

Using indigenous culture to create brand identities of transnational corporations from developing countries

Usando a cultura autóctone na criação de identidades de marca de organizações transnacionais de países em desenvolvimento

Usando la cultura autóctone en la creación de identidades de marca de corporaciones transnacionales en países en vía de desarrollo

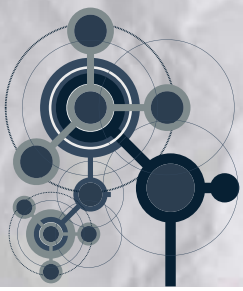


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Abstract

This case study describes the use of cultural elements in the creation of brand identities of three transnational corporations from developing countries: Bourbon Coffee, of Rwanda; Natura, of Brazil; and Xcaret, of Mexico. By relying on consumer culture theory and the country-of-origin concept as theoretical frameworks, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the companies' strategic communication contents to understand how they chose to design the symbolic aspects of their brands.

KEYWORDS: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION • BRAND IDENTITIES • INDIGENOUS CULTURE • DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.

Resumo

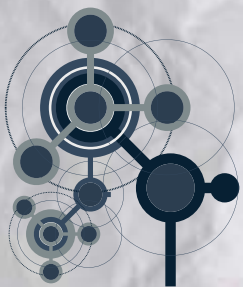
Este estudo de caso descreve o uso de elementos culturais na criação de identidades de marca de três corporações transnacionais em países em vias de desenvolvimento: Bourbon Coffee, de Ruanda; Natura, do Brasil; e Xcaret, do México. Com base na teoria da cultura do consumo e no conceito de país de origem como marcos teóricos, foi realizada uma análise qualitativa de conteúdo da comunicação estratégica das corporações selecionadas, com o propósito de entender como desenharam os aspectos simbólicos de suas marcas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: COMUNICAÇÃO ESTRATÉGICA • IDENTIDADES DE MARCA • CULTURA AUTÓCTONE • PAÍSES EM DESENVOLVIMENTO.

Resumen

Este estudio de caso describe el uso de elementos culturales en la creación de identidades de marca de tres corporaciones transnacionales en países en vía de desarrollo: Bourbon Coffee, de Rwanda; Natura, de Brasil; y Xcaret, de México. Basándose en la teoría de la cultura del consumo y el concepto de país de origen como marcos teóricos, un análisis cualitativo de contenido fue realizado en la comunicación estratégica de las corporaciones seleccionadas, con el propósito de entender cómo diseñaron los aspectos simbólicos de sus marcas.

PALABRAS CLAVES: COMUNICACIÓN ESTRATÉGICA • IDENTIDADES DE MARCA • CULTURA AUTÓCTONE • PAÍSES EN DESARROLLO.



One of the phenomena that contributed to the transition from modernism to postmodernism was the intensification of the use of culture to transfer symbolic meanings to commodities. Many believe such a process gave start to a new phase in the capitalist world – the rise of a consumer society. Therefore, although the existence of a postmodernist period remains in dispute, various theorists have affirmed that it began after World War II (Jameson, 1983) and has been marked by a great expansion of the capitalist system, where culture has assumed a crucial role (Jameson, 1984).

With the postmodern scenario and the continuous use of culture to attribute symbolic meaning to commodities, brands have emerged as powerful representations of these meanings, and consumer goods have started to mediate social relations. Consequently, on one hand, the process of encoding cultural elements into brands – the creation of brand identities – has become a vital communication strategy for companies, and on the other, brand symbolisms have become a way for consumer self-expression. This interaction between brands and consumers is a fundamental concept behind consumer culture theory, the theoretical foundation of this study. Furthermore, with the intensification of the world's social and economic relations due to globalization, strong brands went global, and global brands became “cultural resources” for the construction of postmodern consumer identities (Holt, 2002).

