

Brand localization and consumer perception in China: A pavlovian conditioning approach

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has driven international companies to adapt their brand strategies to local markets, particularly in China, which has become one of the world's largest and most dynamic economies. One crucial aspect of this adaptation is brand name localization, where international brands translate their names into Mandarin to ensure linguistic familiarity, cultural relevance, and positive perceptions. This study examines consumer perceptions of localized brand names—Burger King (汉堡王), KFC (肯德基), and Starbucks (星巴克)—by integrating the theoretical perspective of Pavlovian conditioning with international marketing strategies. A survey of 500 respondents was conducted to measure consumer attitudes toward dimensions such as memorability, cultural appropriateness, emotional resonance, and the influence on purchase decisions. The findings indicate that local brand names significantly shape consumer perceptions and purchasing behavior. Starbucks (星巴克) was perceived as the most successful brand name, associated with coffee culture, a premium lifestyle, and ease of recall. KFC (肯德基) was found to evoke positive emotions strongly, while Burger King (汉堡王) was more likely to trigger curiosity rather than a strong cultural association with Western fast food. Repetition of brand names also enhances positive consumer emotions, aligning with Pavlovian conditioning, where repeated stimuli strengthen affective responses. This study contributes to the understanding of brand localization as a strategic marketing tool in cross-cultural contexts. The results highlight the importance of phonological adaptation, cultural alignment, and consistent brand communication in building consumer trust and loyalty in international markets, particularly in China.

Keywords: Brand localization, Pavlovian conditioning, consumer perception, marketing strategy, China

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has compelled international companies to adapt to local markets, including China, which has emerged as one of the world's largest economic hubs. The country's rapid economic growth has made it a strategic market; however, the success of foreign brand penetration is highly influenced by cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural communication (Chao & Lin, 2017). One crucial aspect of this process is the localization of brand names into Mandarin, which not only preserves the global identity of the brand but also needs to align with local phonology and cultural norms (Hong, Pecotich, & Shultz, 2002). Mandarin has a unique phonological system characterized by four main tones; thus, the accuracy of sound selection and semantic meaning plays a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions of a brand (Sound symbolism effects across languages, 2012). In the context of global marketing, brand name localization reinforces positive associations and prevents cultural misunderstandings (Cui, 2018). Keller (2001) emphasizes that brand names which are easy to pronounce, rhythmic, and carry positive associations are more likely to be remembered by consumers. A successful example is Coca-Cola, translated into Mandarin as 可口可乐 (kěkǒu kělè), which not only approximates the original pronunciation but also conveys the meaning of "tasty and enjoyable" (Liu, 2017). This illustrates how brand-name translation can function as an effective marketing strategy through glocalization. Accordingly, adapting international brand names to Mandarin phonology and cultural context is essential for building a positive brand image and fostering consumer loyalty. This study examines how the localization of international brand names in China is employed as a marketing strategy, with a particular focus on shaping consumer perceptions among international students at the Capital City of Beijing (IBS BFSU).

2. METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of consumer perceptions of the localization of international culinary brand names in the Chinese market. A quantitative approach was adopted through a structured questionnaire distributed to 500 international students at the International Business School, Beijing Foreign Studies University (IBS BFSU). The questionnaire employed a Likert scale to measure several dimensions, including brand recall, cultural appropriateness, consistency with the global brand image, emotional associations, and influence on purchasing decisions. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and simple inferential techniques to identify consumer patterns and tendencies. The qualitative approach involved semi-structured interviews with selected respondents to obtain deeper insights into the cultural interpretations, phonological adaptations, and emotional associations linked to localized brand names. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to extract dominant themes (Mixed-methods research on satisfaction China, 2020). The study's analytical framework is grounded in Pavlovian conditioning theory and the concept of brand localization strategy, which explains how repeated exposure to localized brand names, when aligned with phonological and cultural norms, can create positive associations and foster consumer loyalty in the Chinese market (Consumer perceived value preferences China: A mixed method approach, 2018).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on a scale of 500 respondents, consumer perceptions of the brand name characteristics of Burger King (汉堡王), KFC (肯德基), and Starbucks (星巴克) show a positive trend, but with variations in intensity in each dimension. Regarding the statement "Overall, these brand names are easy for me to remember," 220 respondents (44%) agreed, 200 respondents (40%) were neutral, and 80 respondents (16%) disagreed. These results indicate that although the three brand names are easy to remember, some consumers do not feel the consistent memory strength of name localization. Brand name localization also significantly influences purchasing behavior. A total of 68% of respondents agreed that brand names influence buying decisions, confirming the function of the name not only as a linguistic identity, but also as

a psychological stimulus. This is reinforced by the finding that 64% of respondents experience an increase in positive emotions when the brand name is seen or heard frequently. This phenomenon is consistent with Pavlovian conditioning theory, where the repetition of a stimulus in the form of a brand name can strengthen consumers' positive emotional responses through the classical conditioning process.

