# Brand Perception and Social Context in Emerging Markets: Global Brand Strategies for Cultural Adaptation and Market Positioning

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**A B S T R A C T :**

This research study examines how brand perception is shaped by social and cultural factors across different countries, with a particular focus on emerging markets. It seeks to explore the extent to which global businesses adapt their branding, marketing, and operational strategies to align with local values, norms, and consumer expectations. By analyzing how multinational corporations modify their positioning and communication in response to cultural and societal differences, the study aims to understand the relationship between localization strategies and consumer brand perception.

This research will place special emphasis on the Indian market as a case of cultural complexity and rapid economic development. Through detailed case studies of McDonald's and Zara- two globally recognized brands that have made significant strategic shifts to operate in India- the study will explore how these adaptations have influenced their public image, brand identity, and consumer reception. The findings are expected to contribute to broader insights into cross-cultural brand management and the effectiveness of localized strategies in enhancing brand relevance and market performance in diverse cultural environments.

**Keywords**: Brand Perception, Emerging Markets, Marketing Strategies, Glocalisation

## 1. Main text

Consumption, a fundamental aspect of human existence, transcends mere physiological necessity to become a complex interplay of individual preferences, societal norms, and deeply ingrained cultural values. While the act of consumption is universal, the ways in which desires are satisfied and products are chosen vary dramatically across the globe, as culture profoundly dictates consumption patterns (Onkvisit & Shaw, 2007). In an increasingly interconnected global marketplace, brands constantly strive to maximize their reach and sales, recognizing that a profound understanding of their target markets is paramount. This understanding extends far beyond economic indicators to encompass the intricate social and cultural fabrics that shape consumer behavior.

Decades of research consistently affirm the critical role of culture in influencing consumer responses. Early studies, such as that by Zhang and Neelankavil (1997), found that consumers respond more positively to advertisements when they align with their cultural values and norms. This sentiment is echoed by more recent scholarship, with Lee (2019) concluding that culture plays an undeniably influential role in shaping advertising practices globally. These findings collectively underscore the immense significance for brands to not only acknowledge but deeply integrate cultural and social environmental factors into their strategic frameworks to enhance sales and foster brand loyalty. This crucial link between culture, brand perception, branding strategies, and market performance forms the core inquiry of this research.

Furthermore, in the context of global expansion, particularly into dynamic and diverse emerging markets, the challenge intensifies. These markets, often characterized by unique historical trajectories, evolving socioeconomic landscapes, and strong traditional values, necessitate a sophisticated approach that moves beyond simple standardization. As highlighted by Kotler, tailoring products and services to local needs cultivates a sense of brand relevance and can lead to greater market share. This strategic adaptation, often termed 'glocalisation' (Hayes, 2022), becomes a cornerstone for success, enabling brands to maintain a global identity while resonating profoundly with regional consumers. This literature review will therefore delve into the multifaceted business environment, theoretical frameworks for understanding cultural dimensions, and the practical application of glocalisation strategies by global brands, ultimately setting the stage for a detailed examination of how these principles manifest in the culturally rich and rapidly developing Indian market.

### 1.1. Business Environment – An Overview

Business environment refers to all institutes, individuals, and other forces that are outside the control of the business but may impact the performance of the business in some way. This does not mean that these forces are outside the business itself- they can be internal forces (like employees, management, operations) and external forces (like customers, market, government, technology).

Business environment has 5 dimensions as discussed below- (Keith Davis et al., 2021)

1. Political environment – Political environment affects different business units significantly. A stable and dynamic political environment is essential for business growth. Whenever there is a change in the Government in a democratic country, it is a sign of change in economic policies. It essentially includes the political stability, ideology of the government, relations wit other countries and center -state relationship. The recent tarrif war by the US was part of the political environment as it was caused due to the ideologies of a political party. Similarly, the cut of trade between maldieves and india was due to the beliefs of a political party- hence, come in the political environment.

2. Economic environment - Economic environment consists of economic factors that influence the business in a country. It is very complex and dynamic in nature that keeps on changing with the change in policies or political situations. This can include both microeconomic and macroeconomic factors like increase in competition, increase in unemployment or change in taxes.

