An Investigation into Teens’ Attitudes Towards Fast-Food Brands in General: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

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ABSTRACT. The global teenager hypothesis suggests that communication technology advances have served to homogenize the values, fashion preferences, and attitudes of the world’s teenagers. This study examines attitudes towards fast-food brands in general among Chinese, Japanese, and American teenagers. The purpose of the study was to examine similarities and differences in such attitudes across these three markets. The results show that significant differences in brand attitudes exist between teens from each of these three nations. This study provides global fast-food managers with unprecedented empirical research concerning the idiosyncrasies underlying teenage fast-food brand attitudes. doi:10.1300/J369v09n04_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Teens, fast food, culture, China, Japan, brand attitude
INTRODUCTION

Marketers with a globalization perspective tend to view the world as a homogeneous place where people everywhere, especially teenagers, enthusiastically consume McDonald’s hamburgers and fries. According to the “global teenager” viewpoint, this phenomenon is the result of technological innovation (e.g., satellite television, the Internet), which has contributed to a uniformity in fashion, preferences, values, and attitudes of the world’s teens (Meredith and Schewe, 2002). Walker (1996) argued that worldwide satellite television access is fueling a global consumption culture, which he referred to as a “global mall.” According to Walker (1996), the direct influence of such technologies is evidenced by the tendency for MTV-watching teens to display global teen culture signs, such as jeans, running shoes, CDs, and fast-foods.

The global teenagers’ affinity for fast-food may be the driving force behind the rapidly expanding global fast-food industry, valued at $99.6 billion, with approximately 82.2 billion transactions in 2004. Continued growth is forecasted through 2009, with global transactions reaching 88.6 billion with a value of $115.1 billion (Datamonitor, 2005a). This global fast-food market is dominated by three specific regions: United States (50.2%), Europe (21.9%), and Asia-Pacific (18.9%) (Datamonitor, 2005a). This global growth suggests the need for an industry examination of international market perceptions toward fast-food brand advertising.

The global teenager hypothesis, as it relates to the fast-food industry, suggests international teens have similar attitudes towards fast-food brands in general. Indeed, branding is a very important aspect of fast-foods. Schlevogt (2000, p. 5) sizes up the importance of a company brand name: “Branding is the most powerful invention in commercial history.” The perceptions consumers hold are at least partially based upon the advertising a company does in an effort to get the consumer to remember that company’s brand name and the image which goes with it.

While new technologies have enhanced opportunities for fast-food brands to interact with global teenagers, an electronic literature search uncovered no cross-national comparisons of teens’ attitudes towards fast-food brands in general. Consequently, international fast-food brand managers lack the insight that such literature could provide. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assist in filling this void by comparing Chinese, Japanese, and American teenagers in terms of their attitudes towards fast-food brands in general. These specific teen markets were selected for the following reasons. Their respective countries represent
(1) the world’s three largest nations in terms of gross domestic product (CIA, 2003); (2) three of the largest fast-food markets in the world; and (3) three of the largest teen markets in the world (in aggregate spending power, and in the case of China, sheer numbers).

China has a massive population of nearly 200 million persons aged 10 to 19, which is remarkable considering China’s one-child policy was in effect during their birth years (Carson, 2002). In the United States, Teen Research Unlimited (2003) reported that the nation’s 32 million youth 12 to 19 years old spent a combined $170 billion in 2002 and averaged $101 in weekly spending (comprising discretionary spending combined with any spending done on their parents’ behalf, such as errands). While Japan has a relatively small teen population (approximately 13 million 10 to 19 years old), it ranks fourth globally regarding aggregate teen spending (Krause, 2001).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Analysis of the global fast-food industry is enhanced by segmenting it into Quick Service Restaurants (QSR, 65.5%), Takeaways (17.7%), Leisure Locations (13%), and Mobile and Street Vendors (3.9%) (Datamonitor, 2005a). Global consumers generally perceive fast food as characteristically similar to McDonald’s, Burger King, or Taco Bell. As noted earlier, the present study was designed to examine consumer perceptions of fast food in the United States, Japan, and China due to the continued growth rates of fast-food consumption in each of these three areas.