In terms of cultural appropriateness, around 44-46% of respondents rated the brand names as sounding natural in the Chinese context and not causing cultural conflicts, although there was still a significant group who were neutral or disagreed. This suggests that linguistic sensitivities must be considered in localization strategies. The open-ended question regarding the most successful brand name showed that Starbucks (星巴克) was perceived to be superior, as it was easy to remember (40%), gave a premium feel (16%), and was considered an accurate translation (24%). This suggests that phonetic congruence, symbolic meaning, and cultural relevance are the main factors in a successful brand name localization strategy in international markets.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that brand-name localization plays an important role in shaping consumers' cognitive and affective perceptions. Starbucks (星巴克) was judged to be the most successful in creating associations consistent with its global image, KFC (肯德基) was strong in evoking positive emotions, and Burger King (汉堡王) elicited more curiosity than direct associations with Western fast food. This confirms the importance of implementing brand name localization strategies accompanied by marketing stimulus consistency, in accordance with the principles of Pavlovian conditioning and glocalization in international marketing.

3.1 Analysis of Consumer Perceptions of KFC Brand Localization as a Marketing Strategy

The results of the study show differences in the level of brand conditioning success in two main aspects: In the cognitive dimension, only 45% of respondents automatically associated the name ‘肯德基’ with core products such as fried chicken and burgers, while 47.5% were neutral. These findings indicate that the brand-name localization strategy has not fully strengthened brand recall for KFC's global products. KFC's menu diversification in the Chinese market, such as the addition of porridge, soup, and locally flavored dishes, has increased market acceptance, but it also has the potential to blur the identity of the core products. Thus, consumers do not always automatically associate the name ‘肯德基’ with fried chicken, which is KFC's global icon (see Figure 1)

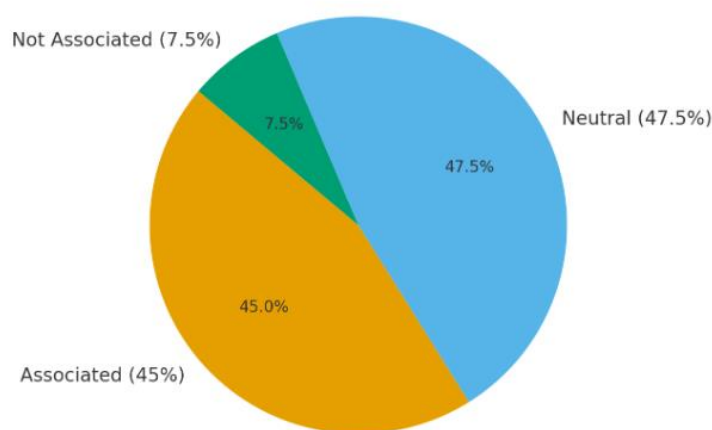


Figure 1. Cognitive Dimension: KFC Association with Core Products

Conversely, on the affective dimension, most respondents (70.7%) stated that the name ‘肯德基’ evoked positive emotions, such as happiness and satisfaction. This confirms that brand localization through name adaptation has succeeded in creating emotional closeness between consumers and the

brand. Within the framework of Pavlov's theory, the stimulus in the form of an easy-to-remember and pronounceable local name has been repeatedly paired with the pleasant experience of consuming KFC products, resulting in a conditioned response in the form of positive emotions (Solomon, Marshall, & Stuart, 2018). From an international marketing strategy perspective, these findings show that consumers in China view global brand localization efforts positively, as the adaptation of the name ‘肯德基’ not only facilitates the cognitive process of recognizing the brand but also fosters a sense of cultural belonging. This supports the theory of localization branding, which emphasizes the importance of brand adaptation to local linguistic and cultural norms to increase relevance and market acceptance (Cui & Liu, 2001). See Figure 2.

