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Culture-Based Rejection of Taboo-Infringing Imports⁴

Abstract

This empirical study analyzes the cultural basis of the United States market response to imported Spanish products that seem to violate strongly-held cultural taboos. Survey responses were obtained from students in two contrasting majors, Art and Business, in two distinct cities and universities, i.e. Little Rock at the University of Arkansas, and Dominguez Hills at California State University. The study focused on a baby doll marketed to piggy-back on the new movement towards breastfeeding babies. Although accepted in its original European market, the United States media reports strong moral objections to this product among U.S. citizens. The toy was overwhelmingly rejected in some, but not all, population sub-groups. This study attempts to discern the cultural basis for product rejection by comparing responses between regions, college majors, genders and gender/major combinations. Differences in acceptance between groups are correlated with specific cultural constructs.

Keywords: culture-based, import rejection, taboo, taboo-infringing, international marketing, Spain, USA, culture dimensions, gender, International Journal of Globalization and Small Business

JEL: F18, F19, M30, M31, M39, Y9, Z10, Z13, Z19

Introduction

This research analyzes U.S. market acceptance and non-acceptance of an apparently culture-laden import from Spain. The product is a life-sized baby doll called Bebe Gloton in Spain and Breast Milk Baby in the U.S., which is produced and distributed by Berjuan, S.L. of Alicante, Spain. Over two million Bebe Gloton dolls were sold in Europe [Peaceful Parenting, 2009] and the product was introduced to the U.S. market in 2011 as Breast Milk Baby in male, female, and three different ethnic versions [Chicago Tribune, 2011]. The doll's introduction created significant a media controversy in the U. S, characterized by reports of extreme aversion to the product. TV-news correspondent Bill O'Reilly even denounced the doll on Fox News [CBS News, 2012]. This American response, in contrast to overall acceptance in Europe, indicates the existence of a cultural taboo in the U.S. [Tews, Halliburton, 2014].

One could assume that common products widely used worldwide, such as traditional dolls, would not be especially prone to violating cultural taboos. Most baby-doll-related negative reactions in the U.S. have been focused on ethnic issues. This may be the first baby-doll product to elicit a reaction related to sexuality. Importing culture-laden products into culturally different markets may, however, easily violate cultural taboos. Taboos are not generally talked or written about, and thus may be invisible to the importer until after market introduction. This research attempts to quantify the cultural-basis, if any, underlying market reaction to this product in (i) two U.S. regions, (ii) between genders, (iii) between Art and Business majors, and (iv) between the four gender/major combinations. These groups have previously been found to exhibit significant differences [Brice, 2016]. Responses will be analyzed to find correlations between product acceptance and scores for seven specific culture constructs. Thelen, et. al. [2003] found that although antecedents of consumer ethnocentrism may be significant for a nation as a whole, they are most meaningful in some, but not all sub-cultures. This implies that there may be critical differences in product acceptance or non-acceptance between different geographic regions or sub-groups and also different specific cultural traits. Such information should help marketers who selling culture-laden products to better chart these differences.

Cultural Taboos and Product Acceptance

The global dissemination of the U.S. products and ideas has, in some countries, replaced traditional patterns with the American lifestyle patterns. The process underlying the spread of non-American culture into the U.S. should be similar [Craig et. al., 2009]. Efforts by foreign (non-U.S.) firms should gradually result in the introduction of foreign products and ideas that may eventually become an integral part of the US culture.

Hofstede [2001] states, “Culture is the collective programming of the mind that differentiates groups of people”. Americanization is interpreted in some countries as an embodiment of globalization and is criticized in others as an attack on traditional culture [Craig et. al., 2009]. Products impact culture because they contain cultural meaning [McCracken, 1986] and can be viewed as culture-laden. The meaning of products is linked to ingrained values and beliefs. Culture is contained and interpreted in the values and norms governing objects used in everyday life and, in marketing, attention is focused on culture’s impact on buying behavior. Product ownership may define lifestyle membership, as well as culture’s values, attitudes and beliefs. Cultural norms shape societal attitudes, lifestyles and products which are embedded in that culture, and also inhibit the acceptance of opposing attitudes, lifestyles and products foreign to that culture [Craig et. al., 2009].

Taboo advertising involves products and ideas that have a culturally forbidden status, and their advertising may cause offence by violating cultural norms [Sabri, 2012a, 2012b]. Some products are more objectionable than others but offensive ideas in advertising often shock more than the products themselves [Beard, 2008]. Taboo product research has shown that taboo-violating advertising can actually be completely unacceptable [Fahy et al., 1995; Waller, 1999]. Because of the power contained in taboo-violating advertisements, marketers increasingly use them as a cost effective way to gain recognition [Pope et. al., 2004].