**United States**

The average American dines out four times weekly, with nearly half of adults consuming at least one meal outside the home daily (Rubin, 2004). In 1970, away-from-home foods accounted for 25 percent of total food spending. That amount increased to 47 percent by 1999 (Clauson, 2000). Fast-food accounts for 32 percent of America’s away-from-home meals (Economist, 2002). The market value of the American fast-food industry approached $50 billion in 2004, and is expected to reach $56.2 billion by 2009 (Datamonitor, 2005b). Fast-food pervades all aspects of U.S. society (Bowman et al., 2004). Ironically, 38 percent of the nation’s top health institutions have fast-food outlets located on their main medical campuses (Cram, 2002). An especially
relevant trend is fast-food’s increasing availability in school cafeterias. According to Wechsler (2001), about 20 percent of U.S. high schools offer brand-named fast foods. In a study of 23 San Diego middle schools, a la carte sales of school-prepared brand-named fast-food exceeded 15,000 items per week (Zive, Elder, and Prochaska, 2002).

The availability of fast-food in schools should come as no surprise considering teens’ affinity for fast-food. According to Horn, Ledet, and Rauch (2002), Americans aged 13-17 select fast-food outlets 86 percent of the time when dining out. On a typical day, fast-food was reportedly consumed by 39 percent of 14- to 19-year-old Americans (Bowman et al., 2004). A survey of 4,746 students 11 to 18 years old reported that 75 percent consumed meals (or snacks) at a fast-food restaurant during the week prior to the survey (French et al., 2001). Another study found that the average American adolescent visited a fast-food restaurant twice weekly and that fast-food outlets provided about one-third of adolescents’ away-from-home meals (Lin, Guthrie, & Frazao, 1999). California teens appear to be especially heavy fast-food consumers. The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research reported that nearly half of California’s approximately three million teens consume fast-food daily. Additionally, more than 300,000 (= 10 %) of the state’s teens eat fast-food twice daily and nearly 90,000 eat fast-food three or more times daily (Hastert et al., 2005).

While the above-noted studies clearly show the popularity of fast foods in the United States, there may be a real negative associated with this popularity. It is interesting to note, for example, that while the United States has experienced a near doubling of the maternal employment rate over the last 30 years (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003), it was also during this same time frame that away-from-home spending on fast-foods increased from 25 to 47 percent of total food expenditures. Further, a recent study conducted by Anderson, Butcher, and Levine (2004) found a positive relationship between maternal employment and childhood obesity. This was particularly true for children of white women, whose children showed the greatest increase in weight as the number of hours the mother worked increased. They further conclude that working mothers in general tend to feed their children calorie-dense foods, while at the same time being relatively unaware of their children’s levels of physical activity. Perhaps given this dramatic increase in the consumption of fast-foods it is more than simple coincidence that children of working mothers tend to be overweight.
Japan

Fast-food has traditionally been available in a variety of forms in Japan, such as noodle shops, street-vended steamed sweet potatoes, skewered chicken slices, and train station boxed lunches (Traphagan and Brown, 2002). The oldest fast-food chain, Yoshinoya, has been in operation since 1899. More recently, Western-style fast-food has proliferated along with conveyor-belt sushi shops designed to minimize waiting and dining time (Traphagan and Brown, 2002). The Japanese fast-food industry reached a value of approximately $5.546 billion in 2004, and is anticipated to reach a value of $5.595 billion by 2009 (Datamonitor, 2005c). The growth of this industry in Japan is likely based on the fast-paced and hardworking lifestyles of the Japanese consumers, as well as the abundance of private automobiles (Traphagan and Brown, 2002).