3. Social Environment – Business is an integral part of society and they both influence each other. These factors include: attitude of people, family system, caste system, religion, education, marriage, habits and preferences, languages, urbanization, customs and traditions, ethics etc. It also includes demographic factors like occupation, age, income, gender. For example Indian culture values family life, hence many ads use the images of a family scenario to resonate better with the audience. (Kumar, 2024)

4. Technological environment : A systematic application of scientific knowledge is known as technology. Everyday there are vast changes in products, services, lifestyles and living conditions, these changes must be analyzed by every business unit and should adapt these changes. The rise of e-commerce, automation and digital marketing fall in the technological environment and can cause significant changes to the functioning of businesses.

5. Legal Environment – Legal environment constitutes the laws framed by the Government and various legislations passed in the parliament. These include labour laws, consumer protection laws and laws specific to industries- like how cigarette ads in india must include "injurious to health" while advertising the product .

All businesses formulate plans and strategies keeping in mind the business environment. A good understanding of the business environment can give an enterprise the first mover advantage, help tap into cheaper resources timely, allow the firm to identify threats and early warning signals and also helps cope with rapid changes – needless to say, a good understanding of the business environment is empirical for the success of a business. Ensure that you return to the 'Els-body-text' style, the style that you will mainly be using for large blocks of text, when you have completed your bulleted list.

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## 2. Cultural & Social Environments: Theoretical Frameworks

Cultural values typically affect decisions on product development, pricing, distribution and communications (Denis 1996). Businesses seek to understand cultural environments through the siz cultural dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede- known as Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions. Hofstede's cultural dimensions prove insightful and are often employed as the basis for cultural differentiation (Liu, Sudharshan and Hamer, 2000).

1. 1.Power distance – this is the degree to which people in a society expect to be equal. A low power distance index would mean a relatively equal distribution of power while a high power distance index would mean that power is held by a few and dictated to many. Austria for example is an example of a low power distance country while Saudi arabia is a high power distance country.

2. 2.Individualism VS. Collectivism – this is the degree to which people focus on their groups. Individualistic societies like the Unites States strongly value personal achievement and value individual needs while collective societies like korea often make decisions with a group in mind.

3. Masculinity vs feminity- it is the way the gender roles are present in a nation. A country may have a high feminity score which means that the gender roles are fairly fluid, while in masculine cultures, gender roles are stringent and often very dramatic.

4. 4.Uncertainty avoidance- This dimension deals with how much a society can cope with uncertainty of the future.While every culture must deal with this, cultures with high uncertainty avoidance rely on their set rules and structures about the way things are done to deal with it, whereas those with low uncertainty avoidance are more relaxed.

5. Long term vs short term orientation – This dimension looks at the extent to which people are willing to forego short-term gains for future rewards, in particular, by emphasizing the virtues of persistence, saving, and thrift. On the opposite end of the spectrum is foregoing future rewards for short-term gains in the past or the present, with an emphasis on immediate gratification and quick results

6. Indulgence vs. Restraint- This dimension deals with how much your culture satisfies human needs or desires versus how much you hold back on your desires to satisfy societal norms. As Nassar puts it, "How's your impulse control? Do you tend to go for instant gratification, or do you hold off, in part through social norms, deferring gratification…"

**Source: Xu (2025) , Wale (2023)**

Moreover, The findings of a study by Lam et al. (2005) concluded that respondents who scored high in individualism were less likely to switch brands. Results also indicated that people with high uncertainty avoidance had greater proneness to brand loyalty. High uncertainty avoidance means taking less risk, translating into less willingness to switch brands. People avoid uncertainty by staying with brands with which they are comfortable.

This indicates a strong relationship between culture, brand image, branding, brand loyalty and marketing strategies.

