

Culturally symbolic products: Would you buy a Sony cappuccino maker?

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Certain brands bring to mind particular cultures, and consumers react more positively to brand extensions when products match expectations about cultures, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. That's why a Budweiser barbecue sauce might be a more successful product than a Sony cappuccino maker.

"Many well-known brands become symbols or icons of the [cultures](#) or countries with which they are associated," write authors Carlos J. Torelli and Rohini Ahluwalia (both University of Minnesota). Examples of culturally symbolic brands include [Budweiser](#) (American), Sony (Japanese), or Corona (Mexican). The authors look at what happens when a culturally symbolic brand extends its product line by creating new products.

The authors focus on a part of consumer [deliberation](#) that is based on cultural congruity—the extent to which a brand and its product automatically bring to mind knowledge about a culture. "This process operates independently of consumers' perceptions of fit between the brand associations and the product attributes, or their inferences about the brand's manufacturing expertise due to its country-of-origin associations, and can influence extension evaluations independently of these factors," the authors explain.

In short, when a brand associated with a culture fits into personal understanding of the culture (cultural schema), [consumers](#) have an easier time processing and therefore accepting a new product.

The authors found that participants had positive feelings for culturally congruent extensions (like a Sony electric car), while they had less positive feelings about a Sony toaster oven; they found the idea of a Sony cappuccino-macchiato maker even less appealing. The authors say the effects emerged only when both the brand and the product were culturally symbolic.

"A brand's cultural symbolism can be a liability or an asset, and to harness it profitably, a manager needs to understand the cultural symbolism of the potential extension categories under consideration," the authors conclude.

More information: Carlos J. Torelli and Rohini Ahluwalia.

"Extending Culturally Symbolic Brands: A Blessing or a Curse?" Journal of Consumer Research (published online June 14, 2011). ejcr.org/

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