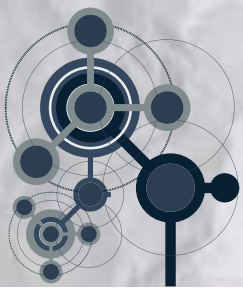
Thus, as the symbolic aspects of brands have become a crucial part of postmodern relations, the goal of this study is to describe, in light of consumer culture theory and the country-of-origin concept, how three transnational corporations – Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret – have used indigenous elements in the creation of their brand identities. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to potentially inform strategic communication scholars and professionals about the symbolisms that these three transnational corporations from developing countries are bringing to international markets and about some implications of each company's choice to show its product's origin so evidently in its brand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer culture theory

Mike Featherstone (1991) explained that the use of culture for capitalist purposes not only blurred the limits between high and mass culture, but also contributed to the emergence of consumer culture, which entails the multiple relationships that consumers establish with the symbolic elements of commodities. Besides, Featherstone (1991, p. 14) hypothesized that the appropriation of culture can occur when “advertising (...) attach[es] images of romance, exotica, desire, beauty, fulfillment, communality, scientific progress, and the good life to mundane consumer goods”. These processes of encoding meanings attribute social, psychological, and emotional exchange values to commodities. Commodities, in this sense, surpass their utilitarian qualities. They become not only vehicles of social integration and exclusion, but also ways for people to socialize and to experience pleasure (Featherstone, 1991).

The symbolic meanings that consumer goods convey, and the use of these symbolisms for the construction of the self and social relations, are the objects of interest in communication culture theory that is a “family of theoretical perspectives” with four domains of research. The first domain, consumer identity projects, investigates the ways that symbolic representations embedded in commodities are used by consumers for the construction of their identities (Arnould; Thompson, 2005). The second, marketplace culture, understands consumers as cultural producers and consumption as a “dominant human practice”, in which consumers receive and generate cultural tendencies (Arnould; Thompson, 2005, p. 873). The third domain,



the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, as explained by Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson (2005, p. 874), relates to “the institutional and social structures that systematically influence consumption, such as class, community, ethnicity, and gender”. Finally, the fourth domain, mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies, concerns the investigation of consumer ideologies, or the elaboration of ideological messages that are transmitted by media channels and received by consumers (Arnould; Thompson, 2005).

Thus, this last domain of research focuses on companies, because although consumers give different interpretations when decoding the ideological messages and symbolisms attached to products, encoding strategies are powerful tools in the interactional processes of creating meanings. Hallahan et al. (2007, p. 16) stated that one strategic communication concern is “how organizations present and promote themselves and interact with their audiences.” The authors observed that, from this standpoint, “[r]esearchers have an important opportunity to renew their interest in examining and understanding what organizations actually do to create and exchange meaning with others” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 27).

Within the communication culture theory perspective, in postmodern societies, this exchange of meaning between companies and consumers can take place at the identity level through interactions that occur when consumers identify with the symbolisms attributed to a commodity by its brand. Consequently, as pointed by Kevin L. Keller and D. Donald Lehmann (2006, p. 740), “[b]randing has emerged as a top management priority in the last decade due to growing realization that brands are one of the most valuable intangible assets that firms have”.

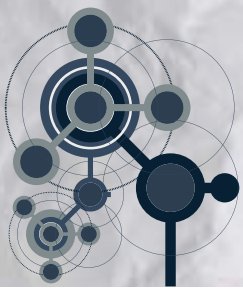
Country-of-origin

The country-of-origin concept can add an additional consideration to the creation of brands and to the interactions that brands establish with consumers. Julie Pharr (2005, p. 34) explained that it could be inferred from the country-of-origin concept that “a product’s country of origin can influence consumers’ evaluation judgments of the product”. Regarding global brands, while Douglas Holt, John Quelch, and Earl Taylor (2004) pointed out that quality is the main characteristic that consumers look for, Peter Verlegh and Jan-Benedict Steenkamp’s (1999) studies indicated that country-of-origin and perceived quality have strong connections. The authors “found that country of origin effects are significantly larger when products from MDCs [more developed countries] are compared with products from LDCs [less developed countries]”, which might be explained by countries’ images held by consumers (Verlegh; Steenkamp, 1999, p. 538).

Roth and Romeo (1992, p. 480) defined country image as “the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country, based on their prior perceptions of the country’s production and marketing strengths and weakness”. Thus, explicit association of brands to their countries of origin can significantly change consumers’ ideas about products. In this sense, considering how once-local brands are now globalizing and how consumers tend to choose brands with identities that somehow relate to their own, as stated by communication culture theory, the use of indigenous elements in the creation of brand identities could affect the establishment of interactions between brands and consumers.

