

Brazil leads in BRICs brands

Brazilian brands have spread internationally by promoting a national cultural narrative, in contrast to China and India where brands tend to hide their cultural origin

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The acronym BRIC captures the new wave of economic dynamism and consumerism in Brazil, Russia, India and China. Each nation is humming along with annual GDP growth well above mature economies. However, in terms of leveraging economic success to create international brands – the acronym is probably best pronounced with a strong B, weak R, and almost silent I and C.

While Brazil's brands are deservedly capturing international attention and allegiance, China and India's attempts have largely been incoherent, awkward and dogged by an unhelpful level of self-righteousness.

Recently, some businesses of Chinese and Indian origin have entered lists of the world's most valuable brands – but they are not leveraging anything recognisably Chinese or Indian in achieving consumer patronage internationally. Looking more closely at brands such as Indian car-maker Tata, Chinese computer brand Lenovo, or

white goods maker Haier, reveals that they are actually anchoring success on strategically hiding signs of their national origins.

Japanese theorist, Koichi Iwabuchi, identified this strategy when observing the internationalisation of Japanese electronic brands in the 1980s. He recognised that the success of Panasonic and Sony was strongly dependent on masking the fact that they were Japanese, so that sensitivity created by the Second World War would not create barriers for consumers in the US and Europe. Iwabuchi used the term 'culturally odourless' to capture the personality of these brands.

In the context of exchange rows, concerns over human rights and the persistent 'made in China' tag, Chinese brands with international ambition have been particularly conscious to 'deodorise' aspects of their Chinese culture. Indian brands like Tata have also taken a similar route to ensure that the potential 'risk' and 'confusion' caused by the country's perceived exoticness is absent from their brand internationally. In contrast, Brazil seems to be stealing a march on its Asian counterparts having already successfully created unique international brands that build on national culture.

Despite the stark geographic and cultural differences between the three would-be economic powers, their recent histories hold close parallels. Each has recently emerged from a period where commercial activity and creativity has been severely stifled – Maoism in China, Socialism in India and Authoritarianism in Brazil. As a result, a sense of pent-up creativity has been released in the context of a more liberal environment. Of the three, Brazil seems to currently possess a unique ability to harness this local energy towards creating compelling international

brands, whose success stems from the confidence to take local culture and history and inject it with new energy and nuance.

FB Collection is a lifestyle range inspired by the Brazilian beach bat game of Frescobol. At the heart of its increasing global appeal is a genuine expression of Brazilian beach style, or, more specifically, the vibrant *Carioca* culture of Rio de Janeiro. Not an expression of sporting prowess, the focus is on the innocence and spontaneity of a sport Cariocas invented and enjoyed as children. To express its local roots, FB Collection has recently worked with local artist Caio Locke whose work focuses on capturing Rio's unique topography and the diverse cultural heritage reflected in the city's carnival parades. Prints of Locke's paintings have brought the vibrancy of Copacabana onto a new line of FB Collection beach trunks.

Conscious of the increasing power of Brazilian-ness, the lifestyle brand has also collaborated across luxury categories and with local celebrities. FB Collection has teamed up with specialist Brazilian luxury travel agency Dehouche to offer tailored itineraries to customers. Local celebrities such as stage and soap opera legend Sylvia Bandeira have become an intimate part of the brand's core message emphasising Brazilians' buoyant and endearing attitude to life.

In São Paulo – the city that the people of Rio love to heckle as overworked, shopping-obsessed and without a beach – a more raw urban energy is forming. In what is considered South America's cultural capital, a wave of creativity is being exhibited by a new generation of designers, artists and musicians proudly drawing upon Brazilian culture.

The increasing global prominence of São Paulo's fashion scene and São Paulo Fashion



and retail presence. The popularity of Brazil's fashion brands is attributable to local designers' aim to create liberated styles for urban women, drawing on local expressions of feminine style and sensuality. São Paulo beachwear and urban style brand Skinbiquini captures the struggle of urban women to express their femininity with its recent tagline 'Stressed, Depressed but Well-Dressed'. Renata Gomes, its founder, explains: "I try to use the perspective of an urban woman to reinterpret different cultural elements and create something unique, versatile and modern. All our clothes and styles are designed for an urban woman who desires to carry a sense of the beach with her". Gomes uses Skinbiquini to turn national stereotypes on their head, taking traditional icons such

Week (SPFW) reflects this creative resurgence. Once disregarded as the sartorial home of flip-flops and bikinis, SPFW now ranks as one of the top global events, showcasing many homegrown fashion brands. These include Osklen, Carlos Miele, Pedro Lourenço, Alexandre Herchcovitch and Lucas Nascimento - all with a growing international reputation



as tropical banana bunches, and playfully reconfiguring them into modern urban style statements.

Fellow São Paulo designer Paula Raia summed up the appeal of this uniquely Brazilian expression of femininity when speaking to *The Guardian*: "I like to play with the obvious sensual aesthetics of Brazilian women, but not in a vulgar way. On the contrary, I add a minimal touch to it." This is a sensibility that is proving refreshing in mature fashion markets.

