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An exploratory study on brand connotations by Indian youth

Abstract

Brands represent range of values and attributes for the consumers. The purpose of the research was to comprehend the brand meanings from the perspective of the Indian youth, aged between 18 to 30 years. Consumer perceptions regarding brands are governed by multitude of factors. A primary research was conducted using the items identified by Strizhakova et al. (2008) for measuring the meaning of branded products in developing countries. The findings demonstrate the Indian consumer's evaluations of brands on a whole host of dimensions. It is as much influenced by individualistic traits as by a desire for group conformity. It illustrates the need for the marketers to understand the growing individualism amongst Indian youth and that their choice of brands is not necessarily reflecting their individual value system.

Keywords: brands connotation, Indian youth, values, Indian culture.

Introduction

Brand Meaning has been defined as the “core attributes of what brand means to the consumer” (Oakenfull et al., 2000). Deriving brand meaning from the brands may vary among consumers in diverse cultural settings. Marketing to the consumers in developing countries would entail having a thorough understanding of their cultural values and being able to offer the brand in a form which is relevant to their needs. A brand connotes several meanings to its consumers and the consumers develop emotional attachment (Fournier, 1998) and feelings with the brands (Pitta and Franzak, 2008). For the consumers brands symbolize quality and status (Batra et al., 2000; Vvan Kempen, 2004; Johansson and Ronkainen, 2005) and enable them to seek conformity within the groups (O’Cass and McEwan, 2004). The consumer evaluates a brand on various attributes and its ability to be in congruence with his values and needs. The brand’s evaluation may be done on its quality, exclusiveness (Kirmani et al., 1999), ability to symbolize style (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), enhance the self-image (Aaker, 1997 and Aaker et al., 2001) and provide identification within the group (Bearden et al., 1989; McAlexander et al. 2002; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Brands are made appealing and relevant to the consumers by linking them with the attributes which the consumer gives priority to (Parasuraman, 1997; Woodruff, 1997). The objective of the research was to understand the connotations of brands from the viewpoint of the Indian youth. Michon and Chebat (2004) posit that shopping is one domain where the consumer affirms his values. “The close linkage between culture, values, and consumer behavior” (Tai, 2008) is a good way to understand the role of personal values in choice of brands.

India is fast emerging as one of the developing economies with a 2 billion consumer base with a large middle class and young consumer segments. The research was conducted using the items identified by Strizhakova et al. (2008) for understanding the meaning of brands in various countries. The objective for selecting the youth for the study lies in the assumption that Indian Youth represents a potential market for brands and their perceptions regarding brands would be useful for marketers.

1. Literature review

The brands are attributed with constructs which have relevance to the consumers’ cultural construct. The evaluation of brands on the dimension of quality, status, and group congruence is based upon the specific cultural value system of the country. The difference between consumers of different countries has been supported by cross-cultural researchers like Kluckhohn and Strodtdeck (1961), Hofstede (1980) and Triandis (1995). The purchase decisions of the consumers are governed by the complex interplay of product attributes, individual and cultural values and social systems. Diminishing geographical boundaries has led to convergence of consumers’ needs across countries. However, De Mooij and Hofstede (2002) point out that converging technologies and merging geographical boundaries do not necessarily lead to homogeneous consumer segments. In fact the researchers like Penaloza, (1994) and Askegaard et al. (2005) have stated that acculturation has its own challenges for consumers, as they attempt to integrate their national culture values with the new culture presented through global brands. Marketers are greatly enamored by the growing population of web-savvy, Internet browsing literate and status conscious youth consumer segment which resides in emerging economies (Hamm, 2007). This new generation of consumers is driving the wave of brands in the emerging economies and is an imperative force to be reckoned with.

Research emphasizes that attitudes of consumers in developing economies are being created and developed about brands (Ger et al., 1993; Kligman, 1996; Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002; Alden et al., (2006). The convolution of social values in shaping human behavior is indicated on its effect on motivation, affect, self-concept and social interactions in the groups (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow and Triandis, 1991; Shkodriani and Gibbons, 1995). The perception of the consumer towards products is largely governed by its acceptance within the value construct of the consumer. Brands which have high degree of congruence with the cultural beliefs would find high acceptance in society.