**Table 1 – Hofstede's Cultural dimensions in Action**

| No. | Cultural Dimension | Cultural Trait | Marketing & Branding Strategy | Example Countries | Brand Example |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Power Distance Index (PDI) | High | Emphasize **status, hierarchy, and brand authority.** Use celebrity endorsements, premium packaging, and "aspirational" branding. | China, India, Malaysia | **Zara India** markets itself as upscale and aspirational, with premium store design and limited promotional content. |
| | | Low | Use **informal, casual messaging** and focus on equality and relatability. Brands are portrayed as friendly and approachable. | Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands | **Ben & Jerry's** uses humor and social causes to appeal to egalitarian cultures. |
| 2 | Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) | High | Offer **clear instructions, guarantees, and detailed product info.** Focus on reliability, consistency, and trustworthiness. | Japan, Germany | **McDonald's Japan** provides nutritional breakdowns and service consistency to reduce uncertainty. |
| | | Low | Use **open-ended, innovative messaging.** Humor, novelty, and brand flexibility are appreciated. | UK, Singapore | **Spotify UK** uses witty and experimental content in marketing. |
| 3 | Individualism vs. Collectivism | Individualistic | Highlight **personal success, self-expression, and independence.** Campaigns focus on the individual. | US, UK, Australia | **Apple's "Think Different"** campaign, emphasizing innovation and individuality. |
| | | Collectivist | Stress **family values, group harmony, and social belonging.** Ads show family meals, festivals, and collective experiences. | India, South Korea | **McDonald's India** uses family-centric ads during festivals like Diwali. |
| 4 | **Masculinity vs. Femininity** | Masculine | Focus on **performance, achievement, success,** and competitive messaging. Brands showcase winners and ambitious goals. | US, Mexico, Italy | **Nike's "Just Do It"** campaign reflects masculine, success-driven values. |
| | | Feminine | Emphasize **well-being, care, and sustainability.** Highlight community, modesty, and ethics over competition. | Sweden, Norway, Netherlands | **The Body Shop** uses ethical, nature-focused branding aligned with feminine cultural values. |
| 5 | **Restraint vs. Indulgence** | Indulgent | Promote **pleasure, entertainment, and emotional satisfaction.** Highlight fun, lifestyle upgrades, and gratification. | Brazil, US, Australia | **Coca-Cola's "Open Happiness"** campaign is an indulgent emotional appeal. |
| | | Restrained | Focus on **tradition, discipline,** and **social norms.** Use reserved, formal messaging with fewer emotionally expressive visuals. | Russia, Pakistan | **Local banks in Pakistan** often use formal tone and religious/cultural symbolism in ads. |
| 6 | Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation | Long-Term | Promote **quality, sustainability, and future rewards.** Messaging focuses on consistency and legacy. | China, Japan | **Toyota's global branding** emphasizes reliability and long-term value. |
| | | Short-Term | Emphasize **quick results,** trends, and convenience. Highlight deals, offers, and limited-time benefits. | US, Philippines | **Zara globally** uses short inventory cycles and limited stock to create urgency and "buy now" appeal. |

**Sources**: (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010), (Kazmi & Rahman, 2019), (Swaminathan & Zameer, 2017)

## 3. Glocalisation strategies by big brands

Glocalisation is one of the ways that brands adapt to varying business environments- it is a combination of the words "globalization" and "localization" and is used to describe a product or service that is distributed globally but is also adjusted to accommodate the user or consumer in a local market.

Phillip Kotler identified the advantages of glocal marketing in a study stating that Consumers have the feeeling that the brand is relevant to them and is tailored to their specific needs and requirements;The different levels of marketing activity (strategic,tactical and operative) are balanced leading to Greater market share of the brands (higher brand equity)

Kotlers framework aligns with the broader international marketing principle of standardisation vs adaptation where companies must find a balance between keeping global consistency and adjusting to local preferences. Glocalisation sits in the middle, allowing brands to maintain their core identity while resonating with regional customers.

There have been multiple successful brand establishments world wide because of this strategy and it can be seen even in the most well known brands. This includes

·Dunkin Donuts serves dry pork and seaweed donuts in China,Grapefruit Coolatas in Korea, mango Chocolate Donuts in Lebanon and Dunclairs in Russia.

· For the Indian market, global telephone brand Nokia released offers that would include an anti-dust keypad, to prevent cell phone damages caused by the heavy dust in the region.