Researchers have found the optimum amount of marketing taboo-violation that attracts maximum attention; and that humor can decrease taboo and increase brand remembrance [Cline, Kellaris, 2007; Madden, Weinberger, 1982]. Overuse of a taboo tactic becomes counterproductive [Sabri, 2012b]. Because taboos are cultural, different cultures will respond differently to the same product addressing the same taboo [Cheng, 2009]. Parry et al. [2013] also found that reactions differed by religion and gender.

Measuring Market Culture

International marketing literature demonstrates that behavior based on culture is strongly related to product acceptance in different markets. Cultural constructs have been developed to measure different aspects of culture. Most of these constructs examine

national-level culture, but some constructs have been developed in order to be used at the organizational or professional-field level.

Five constructs measuring beliefs – called social axioms – have been created. They can be used to distinguish segments of society at the national and sub-national level [Leung et al., 2002]. These axioms are Social Cynicism, Social Flexibility, Reward for Application, Spirituality, and Fate Control. Social Cynicism involves a negative attitude towards society and manipulation. Social Flexibility includes the belief that behavior may sometimes be contradictory, depending on the situation. Reward for Application is the belief that constant effort will have positive outcomes. Spirituality entails the supernatural. Fate Control involves an attitude towards predestination and peoples' impact on future events.

Geert Hofstede [1980, 1991, 2001] created a number of cultural dimensions based on values, two of which have been shown to work for sub-national groups. Power Distance concerns the nature of unequal power in society and its acceptance or non-acceptance. Social classes, and their related occupations, have separate cultures and findings significantly differ according to occupation. The highest scores were related to the lowest status and countries with the lowest Power Distance scores had the largest spread of occupational scores [Hofstede, 1991]. The Masculinity vs. Femininity dimension relates to value differences between genders. In high Masculinity cultures, high scores relate to high differentiation in gender roles as well as strong concern among males for materialism. In high Masculinity cultures women score significantly lower than men. In low Masculinity cultures (high Femininity) scores of both genders are similar or identical. Both genders rate quality of life issues as more important than pure materialism [Hofstede, 2001].

The research developed by Hofstede and Leung, Bond et al. is seminal to the field of culture in the context of international management. The combined cultural constructs they have developed are established and widely disseminated, and have been repeatedly found to be statistically valid. They cover both values and beliefs that do not have any strong overlap in definition. For these reasons, and especially because of the wide range of unrelated cultural constructs they cover, these seven constructs have been chosen for this study.

Hypotheses

Previous research showed a significant correlation between specific cultural constructs and business performance outcomes [Brice, 2013]. It has been found that refection of the Bebe Gloton doll was significantly different between Art and Business majors, gender and gender/major combinations [Brice et al., 2016]. It is expected then that differences among gender and major reflect specific differences in cultural values and beliefs and would show significant correlation with specific cultural constructs. The following relationships are

expected due to the previous research implicating progressive cultural values with greater rejection, and conservative cultural values with greater acceptance [Brice et al., 2016].

H1: The choice to allow a child to Play with the Bebe Gloton doll would significantly correlate with one or more of the seven cultural constructs.

H1a: PDI would show a significant positive correlation with Play.

H1b: MAS would show a significant positive correlation with Play.

H1c: Spirituality would show a significant positive correlation with Play.

H1d: Social Cynicism would show a significant positive correlation with Play.

H1e: Reward for Application would show a significant positive correlation with Play.

H1f: Fate Control would show a significant positive correlation with Play.

H1g: Social Flexibility would show a significant negative correlation with Play.

H2: Major would significantly correlate with one or more of the seven cultural constructs.

H2a: PDI would show a significant correlation with Business.

H2b: MAS would show a significant correlation with Business.

H2c: Spirituality would show a significant correlation with Business.

H2d: Social Cynicism would show a significant correlation with Art. H2e: Reward for Application would show a significant correlation with Art. H2f: Fate Control would show a significant correlation with Business.

H2g: Social Flexibility would show a significant correlation with Art. H3: Gender would significantly correlate with one or more of the seven cultural constructs.

H3a: PDI would show a significant correlation with Male.

H3b: MAS would show a significant correlation with Male.

H3c: Spirituality would show a significant correlation with Male.

H3d: Social Cynicism would show a significant correlation with Male.

H3e: Reward for Application would show a significant correlation with Male.

H3f: Fate Control would show a significant correlation with Male.

H3g: Social Flexibility would show a significant correlation with Female.

H4: Major-Gender groups, as a single variable, would significantly correlate with one or more of the seven cultural constructs.