The definition of culture is “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1997). According to Hofstede (1980), individualistic societies tend to exhibit more self-centered and self-enhanced traits wherein the focus is more on individual self as a source of identity and accomplishment. These societies are less willing to accommodate to group needs and pressures and there is low need for seeking conformance from the group. They perceive individual as the basic unit with his individual aspirations and goals (Hofstede, 1991; Kagitcibasi, 1997). The collectivists’ values social relationships, give priority to group conformance by respecting group processes. They look upon social groups for supporting them in times of crisis. The collectivist societies represent a high degree of cohesiveness within the groups. The individualist cultures are less risk-averse and therefore can form new groups more easily and can get along well with members from diverse groups (Hofstede, 1980; Hui and Triandis, 1986; Triandis et al., 1988). Some researchers, however, perceive values as being more global, based upon product attribute evaluations (Vinson et al., 1977) by consumers. Even if we examine the global nature of values, their contribution to building consumer perception towards brands is significant. Brands symbolize certain values, and marketers have tried to tie the products with cultural values and beliefs (Strizhakova et al., 2008).

1.1. Brand meanings and Indian culture. The brand name connotes intrinsic and extrinsic benefits to the consumers and enables in differentiating the products. Consumer research posits that intrinsic meanings of the brands have a greater influence on consumer purchase behavior than the extrinsic components (Leclerc et al., 1994; Agbonifoh and Elimimian, 1999; d’Astous and Ahmed, 1999; Hong et al., 2002). The meaning of brand should be coded in the context of a need which has relevance

to the consumer to enable decoding. Brands symbolically represent the values and beliefs, activities and interests, attitudes and personalities of the target consumers (Holt, 1997; Kates, 2002). It implies that brand personality is not a concept or theory, but is developed based upon consumers’ need for the brand (Upshaw, 1995). Brand connotations amongst consumers may differ due to importance levied on various constructs related to brand. These symbolisms are important as they enable building brand characterization according to target consumers. Providing the brand with an identity according to the consumer segment enables to build brand’s image which closely fits into their life (Swaminathan et al., 2007; Swaminathan et al., 2008).

1.1.1. Brands and quality. Consumers evaluate brands not only on price and quality parameters but also upon the experiential attributes (Kashyap and Bojanic, 2000). Holbrook et al. (1986) in their research suggest that for brands symbolizing image and status, the physical attributes or extrinsic components become more relevant. Nuamann (1995) suggests that consumers evaluate products based on their perceptions of price, product quality, and service quality. For Indian youth brand purchase decision is governed by the value it connotes in terms of quality it symbolizes (Kumar et al., 2009a).

Brands have been used by marketers to connote quality and personal identity to consumers (Aaker, 1998). The choice for a particular brand is based upon its evaluation as being superior and of high quality (McConnell, 1968). In India, there is a new confidence amongst youth which was not visible in previous generations. Youth in India have seen a buoyant economic growth in past years and are influenced by western individualism. It is expected that the same will be reflected in the brand connotation while assessing brands.

1.1.2. Brands and family. Research studies on family’s influence on consumers’ decision making have investigated the role of family members at each stage of the decision making (Beatty and Talpade, 1994; Levi and Lee, 2004). Research by Moore et al. (2002) demonstrated choice for brands was governed by intergenerational and family influences. In India, social acceptability is more important than individual achievement (Banerjee, 2008) as society is viewed being collectivist. The individual’s aspirations and accomplishment are perceived in the light of family achievements. Even though in recent years, the demographic changes have led to the break-up of joint families and priorities being given to the self-gratification, there is still a close alliance with the family. For most Indians family is the prime concern

(Mandelbaum, 1970) and individual achievements are viewed in the light of family achievements.

1.1.3. Brands and social groups. As consumers we seek conformity with groups, this impulse is universal as it is related to the need to belong (Veloutsou, 2009). Brands provide identification and strengthen the association with groups. Even though reasons for being a member of a group may differ (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008), it enhances the consumer's image within the group and brand choice of the consumer is motivated by the desire to belong (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The social groups influence individuals in their selection and assessment of brands (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Indian culture is influenced by group aspirations rather than individual success. Shivani et al. (2006) posit that socio-cultural aspect has an impact on the personality and behavior of Indian consumers, and individual and society are interlinked (Dev and Babu, 2007).