Younger Japanese have likely contributed to their nation’s fast-food industry growth. Franchises such as McDonald’s have attempted to appeal to this younger consumer by positioning their brands as a place to study between traditional school and cram school. McDonald’s offers these consumers a monthly in-house magazine known as “McJoy,” which discussed topics such as music, media, and lifestyle. They also distribute free promotional items such as mobile phone decorations (Brand Strategy, 2005). According to Traphagan and Brown (2002), McDonald’s strategy of quality, cleanliness, (quick) service, and value meshes well with Japanese cultural values. Interestingly, many older Japanese never visit American fast-food restaurants, which they view as foreign. Ironically, many younger Japanese view these same outlets as distinctly Japanese (Traphagan and Brown, 2002).

China

According to the Economist (2002), barely two percent of all away-from-home eating in China occurs in fast-food outlets, compared with 32 and 25 percent in America and Japan, respectively. However, China’s fast-food industry will likely experience dramatic growth as the nation’s economy expands and its consumers become more affluent, demanding fashion and luxury items, as well as fast-food (Miller, 2004), which they increasingly perceive as hip, new, modern, and exotic (Economist, 2002).

Approximately 80 percent of the fast-food market in China consists of Western-style food (Economist, 2002), with most of the sector’s
approximately 20 percent growth rate occurring with American fast-food brands (Miller, 2004). Since opening its first outlet in Beijing in 1987, KFC has become the most recognized global brand among Chinese consumers (Time Asia, 2003), with more than 1,800 Chinese outlets feeding over two million meals daily (Martin, 2005).

Global QSRs are adapting to cultural differences in China. KFC and McDonald’s have modified their menus and services to accommodate local tastes and culture, such as dropping the expectation for customers to clear their own tables. In a brand-perception study involving interviews of a cross-section of urban Chinese, Eckhardt and Houston (2002) reported that McDonald’s is associated with modernity (e.g., technology, newness, cleanliness, and sanitation). The authors reported that respondents viewed McDonald’s as a more sanitary and hygienic option than the more traditional noodle and dumpling establishments. Moreover, the perceived higher sanitary standards of Western QSRs may have served as an advantage over local restaurants during the SARS outbreaks in 2003 and 2004 (Miller, 2004).

Fast-food consumption among Chinese children appears to be increasing (Cheng, 2003). Consistent with this, Chinese generally perceive McDonald’s as representing youth, perhaps due to the brand’s self-promotion as a children’s birthday party venue and “Uncle Ronald” as an icon for Chinese children (Eckhardt and Houston, 2002). Elder Chinese are commonly observed acquiescing to their children and grandchildren’s requests to be escorted to McDonald’s, although they generally find the food’s taste and affordability to be lacking (Yan, 1997).

Younger Chinese may perceive McDonald’s as fashionable and foreign (Eckhardt and Houston, 2002). The restaurant’s privacy-enhancing two-person seating arrangement is clearly more dating conducive than the eight-person tables typically found at more traditional Chinese restaurants. Moreover, the menu homogeneity generally protects daters from the embarrassment (and loss of face) of being outspent by other dining patrons (Eckhardt and Houston, 2001).

An examination of the three countries involved in the present study suggests a rising fast-food affinity among youths in these nations. Given the size and apparent global popularity of this industry, it is vital for fast-food companies to understand the salience of brand names in the fast-food outlet selection process. Thus, the present study examines attitudes towards the fast-food brands in general in the United States, Japan, and China.
METHODOLOGY

A cross-national study examining differences in fast-food brand attitudes required the construction of a survey instrument and the identification of adolescents in each of the three countries of interest. The study utilized a convenience sample of students in each country. One Chinese and one Japanese graduate student identified comparable regions and cities in terms of geographical location and relative socioeconomic status. Each of the samples was drawn from relatively middle-class neighborhoods in medium-sized metropolitan cities.

Respondents included public middle and high school students from China, Japan, and the United States. Altogether, 620 students responded to the survey. The Chinese sample included 178 students from suburban Xianyang, located in the central Chinese province of Shaanxi. The Japanese sample included 183 students from the city of Kyoto. The U.S. sample included 259 students from medium-sized metropolitan areas in Western Missouri. All respondents were native to their respective countries. The survey instrument was administered in a classroom setting during respondents’ regularly scheduled class sessions. The sample demographics are shown in Table 1.

