

Away from Home: How Little Emperors Travel with Global Brands? Core and Contextual Meanings of Global Brands

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Outline

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Research Background

- Prior studies show that young Chinese consumers (Little Emperors, me generation) have a complex and contradictory attitude toward global brands such as KFC and Starbucks in China (e.g. Yan, 1997; Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008).
- In 2013-14, around 90,000 Chinese students in the UK universities (UKCISA, 2015).
- To investigate the relationship between brand consistency and brand meanings across national boundaries.
- Will brand meanings travel abroad with consumers and change over time?
- There is a paucity of research on changes in consumption patterns over time and Chinese consumers visiting or sojourning in a foreign country (Chung et al., 2009).

Research Objectives/Questions

To investigate how brand meanings attached to global food brands of American origins travel abroad with a group of young Chinese consumers (Little Emperors) sojourning in the UK

Do travelling Little Emperors give different meanings to familiar brands consumed in a new sociocultural context? If so, how do they do so?

Theoretical Background (I)

➤ Little Emperors and Global Brands

- Young Chinese consumers ensuing from the 1979 one-child policy are often referred as Little Emperors (Baker, 1987); avid consumer group both inside and outside China for global brands (Chung et al., 2009).
- Prior studies on global brands in China highlights a complex relationship between Little Emperors and western brands (e.g. Dong and Tian, 2009)
 - Some note the enthusiastic attitude towards global brands, e.g. Starbucks (Venkatram and Nelson 2008) and MCDonald's (Eckhardt and Houston 2002) for their modernity, western lifestyle or cosmopolitan.
 - Others show how global brands are seen as oppressors and instruments of Western domination (Dong and Tian, 2009)

Theoretical Background (II)

➤ Global Brands Standardization and Cultural Paradox

- Standardization of brands activities lead across countries lead to consistent and coherent brand image (Keller, 2008)
- Interpretive consumer research argues consumers can attribute paradoxically contrasting meanings to global brands in order to fit such brands in the local context of consumption (see Heisley and Cours, 2007; Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008)
- Bengtsson et al. (2010) show that consumers change meanings attributed to global brands while sojourning in another country.

“...the perceived consistency of global brands enables consumers to co-create an experience of being at home while traveling.

Global brands abroad may evoke meanings of comfort, predictability, safety, as well as national pride for home-country consumers”

(Bengtsson et al. 2010: 533)

Methods (I)

- This research is part of a larger study exploring food consumption practices among Chinese students – one year business course at a UK university;
- Interpretive paradigm with longitudinal approach looking at how consumption practices change over time
- Focus group discussions (FGDs) – appropriate method to understand how a group of consumers – at a collective level – negotiate their food choices in a foreign context over time (Morgan, 1997)
- Four waves of FGDs over a 9-months period (FGDs 3-months apart)

Methods (II)

- Purposive sampling approach with snowball technique (Silverman, 2006)
- 12 participants recruited from a group of 62
- All participants were familiar with global food brands (e.g. KFC, Pizza Hut, Starbucks)

Participants were classified as

Avid consumer	consuming global brands more than twice a week
Regular consumer	consuming global brands more than once a week
Sporadic consumer	consuming global brands at least once a month

Methods (III)

- Topics of FGDs include aspects of everyday life common to all participants such as shopping, eating out options available on-campus/local town, consumption of Chinese, host, and global food brands
- Each FGD lasted, on average, 2 hours and were audio-recorded
- FGDs were analysed thematically (Silverman 2006)
- Continuous interaction between the data and the theoretical framework was privileged.

Profile of Respondents

Participants[*]	Gender	Age	Region	Consumption of Global brands (food) in China	Consumption of Global brands (food) in the UK
Mona	F	21	Beijing	Avid consumer	Avid consumer
Yvonne	F	21	Chongqing	Avid consumer	Avid consumer
Laurel	F	22	Beijing	Regular consumer	Avid consumer
Cecelia	F	21	Chongqing	Regular consumer	Regular consumer
Emma	F	21	Chongqing	Regular consumer	Regular consumer
Christina	F	21	Suizhou	Regular consumer	Regular consumer
Doris	F	22	Shenzhen	Sporadic consumer	Regular consumer
Wenty	F	22	Dalian	Sporadic consumer	Regular consumer
Sherry	F	22	Shenzhen	Sporadic consumer	Regular consumer
Lucas	M	22	Liouzhou	Regular consumer	Avid consumer
James	M	21	Nanjing	Sporadic consumer	Avid consumer
Roma	M	22	Jining	Avid consumer	Avid consumer

*pseudo names are used.

