007). Thus, a cultural psychology of globalization should uncover the psychological processes underlying people’s reactions to the cultural externalities in a global village. Because of the centrality of identity concerns in shaping these reactions (Arnett, 2002), our analyses takes a cultural identity perspective. Cultures provide symbolic resources through which individuals address their identity concerns (Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2010). As cultural symbols, brands should be instrumental for managing identity needs. Therefore, we propose that people’s engagement with a culturally symbolic brand is partially determined by their perceptions about the extent to which the brand facilitates (versus threatens) the fulfillment of salient identity goals. Next, we review the empirical evidence showing the different ways in which people engage with the cultural meanings in brands, and discuss the consequences for understanding the cultural effects of globalization.

* Culturally symbolic brands can fulfill cultural identity needs

Because culturally symbolic brands activate its attendant cultural meanings, consuming these brands can signal one’s allegiance to the culture (Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989). This is more likely to occur when cultural identity needs are chronically or temporarily salient (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). This is true regardless of whether one wants to reinforce a local or a foreign cultural identity, as people who want to express identification with global culture often favor global brands that symbolize Western values of conspicuous consumption and status-seeking (Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000; Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003; Zhang & Khare, 2009).

Some recent studies illustrate how people use culture-symbolic brands (over non-symbolic ones) to fulfill salient cultural identity needs (Torelli, Chiu, et al., 2010; Torelli, Chiu, et al., 2009a, 2009b). In one study (Torelli, Chiu, et al., 2009b), European Americans reminded (versus not) of the positive qualities of the American identity, which increased their identification with American culture, evaluated more favorably brands that are symbolic of the American culture (e.g., Nike), but were indifferent toward brands that are low in cultural symbolism (e.g., Dasani bottled water).

* Culturally symbolic brands and perceptions of cultural contamination

People can also dislike the central cultural concept symbolized by a brand and signal their animosity toward the associated culture by boycotting the brand (S.-T. Hong & Kang, 2006; Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998). Although such reactions are often evident among consumers of cultures with a history of hostile relations with another culture (e.g., reactions of consumers from the Chinese city of Nanjing toward Japanese brands; Klein et al., 1998), similar reactions are seen when consumers perceive foreign brands or products as threats to the survival of the local culture (Sharma, Shimp, & Shin, 1995; Shimp & Sharma, 1987). The fear that foreign cultural symbols may contaminate the local
culture can escalate to extremes, and even result in violent acts such as the torching of the *Benetton* store in Tehran mentioned earlier.

Recent studies (Chen & Chiu, 2010; Cheng, 2010; Cheng et al., 2010; Chiu & Cheng, 2007; Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2009; Torelli, Tam, Au, Chiu, & Keh, forthcoming) have uncovered the following contextual and psychological factors that control the activation of exclusionary reactions to foreign culture: (1) Making culture a central organizing category for processing information via simultaneous activation of two cultures; (2) Salience of intercultural competition; and (3) Evoking a culture defense mindset. We elaborate next on each of these factors.

Several studies demonstrate that simultaneous activation of two cultures (*bicultural priming*) can increase defensive, exclusionary reactions when the perceiver experiences globalization as a threat to their heritage culture (Chen & Chiu, 2010; Cheng et al., 2010; Chiu & Cheng, 2007; Torelli et al., forthcoming). This occurs because *bicultural* (relative to *monocultural*) priming draws attention to cultural differences and triggers an essentialist view of cultures – characterized by the tendency to perceive culture as a bounded entity with an impermeable boundary and a high level of internal coherence (Shore, 2002). In turn, this results in higher tendencies to make culture-based attributions and judgments and greater likelihood to react negatively to perceptions of cultural contamination. Bicultural priming often arises in globalized spaces where symbols of contrastive cultures co-exist side by side in the same location or product (as in the case of a Starbucks shop in Beijing’s Imperial Palace Museum or a bicultural product such as a Sony-branded cappuccino maker).

