

Cultural Values and Their Impact on Brand Perception in Emerging Markets

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Abstract

The increasing importance of emerging markets in the global economy has intensified scholarly and managerial interest in understanding consumer behavior across diverse cultural contexts. While economic growth, urbanization, and technological advancement have transformed consumer markets in countries such as India, China, Brazil, Indonesia, Vietnam, and South Africa, cultural values continue to exert a profound influence on how consumers perceive and evaluate brands. Brand perception is not merely a consequence of product quality or promotional efforts; rather, it is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, social norms, traditions, and collective experiences that shape consumer attitudes and behaviors.

This paper examines the role of cultural values in influencing brand perception in emerging markets. Drawing upon theories from consumer behavior, cultural studies, branding, and international marketing, the paper explores how dimensions such as collectivism, individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, social identity, and cultural symbolism affect consumer responses toward brands. The study further investigates the interaction between global and local brands and highlights the importance of cultural adaptation in brand management strategies. Additionally, the paper discusses managerial implications, ethical considerations, and future research directions relevant to organizations operating in culturally diverse environments. The findings suggest that successful branding in emerging markets requires a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics and the ability to align brand values with local consumer expectations.

Keywords: Cultural Values, Brand Perception, Emerging Markets, Consumer Behaviour, Brand Equity, Cultural Identity, Global Branding, Consumer Psychology

1. Introduction

The globalization of markets has significantly altered the competitive landscape for organizations worldwide. Emerging economies have become major contributors to global economic growth and have attracted substantial investments from multinational corporations seeking new opportunities for expansion. According to international economic reports, emerging markets account for a growing share of global consumption and are expected to become increasingly influential in shaping future business strategies. However, despite increasing economic integration, consumers in these markets continue to be strongly influenced by cultural values that determine their preferences, perceptions, and purchasing decisions.

Culture has long been recognized as one of the most powerful determinants of consumer behavior. It provides individuals with a framework through which they interpret the world around them, assign meaning to products and services, and evaluate brand communications. Cultural values represent enduring beliefs about desirable behaviors and social goals, influencing attitudes toward consumption and shaping expectations regarding products, brands, and organizations.

Brand perception refers to the collection of thoughts, feelings, associations, and beliefs that consumers hold regarding a brand. These perceptions are formed through direct experiences, marketing communications, social interactions, and cultural influences. In emerging markets, cultural values often act as filters through which consumers interpret brand messages and evaluate brand credibility. Consequently, brands that resonate with local cultural beliefs are more likely to establish trust, emotional attachment, and long-term loyalty.

The importance of understanding cultural influences on brand perception has increased due to the coexistence of traditional values and modern consumer aspirations. Consumers in emerging markets are simultaneously influenced by local cultural identities and global consumption trends. This duality creates unique opportunities and challenges for marketers attempting to position brands effectively.

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between cultural values and brand perception in emerging markets. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how cultural dimensions influence consumer attitudes toward brands and how organizations can develop culturally sensitive branding strategies to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between culture and consumer behavior has been extensively examined within marketing literature. Early studies emphasized that culture serves as a fundamental determinant of consumption patterns by influencing values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral norms. Hofstede (2001) proposed that cultural dimensions such as individualism, collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation significantly affect consumer decision-making processes.

Schwartz (1999) further expanded cultural theory by identifying universal human values that guide individual behavior across societies. These values influence preferences regarding products, lifestyles, and social interactions, thereby affecting brand evaluations.

Brand perception has traditionally been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, trust, and emotional attachment. Keller (2013) argued that strong brands develop positive consumer perceptions through consistent communication and meaningful differentiation. However, the formation of these perceptions is influenced by cultural contexts that shape how consumers interpret brand-related information.

Research on global branding suggests that consumers often associate international brands with quality, prestige, innovation, and modernity. Steenkamp (2019) found that global brands frequently benefit from perceptions of superior competence and international legitimacy. Conversely, local brands often enjoy stronger cultural authenticity and emotional resonance due to their alignment with local traditions and social values.

