

## Using brands to overcome culture shock

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Because it is necessary to explore beneath the surface of consumers' thoughts and deep-rooted motivations, projective techniques allow researchers to tap into consumer's unspoken values. As consumers living abroad, expatriates seem likely to stick to their values by buying brands that convey those same values. Brands seem to encompass great importance and play specific role in expatriates' consumption behavior. The present research applies projective techniques based on narratives, in order to understand expatriates' relationships with brands during their sojourn abroad.

**Key words:** projective techniques, expatriation, brands, narratives

Marketers strive to understand attitudes, motivations and behaviors that drive brand and product selection and loyalty. In addition to tangible aspects such as price, availability and product feature, brand selection and loyalty are also based on intangible values that go beyond rational attributes and reasons. Thus, consumers will select brands that fit their own value system because of the emotional benefits that brand ownership can provide to them. In an attempt to understand the core values that determine these emotional relationships with brands and products, companies will often conduct research based on qualitative data.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Because it is necessary to explore beneath the surface of consumers' thoughts and deep-rooted motivations, projective techniques allow researchers to tap into consumer's unspoken values. Experience can, through stories, become part of consciousness. The narrative mode deals with the dynamics of human intentions, because people seek to explain events by looking at how human actors strive to do things over time. As consumers living abroad, expatriates seem likely to stick to their values by buying brands that convey those same values. Brands seem to encompass great importance and play specific roles in expatriates' consumption behavior. However, part of the relationship between expatriates' and brands is unconscious and emotional, and thus tough to investigate with

direct questioning. Researchers searching for more accurate information about these relationships should apply qualitative methods to obtain the needed depth and transparency in participants' responses. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate in which measure brands might influence expatriate consumers' adjustment in a new cultural environment. As both brands and people spread in the global landscape, seeking ways of relating and belonging, this research could enlighten the way global consumers use brands as well as the way brands should build identity and communication in the global market.

### *Narratives*

When telling about their experience, participants respect the chronological order of happenings and create a sense-making situation as narratives convey experience through reconstituting it (Squire, 2008). Narrative meaning is created by establishing that something is a part of a whole. Narrating is telling a story in the form of a causally-linked set of events, happening and situations that affect human beings. Narratives display the significance that events have for one another (Denning, 2000). People are storytellers as they tell narratives about their experiences and the meanings that these experiences have for their lives. All stories or narratives have a setting in which are evoked vivid associations of particular times and places. Another important element is characters, that is, the players in the action that will experience the situation with the consequences and reactions to these consequences by and for the characters. A story may contain one episode or a sequence of episodes that are more or less interrelated.

Among the qualitative techniques using narratives, the actantial model, developed by A.J. Greimas, is a tool that can theoretically be used to analyze any real or thematized action. In this model, an action can be broken down into six components called actants. Actantial analysis consists in assigning each element of the action being described to one of the actantial classes. Greimas' (1983) Structural Semantics attempts a grand formalization of the narrative content by introducing the notion of "actant" (agents) that are central to the Greimasian approach to narrative. This author studied the role of all agents in a narrative, in relation to their contribution to the plot. After researching a large sample of

narratives, he came up with a typology that, since then, has been widely applied. Hence, the actantial model is composed of six actants and three axes, as follows:

- **The axis of desire:** includes a subject and an object. The subject is what is directed toward an object. For example, a fire-fighter is a subject aiming at saving people in a burning house, which are the objects.
- **The axis of power:** comprehends the helper and the opponent. The helper assists the subject in achieving the object of his desire, while the opponent aims to prevent him from reaching it. In the example, the helpers for the subject are everything that he can use to extinguish the fire and to save the people: water, ladder, etc. The opponents are the fire itself, the wind and other elements disturbing the fire-fighter in accomplishing his mission.
- **The axis of knowledge:** includes the sender and the receiver. The sender is the element requesting the action from the subject and the receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken. Continuing with our example, the sender is the institution that manages the fire-fighters and the receivers are the people who were saved, their neighborhood, and the city where the house is in.

Marketers have long understood that emotional factors play an important role in brand or product selection and understanding a consumption experience is a prime goal of today's marketers. In an experiential perspective, consumers are less interested in maximising their benefits and more focused on gratification within a given social context (Carù and Cova, 2008). In those cases, consumption provokes sensations and emotions that do much more than merely respond to individual's own needs, since they also touch upon the consumer's search for an identity. Those authors state that experience is associated with feelings of great intensity and framing the operations that serve to translate ongoing activities to reportable stories as research on consumption experience has broadly transcended shopping experiences.