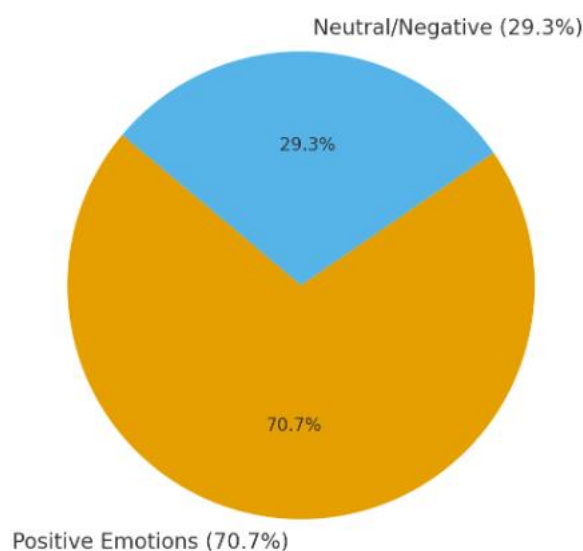


Figure 2. Affective Dimension: KFC Evoking Positive Emotions

Overall, consumer perceptions of KFC's brand localization in China reflect success in affective aspects but show challenges in cognitive aspects related to core product brand recall. Implicitly, KFC's marketing strategy in China must maintain a balance between global consistency and local adaptation. By continuing to emphasize global product icons while maintaining a relevant local menu, KFC can strengthen product associations while maintaining emotional closeness with consumers. This is in line with Kotabe and Helsen's (2020) view that the success of international brands depends on the synergy between global brand consistency and local adaptation of marketing strategies.

3.2 Analysis of Consumer Perceptions of the Localisation of the Burger King Brand Name ‘汉堡王’ as a Marketing Strategy

Based on the results of a questionnaire conducted on 500 respondents, it was found that only 36% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘汉堡王 (Hànǎo Wáng) immediately makes me think of Western-style fast food’, while 30% were neutral and 34% disagreed. These results indicate that although the name 汉堡王 literally means ‘Hamburger King’, consumers' cognitive associations with the Western fast food category are still weak. This condition shows that stimuli in the form of localized names have not yet fully produced a conditioned response in the form of consistent brand recall. Conversely, for the statement ‘Hearing this name Burger King (汉堡王: Hànǎo Wáng) makes me interested in trying the products,’ the results were more positive, with 54% of respondents agreeing, 20% neutral, and only 26% disagreeing. This shows that even though brand associations with Western fast food are not yet strong, name localization has succeeded in evoking an emotional response in the form of curiosity and a desire to try the product. This finding is in line with Pavlovian conditioning theory, in which consistent stimuli can

form certain emotional and cognitive responses. In the case of Burger King, affective conditioning proved to be more dominant, as the name 汉堡王 was able to evoke positive emotions even though cognitive conditioning related to Western fast food had not yet been established. This shows that the process of repeating stimuli through consumer experience and brand communication is still necessary to strengthen cognitive associations (Solomon, Marshall, & Stuart, 2018). In the context of international marketing strategy, the adaptation of the Burger King name into Mandarin is an effective form of localized branding that creates cultural and linguistic connections with Chinese consumers (Cui & Liu, 2001). However, these results also emphasize the need for a balance between global consistency and local adaptation. Burger King needs to maintain its global identity as a Western fast-food brand while retaining local relevance through a localized name, as Kotabe and Helsen (2020) emphasize that the success of global marketing is largely determined by the synergy between global brand consistency and local adaptation.

3.3 Analisis Persepsi Konsumen terhadap Lokalisasi Nama Brand Starbucks 星巴克 (Xīngbākè) Sebagai Strategi Pemasaran

Based on the results of a questionnaire completed by 500 respondents, the localized name for Starbucks, 星巴克 (Xīngbākè), shows strong consumer association both cognitively and affectively. When asked whether 'The name Starbucks (星巴克) is easily associated with coffee culture', 338 respondents (67.6%) agreed, 112 respondents (22.4%) were neutral, and only 50 respondents (10%) disagreed. These results confirm that most consumers have a clear cognitive association between the name 星巴克 and coffee culture, which is in line with Starbucks' global image as a pioneer of the coffee-based lifestyle. Regarding the statement 'This name of Starbucks (星巴克) makes me think of a relaxed and social atmosphere', 250 respondents (50%) agreed, 175 respondents (35%) were neutral, and 75 respondents (15%) disagreed. This shows that in addition to cognitive associations with coffee, the name 星巴克 also evokes affective associations in the form of feelings of relaxation and a social atmosphere. Thus, the localization process of the Starbucks name in the Chinese market not only functions as a linguistic adaptation but also successfully creates emotional resonance consistent with consumer experience worldwide. See Figure 3.