A recent study illustrates the effects of bicultural priming. European American participants first evaluated either bicultural or monocultural products and were subsequently asked to estimate, in an unrelated task, how much a fellow American would prefer a culturally inconsistent commercial message (i.e., a collectivist message, Torelli et al., forthcoming). Participants in the bicultural priming condition evaluated Chinese brands of products that are icons of American culture (e.g., XENSHI jeans), whereas those in the monocultural priming conditions evaluated either Chinese brands of products low in symbolism of American culture (e.g., BEIHUA bread toaster – monocultural Chinese) or American brands of products high and low in symbolism of American culture (e.g., NINE ZERO jeans or ROBIN bread toaster – monocultural American). Results showed that participants in the bicultural (versus monocultural) priming condition were less likely to predict that a fellow American would prefer a culturally inconsistent persuasive message. Furthermore, heightened perceptions of cultural contamination were also evident in the less favorable evaluations of bicultural (versus monocultural) products, regardless of the brand's country of origin (i.e., the American ROBIN or the Chinese BEIHUA bread toaster). This effect is not circumscribed to the incompatibility between one's own culture and a foreign culture, and can also extend to the incompatibility between two foreign cultures, as demonstrated in Americans’ less favorable evaluations of bicultural foreign products (e.g., Sony cappuccino makers) compared to monocultural foreign products (e.g., Sony toaster oven) (Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2009).

Another study with mainland Chinese participants demonstrates more directly how bicultural (versus monocultural) priming triggers less favorable evaluations of a foreign target perceived as a cultural contaminant (Cheng, 2010). Participants were presented with symbols of American and Chinese culture side-by-side (versus separately) prior to evaluating a fictitious New York-based publisher planning to set up an Asian headquarters in China. Only in the bicultural priming condition participants evaluated the publisher less favorably if they perceived that the publisher intended to promote American culture. This
occurs presumably because bicultural priming activates an essentialist view of culture that triggers perceptions of the publisher’s intentions to promote American culture as an act of cultural contamination.

Another factor that can incite negative reactions toward foreign icons is the salience of intercultural competition. Salient intergroup competition highlights ingroup–outgroup boundary and heightens a sense of distrust of outgroups (Insko & Schopler, 1998; Turner et al., 1987). This should result in more unfavorable attitudes toward brands that symbolize foreign cultures compared to a context in which intercultural competition is not salient. Cheng et al. (2010) investigated this notion with Chinese consumers during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Mainland Chinese participants evaluated brands that were symbolic of either Chinese (e.g., LiNing) or American cultures (e.g., Nike), as well as indicated their identification with Chinese culture, immediately before and after the Beijing Olympics. Before the Olympics, only respondents who were highly identified with Chinese culture showed favoritism for Chinese- (over American-) symbolic brands. However, as the Olympics progressed, presumably because of the salient rivalry between the U.S. and China, participants who were both high and low in their identification with Chinese culture exhibited favoritism of Chinese- (over American-) symbolic brands. This finding suggests that, in face of salient intercultural competition, people shifted their preferences in favor of brands that symbolize the local culture over brands that symbolize a competing foreign culture.

Perception of cultural contamination is also heightened by evoking a culture defense mindset, such as that triggered by thoughts of one’s own death (Torelli et al., forthcoming). When reminded of their mortality, people adhere to and defend their cultural worldview as a way to achieve symbolic immortality (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, & Pyszczynski, 1995). This in turn encourages aggression against those who violate the cultural worldview (McGregor et al., 1998) and evokes intolerance of using cultural icons in an inappropriate way (e.g., using the crucifix as a hammer, Greenberg et al., 1995). Extending this notion to the bicultural priming situations discussed earlier, Torelli et al. (forthcoming) show that people are particularly intolerant of contamination of brands that symbolize their culture when they are under the joint influence of bicultural priming and mortality salience. Upon inducing (versus not) mortality salience, American participants were asked to evaluate a marketing plan of Nike (an American icon), which involved some questionable actions to increase its competitiveness in a foreign market (e.g., eliminating the Swoosh symbol and replacing the Nike brand name with the Arabic word for ‘Sportsmanship’ to penetrate the Middle East market). Results showed that, only upon making mortality salient, participants evaluated the marketing plan less favorably following bicultural priming than following monocultural priming. These findings suggest that bicultural priming and worldview defense can jointly enhance negative reactions to the inappropriate use of a cultural icon.