### ***Global Brands***

With the globalization of markets, there are more opportunities to create market potential through stimulating demand for products with universal appeal (Hassan et al., 2003). The objective is to identify consumers having the same expectations and requirements vis-à-vis products, despite cultural and national differences. The segment of global consumers being sometimes small in size in some countries is increasingly big across countries. Thompson (2004) talks about an emerging stream of consumer research that suggests a far more encompassing and significant interrelationship between cultural processes and structures and brand meanings than just the brand image. Brands create unique identities for a firm's products in the eyes of its consumers (Keller, 2003). According to Strizhakova et al. (2008), consumers co-create brand meanings and brands become powerful because of their multiple meanings that are represented by quality, self-identity, group-identity, status, personal values, family traditions and national traditions. The universal vocation of a brand is closely linked to the universality of the benefit proposed to the specific global segment.

Global brand was defined by Steenkamp et al. (2003) as the one that the consumers can find under the same name in multiple countries, while Holt et al. (2004) see global branding as the standardization of products, packaging and communication. The negative attitudes and feelings of an inescapable loss of country differences created by the vision of same brands and same advertising everywhere (Kapferer, 2005) in tourists and other ephemeral travelers, are positive to expatriates who look for stability and familiarity when freshly arrived in the host country. Johansson and Ronkainen (2005), state that esteem for a brand is correlated with its familiarity level, which can be explained by the comfort and positive feelings that come with familiarity.

### ***Expatriates***

Wherever and whenever the term expatriate was originated, the notion has been existing for thousands of years, as it was defined as someone who lived and worked overseas (McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002). When a person moves to another culture, the problem is not the difficulty inherent to the host culture, but the difficulty linked to the difference between home and host countries. As a consumer,

the difficulty is getting familiar and trusting unknown products and brands. When first examining adjustment among expatriates, researchers focused on obvious aspects such as food, weather and daily customs, but more recently, authors added other related dimensions that are adjustment to the job, interacting with host-country individuals and to the general nonworking environment (Stroh et al, 2005). The number of expatriates is large and increasing at rates that parallel growth in global business (Harrison, Shaffer, and Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004)

### RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research assumptions are drawn on the above literature and on our field experience as trainers, as well.

- Global brands are well perceived by expatriates
- Global brands are used to bridge the gap between home and host cultures
- Global brands are not used as facilitators in expatriates' adjustment in all product categories
- Dependency on Global Brands evolves across the stages of the expatriation adjustment curve
- Home country global brands and global brands from other countries do not have the same influence on expatriates' adjustment

Based on those assumptions, our research question was stated as follows: **do expatriates perceive brands as a link with their home culture?** In our research model, we assume that expatriate's adjustment is the dependent variable, which is influenced by the independent variable that is culture, this one being represented by both home and host cultures. The global brands intervene by bridging the gap between the home and the host cultures. The construct is represented in the figure below:

**Figure 1 by here**

The technique used in this research expected interviewees to feature Greimas' agents as follows: ideally, the **senders** would be the home culture and the company and the **receivers** would be the host culture and the local subsidiary. The **subject**, who is the expatriate, desires to be adjusted to the host

culture in order to feel well and be productive. Adjustment is thus, the desired **object**. The subject encounters a resistance from the **opponent**, represented by the host culture and local brands to his forward movement, but he overcomes thanks to the **helpers** which are the global brands from the homeland or from other countries. This model is represented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 by here**

### ***Objectives and Method***

According to our research question, we believe that more than well-known names, global brands represent a link with the home country and help expatriates to bypass the cultural shock. Based on the previous discussion we stated a research question as an exploratory step to examine the storytelling power of transparency in uncovering hidden feelings of this specific target. Our aim was to understand in which measure global brands, as well-known references, could play a role in helping expatriates to adjust. Our reading was based on the textual data from verbatim transcripts of depth interviews (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). Participants were asked to tell (write) a story containing Greimas' agents. The sample was composed of 34 individuals from European, American and Asian countries, which had spent at least one year as expatriates abroad. Most par of them where male (68%) and their ages ranged from 34 to 55 years old. The experiment took place in central location, in France.

## **RESULTS**

The method chosen to analyze responses was content analysis, which is an accepted method of textual investigation (Silverman, 2006). As Marvasti (2004) points out, the method offers convenience in simplifying and reducing large amounts of data into organized segments. Based projective techniques using completion, as well as on Greimas' model, this method asked participants to continue the story presented below by carrying out the corresponding directions, as follows:

They were tired, but happy. Everything was new and different. While excited about experiencing expatriation, they were worried. They felt as being heroes in a novel, which goal was to survive in a
--

new environment by adjusting to it. And, as in a novel, they knew that there would be problems, that they would be facing adversaries, and that to bypass all barriers they would need supporters.

