

How to brand cultural products in overseas markets

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Researchers from Shanghai University of Finance and Economics and the University of Arizona published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines brand name strategies when cultural products are marketed in foreign countries.

The study forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing* titled "Branding Cultural Products in International Markets: A Study of Hollywood Movies in China" is authored by Weihe Gao, Li Ji, Yong Liu, and Qi Sun.

Cultural products such as movies and novels often have immediate [brand](#) name recognition in their home countries. But in foreign markets, consumers are accustomed to titles translated into the local language. In an era of globalization, the trend is to stay as much as possible to the original brand name, particularly for well-branded products (e.g., Batman and Superman movies). However, there is often a need to reframe brand names of cultural products that may be culturally distant to foreign consumers. For example, the animated comedy movie *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* was translated to *It's Raining Falafel* in Israel because meatballs are not something Israelis relate to, whereas falafel is a better equivalent to a local food staple.

By incorporating the unique characteristics of these cultural products, the research team develops a theoretical framework that integrates similarity, which focuses on how the translated brand name relates to the original brand name, and informativeness, which focuses on how the

translated brand name reveals product content, to study the impact of brand name translations.

The movie [market](#) is the research context, specifically Hollywood movies shown in China from 2011 to 2018. The researchers show that higher similarity leads to higher Chinese box office revenue and this effect is stronger for movies that perform better in the home market. When the translated title is more informative about the movie, the Chinese box office revenue increases. The informativeness effect is stronger for Hollywood [movies](#) that have a greater cultural gap in the Chinese market. Moreover, both similarity and informativeness effects are strongest at the time the movie is released and reduce over time.

The study provides several valuable managerial implications for cultural product industries. First, the results point out that brand name translation is not a trivial task. How the brand name is translated can have important consequences on product sales. Two different strategies are described: 1) Make translated brand names resemble the original brand names; or 2) Make translated brand names informative of product content. While each can be managed to influence the sales in [international markets](#), there is also a synergy between them—one [strategy](#) becomes more effective if the other strategy is also implemented. However, there are situations where achieving both goals in one brand name is difficult because it may require different brand name features and translation techniques. Therefore, companies need to make trade-offs between similarity and informativeness.

This trade-off leads to the second managerial implication. If the product has high home market performance but a small cultural gap, the translation should focus on brand name similarity. If the product has low home market performance but a large cultural gap, the translation should focus on informativeness. If the product has both high home market performance and large cultural gap, both similarity and informativeness

will be highly effective in generating sales. Thus, the company should pay attention to both similarity and informativeness, with the relative emphasis between the two decided based on the effect size and the feasibility of each strategy. Finally, if the product has low home market performance and small cultural gap, both strategies will still be helpful, but will not be highly effective.

Third, results indicate that these branding strategies are most effective for product sales in the early period after introduction. This is particularly important for managers given the short life cycle of cultural products. It is critical for companies to be sensitive to brand name translation early and to make sure either similarity or informativeness, or both, are in place before introduction to help increase sales quickly.

Finally, related to the trade-off between similarity and informativeness, companies can follow this analysis to estimate the effect size of the moderating factors. Managers can then more precisely evaluate to what extent product sales will benefit from either strategy so that a sensible trade-off can be made.

More information: Weihe Gao et al, Branding Cultural Products in International Markets: A Study of Hollywood Movies in China, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242920912704](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920912704)

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