In sum, there is consistent evidence that people can and would evaluate unfavorably a brand that symbolizes a foreign culture when it is perceived as a cultural contaminant. Perceptions of cultural contamination are more likely: (1) when people are under the effects of bicultural (versus monocultural) priming; (2) when intercultural competition is made salient; and (3) under the influence of a culture defense mindset, such as that triggered by thoughts of one’s own death.

Overcoming negative reactions to cultural contamination

As stated earlier, cultural priming effects are largely automatic processes that occur without conscious elaboration about cultural implications (Alter & Kwan, 2009; Y.-Y. Hong
et al., 2000; Wan, Chiu, Peng, & Tam, 2007; Wong & Hong, 2005). As a result,
culture’s influence on judgment and behaviors is often stronger when people process infor-
mation in a cursory, spontaneous manner, but its effects can dissipate when people
engage in more deliberative thought processes (Briley & Aaker, 2006). Engaging in
thoughtful elaboration could then attenuate the activation of exclusionary reactions to
foreign culture described earlier. Consistent with this idea, follow up studies of American
participants’ attitudes toward the actions of Nike (an American icon) in the Middle East
discussed earlier (Torelli et al., forthcoming) showed that both chronic and temporarily
salient tendencies to engage in thoughtful elaboration attenuated perceptions of cultural
contamination of the iconic brand. In one study, under the joint influence of bicultural
priming and mortality salience, only participants who scored low in the need for cogni-
tion scale (NFC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) reacted defensively to the potential contami-
nation of American culture vis-à-vis Nike (an iconic U.S. brand). The effects were absent
among participants who scored high in NFC, presumably because they spontaneously
engaged in thorough elaboration about the information. In another study (Torelli et al.,
forthcoming), perceptions of cultural contamination were also reduced by temporarily
inducing, instead of measuring as a chronic tendency, elaboration about cultural complex-
ities prior to the main task.

Bicultural individuals who lack expertise in managing the discomfort-evoking ambiva-
ence arising from their dual identities appreciate it when a coping frame that helps them
reduce the discomfort is provided (Kramer, Lau-Gesk, & Chiu, 2009). By extension, the
threat of cultural contamination by foreign culture should be reduced by reassuring indi-
viduals of the vitality of the local culture in spite of globalization. This idea was investi-
gated in a study of Mainland Chinese’s attitudes toward a New York-based publisher
planning to set up an Asian headquarter in China (Cheng, 2010). Some of the partici-
pants expressed their opinions about the publisher after reading a passage highlighting
how the local culture maintains its vitality in spite of globalization. The remaining partici-
pants stated their opinions after reading a neutral passage. Results showed that participants
who were reaffirmed with the vitality of the local culture exhibited less unfavorable atti-
dudes toward the American publisher than those who did not. In sum, there is converg-
ing evidence that negative reactions to foreign cultures due to perceptions of cultural
contamination can be attenuated. This can be achieved by engaging in thoughtful elabo-
ration about cultural complexities and by reassuring individuals of the vitality of the local
culture.

Conclusions and Future Directions

With the rapid progress of globalization, the possible consequences of cultural contacts
have become a major issue in the heated debates in many public forums and the acade-
my. Thus far, social psychologists have remained relatively silent on this issue (Chiu &
Cheng, 2007). Building upon and extending previous work on bicultural priming and
globalization (e.g., Alter & Kwan, 2009; Briley et al., 2005; Y.-Y. Hong et al., 2000;
Ng, 2010), this article illustrates how studying people’s interactions with culturally sym-
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ronments (i.e., public representations of local and foreign cultures) and psychological
processes – the two central aspects of cultural psychology (Markus & Hamedani, 2007;
Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). Our review demonstrates that brands can be considered
cultural symbols that represent the abstract characteristics of a culture (Morling & Lamo-
reaux, 2008). Incidental exposure to culturally symbolic brands can produce cultural
priming effects – activates its attendant cultural knowledge as well as trigger culturally appropriate behaviors. Furthermore, people use the cultural meanings in brands to fulfill identity needs. Depending on the context, arguments in favor of the global rise of cultural cosmopolitanism are as valid as those that support exclusionary resistance against a global culture. On the one hand, supporting the notion that cultural differences can be temporarily bridged (Alter & Kwan, 2009), our review suggests that people can address their cultural identity needs through increasing liking of brands that symbolize a foreign culture. On the other hand, we uncovered several contextual and psychological factors that can lead to the activation of exclusionary reactions to foreign culture, as well as some mitigating mechanisms. In doing so, we have provided a new behavioral science perspective to investigate people’s diverse reactions to the cultural impacts of globalization.