Brand identity and global brand dimensions

For the transnational corporations, the creation of their brand identities – the process of elaborating the symbolisms that their brands bring to markets – can influence the image of their brands in consumers’ minds, and represent the brands success or failure. To explain the concepts of brand identity and image, Shiva Nandan (2005, p. 268) stated that, “identity represents the firm’s reality, while image represents the perception of the consumer”. Jean-Noël Kapferer (2008, p. 174) also noted:



Identity is on the sender's side. The purpose, in this case, is to specify the brand's meaning, aim, and self-image (...). In terms of brand management, identity precedes image. Before projecting an image to the public, we must know exactly what we want to project.

Consequently, choosing the elements to use in composing the cultural or symbolic aspects of brand identities is a crucial strategy choice for companies since those elements create associations that affect the image that consumers form about the brand and its products. Moreover, this strategy has become more relevant with the emergence of globalization and global brands.

Aysegül Özsoy and Selin Altaras (2008, p. 1) defined global brands as

those that have widespread regional/global awareness, availability, acceptance, and demand and are often found under the same name with consistent positioning, personality, look, and feel in major markets enabled by centrally coordinated marketing strategies and programs.

Additionally, the authors emphasized that due to globalization, brands have acquired a central position in international markets, and "the cultural influence of global brands has never been more important" (Özsoy; Altaras, 2008, p. 1).

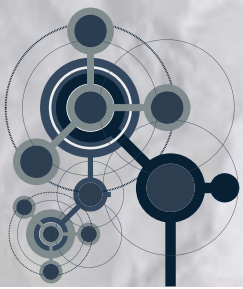
In this way, Özsoy and Altaras (2008) elaborated a model of global brand attitude and purchase likelihood, which serves as an integrated conceptual framework for consumers' attitudes toward global brands. The model – built on three theoretical frameworks: communication culture theory, signaling theory, and associative network memory model – presents dimensions that encompass aspects of the interactions that occur when consumers look for products from global brands. Therefore, dimensions of the model, such as authenticity, cultural capital, globalness, quality, social responsibility, credibility, and prestige, can indicate the most prominent conceptual foundations for brands that aim at international markets. This is noteworthy insofar as the process of encoding symbolic meanings into these dimensions can be a decisive strategy through its ability to create relationships between brands and consumers.

Moreover, as postmodern consumers interact with brand identities and use them to construct their own, as proposed by communication culture theory, elaborating the symbolic aspects of brands can become highly complex. This is especially true if companies that aim at international markets use indigenous culture as a source of meanings in the creation of their brand symbolisms since it can generate the country-of-origin effect, which ultimately can influence consumer-buying decisions.

CASE STUDY

This study's goals are to describe how three transnational corporations from developing countries used cultural elements to elaborate the symbolisms of their brand identities and to discuss some possible implications of this process. In order to reach its goals, this study employed the following criteria in the selection of the brands: the three transnational corporations must be from developing countries, in the same market segments as well-known global brands, and from different market segments.

The first selected company is Bourbon Coffee, a coffee store chain from Africa that has established its business in international markets by offering fine coffees from Rwanda (Bourbon Coffee, 2013). The second is the Brazilian company Natura, which focuses on providing well-being to its customers by producing high-quality beauty products made with natural ingredients from the Amazon rain forest (Natura, 2014). The third company is Xcaret, an eco-archeological theme park located near Cancun, Mexico. The main attractions of Xcaret are a tropical environment that offers visitors numerous opportunities to experience nature and a variety of events based on the Mexican culture (Xcaret, 2013).



Then, after choosing the companies, three research questions were elaborated to guide the analysis of the symbolisms in Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's brands:

RQ1: What are the cultural elements used in the creation of Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's brand identities?

RQ2: How do the cultural elements present in the Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's brands relate to global brand dimensions?

RQ3: What are the common self-perpetrated myths instigated by the Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's brands?

In order to identify the cultural elements used in the creation of Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's brands, a qualitative content analysis following the steps presented by Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon (2005) was employed on the strategic communication contents of the three companies. The qualitative content analysis conducted for this study focused first on 82 files that were randomly collected from online resources, including the companies' websites (news kits, news releases, etc.), Facebook accounts, and YouTube channels. In addition, interviews and video advertisements were included as a part of the data collection.

Then, by applying the parameters of conventional content analysis, the analytical approach followed Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) model: open coding the collected materials, listing the codes into categories, examining the data to combine or separate categories and subcategories, identifying examples of each category, identifying relationships between categories, and analyzing emergent themes in relation to the theoretical framework of the study.

In order to implement these steps, the software NVivo was used to collect and organize the data. NVivo is a program designed to assist qualitative researchers with processes such as coding and classification of themes. For this study, NVivo was used to eliminate similar files, to write annotations (memos) about the files' contents, to code the material that indicated any cultural or symbolic reference, and to place the codes into categories.