Also building recent international success on compelling Brazilian attributes is cosmetic giant Natura Cosméticos. A decade before Unilever's influential Real Beauty campaign, Natura built its reputation with

the Truly Beautiful Woman campaign, which communicated beauty as an expression of positive self-esteem, rather than anxiety.

Identified as one of the world's most sustainable companies, Natura's commitment to ethical and environmental principles is symbolised by the brand's Ekos cosmetic line created from raw materials gathered through sustainable methods from the Brazilian rainforest. In this way, Natura takes the stigma of global environmental crisis, and becomes an active proponent for resolution, reflecting a powerful consumer movement within its homeland.

Not obsessed with winning in mature markets, Natura has localised its community-based strategy to entrench the brand in resurgent and cosmetic-hungry markets of the Americas, particularly Chile, Argentina and Mexico, where their non-retail spaces – Casa Naturas, a place where consumers trial and share knowledge on products,

samba-infused mega-party, as a vehicle for its marketing in the US. As part of the campaign, none other than Jennifer Lopez got into the Carnival spirit by taking up samba lessons and learning Portuguese.

While Brazilian brands are enjoying a degree of global attention due to the FIFA World Cup in 2014 and the Rio Olympics in four years, there are more fundamental reasons underlying their success in creating international brands. First, it's the confidence to create brand narratives that genuinely focus and communicate Brazil's human and natural energies – consciously avoiding or creatively re-presenting tired stereotypes.

Second, it's a demanding market where scrutinising and outwardly focused elite consumers provide brands with a tough litmus test locally before they consider international expansion. This challenge is being intensified by the steady influx of foreign brands into Brazil in recent years.

challenging and creative perspectives. This lack of confidence and imagination leads directly to a corresponding inability of brands to differentiate and premiumise in an international context. This conservatism, or proverbial 'chip on the shoulder', can be seen by the recent media sensitivity shown in China to the re-imagining of the martial arts tradition in *Kung Fu Panda* and, more recently, by Oprah Winfrey's comments about 'still eating with hands' in India.

A more confident and reassured cultural perspective will allow Chinese and Indian brands to take a less rarified tone-of-voice when presenting narratives to global consumers. Rather than cultural torchbearers, brand creators in these Asian giants must expose new perspectives on the cultural equity they hope to derive value from. In this way, we will see brands that communicate and expose the unknown character of these mega-nations – such as the cultural impetuosity of largely unknown Chongqing city in West China, or the decaying beauty of Calcutta. Not 'postcards' of a **Utopian** future, but culture that feels more raw and unmediated to excite global consumers, cutting through their current expectations.

Somewhat ironically, the initial impetus appears to be coming from foreign interests who see a powerful opportunity to anchor brand stories in these rich national cultures.

In China, Hermes co-established Shang Xia in 2010, a luxury brand that draws inspiration from China's dynastic legacy of craftsmanship for modern luxury consumers. Closer to home, UK-based beer brand Cobra recently offered Indian marketers food for thought with a brand campaign that challenged tired exotic stereotypes of India. Cobra's television and digital campaign focused on unveiling a modern and globally sophisticated India, brimming with creativity and innovation.

Brazil's discussion with the world, through an increasing number of international brands, is reflecting a cultural confidence to tell its own story. China and India need to stop sermonising their national culture through brand creation, and start inspiring – otherwise there is no room for them in this important and valuable global conversation.

“Brazil's discussion with the world, through international brands, is reflecting a cultural confidence to tell its own story”

are hugely popular. Natura is proving an independent narrative in the global cosmetic market where major concerns have recently swallowed up many smaller brands – L'Oreal bought the UK's Body Shop in 2006, while Japanese direct seller Pola Orbis purchased Australia's Jurlique in 2011.

There is evidence that the energy created by this new generation of international Brazilian brands is creating a positive flow-on effect for some of the nation's more established and traditional brands.

Since its inception in 1962, sandal brand Havaianas has sold more than four billion pairs worldwide. However, in recent years, Havaianas has drawn inspiration from other local brands to create a more Brazilian story with global consumers. In its flagship store on São Paulo's luxury strip Oscar Freire, it has designed an interactive retail experience that showcases the brand's locally inspired creative direction.

This pride and confidence is also being reflected in the international marketing of beer giant Brahma. In 2012, Brahma used the annual Carnival, Rio de Janeiro's

Looking at the two Asian BRICs, China and India, we see increasingly discerning and globally literate middle class consumers who are placing increasing expectations on local brands. But a lack of concomitant confidence to tell local brand stories that move beyond quixotic foreign stereotypes seems largely absent. China and India are both countries where global influence is a long-held dream of both government and the people, but their inability to create compelling international brands has wider implications in terms of how economic success can become more meaningful in a cultural and global context.

The richness of both nations' culture should be a heaven-sent opportunity for creating globally appealing brand propositions. India's spiritual richness and China's colourful history, coupled with the unique regional diversity of both nations, provides an enviable palette to engage global consumers. However, Chinese and Indian brands seem currently bound by a rationale that they must always project a recognised and accepted part of the nation's culture, rather than exposing refreshing,

