

Managing International Brand Equity In Markets With High Cultural Diversity: An Empirical Study Of Kinshasa Consumers.

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Abstract: This study examines the strategic management of foreign brands in the Congolese market, within a context marked by globalization and diverse local expectations. The main objective is to analyze how companies manage to reconcile global coherence with local adaptation in their brand strategies. The research adopts a quantitative approach based on a sample of 201 respondents in Kinshasa, allowing for an examination of the influence of cultural and economic factors on consumer perception and engagement with foreign brands. Statistical analyses, including Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and multiple regression, identified several key dimensions structuring brand perception: quality and brand image, accessibility and adaptation to the local market, as well as communication and customer satisfaction. The results reveal that economic factors exert a significant influence on the preference for foreign brands, while cultural factors play a more indirect role, linked to symbolic proximity and the perceived legitimacy of the companies. The study thus highlights the need for a glocalization approach, which combines the strength of an international identity with nuanced contextual adaptation. The success of foreign brands in the Democratic Republic of Congo depends on their ability to combine global prestige, economic accessibility, and cultural resonance.

Keywords: brand equity, foreign brand, Kinshasa, cultural diversity, international marketing

Résumé : Cette étude s'intéresse à la gestion stratégique des marques étrangères sur le marché congolais, dans un contexte marqué par la mondialisation des échanges et la diversité des attentes locales. L'objectif principal est d'analyser comment les entreprises parviennent à concilier cohérence globale et adaptation locale dans leurs stratégies de marque. La recherche adopte une démarche quantitative fondée sur un échantillon de 201 répondants à Kinshasa, permettant d'examiner l'influence des facteurs culturels et économiques sur la perception et l'adhésion des consommateurs aux marques étrangères. Les analyses statistiques, notamment l'Analyse en Composantes Principales (ACP) et la régression multiple, ont permis de dégager plusieurs dimensions essentielles structurant la perception des marques : la qualité et l'image de marque, l'accessibilité et l'adaptation au marché local, ainsi que la communication et la satisfaction client. Les résultats révèlent que les facteurs économiques exercent une influence significative sur la préférence pour les marques étrangères, tandis que les facteurs culturels jouent un rôle plus indirect, lié à la proximité symbolique et à la légitimité perçue des entreprises. L'étude met ainsi en évidence la nécessité d'une approche de glocalisation, qui associe la force d'une identité internationale à une adaptation contextuelle fine. La réussite des marques étrangères en République Démocratique du Congo dépend de leur capacité à allier prestige global, accessibilité économique et résonance culturelle.

Mots clés : capital marque, marque étrangère, Kinshasa, diversité culturelle, marketing international

INTRODUCTION

While the internationalization of brands opens up considerable opportunities for growth and competitiveness, it raises a central issue: the relevance of the offering to the diversity of local expectations. Although some companies benefit from strong global brand

equity, their performance abroad depends largely on their ability to understand, interpret, and integrate the specific cultural, economic, and social characteristics of each market.

Managing a brand internationally is not simply a matter of mechanically transposing a marketing model from one country to another. On the contrary, it requires in-depth strategic thinking that encompasses adapting products and services, modulating brand messaging, and organizing distribution channels to suit local realities. This requirement is particularly pronounced in culturally rich contexts, where values, symbols, and social representations directly influence consumer behavior.[1].

One of the major dilemmas lies in striking a balance between standardization and adaptation. While standardization promotes overall consistency and enables economies of scale, it also carries the risk of mismatches, or even rejection, in certain markets. Conversely, excessive adaptation can weaken brand identity and complicate operational management.[2] This paradox is one of the most debated issues in international marketing today.

Furthermore, the emergence of the Congolese market, the increasing diversification of needs, and the sophistication of local expectations require companies to adopt a more flexible, contextualized, and, in some cases, co-creative approach. Therefore, a brand's success in the Congolese market depends not only on its commercial power or global brand recognition, but primarily on its ability to resonate with local consumers.

From this perspective, it appears essential to examine the concrete strategies that companies deploy to effectively manage their brand in the Congolese market, while ensuring a match with local demand.

1. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Conceptual framework

1.1.1. Concept about the brand

In everyday language, we use the word "brand" to refer to a name, a logo, or a company known to the general public. But from a more in-depth marketing perspective, a brand goes far beyond this simplistic definition. It represents a complex set of signs, perceptions, emotions, and experiences that allow a product, service, or company to stand out in a given market.[3] It is both a benchmark and a strategic lever for creating value, not only for the company, but also for the consumer.

From an etymological point of view, the term "brand" derives from the Old French word "marche," itself from the Germanic word "marka," meaning "boundary, border." This root is not insignificant, as it clearly illustrates the primary function of a brand: to mark a difference, to draw a line of demarcation between one product and others. In the days of cattle ranchers, a brand was a physical mark burned onto an animal's hide to indicate its owner. Even today, the brand retains this identity-defining function, although it has largely evolved into more symbolic forms.