**Please continue the story by using brands.**

Evidence from this research demonstrates that global brands can be used by expatriates for different reasons. The narratives collected here allow us to classify them into two main categories: as a way of fighting against homesickness and as a way of reassuring expatriates about the quality of the products. As it comes to the actantial model, the subject agent was always the expatriate, while the other agents varied.

### ***Homesickness***

Here, the object was adjusting to the new cultural environment and the helpers were home countries' brands. Expatriates used to buy them to create situations similar to those they had back home, like long Sundays' lunches prepared with products from the homeland in which "the brands were our relatives". The opponent was the local culture which made them feel lonely. As it was stated by one respondent when seeing home countries' cars on the streets: "my heart is fulfilled with joy and my day become sunny". This is consistent with our research question and theoretical model.

### ***Quality***

Global brands were the helpers in all the described situations. Although some of the expatriates are used to buy local brands to better adjust to the host culture, they prefer familiar brands for specific uses such as products for their bodies and clothes. The helpers happened to be opponents as well. It was the case when expatriates bought well-known brands and noticed differences with the ones they were used to buy in their home countries. Some of them thought that "it was a counterfeit Coca-Cola, because it was sweeter" or a "strange Pepsi, as it was sweeter and spicy". Often, participants looking for authenticity in buying global brands, were disappointed, because they noticed that there weren't



any available, and that all that they could find were local adaptations of them, as for example, banana flavored Kit Kat and melon Fanta instead of “my beloved orange Fanta”.

One participant experienced very bad weather conditions during the sojourn abroad and thought that the best way of feeling better was with a nice hot chocolate from Nestlé: “Thanks Nestlé for having created powder chocolate to which we only add hot water and while drinking it we can imagine ourselves very far away from there”. Finally, there were situations in which the expatriates got confused with the brand names they knew: “I was looking for my shampoo Elsève from L'Oréal and I found Elvital. I hesitated to buy it because to me it was not the same product. And when I used it, I noticed that the result was indeed not the same”.

The content analysis of the interviews allowed us to identify the agents as described by Greimas. In all the cases the subject was the expatriate, the object was trying to adjust to the new cultural environment and the helpers were the familiar brands, both global and from their country of origin and the opponents were the host cultures represented by local product adaptations and unfamiliar brands and environment.

Although our assumptions were confirmed, we observed that product adaptation for global brands can be an issue for companies as they generate frustrated expatriates, because when the product does not correspond to the brand as they know it, it fails to play the helper's role. Consumers feel like being betrayed by those who were meant to be on their side.

## CONCLUSION

The findings reported here on the efficiency of the storytelling technique applied to expatriates have general implications. First, it comes out from this study that expatriates develop specific relationships with brands. Second, the storytelling technique seems to be appropriate to explain expatriates' feelings and their attitudes towards brands, in complementing the descriptive approach of quantitative techniques. Therefore, practitioners should examine under new prisms the global presence of brands,

as consistency and synergy appear to raise global demands not only in terms of communication but also in terms of product characteristics such as packaging, pricing and other attributes. Academics on the other hand should further investigate the contexts in which consumer-brand relationships are developed, as well as the commonalities of human and brand identities forged far from the country of origin. It seems that the real challenges of the global era rise away from home. Thereby, expatriates are a growing market target which deserves special attention from companies.

### ***Discussion***

The findings indicate that global brands are precious helpers, by providing practical and emotional safety by reconstituting memories of situations from the homeland. This is why they can even become objects of desire. The potential of a loyal relationship between global brands and expatriate citizens appears to be greater because of the ambiguity linked to the contextual differences. As stated in our research question, familiar brands are perceived as helpers by the expatriates, when they experience ambiguous situations linked to the new cultural environment. We could argue that the search for familiar brands intervenes at the beginning of the adjustment curve, but results from this research demonstrated that they are used during other periods like the crisis as well, when nostalgia is stronger than their willingness to adapt. In those cases, home countries' brands are preferred over global brands from other countries.