· Fanta offers different flavours around the globe, such as Fanta Shokata in Romania ("socata" or "elderflower juice" is a traditional Romanian beverage), green apple Fanta in China and watermelon Fanta in Spain and Portugal.

Beyond product features, branding, colors, and packaging are often glocalised to reflect regional aesthetics and sensitivities. For instance, PepsiCo redesigned its packaging for the Middle East to incorporate Arabic calligraphy during Ramadan, while Coca-Cola launched personalized bottles with common Indian names in India under its "Share a Coke" campaign. These efforts enhanced emotional connection with the brand and boosted sales.

While product adaptation is often the most visible form of glocalisation, it is by no means the only one. Brands also tailor their marketing mix—namely pricing, promotion, and distribution strategies—to align with local economic conditions, consumer behavior, and cultural preferences. These adjustments ensure that the brand remains competitive, accessible, and relevant in diverse markets.

McDonald"s and KFC are consider not only fast but cheap food for US market. Fon Indian market, comared with the local offer they become expencsive. That is why the decision was to reduce the price to a rand of 20-300 Rs, that still place their offers to as „high price". Similar situation was

recorded in Romania at the begining when McDonald"s and KFC offers were considered higher-end family dining like in India or other Asian countries.

In Japan, luxury brands like Louis Vuitton have taken the opposite approach—raising prices slightly to align with the local perception that premium quality must be expensive. This is also a form of price glocalisation adapted to the local value-perception gap.

Promotion

Upon entering the U.S market, Tesco, the British multinational grocery and general merchandise retailer decided to take a very careful approach, making the decision to not operate under its usual brand name but as "Fresh & Easy Neighbourhood Market". The decision was unexpected till the original name was succesfull in countries such as Romania, Hungary, Czech Republic or Thailand.

Similarly, Nike adjusted its advertising in India to include themes of female empowerment and local sports like cricket and kabaddi, diverging from its Western focus on individualism and extreme sports.

Distribution

Initially, when entering the U.S market, H&M located its stores in the suburbs, but, facing price competition, management took the decision of relocating to more upscale, downtown locations, while maintaing the same prices.

While glocalisation offers advantages across all markets, its strategic imperative is particularly pronounced in emerging economies. These markets, often characterized by vast cultural diversity, evolving consumer preferences, and a strong emphasis on traditional values, present both immense opportunities and complex challenges for global brands. Unlike more homogenized developed markets, emerging economies demand a nuanced approach, where understanding and adapting to local specificities are not merely advantageous but often critical for market entry, acceptance, and sustained growth, as exemplified by India's intricate social fabric, where cultural values are deeply ingrained (Hofstede Insights, 2023), a standardized global approach risks alienating a significant portion of the consumer base."

## 4. Understanding the social environment in India

India is a mosaic of cultures, religions and languages with 22 officially recognized languages, an array of dialects, religions, festivals, arts, clothing and food dishes. India is now estimated home to over 1.4 billion people representing over two thousand ethnic groups and represents at least six religions with over 122 spoken languages. India's social structure and cultural complexity make it a challenging yet highly promising market for businesses. (DynamicStudyHub, n.d., Socio Cultural Environment section). Researchers consistently highlight India as a collectivist, family-oriented society with strong hierarchical values...(Verma, 2024). "Families serve as the primary agent for transferring cultural values to their members Culture explains families' ways of defining problems and solving them (Indian Family Systems & Psychotherapy, 2013, p. Y)

According to Hofstede Insights, 2023, India demonstrates a high power distance meaning hierarchies are highly respected. This implies that marketing strategies in india often highlight authotity figures, brand legacy and status oriented positioning to resonate with cultural expectations of deference to power. McDonald's marketing in India reflects hierarchy and respect for authority—often featuring father figures or elder approvals in family-oriented ads, reinforcing traditional power structures.

It is a society with both collectivist and individualistic traits which means family, community, caste and religion form strong groups. This causes advertising in india to favour collective values like family, tradition, festivals while also touching upon personal aspirations.Cadbury ads show family celebrations and community sharing, promoting consumption during festivals—highlighting collectivist values over individual indulgence.

