

Cross-Cultural Analysis of Brand Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

Brand consciousness is more than simply an awareness or preference for brand names. It is the understanding that brand names, in general, have personal relevance or value in that they serve as a signal of functional or symbolic value. In the United States, the importance of brand names is well established. However, there is little understanding of the importance brand names hold in other cultures.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to better understand the role brand name plays in consumer decision-making by culture. Moreover, age and gender comparisons were also analyzed. As the results have indicated, there is no significant difference in the level of brand consciousness between students in Mexico and students in the United States. However, there were other statistically significant findings: overall, males are more brand conscious than females; Mexican males are more brand conscious than Mexican females and American males; 11-12 year old American males are more brand conscious than 16-17 year old and 20-22 year old American males; and 20-22 year old Mexicans are more brand conscious than 20-22 year old Americans.

INTRODUCTION

Brands are everywhere. There is no denying that corporations have taken the marketing of brand names very seriously. Billions of dollars have been spent trying to impress consumers while aiming to increase brand loyalty and recognition. In the United States, brand names are an important factor affecting consumers' purchase decisions, with well-known brands, such as Nike and Gap, being popular choices (Liebeck, 1996). Younger age levels have become desirable targets because of their purchasing power. In addition to spending \$93 billion annually, students are brand conscious and very loyal (Marx, 1995, p. 40). "They (college students) wouldn't give a second thought to buying a 1-liter bottle of Evian water," says Eric Weil, a publisher of *Collegiate Trends*, a college marketing publication" (Marx, 1994, p. 40). According to a study by *Mademoiselle* magazine, today's twenty-something females are "more likely to know what brands they want before they go shopping" (Parks, 1997). Many implications in marketing research have led to the belief that young adults are brand conscious consumers.

Is this idea applicable to individuals across cultures? Thus far, most research conducted on brand consciousness has been focused on the U.S. As global trade increases and trade barriers fall, companies are diverting intense marketing efforts overseas to gain from newly-opened economies. Mexico is one of these targeted nations. Currently, Mexico is the

third largest importer of U.S. goods, and the Mexican consumers purchase most of their durable and industrial goods from the United States (Kumar, 2000). Since many previous barriers to trade have been eliminated, overcoming cultural barriers will be the key to future global success. When companies are able to determine the factors driving purchase decisions, they will be able to better tailor products, advertisements and other marketing strategies to the needs and desires of Mexico's market.

The importance of brand names or "brand consciousness" of the current generation of U.S. consumers is frequently mentioned by articles in the business or popular press (Leonhardt, 1997). Yet, little research has been conducted on the importance brand names hold in other cultures. Does the degree of consumer brand consciousness fluctuate from country to country? Do consumers in Mexico place as much importance on brand names as in the United States? Does the importance of brand name vary with age?

The objective of this proposed study is to better understand the role brand name plays in consumer decision-making by culture, gender and age. It is hypothesized that the American participants will be more brand conscious than Mexican participants because the United States is more economically advanced. In addition, it is hypothesized that females will be more brand conscious than males. In comparison with males, females shop more, and they search for more information when they make purchase decisions (Punj & Staelin, 1983; Cobb & Hoyer, 1985). It is assumed that females will pay more attention to brands and place more value on brand names. Finally, it is hypothesized that 16-17 year olds will be more brand conscious than 11-12 year olds or 20-22 year olds. In a previous study, parents have claimed that high school students are the most brand conscious (Liebeck, 1996).

METHODS

Sample

The sample consisted of 93 Hispanic students from public schools in the mid-eastern part of Mexico and 321 students from mid-western public schools in the United States. Of the Hispanic respondents, 53 were male and 40 were female. In addition, 29 Hispanic respondents were in the 11-12 age group, 22 in the 16-17 group, and 42 in the 20-22 group.

Of the American respondents, 147 were male and 174 were female. In addition, 169 American respondents were in the 11-12 age group, 100 in the 16-17 group, and 52 in the 20-22 group.

Procedure

Survey data was collected in Mexico from June-July 2001 and in the United States from October-November 2001. Students were asked to complete the brand consciousness questionnaire in a classroom setting; the investigation was undertaken after the teachers in Mexico and the school board in the U.S. granted approval to enter classrooms. Notification forms were sent home with American students one week prior to distributing surveys. The schools in Mexico did not request parental or notification forms; therefore, none were distributed.

The student researcher was present to administer the survey and answer any questions related to it. She explained to the students that participation is strictly voluntary. To maintain confidentiality, the students were specifically asked not to write their names on the survey forms. After the surveys were completed and collected, the researcher distributed debriefing forms to provide additional information to explain the origin of the study and to provide contact information.

Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). More specifically, a three-way between subjects analysis of variance was used to test for statistically significant differences between culture, age and gender.

Instrument

A quantitative 10-item, five-point Likert-type scale was developed; many of the items in the scale were based on items used in previous brand equity and brand consciousness research. Students were asked to mark strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree to the 43 statements presented. For the purpose of establishing validity of the scale, brand loyalty, brand awareness and materialism constructs were also measured. It is posited that brand conscious consumers typically will be more aware of brand names, have a preference towards one or more brands and be more materialistic.