1.1.4. Global and local brands. Research suggests that consumers in some instances prefer domestic products for reasons such as familiarity, and the belief that purchasing local brands promotes the economy (Pecotich and Ward, 2007). Such orientation will make the consumer biased while comparing brands based on the national heritage and are strengthened by factors such as familiarity with the brands of the country from which it originates (Han, 1989). Over a period of time brands become a significant part of the national culture as they embody values which are attuned to cultural values. Research has demonstrated the relationship between values and the culture of the country influencing in purchase decisions (Askegaard & Kjeldgaard, 2002; Wiedmaan et al., 2007).

1.1.5. Brands and values. It is expected that consumer connotation of brand will be affected by the congruence in personal values and values endorsed by the brands. The contention of most brand theorists (Temporal, 2002; Keller, 2004; Percy and Elliott, 2007) is that consumer owns the brands; as a result, the consumer looks for self-identification with the brands. The meaning of brand should be coded in the context of what is relevant to the consumer to enable decoding which symbolically represents the values and beliefs, activities and interests, attitudes and personalities of the target consumers (Kates, 2002). In this light, the paper attempts to identify the symbolic meaning of brands for the Indian youth. The research attempted to explore and understand the impact of various attributes

of a brand that affect deriving brand meanings amongst the youth in India.

2. Research methodology

This research was exploratory in nature as we attempted to identify how Indian youth is influenced by a few selected variables while deriving a brand's meaning which we have termed brand connotation. For the purpose of this study the researchers used a list of items identified by Strizhakova et al. (2008) in a research on branded products meanings. The responses on 34 items were sought on a Likert type five point scale. A primary research was conducted through questionnaire on a sample of 300 students studying in Graduation level in various Universities and Institutions located in the cities of Delhi and Allahabad. Only a sample of 236 respondents could be considered as the rest of the questionnaires were not complete or were not returned. These Institutions had a mix of students from various parts of the country in their residential programs. The basic objective was to get a sample which was able to closely represent the population to be considered for the study. We have checked all the statements for reliability test through bivariate correlation (Furrier, 1993). We calculated total score of all the statements and again calculated a correlation of total score with individual items. Out of 34 items, 33 ones were found to be highly significant. Therefore, we retained 33 statements for further analysis. The final result is not a perfect stratified sample due to elimination of several selected units without replacement (because of temporal and financial constraints).

To define the underlying structure in the data we used a multivariate approach factor analysis which enabled us to identify factors affecting brand connotations among youth in India. Varimax and Kaiser normalization rotation method was used due to expected correlation among factors. Significant loadings were interpreted. Factor analysis was further used for data reduction by calculating scores for each underlying dimension and substituting them for the original variables (Hair et al., 1998).

Sample characteristics closely resemble characteristics of the population of university students in India. As shown in Table 1, there are 63.7 per cent males and 36.3 per cent females in the sample, with the average age of 23 years. The youngest respondent is 18 and the eldest is 30 years old.

Table 1. Gender structure and age characteristics of the respondents

Gender	Number of units	Percentage of units	Average age	Minimum age	Maximum age
Male	136	63.7	23	18	30
Female	85	36.3	22	19	27
Total	236	100.0	23	19	28.5

2.1. Findings. There is high reliability of the statements and the scale used in the research i.e $\alpha = .88$ (Cronbach, 1951). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy with value of 0.800 was in the acceptable range. Bartlett's test

of sphericity (2975.116, df. 561, Sig.0.00) showed that non-zero correlations existed at the significance level of 0.000. This provided an adequate basis for proceeding with the factor analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		.800
Bartlett's Test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-square	2975.116
	Degree of freedom	561
	Sig.	.000

The first step in the factor analysis procedure was to select the number of components to be retained for further analysis. The importance of each component as well as their relative explanatory power as expressed by their eigenvalues were analyzed. The screen test indicated that eight factors might be appropriate. Eigenvalue for all these factors was greater than 1 as per the latent root criterion value of

1.0, we considered inclusion of all these factors. These eight factors represented 59.7 per cent of the total variance. Extraction method used was the Principal Component Analysis, followed by the Varimax rotation method with Kaiser Normalization. Out of the 33 items used all statements were found to be useful for discussion as they fell in the category of discussion.