Looking at masculinity, india is very masculine in terms of visual display of success and power – this suggests that brands highlight achievement and premium status as well as material success to perform well- specially in the case of fashion, cars and technologyZara projects itself in India as an aspirational and elite brand, aligning with the cultural appeal for status, appearance, and material success—despite minimal advertising.

India scores medium- low on uncertainty avoidance suggesting that people often do not feel the need to mitigate risk through planning. This implies that Indian consumers are somewhat open to ambiguity and experimentation which brands leverage through informal campaigns and spontaneous value offerings.The rise of Patanjali—a brand that didn't follow conventional R&D-heavy models—reflects India's openness to new solutions, trust in traditional remedies, and comfort with informal systems like jugaad.

Lastly, the Indian culture is oe of restraint- which means that Indian consumers are less driven by impulse and more by socially approved, value based consumption, preferring brands that signal responsibility and moderation.The product fair and lovely was marketed around social approval and controlled self-expression—a clear nod to restrained cultural attitudes where external validation and societal norms matter more than personal indulgence.

By using Hofstede's dimensions to analyse India's cultural landscape, one can see how strongly social values influence consumer behaviour. These cultural characteristics, which range from reverence for authority to the value placed on family and self-control, have a direct impact on how brands should position themselves. More than just translation is needed for successful marketing in India; cultural adaptation is also necessary. Resonance in the Indian market depends on matching emotional values and societal norms, as demonstrated by brand examples.

## 5. Case studies : Zara and McDonalds

*ZARA*

Zara began as a family company in 1975 in Northern Spain. Its original store sold low cosr knockoffs of well known high end clothes and fashion. Now, it has 2,264 stores in 96 countries, making it the largest fast fashion retailer and inditex's main brand.Zara's marketing approach in India is notably minimalist, allowing its store design, product presentation, and pricing to communicate exclusivity. According to The Fashion of India (2023), "Behind Zara's perception as a luxury brand in India is its price positioning strategy.… this slight premium … fosters the perception of exclusivity and luxury." Rather than relying heavily on advertisements, Zara creates a premium feel through its branding and in-store communication, elevating its appeal among urban consumers.

This strategy aligns with the hierarchical and status-conscious nature of Indian society. As Khare et al. (2014) note, "Indian consumers perceived quality and value for Zara is high … they perceive the brand as a symbol of status and wealth… The Indian society is largely hierarchical… influencing consumers to display wealth through consumption." The brand's higher price point compared to Indian mid-market alternatives is interpreted as a symbol of quality and prestige, reinforcing its image as an aspirational luxury brand, even though it belongs to the fast-fashion segment.

Furthermore, Zara's strategic understanding of the Indian cultural context is reflected in its alignment with local values. According to Hofstede Insights (2023), India scores high in power distance, indicating that "people accept unequal distribution of power and often associate quality and authority with higher cost and brand legacy." Zara leverages this by positioning itself as elite and globally recognized, which resonates with consumers in a power-distance-oriented culture.In the United States, Zara's brand positioning and marketing strategy are shaped by the country's low power distance, high individualism, and indulgent consumer culture, as outlined by Hofstede Insights (2023). The U.S. scores low on power distance (40), indicating a society that values equality and accessibility over status and hierarchy. As a result, Zara is not perceived as an elite or aspirational brand in the U.S., but rather as an accessible fast-fashion retailer. This is reflected in consumer sentiments; as one U.S. consumer noted, "Zara is expensive but cheaply made, and therefore deemed 'cheap'" (Reddit, 2022). The brand's relatively low pricing compared to high-end labels reinforces this perception.