RESULTS

The data was compared across cultures, age and gender to find statistically significant differences in brand consciousness based on the scale used. The means by country, age and gender are presented in Table 1, with higher scores reflecting a higher level of brand consciousness.

Table 1

Age	MEXICO			U.S.		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
11-12	3.00	2.48	2.74	3.01	2.87	2.94
16-17	3.28	2.64	2.96	2.58	2.71	2.64
20-22	3.05	2.76	2.90	2.89	2.52	2.70
Total	3.11	2.62	2.87	2.825	2.70	2.76

Totals (MEXICO & U.S.)	
11-12 yr.	2.84
16-17 yr.	2.80
20-22 yr.	2.80
Male	2.97
Female	2.66

Brand Consciousness by Country

Although the mean brand consciousness score of American students (M=2.76) was slightly lower than that of Mexican students (M=2.87), no statistically significant difference was found to exist between the two groups (p-value=.184, Graph 1). These results did not support the hypothesis that students in the United States are more brand conscious than students in Mexico.

Brand Consciousness by Age

The means are very similar across overall age groups: the 11-12 year olds have a mean of 2.84, the 16-17 year olds have a mean of 2.80 and the 20-22 year olds have a mean of 2.80 (Graph 2). There were no statistically significant differences found when the data was compared across age (p-value=.914). These results do not support the hypothesis that high school students would be the most brand conscious age group.

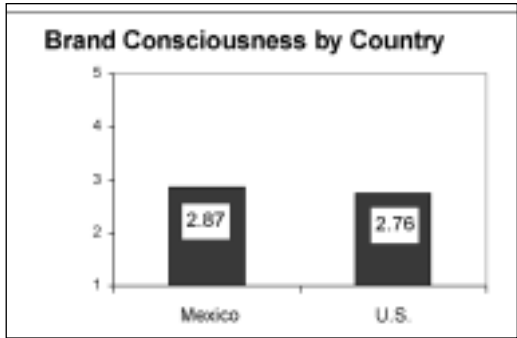
Brand Consciousness by Gender

The overall mean for male participants is 2.97 while the overall mean for female participants is 2.66 (Graph 3). When the data is compared, it is determined that the males are significantly more brand conscious than females (p-value=.000). These results do not support the previous hypothesis that females are more brand conscious than males.

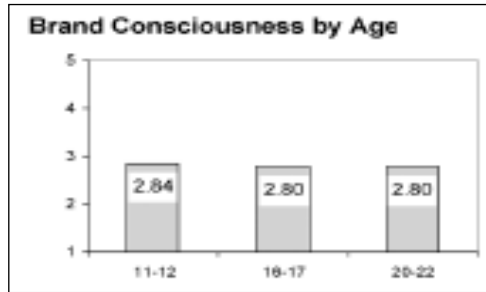
Brand Consciousness – Country by Gender

Although there are no statistically significant differences found in overall brand consciousness between the two cultures, there are differences within segments in each country and across the two countries. With regard to gender, the mean for Mexican males is 3.11, and the mean for Mexican females is 2.62 (Graph 4). Mexican males are significantly more brand conscious than Mexican females (p-value=.02). The mean for American males is 2.825, and the mean for American females is 2.624. There is no significant difference between the means of American males and females (p-value=.204). However, there is a significant difference between the mean of Mexican males and the mean of American males (p-value=.034). These findings suggest that Mexican males are more brand conscious than American males. No significant difference was found between Mexican women and American women.