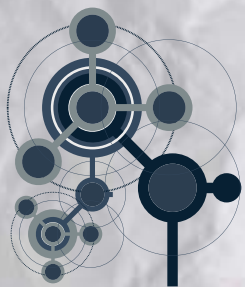
After the initial coding process, by using Özsomer and Altaras' (2008) model, some categories were collapsed and others placed as subcategories, generating the final version of the codebook with four main category levels. The first level contains categories of codes related to the companies' home countries. The second level groups categories with references regarding the concepts that compose global brand dimensions (Özsomer; Altaras, 2008). In the third level, there are subcategories of the first and second levels. In the fourth level, there are categories of codes not directly related to the research questions but useful for the argument in general ways.

Afterwards, the themes of the main categories and subcategories were related to the concepts in the global brand dimensions presented by Özsomer and Altaras' model (2008) and to the CO concept. Finally, by analyzing the relationship among themes, common elements were identified in the three companies' strategic communication contents.

FINDINGS

RQ1: Cultural elements used in the creation of Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's Brand identities.

To answer the first research question, the analysis focused on discovering symbolic references in Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's strategic communication contents. The analysis revealed five broad categories of codes that indicate how these three companies used their countries' cultures to create their brand identities.



Country references

This category includes codes where texts and images, such as country names and maps, are explicitly linked to company logos or brands. Within this category, the three brands indicate clear graphic connections with their home countries. Xcaret, for instance, is the most obvious case, as the name of its country of origin, Mexico, is part of the park's logo.

Indigenous references

By establishing a clear connection with their countries, Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret appropriated numerous indigenous elements to elaborate the symbolisms of their brand identities and communication strategies. Thus, codes regarding history, traditions, beliefs, music, and people were aggregated in this category.

Bourbon Coffee, for example, incorporates African artifacts into the interior designs of its stores. The following excerpt illustrates the finding: "Bourbon offers five varieties of "crop to cup" African beans (as well as a litany of other coffee shop staples) in a comfortable open atmosphere, replete with a fantastic assortment of handmade African art" (Underwood, 2009).

Natural references

The codes in this category indicate that the companies used environmental references in the creation of their brand identities in various forms. Natura, for instance, emphasizes its commitment to employ sustainable ways to extract and use natural ingredients from Brazilian forests.

On Natura's website, this category is clearly identifiable in the company's projected brand identity: "We don't see nature as a separate entity, but something that we, as humans, are a fundamental part of. We are all active participants in the progression of life on this planet, and to hurt nature in any way is to hurt ourselves" (Sustainability, 2013).

Uniqueness

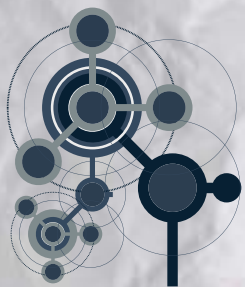
Although the three companies selected for this study have some characteristics in common, they also present aspects of uniqueness. Xcaret, for example, integrated the culture of Mexico in its conceptualization since its business is based on the distinctive Mayan culture and history.

In a strategic communication video – designed as an introduction to the company – Xcaret is presented as "a unique eco-archeological park with entertainment for the entire family (...) [and with] unique expressions of Mexico" (Xcaret, 2011).

Values

This category considers the values that the three transnational corporations articulated in their brand presentations. Here it is possible to see how Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret interweaved their countries' cultural elements with the core values of their companies.

Bourbon Coffee's values, for example, are based on the company's business model that diminishes the role of the middleman in the commercialization of coffee. By establishing a direct connection with Rwanda's farmers, the company elevates the coffee purchase price paid to farmers and as a result improves the quality of the lives of the workers involved with the company.



In this way, Bourbon Coffee's brand concept makes it clear that the company's core values are connected with its home country culture: "We will enter the international market with the goal of introducing the fine coffees of Africa to consumers and promoting our mandates for the brand: economic development, sustainable practices, uncompromising quality, and cultural unity" (About us, 2013).

RQ2. Relationships between the cultural elements from Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's brands and global brand dimensions.

To answer the second research question, this study considered brand dimensions as concepts that can serve as foundations for the encoding of symbolic meanings into the creation of brand identities. Thus, the analysis focused on identifying connections between the codes and the dimensions present in Özsomer and Altaras' (2008) model: authenticity, cultural capital, globalness, quality, social responsibility, credibility, and prestige.