Moreover, the high individualism score suggests American consumers prioritize self-expression and uniqueness. Zara appeals to this trait by offering frequently updated, trend-forward collections, allowing consumers to reflect their personal style. However, the fast turnover of styles and mass production can sometimes be at odds with this need for individuality, leading to critiques of Zara as offering "fashionable but disposable" clothing (Latterly.org, 2024).To sum up, Zara's divergent brand perceptions in India and the US highlight the significant influence of cultural values on how consumers interpret and position brands. Despite its fast-fashion identity, Zara is viewed as an aspirational, premium brand in India, a country with a high power distance and status-driven consumption. It effectively appeals to cultural signals of exclusivity and prestige through its premium pricing and understated marketing. In contrast, Zara is seen as a trendy but disposable retailer in the low power distance, highly individualistic American culture. It is a convenient way to get affordable fashion without being connected to luxury or elite status. These disparate viewpoints show that in order to connect with local consumers, a global brand must use culturally sensitive marketing, pricing, and communication tactics.

*MCDONALDS*

McDonald's is one of the world's most recognized fast-food brands, operating in over 100 countries with a standardized yet adaptable business model. Founded in the United States in 1940, the brand has grown into a global symbol of convenience, affordability, and quick service. Known for its iconic golden arches and core offerings like the Big Mac and Happy Meal, McDonald's has become synonymous with American fast food culture.

McDonald's entered the Indian market in 1996, initially facing backlash due to its association with beef-based products, which conflicted with the dietary beliefs of India's Hindu majority. In response, the company localized its offerings, introducing vegetarian options like the McAloo Tikki—a spiced potato and pea burger developed specifically for Indian consumers. This shift proved pivotal for McDonald's acceptance and growth in India. As Panwar and Patra (2017) note, "Product localization plays a crucial role in McDonald's success in maintaining its competitive position in the Indian market" (p. Abstract).Beyond its menu, McDonald's adopted affordable pricing strategies like the Happy Price Menu, Extra Value Meals, and combo offers to cater to India's price-sensitive consumer base. These tactics have broadened its appeal and enhanced customer retention. According to MarketingMonk (2024), such strategies were aimed at "attracting customers across different income levels… to increase loyalty."

McDonald's also positioned itself as a family-friendly, emotionally resonant brand in India. A well-received advertisement tells the story of a shy boy gaining confidence in a McDonald's restaurant—an ad that, according to Marketing Japan (2024), "touched many viewers by telling them that McDonald's is a place for the whole family to enjoy." This storytelling aligns with India's collectivist, family-centric social values, fostering a perception of the brand as inclusive, comforting, and culturally sensitive.In contrast, in Western countries, McDonald's marketing emphasizes convenience, efficiency, and individuality, often catering to fast-paced lifestyles. It is also more likely to highlight corporate social responsibility and sustainability efforts to combat criticisms of health and environmental impact. A study by the University of Sydney School of Public Health (2024) found that "More than a fifth (21%) of McDonald's media content promoted corporate social responsibility, brand events, and recruitment drives."

Thus, while McDonald's is seen in India as a socially integrated, family-oriented, and culturally respectful brand, in Western markets it is often perceived more as a functional, mass-market brand focused on speed and accessibility. These divergent brand perceptions reflect how McDonald's adapts its identity to local social values, emphasizing emotional connection in India and operational value in the West.

## 6. Concolusion

This study underscores the critical importance of aligning brand strategy with the cultural and social context of emerging markets. Through an in-depth analysis of India—a market characterized by cultural complexity, collectivist values, and a blend of tradition and modernity—it becomes evident that brand perception is not universal but constructed through local lenses of value, status, and identity.

It underscores the importance of glocalisation and brand adaptation as per the social environment for the success of brands as well as shows how brand perception is moulded through business marketing and branding strategies in various environments.

The cases of Zara and McDonald's clearly demonstrate that successful global brands do not simply export their business models; rather, they localize strategically to resonate with societal norms, consumer expectations, and cultural psychology. Zara's positioning as a premium, aspirational brand in India, despite its fast-fashion identity, highlights how cultural cues like power distance and status influence perception. Similarly, McDonald's success through menu localization, value pricing, and family-centered messaging shows the effectiveness of embedding brand identity into local cultural narratives.Hence, in emerging markets, brands are established not only by following their global standards, but also learning and adapting to the local environment - finding the right mix of localisation and globalisation and best understand the customer base and their psychology.

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