H5: One or more specific Major-Gender pairings would significantly differ with each other on one or more of the seven cultural constructs.

H6: One or more specific Major-Gender pairings would significantly differ with each other with respect to the variable Play.

Methods

A survey instrument was administered to 242 respondents on two college campuses; the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) and California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH). Data were collected in-person and on-campus at the Business and Art departments. 144 Business students and 89 Art students provided complete responses: 45 Business students at UALR and 99 at CSUDH; 41 Art students at UALR and 48 at CSUDH. The study involved 91 Male and 142 Female students: 30 Male students from UALR and 61 from CSUDH; 56 Female students from UALR and 86 from CSUDH (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Respondent Demographics

	Total	Male	Female	Art	Art M	Art F	Business	Bus M	Bus F
UALR	86	30	56	41	13	28	45	17	28
CSUDH	147	61	86	48	16	32	99	45	54
Total	233	91	142	89	29	60	144	62	82

Source: own study.

The survey instrument featured a photo of the Bebe Gloton doll product in its original packaging, with a description of the product's attributes and intended use. Part 1 of the survey asks demographic questions and studies respondents' reactions to the product (see survey in Appendix).

Questions from part 1 examined whether there would be anything "immoral" about the product if it were intended for a 5-year-old girl; if the respondent would allow their presumed 5-year-old girl to "play" with the product; and finally if they would "buy" the doll. The variable Play was chosen to be the measured dependent variable because it was the response with the least restrictive interpretation.

Part 2 questions represented five Leung and Bond cultural constructs (Social Cynicism, Social Flexibility, Reward for Application, Spirituality, and Fate Control), with two Hofstede constructs (Power Distance and Masculinity-Femininity).

Results

H1-H1g: The variable Play significantly correlated with PDI (Pearson Chi-Square of 0.008). Play did not correlate with any other construct. Because one of the seven cultural constructs significantly correlated with Play, H1 is supported. H1a is supported in that the relationship between Play and PDI is positive instead of negative. Thus, the choice of

Play is more likely when PDI is high. H1b through H1 g are not supported as there were no other significant correlations.

H2-H2g: College majors significantly correlated with MAS (Pearson Chi-Square of -0.038), Spirituality (Pearson Chi-Square of -0.014), and Fate Control (Pearson Chi-Square of -0.004). All three were positively correlated with Business as expected. The major Business is associated with higher Masculinity, higher Spirituality, and higher Fate Control. Thus H1, H2b, H2c, and H2f were supported while H2a, H2d, H2e, and H2g were not supported with significant findings.

H3: Gender significantly correlated with Social Cynicism (Pearson Chi-Square of -0.008), thus supporting H3 and furthermore correlated with Male, supporting H3d. However, H3a, H3b, H3c, H33, H3f, and H3g were neither supported nor reversed with significant findings.

H4: The four Major-Gender groups, when treated as a single variable, significantly correlated with PDI (Kruskal Wallis of 0.032). Because no other cultural construct showed significance Power Distance may be considered the primary cultural construct difference among these four groups, and H4 is supported (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Major-Gender Grouping vs. Cultural Construct (Kruskal Wallis)

Major-Gender Groupings*	Cultural Construct	Kruskal Wallis Significance	Average Construct Scores (0–5)	
BM, BF, AM, AF	Power Distance	0.032	Bus M 3.53	Art M 3.42
			Bus F 3.30	Art F 3.25
AM & BF	Spirituality	0.017	Bus F 3.18	Art M 2.98
AF & BM	Power Distance	0.014	Bus M 3.53	Art F 3.25
AM & BM	Spirituality	0.032	Bus M 3.17	Art M 2.98
AM & BM	Reward for Application	0.049	Bus M 3.99	Art M 3.82
AF & BF	Social Cynicism	0.014	Art F 3.20	Bus F 2.84
AM & AF	Masculinity	0.040	Art M 3.89	Art F 3.61
AM & AF	Spirituality	0.044	Art F 3.21	Art M 2.98
BM & BF	Power Distance	0.013	Bus M 3.53	Bus F 3.30
BM & BF	Fate Control	0.028	Bus M 2.67	Bus F 2.36

* A = Art, B = Business, M = Male, F = Female

Source: own study.

H5: Nine specific Major-Gender pairings significantly differed from each other with respect to various cultural constructs, including PDI, Masculinity, Spirituality, Reward

for Application, Social Cynicism, and Fate Control. Social Flexibility did not significantly correlate with any pairing. H5 is thus supported (see Table 2).