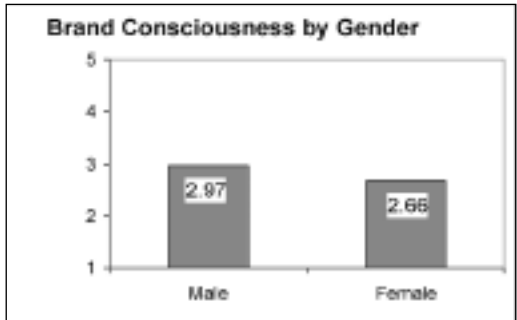
Graph 1



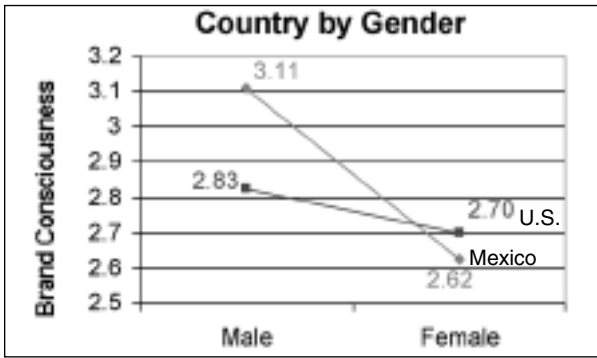
Graph 2



Graph 3



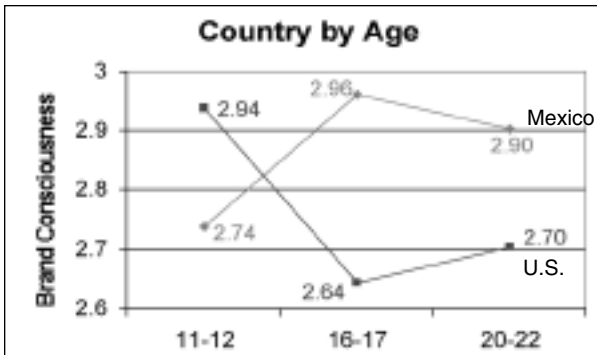
Graph 4



Brand Consciousness – Country by Age

In the U.S., the 11-12 year olds have a higher mean (2.94) than the 16-17 year olds (2.64) and the 20-22 year olds (2.70), (Graph 5). This difference was significant; therefore, according to the findings, 11-12 year old American students are more brand conscious than 16-17 year old and 20-22 year old Americans (p -values=.001 & .015). The means in Mexico are as follows: 11-12 year olds have a 2.74 mean, the 16-17 year olds have a 2.96 mean, and the 20-22 year olds have a 2.90 mean. None of these means in Mexico were significantly different from one another. Moreover, the means of the 11-12 year olds in Mexico and in the United States are not significant (p -value=.267). However, the mean of the 16-17 year olds in Mexico is marginally significant when compared to the mean of the 16-17 year olds in

Graph 5



the United States (p =.072); this Mexican group of students tend to be more brand conscious than the students of the same age in the United States. Likewise, the mean of the 20-22 year olds in Mexico is significantly higher than the mean of 20-22 year olds in the U.S. (p =.037). It can be concluded from the results that Mexican 20-22 year olds are more brand conscious than American 20-22 year olds.

DISCUSSION

This study suggests there is no overall difference in the level of brand consciousness of students in Mexico compared to the students in the United States. This similar level of brand consciousness may be attributed to the growing trend in globalization. As trade has become more open, brands have been internationalized. Not only has availability increased on a global scale, but marketing and promotional efforts have also expanded to increase consumer perceptions of brand equity and associations. Since independent markets have merged to form one global market with the same products and brands circulated worldwide, the degree of brand consciousness among cultures is shifting to a similar level.

The level of brand consciousness was found to be significantly different across gender. Based on the results, males are more brand conscious than females. According to previous research, females shop more, and they search for more information when they make purchase decisions (Punj & Staelin, 1983; Cobb & Hoyer, 1985). Therefore, it can be assumed that males generally do not shop as frequently or do not put as much effort into searching for information about product brands. They conveniently choose the brands they recognize and use the name of the brand as a signal of quality.

The research shows that Mexican males are significantly more brand conscious than Mexican females and American males. The high level of machismo among Mexican males may be driving this statistic. Mexican males tend to be extremely concerned with their social image. It is important that they show that they are macho, especially to women and to themselves, and they feel constant pressure to prove themselves (Rogers, 1999, p. 319). Thus, they may pay particularly close attention to brand associations in order to base their purchasing decisions on the brands they want to represent them.

Previous research done in the United States has suggested that older-aged students are more brand conscious than younger-aged students. Marx states, "College students are decidedly brand conscious" (1995). In another study, parents expressed concern that kids are extremely brand conscious with high school students being the most brand conscious (Liebeck, 1996). However, this research concluded that 11-12 year olds at the middle school level are significantly more brand conscious than the 16-17 year olds at the high school level and also more brand conscious than the 20-22 year olds at the college level. Possible explanations for this finding are that marketers are targeting younger American students in hopes of obtaining lifelong customers and/or this younger group has significant purchasing power.

Although the means of the 11-12 year old students in Mexico and the United States were not statistically significant, the difference between these means suggests that the American 11-12 year olds may be somewhat more brand conscious. This might be attributed to the idea that advertisements and promotions target young Americans more than they target young Mexicans. Marketers may presume that young adults in the United States have more money to spend than young adults in Mexico do. However, further research is needed in this area.

The assembled results and conclusions from this study will aid domestic and global companies through the processes of product and marketing development based on consumer preferences and motivations. Furthermore, the findings from this research will provide valuable insight for educators concerned with consumerism and the level of youth brand consciousness. Finally, this research could serve as a foundation for various follow-up studies with markets worldwide.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE STUDIES

There are a few limitations of this study. The sample size obtained in Mexico is relatively small; a larger sample size would have increased the reliability of the results. In addition, the socio-economic status of the students and their families in Mexico was undeterminable due to time constraints and lack of available demographic information. Finally, the American college students were asked to list their major in order to run analyses to determine if response biases existed. However, the Mexican college students were not asked to list their area of study so biases could not be determined.

For further studies, this research could be conducted across other cultures and those results could be compared to this project's findings. In addition, older age groups should be

surveyed to help determine how globalization has affected different generations. Finally, additional studies regarding self-image and machismo may help to verify the findings that men, especially Mexican men, are more brand conscious consumers.

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