

**Can uncertainty avoidance explain acceptance and rejection of familiar and unfamiliar brands? A cross-cultural research on American and French attitudes**

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**Abstract**

With the globalization of markets and the large array of known and unknown brands consumers from all countries are exposed to, it seems relevant to consider the Uncertainty Avoidance Index, as one of the cultural dimensions stated by Hofstede that can have an impact on consumers' acceptance of unfamiliar brands. Therefore, this paper aims at understanding in which measure the articulation between brand familiarity, celebrity endorsement and cultural differences can have an influence on consumers' attitudes towards familiar and unfamiliar brands. Evidence from this research demonstrated that while worldwide celebrities are well-known, they do not have the same impact on consumers' attitudes from different countries.

Keywords: global brands, celebrities, brand familiarity, uncertainty avoidance

## **Can uncertainty avoidance explain acceptance and rejection of familiar and unfamiliar brands? A cross-cultural research on American and French attitudes**

### **Introduction**

Globalization of the world's economy has led to dramatic rises in the scope and complexity of international brand management, because globalized brands enjoy esteem and images of prestige when associated with glamorous personalities. Hofstede's influential work on cross-cultural value systems identifies many aspects of cultures that can be related to brand choice. We thus assumed that the uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) defined by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) as *the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations* would capture the cultural pattern of seeking stability, predictability, and low risk and therefore influence consumers' choices with familiar and unfamiliar brands. This paper is relevant because it aims at understanding in which measure the articulation between brand familiarity, celebrity endorsement and cultural differences can have an influence on consumers' attitudes towards known and unknown brands, as far as the impact of celebrity endorsement can vary following the product category, the brand familiarity and the consumer's culture.

### **Global Brands and Consumers' Attitudes**

With the globalization of markets, there are more opportunities to create market potential through stimulating demand for products with universal appeal (Hassan et al., 2003) and global brand was defined by Steenkamp et al. (2003) as the one consumers can find under the same name in multiple countries, which relates to a standardization of products, packaging and communications (Holt et al 2004). In addition, when there is quality uncertainty, consumers tend to search more information before making a decision and will be guided by brand familiarity (Johansson et al., 1994).

### **Brand Familiarity and Celebrity Endorsement**

Johansson and Ronkainen (2005) state that esteem for a brand is correlated with its familiarity level and celebrity endorsement can be a solution for unfamiliar brands, because the celebrity world is one of the most potent sources of cultural meaning at the disposal of the marketing system and the individual consumer (McCracken, 1989). Therefore, celebrity image can be defined as *the perceptions about an individual who enjoys public recognition as reflected by the celebrity associations held in consumer memory* (Seno and Lukas, 2007). According to Shimp (2003), the most important attributes determining effectiveness of the endorser are credibility with trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The attractiveness of a brand can be explained by the esteem consumers have for a brand, by the attractiveness of the endorser and/or by the brand name itself. We also believe that the country of origin can play an important role in consumers' attitudes towards brands, either if it is linked to the brand, to the endorser or to the consumers' nationalities.

### **Research Design and Results**

Needless to say, our focus on uncertainty avoidance does not imply that other cultural dimensions are irrelevant to understand consumers' attitudes towards brands. It merely reflects the fact that culture is a complex whole and that it is tough to either isolate dimensions or to measure all five of them in an exploratory research. Thereby and as it has

been done in previous research (Jun and Lee, 2007; Erdem et al., 2006), only the uncertainty avoidance dimension was used in the present research. Many of previous studies on celebrity endorsement have focused on how celebrity endorsement influences consumer behavior. What has received less attention in empirical research is the power of this endorsement when relating unknown brands. The United States' uncertainty avoidance index is 46, while France's score is 86 what means that those two cultures differ in the way they cope with anxiety generated by ambiguous situations. Thus, based on the previous discussion we stated research questions as an exploratory step to examine the influence of uncertainty avoidance on American and French consumers' behavior regarding brands. Our aim was to understand if the French are more reluctant to buy unknown brands than Americans and if celebrities' endorsement has the same impact on both cultures. Indeed, our goal was to explore the potential influence of the UAI on consumers' perception of familiar and unfamiliar brands both without and with celebrity endorsement.