H6: The Art/Male and Business/Female pairing significantly differed with each other with respect to the variable Play (Pearson Chi-Square of 0.021). Business Females were significantly less likely to allow a child to Play than Art Males. No other Major-Gender pairing showed significant correlations with the variable Play. H6 is supported.

Discussion

Earlier research found that while all samples exhibited overwhelming non-acceptance of this breast-feeding doll for 5-year-olds, contrary to expectations, Arkansas disliked the doll less than California. Males accepted the doll more than Females in both Art and Business. Male Art students proved to be the most tolerant towards the doll and Female Business students the most intolerant [Brice et. al., 2016].

These results clearly showed that the Bebe Gloton doll product is culture-bound, both directly and through linking acceptance with gender, major, and major/gender combinations. It is reasonable that product acceptance and non-acceptance should be related to only one or two cultural constructs, as the seven cultural constructs examined here have little correlation. Market reaction related to one construct should not translate to other constructs. The fact that Power Distance was the only cultural construct significantly correlated with the variable Play supports the idea that it is of special importance. Other research has pinpointed Power Distance as having distinctive importance in differentiating family firm culture from non-family [Brice, Richardson, 2009]. In addition, H4 of this study supports the idea that Power Distance is the primary cultural construct that differs among the four Major/Gender groups.

High Power Distance is considered to be a socially conservative value. The association of choice of Play with higher Power Distance confirms earlier results based on demographics [Brice et. al., 2016]. Despite early assumptions, this research supports the idea that a breast-feeding doll product cannot be considered to be a progressive product and seems to indicate that the new breast-feeding social movement is not really accepted even by American progressives. Speculation might center on whether breast-feeding could be perceived as contrary to front-line progressive goals involving male-female career equality.

These results show that specific cultural constructs also correlate with College Major, Gender, and especially specific Major/Gender combinations. College major is possibly self-selected by individuals in accordance with their values and beliefs. This study goes beyond raw gender disparities between majors and reveals disparities in self-selected cultural values and beliefs within and between gender and major combinations. In particular, socially conservative values positively correlated with Business. More importantly, specific Major/

Gender pairings differed from each other with respect to six of the seven cultural constructs tested here. Simply comparing gender would not bring out the essential differences and clearly Gender and Major cannot be considered fully adequate variables on their own.

The question about whether this doll truly represents progressive or conservative values is partially answered by this study. Additional questions that arise include: is it because a breast-feeding doll touches strongly on Female issues that Females reject the doll more than Males? Perhaps the line between progressive and conservative is not linear. Social commentators often claim that “progressives”, being further from the mainstream, are more intolerant than centrist “liberals”. Are Art Males somewhat more “liberal” than Business students AND less “progressive” than Female Art students; and therefore more tolerant than Females at either end of the progressive/conservative spectrum?

This study supports the idea that this product might have a strong U.S. niche market of about ten percent, if those accepting the product have as much passion about it as the non-acceptors [Brice et. al., 2016]. Respondents were also aware that this product was Europe-based and Sweeney [1993] found that a culture gap may exist that tends to make this product seem ‘unhealthy’ and foreign. The disparities illustrated here show that there does not exist one national culture and that an imported product that appears to be rejected, has the potential to become successful if the market is segmented to find an accepting subculture [Thelen et. al., 2003]. Research shows that the Spanish importer of this product can overcome its basic lack of U.S. market knowledge by incrementally expanding its involvement in the U.S. [Johanson, Vahlne, 1977].

Implications and Limitations of this Research

This study supports the idea that, at least in a large masculine country like the U.S., the proper units of market investigation should consider region and gender/occupation groups rather than simply just gender *or* occupation. Assumptions cannot be made about the political or class identity of a product without both quantitative and qualitative research.

Cultural taboos can strongly and negatively affect product acceptance but a careful analysis of cultural segments can reveal strongly positive niche markets within the overall negative social culture. Even when a foreign product faces an overwhelming negative cultural response, some acceptance can be found in cultural subgroups. This acceptance may be as passionate as disapproval when that disapproval is based mostly on cultural attitudes. This is so because cultural attitudes vary widely between subcultures, even within the same nation. The implication is that products which are culture-laden need to be matched with the appropriate subcultures.

The major limitation of this research is that it is confined to only two regions and a single country. Further research is necessary to more precisely identify what cultural

attributes make a difference in terms of gender/occupation, ethnicity, age and other segments in terms of product taboos. Similar groups should be surveyed in additional regions within the U.S. This research should be replicated in Spain where this product originates and in Sweden, which displays more welfare-oriented values than does the U.S. [Hofstede, 1980, 2001], as well as in other countries shown to strongly differ from the U.S.