Cross-national respondent comparisons were complicated by a three-way language barrier. Direct translation was not attempted due to translation difficulties in the case of some of the words. Three translators were employed for survey examination and translation comparisons. One translator was fluent in all three languages, another fluent in English and Japanese, while the third was fluent in Japanese and Chinese. The English survey version was initially developed. The instrument was then translated in both directions through Japanese and

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<th>TABLE 1. Respondent Frequencies</th>
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<td><strong>Sample Size</strong></td>
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<th></th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Japan</th>
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<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>613</td>
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<td>Gender Male</td>
<td>287</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Female</td>
<td>326</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 13 to 14</td>
<td>306</td>
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<td>Age 15 to 16</td>
<td>243</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 17 to 18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>243</td>
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Refereed
Chinese and back into English. Back-translation techniques were used for item comparisons to verify concurrent survey instrument interpretation across the three cultures (Kotabe and Helsen, 2000). Each version of the questionnaire was then compared in each language. Translation discrepancies were discussed and modified so as to enhance cross-version meaning consistency.

The survey instrument included a seven-item scale, with specific questions regarding fast-food brand attitudes. These measures were modified from a dissertation published by Moschis (1978). Items AttBrand6 and AttBrand7 were added to the original scale to improve scale reliability ($\alpha = .50$) reported in the original study. The scale items were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. The seven items, the means for each country, and results of ANOVA comparisons across countries are reported in Table 2.

The additions to the original scale resulted in an improved coefficient alpha; however, one of the original items (AttBrand4) appeared to detract from scale unidimensionality. Using factor analysis, it appears that due to the negative item wording, the item does not load with the remaining scale items (see Hersche and Engelland, 1996). Coefficient alpha without AttBrand4 is .734 and the resulting scale is unidimensional with factor loadings ranging from .438 to .708. While scale unidimensionality is an important consideration in cross-cultural research, the likely cause of the item loading failure concerns a reversed positivity bias associated with Likert-type measures, rather than a true psychographic difference among the items (Hersche and Engelland, 1996). Therefore, item AttBrand4 may yet contribute with considerable merit in a comparative analysis. Country by country differences for each of the scale items are provided in Table 3. An examination of this table reveals that statistically significant differences exist between respondents from each of the identified countries for five of the seven questions.

**RESULTS**

Responses for the first question (AttBrand1) suggest that the Japanese respondents had stronger preferences for more heavily advertised fast-food brands, followed by Chinese and American respondents. The ANOVA (see Table 2) revealed overall significant differences ($p < .020$). As shown in Table 3, a Tukey test was run to test for specific country differences and showed significant differences between Japan and the United States ($p < .016$).
When asked about the preference for certain brands of fast-food (AttBrand3), significant overall group differences were found ($p < .016$). Specifically, respondents from the United States agreed with this statement most strongly, followed by those from China and Japan respectively. The Tukey technique (see Table 3) revealed that significant differences existed only between Japan and the United States ($p < .025$).

When asked about how much they cared about the brands of fast-food purchased (AttBrand4), significant overall differences were shown ($p < .009$). The U.S. respondents agreed less strongly that they cared about brand-name fast-foods than did the other groups. As shown in Table 2, the ANOVA revealed significant overall between-country differences at the .009 level, while the Tukey test (see Table 3) showed significant differences shown between Chinese and American respondents specifically ($p < .008$).

When questioned about preferences of brand name to off-brand fast-foods (AttBrand5), overall differences were found between countries at

