

# 'Cultural distinctiveness' can influence consumer preferences for certain products

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The concept of "cultural distinctiveness" prompts consumers to fulfill a need to connect with home by favoring brands or products associated with a related cultural group, says U. of I. business professor and branding expert Carlos J. Torelli. Credit: Photo by University of Illinois College of Business

Would a Minnesota Vikings fan, during a business trip to Mumbai, be

more likely to root for the Green Bay Packers than another random NFL team? Or would a die-hard Boston Red Sox fan, working abroad and pining to connect with something from home, root for - gasp! - the dreaded New York Yankees in the World Series?

According to new research from a University of Illinois expert in consumer behavior and global marketing, it depends on the concept of "cultural distinctiveness."

Cultural distinctiveness prompts consumers to fulfill the need to connect with home by favoring brands or products associated with a related cultural group, says Carlos J. Torelli, a professor of business administration at Illinois.

"Traveling to a foreign country for a short period of time or being an immigrant in a foreign country - these are events that can heighten feelings of separation from the surrounding cultural environment. It's often accompanied by a desire to connect with a home culture - an experience that we term 'cultural distinctiveness,' and one that can impact an individual's behavior as a consumer," he said.

When consumers are exposed to products associated with a cultural group that could potentially be construed as "home," like the homesick Red Sox fan watching the Yankees play, they are broadening their definition of "home" to include the related group.

But when intergroup rivalries are salient - when it's the Minnesota Vikings playing the Green Bay Packers, or the Red Sox playing the Yankees - the boundary expansion process is thwarted and the opposite effect emerges: a denigration and rejection of products or brands associated with a related cultural group, Torelli said.

"Our research is the first to show that cultural consumption is a dynamic

process, and that in-group boundaries can be malleable and expandable, depending upon the context and motivation of the consumer," he said. "It's very common for groups to share common cultural roots or geographical boundaries - but chances are, they also share some rivalries. And these rivalries might reach the point of complete animosity."

The paper, which will be published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, employed the results from seven studies to test its hypothesis.

The first two studies tested the prediction that experiencing cultural distinctiveness leads to a heightened desire to connect with home, "and that this desire motivates people to expand their boundaries, with a view of making it easier to connect with home," Torelli said.

The next two studies assessed the impact of experiencing cultural distinctiveness on preference for products and brands associated with a related cultural group - Minnesotans' preferences for Wisconsin brands, or Mexicans' preferences for Argentine products, for example. The next three studies examined the role of intergroup rivalry salience in different contexts: the Sochi Olympics, college football and competition between businesses.

The results show that when consumers experiencing cultural distinctiveness are exposed to products associated with a cultural group that could potentially be construed as "home" either through geographical proximity or similarity in cultural roots, they broaden their definition to include the related group.

"This broadened definition allows them to fulfill the need to connect with home by favoring brands or products associated with the related cultural group," Torelli said.

The findings are a new development in the research on [brand](#) symbolism

and have implications for marketers of ethnic-oriented products, especially products catering to immigrants, according to Torelli.

"Past research on the cultural symbolism of brands has mainly focused on how brands can become icons of national cultures," he said. "Less is known about the meanings of brands for geographically defined regions within a country, or more than one country."

However, with globalization, brands associated with geographically defined regions within a country - Jack Daniel's for the American South, for example - are attempting to build a global image, and "cultural distinctiveness may play a role in helping to foster engagement and loyalty."

"Similarly, some national brands like Singapore's Tiger beer are attempting to build cultural meanings pan-regionally - a Pan-Asian image, for example," Torelli said. "Our research highlights that the symbolic meaning of brands for different cultural groups can be dynamically constructed. Brands can symbolize a more broadly defined group with expanded boundaries that include more than one [cultural group](#)."

"Such companies might be able to expand their target market amongst immigrant communities, who are likely to experience cultural distinctiveness, to the extent that their product assortment and cultural associations allow these consumers to expand their definition of home."

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