Notes

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⁴ This paper is a continuation of earlier research by Brice et al. presented in volume 50 of the *IJME* (see: Brice, W.D., Chu, E., Jones, W. (2016), Culture-laden imports: international market entry and cultural taboos, *International Journal of Management and Economics*, No. 50, pp. 49–62).

⁵ This questionnaire was published in volume 50 of the *IJME* (see: Brice, W.D., Chu, E., Jones, W. (2016), Culture-laden imports: international market entry and cultural taboos, *International Journal of Management and Economics*, No. 50, p. 61).

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Part Two

Please think of an ideal job, disregarding your present job if you have one. In choosing an ideal job, how important would it be to you to...

(please circle one answer in each line across):

- | | | | | | | |
|----|---|---------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| 1. | have a good working relationship with your direct superior? | of very little or no importance | of little importance | of moderate importance | very important | of utmost importance |
| 2. | work with people who cooperate well with each other? | of very little or no importance | of little importance | of moderate importance | very important | of utmost importance |
| 3. | be consulted by your direct superior in his/her decisions? | of very little or no importance | of little importance | of moderate importance | very important | of utmost importance |
| 4. | have an opportunity for advancement to higher level jobs? | of very little or no importance | of little importance | of moderate importance | very important | of utmost importance |
| 5. | How frequently, in your experience, are subordinates afraid to express disagreement with their superiors? | very frequently | frequently | sometimes | seldom | very seldom |

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

(please circle one answer in each line across):

- | | | strongly
disbelieve | disbelieve | no opinion | believe | strongly
believe |
|-----|---|------------------------|------------|------------|---------|---------------------|
| 6. | Most people can be trusted. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. | An organization structure in which subordinates have two bosses should be avoided at all costs. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. | When people fail in life it is often their own fault. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. | Religious faith contributes to good mental health. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. | Caution helps avoid mistakes. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. | Good luck follows if one survives a disaster. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. | Human behaviour changes with the social context. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. | Religion makes people escape from reality. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. | People may have opposite behaviours on different occasions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

15.	Fate determines one's successes and failures.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	Religious people are more likely to maintain moral standards.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Ghosts or spirits are people's fantasy.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	There is a supreme being controlling the universe.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	One who does not know how to plan his or her future will eventually fail.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	Art is a compensation for the dismal features of everyday life.	1	2	3	4	5
21.	Knowledge is necessary for success.	1	2	3	4	5
22.	Young people are impulsive and unreliable.	1	2	3	4	5
23.	It is rare to see a happy ending in real life.	1	2	3	4	5
24.	Individual characteristics, such as appearance and birthday, affect one's fate.	1	2	3	4	5
25.	Adversity can be overcome by effort.	1	2	3	4	5
26.	Every problem has a solution.	1	2	3	4	5
27.	One has to deal with matters according to the specific circumstances.	1	2	3	4	5
28.	Competition brings about progress.	1	2	3	4	5
29.	There is usually only one way to solve a problem.	1	2	3	4	5
30.	Tranquillity and serenity lead to a contented existence.	1	2	3	4	5
31.	Most disasters can be predicted.	1	2	3	4	5
32.	Old people are usually stubborn and biased.	1	2	3	4	5
33.	Person's talents are inborn.	1	2	3	4	5
34.	One's behaviours may be contrary to his or her true feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
35.	There are certain ways to help us improve our luck and avoid unlucky things.	1	2	3	4	5
36.	One will succeed if he/she really tries.	1	2	3	4	5

37.	Failure is the beginning of success.	1	2	3	4	5
38.	Religious beliefs lead to unscientific thinking.	1	2	3	4	5
39.	One feels safer in the world through a belief in a supreme being.	1	2	3	4	5
40.	Current losses are not necessarily bad for one's long-term future.	1	2	3	4	5
41.	Power and status make people arrogant.	1	2	3	4	5
42.	Powerful people tend to exploit others.	1	2	3	4	5
43.	People will stop working hard after they obtain a comfortable life.	1	2	3	4	5
44.	Social institutions in society are biased towards the rich.	1	2	3	4	5
45.	Belief in religion helps one understand the meaning of life.	1	2	3	4	5
46.	After death, one exists in another form.	1	2	3	4	5
47.	Kind-hearted people are easily bullied.	1	2	3	4	5
48.	Belief in a religion makes people good citizens.	1	2	3	4	5
49.	People deeply in love are usually blind.	1	2	3	4	5
50.	Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses.	1	2	3	4	5
51.	Caring about the larger affairs in society only brings trouble for yourself.	1	2	3	4	5
52.	There are many ways for people to predict what will happen in the future.	1	2	3	4	5
53.	Hard working people will achieve more in the end.	1	2	3	4	5