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Grand</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AttBrand1. I prefer the more heavily advertised brands of fast-food</td>
<td>4.172 ± 1.361</td>
<td>3.994 ± 1.624</td>
<td>3.747 ± 1.692</td>
<td>3.943 ± 1.589</td>
<td>2, 609</td>
<td>3.955</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AttBrand2. Well-known companies make quality fast-food</td>
<td>4.100 ± 1.358</td>
<td>3.829 ± 1.697</td>
<td>3.942 ± 1.829</td>
<td>3.956 ± 1.665</td>
<td>2, 608</td>
<td>1.197</td>
<td>.303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AttBrand4. I don’t care about the brands of fast-food that I buy</td>
<td>4.212 ± 1.390</td>
<td>3.791 ± 1.944</td>
<td>4.315 ± 1.901</td>
<td>4.137 ± 1.790</td>
<td>2, 605</td>
<td>4.705</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AttBrand5. Brand-named fast-food is better than “off-brands”</td>
<td>4.316 ± 1.534</td>
<td>3.707 ± 1.779</td>
<td>3.794 ± 1.796</td>
<td>3.921 ± 1.735</td>
<td>2, 605</td>
<td>6.733</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AttBrand6. I usually choose the more expensive brand of fast-foods</td>
<td>3.594 ± 1.398</td>
<td>2.994 ± 1.682</td>
<td>2.965 ± 1.623</td>
<td>3.155 ± 1.602</td>
<td>2, 602</td>
<td>9.525</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AttBrand7. Well-known brands of fast-foods are best for me</td>
<td>3.813 ± 1.324</td>
<td>3.491 ± 1.748</td>
<td>3.584 ± 1.658</td>
<td>3.624 ± 1.598</td>
<td>2, 598</td>
<td>1.910</td>
<td>.149</td>
</tr>
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* 1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Strongly Agree.
the .001 level (see Table 2), with Japanese respondents agreeing most strongly, followed by the U.S. and Chinese respondents. The Tukey test (see Table 3) revealed significant differences between Japanese and Chinese respondents ($p < .003$), as well as between Japanese and U.S. respondents ($p < .006$).

The question regarding the preference for expensive fast-food brands (AttBrand6) also revealed an overall significant difference between countries ($p < .001$), with the Japanese teens tending to agree most strongly, followed by those from China and the U.S., respectively (see Table 2). As shown in Table 3, the Tukey test revealed significant differences between Japanese respondents and Chinese respondents ($p < .001$)
specifically, as well as between the Japanese and U.S. respondents ($p < .001$).

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the present study generally do not support the global teenager hypothesis as it relates to fast food. The results suggest that American teens are less likely than the Chinese and Japanese teens to prefer highly advertised fast-food brands. This is consistent with Schaefer, Hermans, and Parker (2005) who found that relative to Japanese and Chinese teenagers, Americans teens were generally more skeptical of advertising. The authors postulated that the jaded American teens had experienced relatively higher levels of advertising saturation throughout their lives. It is estimated that over $1$ billion dollars worth of television advertising is directed at America’s youth each year and another $4.5$ billion on youth-targeted sales promotions and another $2$ billion on public relations, including event marketing and school relations (McNeal, 1999).

While the findings suggest American teens have lower preference levels for highly advertised fast-food brands in general, they also appear to have stronger preferences for specific fast-food brands. This suggests that fast-food companies have achieved some level of success in their branding efforts with this group. Early on, this group has been targeted with various items and promotions. According to Ji (2000), the likelihood of a child-brand relationship developing is directly related to child-brand interaction opportunities. Clearly, American children have had ample opportunity to form fast-food brand relationships throughout their lifelong brand experiences. These experiences can be either direct (e.g., consuming the product) or indirect (e.g., viewing television commercials). In a content analysis of Saturday morning television commercials, Kotz and Story (1994) found that 54 percent were for food products, of which 11 percent were for fast-food restaurants. Advertisers are not restricted to reaching children during Saturday morning. Since 2000, American fast-food companies have had access to 38 percent of U.S. middle and high school students through the controversial Channel One. Each school day this channel delivers 10-minute-long current event programs along with two minutes of embedded commercials to participating schools (Walsh, 2000).

The Chinese respondents reported caring significantly more about the brands of fast-food outlets patronized than did either the Japanese or
Americans. At least in the realm of fast-food, this finding is supportive of Tse’s (1996) contention that Chinese place more importance on brands’ social value than do Westerners. Tse argued that Chinese consumers use brands to disassociate from out-groups, and in-groups have greater influence concerning brand-name choice. Consequently, he proposed that relative to Westerners, Chinese consumers would be more likely to match consumed brands with perceived social status. The present results support this contention.