Table 3. The communalities

Variable code	Variable description	Communalities
S-1	I can tell a lot about a product's quality from the brand name.	.591
S-2	I use brand names as a sign of quality for purchasing products.	.664
S-3	I choose brands because of the quality they represent.	.741
S-4	A brand name tells me a great deal about the quality of a product.	.592
S-5	I choose brands that help to express my identity to others.	.650
S-6	The brands I use communicate important information about the type of person I am.	.648
S-7	I use different brands to express different aspects of my personality.	.580
S-8	I choose brands that bring out my personality.	.709
S-9	Using brands can help me connect with other people and social groups.	.525
S-10	I buy brands to be able to associate with specific people and groups.	.580
S-11	I feel a bond with people who use the same brand as I do.	.700
S-12	By choosing certain brands, I choose who I want to associate with.	.730
S-13	My choice of a brand says something about the people I like to associate with.	.652
S-14	I avoid choosing brands that do not reflect my social status.	.535
S-15	I use brands to communicate my social status.	.695
S-16	I choose brands that are associated with the social class I belong to.	.557
S-17	The brands I use reflect my social status.	.657
S-18	I communicate my achievements through the brands I own and use.	.546
S-19	I choose brands because I support the values they stand for.	.753
S-20	I buy brands that are consistent with my values.	.636
S-21	My choice of brand is based on the company's values.	.700
S-22	I use brands because I agree with the company's values.	.737
S-23	I avoid brands because I do not support the values they stand for.	.554
S-24	I buy brands because they are an important tradition in my household.	.511
S-25	I use brands that my family uses or has used.	.588
S-26	I use brands that remind me of my family.	.618
S-27	I buy brands in order to continue family traditions.	.607
S-28	I buy brands that my parent, buy/have bought.	.594
S-29	I use brands that reflect my national heritage.	.646
S-30	I prefer brands associated with my national heritage.	.687
S-31	I avoid brands because they do not fit with my national heritage.	.586
S-32	I choose brands because they are a part of national traditions	.508
S-33	My national heritage is not important in my brand decisions.	.479

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. As shown in Table 3, each factor is composed of items with communalities value of 0.47 or higher.

To identify the factors only items with loadings value above .45 were retained for discussion. One item was dropped at this stage.

Table 4. The pattern matrix

Variable code	Description	Factor loadings	Factor label (Variance explained)
S-15	I use brands to communicate my social status.	.783	Social recognition and status (21.25)
S-17	The brands I use reflect my social status.	.753	
S-14	I avoid choosing brands that do not reflect my social status.	.701	
S-16	I choose brands that are associated with the social class I belong to.	.637	
S-18	I communicate my achievements through the brands I own and use.	.554	
S-25	I use brands that my family uses or have used.	.754	Family tradition (9.58)
S-26	I use brands that remind me of my family.	.710	
S-27	I buy brands in order to continue family traditions.	.677	
S-28	I buy brands that my parent buy/have bought.	.640	
S-24	I buy brands because they are an important tradition in my household.	.524	
S-3	I choose brands because of the quality they represent.	.816	Quality (7.58)
S-2	I use brand names as a sign of quality for purchasing products.	.795	
S-1	I can tell lot about a product's quality from the brand name.	.690	
S-4	A brand name tells me a great deal about the quality of a product.	.613	
S-11	I feel a bond with people who use the same brands I do.	.810	Group influence (4.99)
S-12	By choosing certain brands, I choose who I want to associate with.	.722	
S-10	I buy brands to be able to associate with specific people and groups.	.576	
S-13	My choice of a brand says something about the people I like to associate with.	.539	
S-9	Using brands can help me connect with other people and social groups.	.458	
S-30	I prefer brands associated with my national heritage.	.757	National heritage (4.48)
S-31	I avoid brands because they do not fit with my national heritage.	.675	
S-29	I use brands that reflect my national heritage.	.597	
S-33	My national heritage is not important in my brand decisions.	-.591	
S-32	I choose brands because they are a part of national traditions.	.575	
S-8	I choose brands that bring out my personality.	.788	Self identify (4.08)
S-5	I choose brands that help to express my identity to others.	.677	
S-6	The brands I use communicate important information about the type of person I am.	.676	
S-7	I use different brands to express different aspects of my personality.	.617	
S-22	I use brands because I agree with the company's values.	.813	Values company endorses (4.05)
S-21	My choice of brand is based on the company's values.	.795	
S-19	I choose brands because I support the values they stand for.	.810	Strong relationship in personal values and values portrayed by brand (3.48)
S-20	I buy brands that are consistent with my values.	.726	
S-23	I avoid brands because I do not support the values they stand for.	-.503	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. (Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. A Rotation converged in 7 iterations).