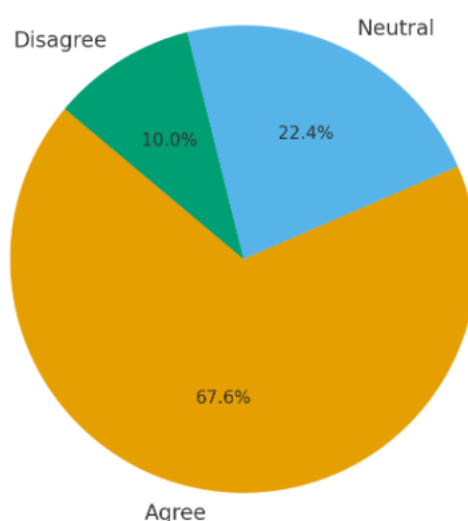


Figure 3. Cognitive Association: Starbucks with Coffee Culture

These findings can be understood through the framework of Pavlovian conditioning, in which the stimulus of the name 星巴克 has been repeatedly paired with consumers' sensory and emotional experiences—for example, the comfortable atmosphere of the outlet, social interactions in the café, and brand communication that emphasizes coffee culture. Through repetition of this stimulus, consumers form conditioned responses at both the cognitive (coffee as the core product) and affective (relaxation, social togetherness) levels (Solomon, Marshall, & Stuart, 2018). This demonstrates the effectiveness of Starbucks' localization strategy: a simple yet memorable name translation, combined with global consistency in delivering the brand experience, reinforces positive associations in the minds of Chinese consumers. See Figure 4

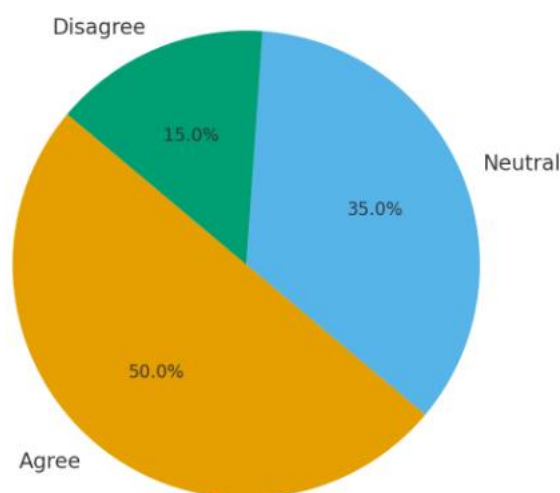


Figure 4. Affective Association: Starbuck with Relaxed and Social Atmosphere

From an international marketing perspective, Starbucks' success shows that brand localization aligned with the consumer experience can accelerate the conditioning process, thereby strengthening brand recall and attachment. This strategy is in line with Kotabe and Helsen's (2020) view that the key to the success of global brands in local markets is a balance between global identity consistency and local cultural adaptation. In the case of Starbucks, the name 星巴克 is not just a phonetic translation but has also become a symbol of coffee culture that is embedded in the social life of Chinese consumers.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that localizing international brand names into Mandarin significantly affects consumer perceptions in the Chinese market. First, consumers assessed that most brand names were consistent with their global image, although their effectiveness varied between brands. Starbucks (星巴克) had the strongest association with coffee culture and premium lifestyle, KFC (肯德基) was more prominent in evoking positive emotions related to its products, and Burger King (汉堡王) was still limited to arousing curiosity about Western fast food. Second, brand name repetition has been proven to strengthen positive consumer emotions, in line with Pavlovian conditioning theory, which explains that repeated stimuli can create affective associations. This finding confirms that brand name localization strategies serve as linguistic adaptations and a means of conditioning to build consumer loyalty. Third, although most respondents considered the brand names to sound natural and not cause cultural conflict, there was a group that showed linguistic sensitivity. This indicates the importance of paying attention to cultural and semantic aspects of the localization process to avoid potential consumer resistance.

Ethical approval

This research did not require ethical approval.

Informed consent statement

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

Authors' Contributions

SSS contributed to the conceptualization, theoretical framework, and supervision of the research, as well as manuscript refinement as the corresponding author. AKP contributed to the research design, data analysis, and interpretation of results. DAP contributed to data collection, literature review, and preparation of the discussion section.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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