It seemed that writing a story with inhuman characters was a tough task for the participants to accomplish. They spent between 10 and 30 minutes to write down the story and seemed to be somehow disturbed by the exercise. However, some quotes were very enlightening: *When you first arrive in a new country, you feel lost and confused. The first things that you see at the airport are billboards, and when they are about brands that you already know you feel a bit at home. After a while, local brands will become part of your life. You will feel more secure and less lost.*

*When I arrived in the airport, I felt as the only fish in the ocean, because I didn't know anyone. Then, there was an ad for Heineken beer and I went to a bar to drink it with some Lay's chips while seeing*

*ads for cars and watches at the bar's TV, and was wondering in which McDonald's I would have dinner that evening.*

### ***Implications***

Evidence from this study contributes to the existing research on the use of qualitative methods in marketing research. Indeed, managers should use projective techniques for a deeper understanding of the role of brands in the expatriates' lives. Brand's meanings change according to their life experience. Expatriates clearly change their behavior as consumers when they are abroad, because brand's messages refer less to the product and more to the consumers' values and aspirations. Although many brands target global audiences, researchers and practitioners have been neglecting this growing market target which is composed of people that are never locals, but try to survive in several different cultural environments. Indeed, the average length of expatriates' assignments is three years and after re-entry they often start preparing to go to a new destination. It is of interest to both marketers and researchers to use appropriate methods to understand expatriates' relationship with brands as it can be significantly different from the relationship locals can have with the same brands. Using methods that allow going deeper in consumers' feelings provide researchers and practitioners with more accurate information which will be a better basis for adequate decision making in brand management. So far, expatriates were deemed as a restricted niche market, but the increasing number of professionals moving around the world might be of interest to marketers as a fruitful market target. Indeed, expatriates can start using new global brands during their sojourn abroad and become loyal to them when returning to the homeland, or going to the next destination.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The main limitations of the present research are its restricted sample. Although the chosen method was qualitative and the research approach was exploratory, a larger sample would give better understanding of the storytelling efficiency in describing expatriates' relationship with brands. Analyzing few respondents from each culture is not unfair if we assume that expatriates are a universal target and that they tend to act the same way independently on their culture of origin. Nevertheless, a

cross-cultural research conducted with a more representative sample would certainly confirm or reject this statement by showing if differences in behavior are observed and if they can be explained by cultural differences, instead of personal ones. Finally, some respondents were interviewed during their sojourn abroad, while some others participated in the research after re-entry, which could have introduced a bias in their responses.

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Figure1. Research model

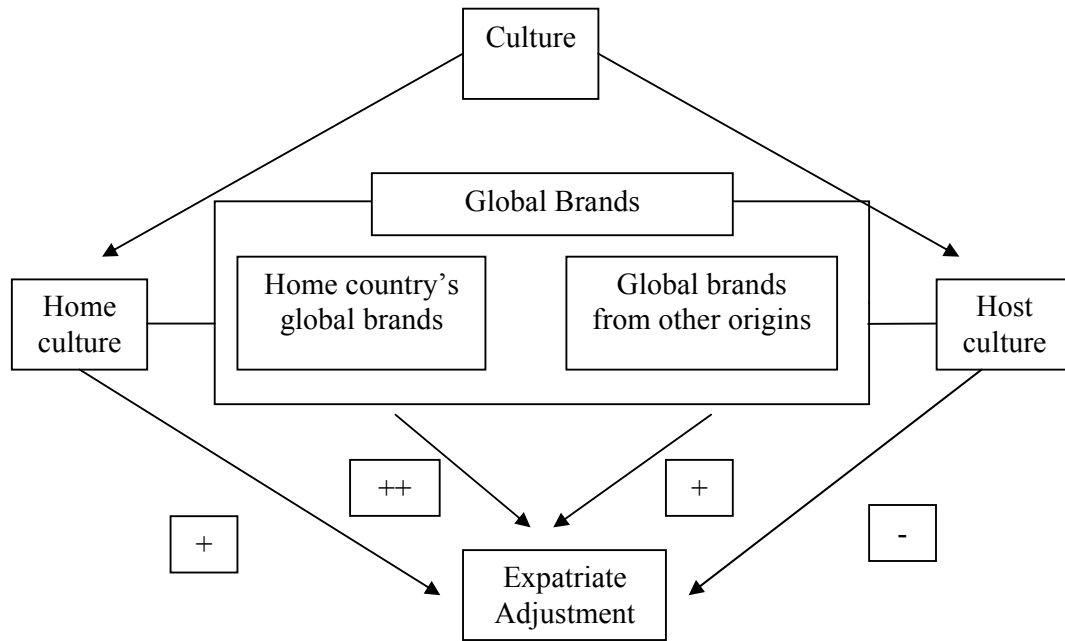


Figure 2 – The actantial model applied to expatriate’s adjustment