Validation of factor analysis was performed by splitting the sample into two subsamples and re-estimating the factor model to test for comparability

(Hair et al., 1998). The results are stable within our sample. The findings suggest that the brand connotations amongst Indian Youth are primarily dominated by eight factors. Statements S-14, S-15, S-16, S-17 and S-18 were found to be related to factor one which we have termed Social

Recognition and Status. This factor explains 21 percent of variance in the sample. Statements S-24, S-25, S-26, S-27, S-28 constitute the second factor which focuses on the influence of Family tradition in determining brand meanings. This factor explains 9.58 percent of variance. Statements S-1, S-2, S-3 and S-4 were found to be related to the third factor which was Quality of the products as explaining the brand meaning; it explained a variance of 7.58 percent. Statements S-10, S-11, S-12, and S-13 capture the fourth factor Group influence while deriving the brand meanings; it explains 4.99 percent variance. Statements S-29, S-30, S-31, S-32, S-33 were found to be related to National Heritage of a brand, the fifth factor, and it explains 4.48 percent variance. Statements S-5, S-6, S-7 and S-8 were identified to be related to Self-identity as the sixth factor in the research. Self-identity was found to explain variance up to 4.08 percent in the sample. Statements S-22 and S-23 were related to Values the company endorses as seventh factor, explaining a variance of 4.05. Statements S-19, S-20, and S-23, were found to be related to Relationship in the personal values and company values (congruence between individual's values and company values), the eighth factor which explains variance up to 3.48 percentages.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings suggest that Indian youth prefers brands which symbolize status; this is because Indian markets are still dominated by unbranded products from unorganized market. Wearing branded products is considered a luxury in India as exposure to using branded products is very low in the country. It is only after the 1990s new economic policy in the country that branded products gained a wider acceptance in the country, earlier they have been confined to the upper income strata only. The use of branded goods was restricted to the Upper classes and therefore they were viewed as status symbol. However, the availability of global brands has transformed the consumers' perception towards them. International branded products like Reebok, Adidas, Benetton, Gap, and Nike are status symbol amongst the Indian youth. Brands in India now symbolize a lifestyle and youth's purchase is largely driven by the psychographic element that it connotes. This is in line with the research by Sinha (2003) that Indian consumers are more driven by the emotional component accompanying brands than the functional attributes. Brands that are high priced within a product class convey more quality and value. These are perceived by consumers as having greater status symbol and are able to position themselves as proud possessions contributing to a positive brand connotation. Since this factor

explains a variance of 21 percent in the sample, efforts by organizations in conveying more value will make a major impact on diffusion of brands amongst youth.

The study correlates with research of Hofstede, (1980), Hui and Triandis (1986) that individualist cultures are self-focused. The consumers in these cultures would seek self-gratification in their brand choices rather than group conformity. Influence of individualism was found to be the most vital construct of brand meaning and has a major impact on brand connotation amongst the Indian youth. The findings further reinforce that consumers create links between brands and self-concepts (Sprott et al., 2009). In collectivist societies the role of groups in consumption decision making is immense. Reed (2002) suggests that people seek group conformity and positive evaluation from the groups in the values they hold. However, the research suggests that Indian youth is less governed by family values in the evaluation of brands. According to Read, brand symbolically represents a global lifestyle and is distinct from it having any identification with Indian family values. The family values are intrinsic to the self-identity whereas brands extrinsically represent a lifestyle and symbolize status. This is in line with research by Elliott and Yannopoulou (2007) that brands provide a meaning to consumers' lives and help in choosing specific lifestyles.