However, the model's dimensions named "consumer depositional characteristics" and "brand price" that can be directly related to consumer perceptions (Özsomer; Altaras, 2008) were not included in this analysis.

Authenticity

Authenticity indicates brand references to genuineness. Xcaret, for example, not only makes sure to emphasize its cultural attractions but also clearly states the authentic experiences that tourists enjoy when in contact with the Mayan culture. The following passage illustrates this category: "Set in the exotic surroundings of Xcaret eco theme park in Mexico you will find an authentic Yucatecan Hacienda Henequenera, which name originates from the word henequen, the major plantation fiber agave of Eastern Mexico" (Hacienda, 2013).

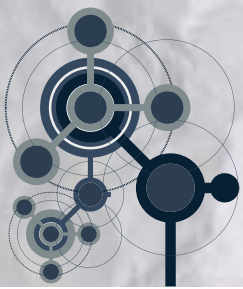
Cultural capital

Cultural capital refers to tangible and intangible cultural assets as well as the concepts that brands bring to markets. Natura, for instance, by promoting campaigns without stereotypes, connects its products to the concept of natural beauty. Jones (2012, p. 143) cited an example: "A decade before Unilever launched Dove's iconic Real Beauty campaign, Natura in its Truly Beautiful Woman campaign, which featured ordinary women over 30, had already moved to equate beauty not with the anxious pursuit of youth but with increasing self-esteem".

Globalness

Globalness refers to companies efforts to participate in the global market scenario. In Bourbon Coffee's strategic communication contents, for example, there are references to the company's goal to be known in international markets.

Bosco Munga, CEO of Bourbon Coffee, explained: "First, we wanted to introduce Rwandan coffee to a broader market. Second, we wanted to generate an African brand that can compete and coexist in the international market. Third, we wanted to tell the story of our farmers and crops from our perspective and by connecting end user to the rural farmer" (Schaber, 2013).



Quality

Quality, along with social responsibility, is one requirement for competing in international markets. Thus, codes that explicitly emphasized the quality of the companies' products and services were placed under this category.

Here is an example from Bourbon Coffee: "When we search Rwanda to source our beans, we only ever look for lots of 100% Arabica Bourbon coffee – we truly believe it is the best that the country, and perhaps even the world, has to offer, and we are always excited to be able to share the Bourbon experience with our customers" (Why Bourbon Coffee?, 2013).

Social responsibility

Consumers expect that companies assume social responsibilities and transparency in their activities. Natura, for instance, emphasizes its commitment to indigenous communities in Brazil: "By working together with local communities in Brazil, and incorporating the principles of sustainable development in the harvesting of our ingredients and our production processes, we create products with rich and unique textures" (Values, 2013).

Credibility and prestige

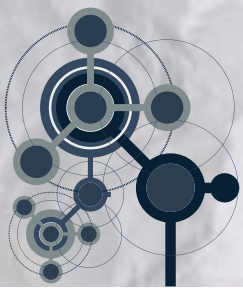
Credibility can be related to consumer perceptions of the consistency of messages delivered by companies' brands. Consistency in the strategic communication contents from Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret can be observed through the relationships between the themes that emerged during the coding process and the resulting categories that composed the codebook.

Credibility is also related to the prestige that brands can confer to consumers. References regarding brand credibility showed connection with the awards received by the companies, which give their brands local and international recognition. Xcaret's strategic communication contents, for instance, present the company's awards for its environmental initiatives: "Thanks to Xcaret's Scarlet Macaw Breeding Program, Xcaret holds the only Guinness World Record in history for an endangered species reproduction program for most macaws born at a single location in one year: 840 birds born since 1993" (Xcaret, 2011a, p. 12).

RQ2. Common self-perpetrated myths of Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's Brands.

In order to answer the third research question, which suggests that three companies from different economic sectors – a coffee store chain, a cosmetic company, and a theme park – promote similar myths, the relationships between the categories and themes were considered.

The annotations (memos) written during the coding process revealed that various codes under the category of natural references were also suitable or related to other categories and subcategories. This, therefore, indicates that the three companies promote common myths by strategically using their sustainable practices and their home country natural resources as integrating elements in the elaboration of the symbolisms carried by their brands.



DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data shows how three successful transnational corporations from developing countries, Bourbon Coffee, Natura and Xcaret, used cultural elements in creating their brand identities. Although the themes that emerged during the coding process can be related to one another, the initial analysis generated five distinctive code categories: country references, indigenous references, natural references, uniqueness and values. Afterwards, some codes in these main categories were placed into subcategories based on the global brand dimensions of Özsomer and Altaras' (2008) model.

By doing this, the analysis raises questions about the CO concept and its effect on the interactions between brands and consumers because a company can elaborate the symbolisms of its brand identity without necessarily using explicit references to its home country. For example, Natura could have emphasized the natural aspects of its products without attaching the Brazil name to its international brand. The same is true for Bourbon Coffee, which could have used the well-known quality of African beans in the conceptualization of its brand without associating Rwanda's history with it.

Besides, the analysis reveals that the connections Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret have established with their home countries' natural resources, treated in this study as a part of their societies' cultural assets, indicate a common self-perpetrated myth or a common communication strategy related to green marketing used by the three companies.

Green marketing

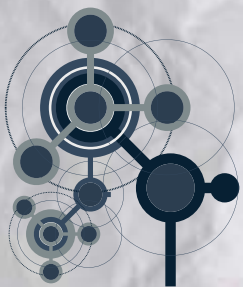
Green marketing refers to an increasing demand for natural and healthy products and consequently to an increasing interest in companies' social and environmental responsibilities (Organic market, 2014; Global insight, 2007). While the companies selected for this study implement various social and environmental programs, the association of their brands with natural resources of their home countries is a strategy that seems to reinforce other symbolic aspects of their brand identities.

Bourbon Coffee, for instance, highlights that its business model intends to improve the life conditions of Rwandan farmers and the quality of the company's coffee. At the same time, Bourbon Coffee forges a closer relationship between its home country and consumers by offering high-quality coffee straight from Rwanda's plantations in an ambience full of references to the African culture.

Xcaret promotes a similar connection between its home country's nature and culture. For instance, the park's strategic communication contents, including its slogan *Xcaret, pride of Mexico!*, invite visitors to enjoy not only the beauty of the local natural environment but also the revered traditions of the Maya people.

Natura's brand also associates environmental with cultural symbolisms. In addition to establishing sustainable ways of extracting natural ingredients from the Amazon rain forest, Natura emphasizes the connection between its natural products and its home country's culture. The first line of products that Nature chose to promote in France, for example, was developed by following traditional recipes of indigenous people from Brazil. In this way, the company delivers to its foreign consumers natural products that are rooted in the Brazilian culture.

However, the encoding of environmental and cultural references into brands is a complex matter since a clear connection between products and their home countries can raise other issues, especially regarding the country-of-origin effect.



Country-of-origin

Beyond establishing a connection with their countries' cultural and natural resources, Natura and Xcaret explicitly attached their home countries' names to their logos. By doing this, these companies connect their brands to Brazil's and Mexico's images, which can influence consumer choices.

Martin Roth and Jean Romeo (1992, p. 493) pointed out that their study "found that willingness to buy a product from a particular country will be high when the country image is also an important characteristic for the product category." This might explain the strategies of Natura and Xcaret in ascribing their countries' names and indigenous elements to their brands.

Xcaret, for instance, uses the country-of-origin concept to emphasize the known Mexican natural exuberance, particularly due to Xcaret's proximity to Cancun in the Mexican Caribbean. Besides, the company's founder and CEO, Miguel Quintana, has clearly stated the park's goals to promote the culture of the Mayan people internationally (Leo, 2012).

Natura, in addition to promoting the Brazilian culture overseas, chose to attach the Brazil name to its international logo, a tactic that serves to reinforce the origin of its products. Thus, according to analysis of Natura's strategic communication contents, the company seems to use the country-of-origin concept to harness Brazil's common association with the Amazon rain forest. Conversely, the country-of-origin effect can also generate negative associations in consumers' minds. In the late 1990s, for example, Natura failed to enter the developed US, French, and Portuguese markets. One reason for this failure was that "Brazil was equated in much of the world not with rain forests and biodiversity but with hyperinflation, deforestation, soccer and samba" (Jones, 2012, p. 143).