Several studies conducted in emerging markets indicate that cultural congruence significantly affects brand preference. Consumers tend to respond positively to brands that reflect local values, traditions, and social identities. Cultural symbolism embedded in advertising, packaging, and brand narratives enhances emotional engagement and strengthens consumer-brand relationships.

Recent literature has also emphasized the role of social identity theory in explaining brand perception. According to this perspective, consumers use brands as symbolic resources to express group membership and social identity.

Brands become vehicles through which individuals communicate their cultural affiliations, aspirations, and social status.

Despite extensive research, gaps remain regarding how cultural values interact with rapid social and technological transformations occurring within emerging markets. As globalization and digitalization continue to reshape consumer environments, understanding the evolving influence of cultural values on brand perception remains a critical area of investigation.

3. Cultural Foundations of Brand Perception

3.1 Understanding Culture and Consumption

Culture can be defined as the shared system of values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and behavioral norms that characterize a society. It influences virtually every aspect of consumer behavior, including information processing, product evaluation, purchasing decisions, and post-purchase satisfaction.

Consumers do not evaluate products and brands in isolation. Instead, they interpret brand-related information through culturally constructed meanings and expectations. The same marketing message may generate different reactions across cultural contexts because consumers attach different symbolic meanings to products, services, and communication styles.

For example, luxury consumption may represent personal achievement in one culture while symbolizing family success or social recognition in another. Similarly, trust in a brand may be based on technological competence in some societies and relationship-building efforts in others.

Understanding these cultural foundations is essential for explaining why identical branding strategies often produce different outcomes across markets.

3.2 Emerging Markets as Unique Cultural Environments

Emerging markets are characterized by economic growth, increasing urbanization, expanding middle-class populations, and rapid technological adoption. At the same time, these societies often maintain strong cultural traditions that continue to shape consumer behavior.

Consumers in emerging markets frequently experience tension between modern aspirations and traditional values. Global media exposure introduces new lifestyles and consumption patterns, while family structures, religious beliefs, and community norms continue to influence daily decision-making.

This coexistence of modernity and tradition creates complex consumer identities. Individuals may aspire to own international brands that symbolize progress and global connectivity while simultaneously seeking products that reflect local cultural values and social expectations.

Marketers operating in these environments must therefore understand not only economic conditions but also the cultural dynamics that influence consumer perceptions.

3.3 Culture as a Source of Brand Meaning

Brands derive meaning from cultural contexts. Beyond functional attributes, brands communicate symbolic messages related to identity, status, belonging, and values.

Consumers often evaluate brands based on their ability to align with culturally significant ideals. For example, brands emphasizing family relationships may resonate strongly in collectivist societies, while brands promoting independence and self-expression may appeal more to individualistic consumer segments.

Cultural meanings are reinforced through language, rituals, traditions, stories, symbols, and social interactions. Successful brands incorporate these cultural elements into their positioning strategies to create deeper emotional connections with consumers.

As markets become increasingly competitive, cultural relevance has emerged as an important source of brand differentiation. Brands capable of embedding themselves within local cultural narratives often achieve stronger consumer engagement than brands relying solely on functional benefits.

3.4 The Cultural Construction of Trust

Trust represents one of the most important dimensions of brand perception. However, the foundations of trust vary across cultures.

In many emerging markets, trust is closely linked to interpersonal relationships, community recommendations, and social reputation. Consumers frequently rely on family members, friends, and social networks when evaluating brand credibility.

Brands that actively engage with communities, demonstrate social responsibility, and maintain consistent quality standards are more likely to establish trust. Cultural expectations regarding honesty, transparency, and ethical behavior significantly influence how consumers assess organizational credibility.

The cultural construction of trust highlights the importance of understanding local values when developing branding strategies. Organizations that fail to appreciate these cultural expectations may struggle to build meaningful relationships with consumers despite offering high-quality products or services.