The sample was composed of 25 American and 27 French respondents. Participants were asked to rank the brands they would buy by order of preference and repeat the choice when presented with both familiar and unfamiliar celebrities and prices. Therefore, we conducted a research in which American and French consumers were exposed to brand name and should tell about their feelings toward it. Then, the same brand was presented in association with a celebrity and participants were asked to express their feelings again. As it has been done in previous research (Ang et al., 2007), endorsers were chosen following their nationalities as well as the geographical reach of their celebrity, including both local and worldwide ones. The chosen product categories were bottled water (Tables 1 and 2), yogurts (Tables 3, 4 and 5) and sweeties (Tables 6 and 7), because it seemed to us that participants from both countries would be more familiar with FMCG than with other product categories.

**Table 1 – Choosing bottled water by order of preference without celebrity endorsement**

Americans				French			
1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Evian 71%	Dasani 53%	Kiwi 47%	Aqua 47%	Evian 80%	Aqua 67%	/	Dasani/Kiwi 40% / 47%

± Americans: High quality/Relatively inexpensive/I'm familiar with/French product/Credible brand/Good taste French: I know the brand/French brand/National water/Emotional link/Drink it since was born

- Americans and French: Expensive

**Table 2 – Choosing bottled water by order of preference with celebrity endorsement**

Americans				French			
1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Evian 41%	Aqua 47%	Dasani 29%	Kiwi/Dasani 53% / 29%	Evian/Dasani 54% / 20%	Kiwi 27%	Aqua 47%	Dasani 40%

± Americans: She's pretty and Evian is good/I know the brand/Still my favourite water/She's beautiful and looks like us French: Natural looking

- Americans: I don't know the girl/Looks fake French: The brand is more important than the girl

Despite the fact that all participants prefer Evian because of brand familiarity, when an unknown person is associated with the brand 30% less Americans would buy it, while French respondents would keep it at the first place. The American brand Dasani was rated second by Americans, but when associated with Tom Cruise, it passed to third and fourth positions, whereas the French partly upgraded it to the second place. Instead, Angelina Jolie's impact on the unknown brand Aqua was more positive for Americans than for the French.

**Table 3 – Choosing yogurt by order of preference without celebrity endorsement**

Americans				French			
1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
R.Organic 71%	GoMorgen 41%	Jo 59%	Danone 35%	R.Organic 60%	/	Jo 46%	Dan/ GoMo 46% / 45%

+ Americans: I like strawberries/I trust Dannon/I recognize Dannon French: I know the brand/It is Danone/Recognize logo + colors

- Americans: Looks too foreign/I want to know what I'm eating/I can't read it/I haven't a clue what would be inside/I don't like the brand  
French: I can't read

**Table 4 – Choosing yogurt by order of preference with celebrity endorsement**

Americans				French			
1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
R.Organic 65%	Jo 41%	GoMorgen 53%	Danone 82%	Jo 47%	R.Organic 40%	/	Dan/ GoMo 52% / 39%

+ Americans: Dannon is familiar French: It must be French/Looks like a French product

- Americans: Both man and product look scary/I don't trust the person/Not associated with good yogurt/Makes me think the product is dirty/Looks gross French: Not attractive/Doesn't fit with the product

Although both samples could recognize Danone's logo, they felt uncomfortable by not being able to read what was written in the packaging and when associated with French rugby man Chabal, which was unknown by Americans and known by few French respondents, both samples rejected it. The very unfamiliar brand Jó was bad ranked by both Americans and French, before being associated with Brad Pitt. Conversely, the unknown brand Go Morgen associated to the unfamiliar person had a more negative impact on Americans than on the French. Rachel's Organic being an organic product, was preferred by both samples, although the English soccer player David Beckham had a negative impact on French respondents. Finally, when prices were featured with the yogurts, Americans evoked much more price concerns than French who focused more on the brand and the on product itself, as demonstrated below:

**Table 5 – Yogurts with prices**

**Tine (price 4,50):** + Americans: Looks like simple and normal yogurt/Fruit is fresh/Cheap/Can easily tell what is inside/Good packaging and price French: I like the packaging/Looks like Yoplait/Looks like quality product/Same as Yoplait, but cheaper

- Americans: Too cheap looking French: I don't like the fruits in it

**Mishti Doi (price 3,45):** + Americans: Nice price/Second cheapest

- Americans: I don't know the brand/I don't like the look/Packaging is awful/No picture/I can't tell what it is French: Looks odd/I don't like caramel/I don't know what it is/Bad packaging

**Yoplait (price 5,50):** + Americans: Is the most famous brand/I know the brand/I trust Yoplait/Popular in the US French: I know the brand/Yoplait is French/Nice packaging/Brand reputation

