

For Immediate Release: September 14, 2011
Contact: Mary-Ann Twist / 608-255-5582 / JCR@bus.wisc.edu

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Culturally Symbolic Products: Would You Buy a Sony Cappuccino Maker?

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.

Carlos J. Torelli and Rohini Ahluwalia. "Extending Culturally Symbolic Brands: A Blessing or a Curse?" *Journal of Consumer Research* (published online June 14, 2011). For further information, see <http://ejcr.org>



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