Through purchase decisions, consumers describe themselves as members of the social groups (Haslam et al., 1998; Rijswijk et al., 2006; Chattaraman et al., 2008). The research findings support the earlier researches that the Indian youth purchases global brands because it helps in providing identification with the global consumer groups. The brand choice is dependent upon the global 'value' and 'image' the brand communicates to them. Fournier (1998) suggests that consumer brand relationships are influenced by the perceptions of brand quality. The reason for evaluating the quality attributes lies in the intrinsic desire of the consumer to choose the best products which would improve his life.

The brand originating from a specific country conveys a meaning in the consumers mind (Cervino et al., 2005; Kouba, 2008). We believed that Indian youth is not greatly influenced by the country of origin image of the brand and was found to have a low impact on brand meaning. The global exposure of the consumer class in emerging economies and their new confidence gives no inherent advantage to the brands originating from developed nations, or to local brands. The consumer assesses the brand in a rational manner and its ability to relate to him as an individual. This is a consequence of globalization and internet exposure of the youth.

In the research, the value congruence construct demonstrated a low relevance and loading showing an insignificant role of brand comprehension by Indian youth. It is expected that those individuals who will be strong in individualism will seek congruence in their personal values and in the brands they endorse (Phau and Lau, 2000). Though consumers buy products because of individualistic orientation but results have shown that it does not have congruence with their personal and brand values. This may put marketers in a dilemma as to how the brands should be pitched. The results show that Indian youth has capabilities to disconnect between the material possession and his values. He may endorse a brand because of status value it evokes whereas might not subscribe to the values endorsed by it. However, the values endorsed by the brand can be the values of aspiration group and at subliminal level consumer might approve of them. To a great extent India is a repressive society and such results should be read with caution. The implication can also be understood in the light of dual personality (Kumar et al., 2009b) capabilities Indian consumer may possess, an ability to compartmentalize their values. The results can also be interpreted in the light of a number of researches in social psychology which conceded that attitudes towards the object no matter how they are defined and measured are not the sole determinants of a person's behavioral intention or actual behavior towards the object (Triandis, 1971; Katz and Scotland, 1959). The influence on brand connotation in the research can be considered behavioral intention. The research findings are in line with that of Kumar et al., (2009c) wherein they have argued that Indian consumer's perception towards brands is influenced by the emotional construct and its ability to enhance the consumer's self-image. Indian society is witnessing an economic and social transformation, with consumers being influenced by the symbolic representation the brand has within their social system. Global brands are poised to gain greater

acceptance in the market as they symbolically and emotionally represent a lifestyle and value.

The brand connotations across different cultures may vary largely and within same economy consumer groups differ demographically and psychologically. Our study contrasts with earlier researches that group conformity has a major impact on brand connotations in India. It shows that Indian Urban youth has a high degree of individualistic orientation and is conscious of his self-identity. Brands reinforcing self-identity stand a better chance of being chosen as compared to brands low on this association. Self-identity is closely related to status symbolism and individualistic orientation is related to material possession for this segment. Self-identity has been an important construct in previous researches and the finding in this research corresponds with youth's self identity brand connotation in India. Global brands transmit similar identification to consumers in different cultures. Low impact of congruence in personal values and brand values is an interesting insight wherein the youth may use a brand because of status symbol while he might not conform to the values endorsed by the brand. Thus while positioning brands for this segment in India brands should portray superior quality perception and status.

Branded products are judged in the perspective of their capability to justify the consumer's inherent values and social norms of their culture. Within cultural setting marketers should give special emphasis to different segments. Indian urban youth's values are a fusion of western and eastern culture and should not be generalized in previous researches on Indian culture and society, especially with the researches done in pre-liberalization years (before 1991) in India.

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