- Americans: Very expensive/Too expensive

**Engjapykkni (price 2,10):** + Americans: The cheapest one French: I like musli/Good cereals

- Americans: Looks too foreign/Looks sketchy/I can't read/Low quality because of price French: I can't read/Bad packaging/Too cheap

**Nesvita (price 5,20):** + Americans: I'm familiar with Nestlé/Looks healthy/I trust the brand French: I know Nestlé/Nestlé is good/Natural product/Healthy product

- Americans: Never heard/Too expensive French: Bad colours/Not appealing

**Table 6 – Choosing sweets by order of preference without celebrity endorsement**

Americans				French			
1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<b>Ant. Berg</b> 59%	<b>Aero</b> 47%	<b>Go</b> 47%	<b>Haribo</b> 82%	<b>Aero</b> 40%	<b>Ant.Berg</b> 54%	<b>Go</b> 40%	<b>Haribo</b> 52%

+ Americans: Packaging makes it look very prestigious/It looks good, fancy/I love chocolate French: Attractive packaging/Looks good/Looks prestigious  
 - Americans and French: Not attractive

**Table 7 – Choosing sweets by order of preference with celebrity endorsement**

Americans				French			
1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<b>Ant. Berg</b> 59%	<b>Aero</b> 59%	<b>Go</b> 82%	<b>Haribo</b> 100%	<b>Aero</b> 47%	<b>Ant.Berg</b> 47%	/	<b>Haribo/Go</b> 45%/39%

+ Americans: She proves how prestigious it is/I know her/I like her/She adds to the appeal French: She's well known/She's attractive/Good quality chocolate  
 - Americans: Should be expensive French: I don't like her

The willingness of both samples to buy the unfamiliar chocolate brand Anthon Berg thanks to its prestigious packaging was enhanced by the endorsement of the actress Keira Knightley. The French brand for sweets Haribo, was ranked fourth by Americans and reached 100% of votes for the last place when associated with Swiss tennis man Roger Federer, while the French split their votes between third and fourth places. Although some participants were familiar with the bars Go, the association with model Gisèle Bündchen did not motivate them to rank it better. Finally, Aero chocolate from Nestlé was positively influenced by its endorser George Clooney.

### Discussion and Managerial Implications

It seems that results from this research are not likely to be explained by the UAI, as French respondents were not more reluctant than Americans to buy unfamiliar brands. The criteria used to evaluate brands was however different as Americans were more concerned by price and celebrity endorsement whereas the French were more attracted by brands that conveyed health and taste image. When associated with celebrities like Brad Pitt and Keira Knightley, unknown brands better scored with Americans than when they were presented alone. However, all celebrities do not have a positive effect on brands, as it was observed with Tom Cruise and Dasani, and Aqua with Angelina Jolie. In addition, unfamiliar celebrities can have a negative impact as shown with Danone and Chabal, Haribo and Federer, and Evian with the unfamiliar model. Although we did not intend to measure the impact of packaging on respondents' choices, it came out of this study that this variable should be taken into account. Therefore, the current study has several meaningful managerial implications, as long as benefits of brand globality for which a critical factor would be creating differentiation and familiarity (Johansson and Ronkainen, 2005) should not be forgotten, because consumers from different cultures do not display the same sensitivity to it. Celebrity endorsement arises as a possible solution to achieve cross-group coordination, but the use of celebrities associated with brands should be carefully reviewed for any cross-cultural communication as perception of celebrity's trustworthiness and attractiveness can vary across cultures.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

The first limitation of the present research is its restricted sample. In addition to the fact that it is not possible to generalize the findings, results can also have been influenced by culture as well as by individual variables of the participants. We should assume that using other brands, different product categories and other celebrities would not replicate the results here presented

as the products' categories were chosen based on the belief that participants would feel more concerned by FMCG, with a random selection of brand names, for which the only criterion was belonging to different cultures, as well as for choosing the celebrities. Furthermore, we should look for a correlation between participants', brands' and celebrities' nationalities, which could explain preferences better than brand and celebrity familiarity. Because the UAI was not likely to explain differences in consumers' attitudes, other cultural dimensions should be considered in further research. In spite of the exploratory approach of the present paper, which limits the reach of its results, one unexpected subject emerged from it and invited us to shed some light on the impact of packaging on consumers' attitudes towards unfamiliar brands and a new research is being conducted to analyze it.

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