Previous research on the psychological effects of globalization on consumption has relied heavily on qualitative research methods (e.g., Ustuner & Holt, 2010; Varman & Belk, 2009). Dominant perspectives in cultural psychology have focused mainly on cultural differences in values and behaviors (see Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). The present review suggests that, using brands as stimuli, it is possible to develop innovative experimental paradigms to study in a laboratory setting the interface where the feelings and motives inside people’s heads engage with the cultural meanings created by globalization. These paradigms will allow researchers to develop controlled experiments and to make precise observations on how the cultural changes brought about by globalization affect people’s psychological processes.

Although the empirical evidence reviewed in this article advances our understanding of the cultural psychology of globalization, several important questions still remain unanswered: How do personal experiences integrating different types of cultural knowledge moderate the effects reported here? How deep should cultural experiences be for the effects to emerge? What other mechanisms can mitigate exclusionary responses? Do exclusionary responses also emerge among sub-cultural groups? What is needed to make multicultural experience an empowering and constructive self-transformational experience? How does the self-regulatory system work in multicultural contexts? Research in biculturalism indicates that some individuals with greater expertise in managing cultural duality (integrators) react favorably to dual cultural messages (Lau-Gesk, 2003). These individuals might spontaneously bridge cultural divisions and fail to exhibit the exclusionary responses triggered by bicultural priming (and even appreciate such cultural integration). Poorer or insular cultures that have less access to travel or information about foreign cultures are unlikely to exhibit cultural frame switching (Alter & Kwan, 2009). Bicultural priming might unlikely trigger an essentialist view of cultures among members of these cultures. Future research should investigate how personal experiences integrating foreign cultural knowledge moderate exclusionary responses.

This review focused on empirical evidence emerging from consumers’ reactions to brands that symbolize national cultures (e.g., American or Chinese culture) because people easily develop cognitive representations of these national cultures from direct or indirect cultural experiences (Y.-Y. Hong et al., 2000) and consensually associate brands and products with them (Torelli, Keh, et al., 2010). However, the effects uncovered here should also extend to consumers’ reactions to brands that symbolize sub-cultural groups, such as those defined on the basis of ethnicity, age, geographic region or gender. People can have well-established mental representations of these sub-cultures and should consensually agree on the brands and products that symbolize them (McCracken, 1986; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Oyserman, 2009; Penaloza, 2001; Torelli, Keh, et al., 2010). These predictions await further investigation.
The disciplinary perspective we take in the present article is social psychological. However, we believe that a cross-disciplinary perspective is required to answer some of the questions listed in the previous paragraphs. For example, we need to understand how the self-regulatory system works in multicultural contexts. This is where personality psychology, cultural psychology, and social cognitive neuroscience can contribute. We also need to situate cultural contacts in their historical contexts and the power relations between the cultures in contact. This is where humanists and social scientists can contribute. We believe that concerted effort from a multidisciplinary research team will deliver a holistic answer to these important questions. Such answers will have important policy implications on international relations, intercultural relations within a country, global marketing, international business, management of a culturally diverse workforce, and the psychological adjustment of expatriates.

Short Biographies

Carlos J. Torelli’s current research focuses on identifying the key cultural factors that drive consumers’ reactions in a globalized economy, and on uncovering the underlying socio-cognitive processes for these reactions. His work has been published in several books and in top journals in psychology and consumer behavior, including Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Journal of Consumer Psychology and Social Cognition. He received his PhD in Business Administration from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Before moving to the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus, where he teaches Brand Management and Marketing Management courses for undergraduate and executive education programs, he worked as Marketing Vice-President for Citibank in Venezuela and Turkey.

Shirley Y. Y. Cheng received her PhD in Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Her current research is located in the intersection of social psychology and consumer behavior. Aside from the social psychology of globalization, she is also examining motivational and interpersonal factors that contribute to the emergency and crystallization of consumer cultures.

Endnote

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