Findings (I)

- Global Brands in China: 3 different meanings

Key Themes	Sample Quotes from Respondents
A cool and trendy social consumption experience	"On Saturday I used to go to KFC or Pizza Hut with my friends. It was like having a break after few hours of shopping. I like it because it is very informal and relaxing".
Escaping local tradition	"Well, if I go out with my parents we go for a more formal meal. Usually a Chinese meal...A Chinese meal requires a lot of etiquette. You need to wait for the food, you need to eat slowly and share your food with others waiting your turn to serve yourself. It is a very polite way of eating, but sometimes you want something more relaxing. [...]McDonald's and Starbucks are places for young people; you don't go there with your parents".
A modern and global consumption experience	"When I go to KFC, I feel that I can be everywhere in the world. You know what I mean? I can be everywhere and having the same stuff that people in America or in Europe can have. It's cool that I can have the same stuff as young people have elsewhere without leaving the city".

Findings (II)

- Global Brands in the UK: 3 different meanings

Key Themes	Sample Quotes from Respondents
A sense of home and familiarity	“When you are there [McDonald’s] is like being at home. You know how to order, what to order. It is the same as in China. You know what to do. You are relaxed and you do not have any bad surprises like ordering something you don’t like. The atmosphere is the same; you chill out with your friends as you were doing it in China”
A sense of safety	“I dislike the canteen food. I only tried it once and decided that I’m not going to have it anymore. Now I go to McDonalds’s for lunch. I used to go there once or twice a week when I was in China [...]. I am familiar with McDonald’s and I can get pretty much what I used to have at home; the same burger with the chips and coke”
Connecting with the global youth consumer culture	“The only meal I can share with my boyfriend is a pizza at Pizza Hut! It is honestly the only thing we can have without having an argument. The only thing that make both of us happy is a pizza”

Discussions (I)

<div>Context of Consumption</div> <div>Brand meanings</div>	CHINA	UNITED KINGDOM
Contextual meanings	Sense of belonging to the local Chinese youth culture	Sense of home and familiarity
Core meanings	Refuge from the local environment (<i>Chinese eating culture</i>)	Refuge from local environment (<i>host country eating culture</i>)
	Connection to the global youth community (<i>imaginary Western Other</i>)	Connection to the global youth community (<i>specific Other: international and host students and friends</i>)

Discussions (II)

- Travelling consumers applaud brand consistency;
- Brand meanings change over time;
- Findings challenge previous studies suggesting that standardization of branding strategies lead to consistent brand meanings (e.g. Keller, 2008); and also not confirm the statement (Bengtsson et al., 2010: 521): “what consumer seeks from a global brand in unfamiliar context is different from what is sought in the home”;
- Study further demonstrates that global brands are characterised by: **context related meanings** and **core meanings** are reshaped and readapted;
- Methodologically, this study adopts a longitudinal research approach – addressing the lack of longitudinal studies in understanding changes in consumption patterns over time.

Limitations

- Study focuses on a small group of young Chinese consumers (Little Emperors); findings cannot be generalised to other young consumers from other countries;
- Further studies should replicate this research with different consumer groups (e.g. Generation Z) from other countries (e.g. India)
- Study did not control for the extent participants have formed prior relationships with the global brands (see Fournier, 1998)

Area for Future Research

- Extend this longitudinal research by collating data (e.g. using diary methods) in participants homeland with subsequent data collection during their stay in the UK
- Prototypical brands examined in this study are mainly of American origins and relate to low involvement food related consumption experiences; need to extend to high involvement global brands (e.g. luxury fashion brands) of various origins



Thank You

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