While the findings suggest that Chinese respondents cared more about fast-food brands than did their counterparts, the Japanese agreed more strongly that brand-named fast foods were superior to off-brands. Similarly, the Japanese also agreed more strongly that well-known fast-food brands suited them best. As Han and Schmitt (1997) suggest, Japanese generally do not trust products of unknown origin, and corporate family reputation plays an important part in brand evaluations. Realizing this, Proctor & Gamble began providing manufacturer information at the conclusion of their Pampers diapers commercials in Japan (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

The findings suggest that Japanese teens are more likely to patronize expensive fast-food brand outlets. This may be explained by the superior spending capacity of the Japanese teens. Schaefer, Hermans, and Parker (2004) found that Japanese teen respondents reported nearly double the discretionary spending power of American teen respondents, and approximately 20 times that of the Chinese teen respondents. Indeed, prior research suggests that teens’ discretionary income may be positively related to fast-food consumption (Bowman et al., 2004).

**MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

In the United States, and increasingly in East Asia, fast-food outlets are ubiquitous. Teenagers have no doubt contributed to this phenomenon. Brand managers with an appreciation for the cultural differences in teens’ fast-food brand perceptions and attitudes are likely to experience greater levels of success in the global marketplace.

The findings of the present study suggest that advertising-saturated American teens tend to be less responsive to fast-food advertising than Japanese teens. This implies fast-food firms operating in the United States should consider advertising strategies that focus on more advertising-responsive age segments, such as pre-teens. Such individuals are also likely to be in the brand preference development process. The
consistent use of this strategy by McDonald’s (e.g., Ronald McDonald, birthday parties, and Happy Meals) has likely contributed to their global success.

The results suggest that when targeting advertising-skeptical American teenagers, firms should consider nontraditional marketing approaches, such as online advertising and product placement in video games. In 2004, Burger King created the now infamous Subservient Chicken Web site, where visitors command a chicken (portrayed by a man in a chicken suit) to perform certain acts (e.g., jump, run, fall). Originally seeded in chat rooms, the Web site received more than a million hits its first day, and 20 million in its first week. Participants apparently responded to the “get chicken just the way you like it” message, as same store sales volume increased by an average of nine percent versus the prior year (Anderson, 2005). Another way to potentially reach the advertising-elusive teen male is through product and advertising placement in video games. McDonald’s has opened virtual outlets in the video game The Sims; and Crazy Taxi passengers ask to be dropped off at Pizza Hut (Guardian Unlimited, 2005).

Given the tendency for Japanese consumers to infer product quality from company reputation, managers should consider targeting Japanese adolescents with advertising communicating company reputation-based quality. Moreover, the findings suggest that price appeals may be counterproductive, as Japanese teens expressed greater preference for expensive fast-food brands than did their Chinese and American counterparts. Such value- and price-oriented appeals may lessen the perceived quality and desirability of such brands among the quality-oriented Japanese teens.

Advertising may contribute to the perceived foreignness of a fast-food brand. As noted earlier, many older Japanese never visit American fast-food restaurants, which they typically view as foreign. However, advertising may have led many younger Japanese view these outlets as distinctly Japanese. Ironically, this means teens from different cultures may perceive the same fast-food outlets as originating from their own respective cultures. Thus, U.S. fast-food companies may want to avoid American-oriented advertising imagery in Japan. In contrast, Chinese teens may perceive foreign brands as being more prestigious and impressive (Eckhardt and Houston, 2002) and therefore a place where one can enhance their own image. This type of “face gaining/saving” can be used in advertising which emphasizes the higher image of these restaurants over those that are locally owned and operated. Consequently,
American fast-food firms need not conceal their foreign origins when marketing to Chinese teens.

Clearly, managers of multinational fast-food outlets need to understand the differences in perception and cultures. Advertising must adapt to each culture to emphasize the brand name differently depending upon the cultures in question. Future research might continue to examine the “global teenager” concept and determine if attitudes are changing within cultures and becoming more homogenized so that advertising might also become more standardized.

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