4. Major Cultural Dimensions Influencing Brand Perception

4.1 Collectivism and Community Orientation

One of the most influential cultural characteristics observed across many emerging markets is collectivism. Collectivist cultures emphasize group harmony, family relationships, social cohesion, and collective welfare over individual interests. Countries such as India, China, Indonesia, and several African nations demonstrate strong collectivist tendencies that significantly affect consumer behavior.

In collectivist societies, purchasing decisions are rarely made independently. Family members, relatives, friends, and community groups often influence product evaluations and brand preferences. Consumers seek social approval and prefer brands that align with group norms and expectations. Consequently, word-of-mouth communication, recommendations from trusted individuals, and community endorsement become critical determinants of brand perception.

Brands that emphasize family values, emotional bonding, community welfare, and social responsibility generally achieve stronger consumer acceptance in collectivist environments. Advertising campaigns portraying family celebrations, cultural traditions, and collective achievements tend to generate favorable responses because they resonate with deeply held cultural beliefs.

Furthermore, collectivist consumers often view brands as social symbols that communicate group membership. Consumption becomes an expression of belonging rather than purely an individual choice. As a result, brand managers must recognize the social context in which consumption occurs and design communication strategies that appeal to collective identities rather than solely focusing on individual benefits.

4.2 Individualism and Emerging Consumer Aspirations

Although collectivism remains dominant in many emerging economies, rapid modernization, urbanization, and globalization have encouraged the growth of individualistic values, particularly among younger consumers.

Exposure to global media, international education, and digital technologies has contributed to the emergence of consumer segments that prioritize self-expression, independence, and personal achievement.

Individualistic consumers are more likely to evaluate brands based on their ability to support personal identity and lifestyle aspirations. They seek products that differentiate them from others and allow them to express unique characteristics. Premium fashion brands, luxury goods, technology products, and lifestyle services frequently appeal to these motivations.

The coexistence of collectivist and individualistic values creates a dynamic marketplace where different consumer segments respond to different branding approaches. For example, younger urban consumers may appreciate marketing messages emphasizing innovation, creativity, and self-expression, while older consumers may respond more positively to messages centered on family and tradition.

This cultural transition presents opportunities for marketers to develop hybrid branding strategies that combine individual aspirations with collective cultural values. Such approaches enable organizations to appeal to diverse consumer groups within emerging markets.

4.3 Power Distance and Status-Oriented Consumption

Power distance refers to the extent to which societies accept unequal distributions of power, status, and authority. Many emerging markets exhibit relatively high power-distance cultures, where social hierarchy and status distinctions are widely recognized and respected.

In these environments, brands often function as symbols of social position and economic achievement. Consumers may perceive ownership of prestigious brands as evidence of success, upward mobility, and social recognition. Luxury brands, premium automobiles, international fashion labels, and high-end technology products frequently benefit from these perceptions.

Status consumption is particularly significant among expanding middle-class populations in emerging economies. As income levels increase, consumers often seek brands that reflect their improved social standing. The symbolic value of a brand may become as important as its functional utility.

Marketers frequently capitalize on status motivations by emphasizing exclusivity, prestige, heritage, and aspirational lifestyles. Advertising campaigns featuring successful professionals, celebrities, or influential figures reinforce the association between brands and social achievement.

However, excessive emphasis on status can create challenges. Consumers increasingly demand authenticity and may reject brands perceived as overly elitist or disconnected from local realities. Consequently, organizations must balance aspirational positioning with cultural relevance and accessibility.

4.4 Uncertainty Avoidance and Brand Trust

Emerging markets are often characterized by economic volatility, institutional uncertainty, and rapidly changing social environments. Under such conditions, consumers frequently seek reassurance and reliability when making purchasing decisions.

The cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance influences how consumers evaluate risk and develop trust in brands. Individuals with high uncertainty avoidance prefer predictable outcomes and are more likely to favor established brands with proven track records.