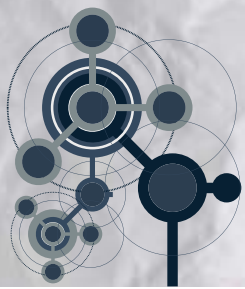
Bourbon Coffee, although not showing its country's name on its logo, uses numerous references to Africa and Rwanda on its strategic communication contents. Furthermore, Bourbon Coffee is the most interesting case when the political mission behind its brand is considered – the company uses the country-of-origin concept in reverse, as one of its brand goals is to alter Rwanda's reputation in the minds of foreign consumers after the genocide of 1994.

In 1994, Rwanda was the stage of one of the most tragic events in recent human history – a dispute between two groups, extremists (Hutu) and rebels (Tutsi), which devastated the country and left more than 800 thousand people dead, including innocent children, women, and men (Rwanda, 2012). Thus, regarding Rwanda's image and Bourbon Coffee's brand mission, Arthur Karuletwa, the company's founder and former CEO, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, stated the following:

If done right, it could be the platform to rebrand the country [. . .] [Coffee can] create awareness that there's recovery, there's trade, there's investment opportunities, there's tourism. There's life after death (Kilpatrick, 2009, para. 3).

Considering the examples of country-of-origin references in the Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret's brands, it becomes clear that this concept has grown increasingly complex with the coming of globalization, insofar as a country's name can impute to a brand the country's image regarding its history, economics, politics, and environment (Roth; Romeo, 1992). Furthermore, with the crucial role that brands have assumed in postmodern societies, country-of-origin has become more than simply a cue to inform consumers about product origins.

In the contemporary world, the country-of-origin concept can also involve issues regarding identity, since postmodern consumers choose products from brands that convey symbolisms with which they identify. This interaction between



brands and consumers may set an encoding/decoding process, where on one hand companies ascribe symbolic meanings to their brands, and on the other, consumers appropriate these meanings for constructing their own identities, as stated by consumer culture theory. Consequently, this encoding/decoding process suggests that the symbolisms and myths that brands offer can be crucial for their triumph in markets.

Moreover, with respect to international markets – despite the dominance of strong brands from developed nations – “the 21st century is witnessing a profound shift in global dynamics, driven by the fast-rising new powers of the developing world” (Human development, 2013, p. 22). Therefore, the way that successful brands such as Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret articulate the symbolisms that their brands bring to the global scenario, as presented in this study, can be a relevant issue for transnational corporations from developing countries.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study showed how three transnational corporations from developing countries used genuine sources of meanings—indigenous cultures—to elaborate the symbolisms of their brand identities. In order to analyze this phenomenon, this study described how Bourbon Coffee, Natura, and Xcaret integrated their brands, goals, and values with elements of their home countries.

One limitation of this study is that the results are not generalizable, a common outcome from similar case studies. Additionally, the approach of this study focused on understanding one side of the equation regarding processes of meaning making. Thus, from the consumer culture theory perspective, this study concerns the symbolisms that companies encode into their brands, which gives space for future research to investigate how consumers and other stakeholders decode them.

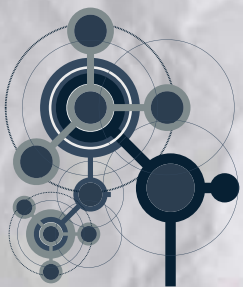
Besides, the analysis revealed a common self-perpetrated myth that these three successful companies are infusing in international markets, which indicates a growing interest in environmental issues and a rising expectation by consumers for natural products. Therefore, one implication of this study relates to the possibility for future research to investigate the competitiveness of companies from developing countries that have natural resources.

The analysis also raised questions about the political function that brands could assume in local and global scenarios. The most representative example comes from the mission assigned to Bourbon Coffee's brand, which is to bring to the international scene a new conception of Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. Thus, with regard to the political aims of global brands, future studies could focus on consumer perceptions of brands as world ambassadors.

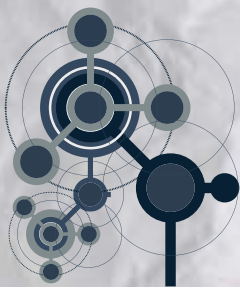
Lastly, concerning brand identities, another area that could be investigated refers to the impact of the symbolic meanings and attributes of brands on consumer behaviors, especially those of consumers who are highly engaged in cosmopolitan trends. This would provide not only an overview of tendencies in international markets, but also an understanding of consumer orientations in relation to brands. In this way, future researchers might focus on studying how the entrance of companies from developing countries into international markets may affect the purchasing behavior of foreign consumers and, perhaps, their acceptance of the ideals and causes advocated by these companies' brands.

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