Brand reputation becomes particularly important in reducing perceived risk. Consumers rely on indicators such as quality certifications, warranties, customer reviews, and recommendations from trusted sources to evaluate brand reliability. Consistent performance and transparent communication contribute significantly to positive brand perceptions.

Trust-building activities are especially important in emerging markets because consumers may encounter counterfeit products, inconsistent service quality, and information asymmetry. Organizations that demonstrate honesty, accountability, and customer commitment are more likely to establish long-term relationships with consumers.

The importance of trust extends beyond product performance. Corporate social responsibility initiatives, ethical business practices, and community engagement activities also influence consumer perceptions of organizational credibility.

4.5 Tradition, Religion, and Cultural Heritage

Traditional values continue to exert considerable influence on consumer behavior across many emerging markets. Religious beliefs, cultural customs, and historical traditions shape consumption patterns and affect brand evaluations.

Consumers often prefer brands that demonstrate respect for local traditions and cultural identities. Marketing campaigns that incorporate culturally meaningful symbols, languages, festivals, and narratives can strengthen emotional connections with consumers. For example, brands that actively participate in local celebrations or adapt their communication to cultural occasions frequently achieve higher levels of consumer engagement.

Religious values also influence consumption decisions. Food products, financial services, clothing brands, and healthcare offerings often require adaptation to align with religious norms and expectations. Organizations that ignore these considerations risk alienating consumers and damaging brand reputation.

The growing importance of cultural heritage has further encouraged consumers to support brands that preserve and celebrate local traditions. Local brands often benefit from perceptions of authenticity and cultural legitimacy because they are viewed as representatives of national identity and heritage.

Consequently, successful brand management in emerging markets requires sensitivity toward cultural traditions and a commitment to respectful engagement with local communities.

5. Cultural Identity and Consumer-Brand Relationships

5.1 Brands as Identity Markers

Brands increasingly serve as tools through which consumers construct and communicate their identities. Consumption is no longer limited to satisfying functional needs; it also fulfills symbolic and psychological needs related to self-expression and social belonging.

Consumers frequently select brands that reflect their personal values, aspirations, and cultural affiliations. Through brand choices, individuals communicate information about their lifestyles, social status, beliefs, and group memberships.

In emerging markets, cultural identity remains a powerful influence on brand-related behavior. Consumers often evaluate brands according to their compatibility with cultural norms and social expectations. Brands that successfully align with cultural identities become integrated into consumers' self-concepts and social relationships.

This identity-based perspective explains why certain brands generate strong emotional attachments despite offering products that are functionally similar to competitors. The symbolic meaning associated with the brand becomes a source of differentiation and consumer loyalty.

5.2 Social Identity Theory and Brand Preference

Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups. Consumers seek positive social identities and often use brands as symbols representing these identities.

In emerging markets, social groups based on family, community, profession, religion, nationality, and lifestyle exert significant influence on consumption patterns. Consumers may prefer brands associated with groups they admire or aspire to join.

Global brands often symbolize cosmopolitan lifestyles and international connectivity. Local brands, on the other hand, frequently represent cultural pride, authenticity, and community belonging. Consumer preferences may therefore depend on which identity dimension is most salient at a particular moment.

Understanding these identity processes enables marketers to position brands in ways that resonate with culturally meaningful group affiliations and social aspirations.

6. Global Brands versus Local Brands in Emerging Markets

The competition between global and local brands represents one of the most significant strategic challenges within emerging markets. While globalization has increased the visibility and accessibility of international brands, local brands continue to maintain strong market positions due to their cultural relevance and familiarity among consumers.

Global brands are often associated with superior quality, technological advancement, prestige, and international recognition. Consumers in emerging markets frequently perceive international brands as symbols of modernity, success, and upward social mobility. The ownership of globally recognized brands can provide consumers with psychological benefits related to status enhancement and self-esteem. This phenomenon is particularly evident among young urban consumers who are highly exposed to global media and international lifestyles.

However, the appeal of global brands is not universal. Local brands possess several advantages that enable them to compete effectively. They often demonstrate a deeper understanding of cultural values, social norms, language preferences, and consumption habits. Local brands can establish emotional connections with consumers by incorporating culturally relevant symbols, traditions, and narratives into their marketing strategies.

Research indicates that consumers frequently maintain dual attitudes toward global and local brands. While global brands may satisfy aspirations for prestige and innovation, local brands often fulfill needs for authenticity, trust, and cultural belonging. This duality creates opportunities for organizations to develop hybrid branding strategies that combine global quality standards with local cultural relevance.

The concept of "glocalization" has emerged as a popular approach for multinational corporations operating in emerging markets. Glocalization involves adapting global branding strategies to local cultural contexts without compromising core brand identity. Organizations adopting this approach modify communication styles, product features, packaging, and promotional activities to align with local consumer expectations.

Examples of successful glocalization can be observed across industries. Food and beverage companies frequently introduce region-specific products that reflect local tastes and dietary preferences. Fashion brands adapt designs to accommodate cultural norms regarding clothing and appearance. Technology companies localize user interfaces and communication strategies to enhance cultural acceptance.

The growing competition between global and local brands highlights the importance of cultural intelligence in brand management. Organizations that successfully integrate cultural understanding into strategic decision-making are better positioned to establish meaningful relationships with consumers and achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

7. Managerial Implications

The findings discussed throughout this paper provide several important implications for marketing practitioners operating in emerging markets.

7.1 Developing Cultural Intelligence

Organizations must invest in developing cultural intelligence among marketing professionals. Cultural intelligence refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and adapt to diverse cultural environments. Managers who possess strong cultural intelligence are better equipped to identify consumer needs, interpret cultural signals, and develop effective branding strategies.

Market research should extend beyond demographic and economic variables to include cultural values, traditions, beliefs, and social norms. Understanding these factors enables organizations to design products and communication strategies that resonate with local consumers.

7.2 Creating Culturally Relevant Brand Narratives

Brand stories play a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions. Effective storytelling enables organizations to communicate brand values in ways that align with cultural expectations and emotional experiences.

In emerging markets, culturally relevant narratives often emphasize themes such as family relationships, community welfare, national pride, personal achievement, and social progress. Marketing communications should reflect these themes while maintaining consistency with overall brand identity.

Organizations should also recognize regional cultural variations within national markets. Large emerging economies often contain diverse cultural groups with distinct preferences and values. Tailored communication strategies may therefore be necessary to address different consumer segments effectively.

7.3 Building Trust through Authenticity

Authenticity has become a critical determinant of brand success. Consumers increasingly expect organizations to demonstrate genuine commitment to their stated values and promises.

Brands that consistently deliver quality, maintain transparent communication, and engage responsibly with stakeholders are more likely to establish trust. Corporate social responsibility initiatives, ethical business practices, and community engagement activities contribute positively to brand perception.

Authenticity is particularly important in culturally sensitive environments where consumers closely scrutinize organizational behavior. Superficial attempts to exploit cultural symbols for commercial gain may generate negative reactions and damage brand reputation.

7.4 Balancing Standardization and Adaptation

One of the most challenging decisions facing multinational corporations involves determining the appropriate balance between global standardization and local adaptation.

While standardization can enhance efficiency and maintain brand consistency, excessive uniformity may reduce cultural relevance. Conversely, extensive adaptation may weaken global brand identity.

Successful organizations achieve balance by preserving core brand values while adapting specific elements of the marketing mix to local cultural contexts. This approach enables brands to remain globally recognizable while simultaneously addressing local consumer expectations.

7.5 Leveraging Digital Platforms for Cultural Engagement

Digital technologies provide new opportunities for culturally informed brand communication. Social media platforms enable organizations to engage directly with consumers and participate in culturally significant conversations.

Brands can use digital channels to celebrate cultural festivals, support local communities, promote culturally relevant content, and encourage consumer participation. Such activities strengthen emotional connections and enhance brand visibility within local cultural ecosystems.

8. Ethical Considerations and Challenges

The incorporation of cultural values into branding strategies raises several ethical issues that require careful consideration.

One major concern involves cultural appropriation. Organizations may be tempted to utilize cultural symbols, traditions, or narratives solely for commercial purposes without demonstrating genuine respect or understanding. Such practices can be perceived as exploitative and may provoke negative consumer reactions.

Another challenge relates to cultural stereotyping. Simplistic representations of cultural groups can reinforce misconceptions and undermine social diversity. Marketers must avoid relying on stereotypes when developing communication strategies and instead seek authentic representations of cultural experiences.

The commercialization of cultural traditions presents additional ethical concerns. While cultural adaptation can enhance brand relevance, excessive commercialization may contribute to the erosion of cultural authenticity and heritage. Organizations should engage with cultural communities respectfully and responsibly when incorporating cultural elements into branding activities.

Ethical considerations also extend to issues of social responsibility and sustainability. Consumers increasingly expect brands to contribute positively to society and address social challenges. Organizations operating in emerging markets should ensure that their branding strategies align with broader commitments to social welfare, environmental sustainability, and ethical business conduct.

Furthermore, the growing use of digital technologies and data analytics raises concerns regarding privacy and consumer autonomy. Personalized marketing strategies should be implemented transparently and ethically to maintain consumer trust and confidence.

By adopting ethical branding practices, organizations can strengthen long-term relationships with consumers and enhance their reputations within culturally diverse markets.

9. Future Research Directions

Although significant progress has been made in understanding the relationship between cultural values and brand perception, several important research gaps remain.

First, future studies should examine the influence of digital transformation on cultural consumption patterns. Social media platforms, online communities, and digital influencers increasingly shape consumer perceptions and may alter traditional cultural influences.

Second, comparative research across different emerging markets would provide valuable insights into cultural similarities and differences. Such studies could identify common patterns while highlighting unique cultural characteristics that influence brand perception.

Third, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how cultural values evolve over time in response to economic development, technological change, and globalization. Emerging markets are experiencing rapid social transformations that may influence consumer attitudes toward brands.

Fourth, future research should explore generational differences in cultural values. Younger consumers often exhibit different consumption patterns and cultural orientations compared to older generations. Understanding these differences can help organizations develop more effective segmentation strategies.

Fifth, the growing adoption of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and personalized marketing technologies presents new opportunities for research. Scholars should investigate how these innovations interact with cultural values to shape consumer experiences and brand perceptions.

Finally, greater attention should be devoted to sustainability and ethical consumption within emerging markets. As environmental and social concerns become more prominent, cultural values may increasingly influence attitudes toward responsible brands and sustainable business practices.

10. Conclusion

Cultural values represent one of the most influential factors shaping brand perception in emerging markets. While economic development and globalization have transformed consumer environments, cultural beliefs, traditions, and social norms continue to guide how consumers interpret and evaluate brands.

This paper has demonstrated that cultural dimensions such as collectivism, individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and tradition significantly influence consumer attitudes, preferences, and purchasing decisions. Brands are not evaluated solely on the basis of functional attributes; they are also assessed according to their ability to reflect cultural values, reinforce social identities, and satisfy symbolic needs.

The analysis further highlights the importance of cultural adaptation in brand management. Organizations that align their strategies with local cultural contexts are more likely to establish trust, emotional engagement, and long-term loyalty. The increasing competition between global and local brands underscores the need for culturally informed decision-making and strategic flexibility.

From a managerial perspective, cultural intelligence, authenticity, trust-building, and ethical responsibility have emerged as critical success factors. Organizations that respect cultural diversity and engage meaningfully with local communities can create stronger consumer relationships and achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

As emerging markets continue to evolve, the interaction between cultural values and brand perception will remain a vital area of academic inquiry and managerial practice. Future research should continue exploring these relationships to enhance understanding of consumer behavior within an increasingly interconnected yet culturally diverse global marketplace.

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