According to Kapferer (2008), a brand is "a name that influences the perception of the product." This means that the product itself is not enough: what makes the difference is how it is perceived thanks to the brand. A coffee sold in a plain cup will not taste the same, nor will it cost the same, as the same coffee served in a cup bearing the "Starbucks" logo. This is where the full symbolic power of the brand comes into play.[4].

1.1.2. A strategic construction

Creating a brand is not simply about inventing a name or designing a logo. It's a long-term strategic process that requires coherent thinking about the company's mission, its values, its market positioning, its target audience, and above all, how it wants to be perceived. In this context, the brand becomes an intangible but extremely valuable asset.

Some brands are worth billions of dollars without owning factories or inventory. It's not the physical structure that creates value, but the image, the reputation, the trust the brand inspires. Apple, for example, derives much of its strength not solely from its

products, but from its brand universe: innovation, simplicity, elegance, exclusivity. These intangible elements forge a loyalty that transcends rationality.[5].

From this perspective, a brand is an asset, sometimes called brand equity. It encompasses all the competitive advantages a company gains from being known, recognized, liked, or respected. A strong brand facilitates the introduction of new products, reassures distributors, attracts talent, and, above all, fosters customer loyalty.[4].

1.1.3. International brand strategy

In a world where economic borders are becoming increasingly porous, companies are called upon to rethink their brand strategies beyond their domestic market. Internationalization is no longer a luxury reserved for large multinationals, but a strategic necessity to ensure growth, competitiveness, and sometimes even survival. Therefore, managing a brand on an international scale requires delicate, often complex, choices between uniformity and adaptation.[6].

It's not simply a matter of exporting a product or logo from one country to another. It's about conveying an identity, a promise of value, and ensuring that this promise is understood, accepted, and appreciated in often very different cultural, economic, and social environments. This is where strategic thinking about international brand management truly begins.

1.1.4. Global brands with local faces

Many large companies have embraced globalization as a strategic pillar. Coca-Cola, for example, uses the same visual identity in almost every country but adapts its messaging and campaigns to suit local cultural references. In India, the brand has used local musicians and actors in its advertisements. In Africa, it often emphasizes solidarity, community spirit, and family relationships, which are central cultural values.

In the mobile phone sector, brands like Samsung and Huawei design specific features for certain markets, such as dual SIM in Africa or selfie-optimized cameras in Asia. This clearly demonstrates that adaptation can affect both form and function.

Globalization is therefore more than just a marketing adjustment: it's a true business philosophy. It requires actively listening to markets, close collaboration with local stakeholders, and a certain humility. It's no longer about "conquering" a market, but about integrating into it intelligently, almost like a respectful guest.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding international brand management strategies relies on several theoretical models.

- Hofstede's theory of culture[1] highlights the cultural differences that structure consumer behavior according to six dimensions (power distance, individualism, masculinity, etc.).
- Kapferer's brand identity prism[4] helps to understand how a brand builds and communicates its identity through six facets: physical, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and mentalization.
- Keller's Brand Equity Model[7] explains the perceived value of a brand based on the mental and emotional associations created in the consumer's mind.

These frameworks allow us to understand the tensions between global coherence and local adaptation, at the heart of international marketing.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The choice of a mixed approach is explained by the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon studied. The quantitative approach makes it possible to measure the importance of cultural and economic factors in brand adaptation, while the qualitative approach provides contextual and interpretive insights.

A sample of 201 respondents was selected, in accordance with the methodological recommendations of Hair et al.[8], according to which a minimum of 150 to 200 observations is required for a robust PCA and multiple regression.

The statistical analyses used (PCA, multiple regression, classification) aim to identify the latent structures and causal relationships between cultural, economic and behavioral variables.

3. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The analysis aims to examine several variables simultaneously in order to highlight complex relationships, latent structures, and homogeneous profiles within the sample. Unlike the univariate approach, which is limited to describing each variable in isolation, multivariate analysis makes it possible to identify correlations, groupings, or underlying dimensions that guide individual behavior.

This approach provides a more nuanced reading of the data by revealing not only the explanatory dimensions of behaviors, but also the typical profiles of responsible consumers, which enriches the understanding of green marketing strategies and their reception by different categories of the population.

Table 1: Variance explained by perceptual dimensions

perceptual dimensions	Equity	Variance share	Cumulative (%)
1. Quality and brand image	1.477	9.2%	9.2%
2. Accessibility and adaptation to the local market	1.411	8.8%	18.0%
3. Communication and international reputation	1.293	8.1%	26.1%
4. Price and perceived value	1.232	7.7%	33.8%
5. Customer trust and satisfaction	1.191	7.4%	41.3%
6. Innovation and differentiation of the offer	1.097	6.9%	48.1%
7. Product distribution and availability	1.019	6.4%	54.5%
8. Cultural and symbolic resonance	1.010	6.3%	60.8%
9. Social commitment and perceived responsibility	0.947	5.9%	66.7%
10. Brand loyalty and attachment	0.881	5.5%	72.2%
11. User Experience	0.863	5.4%	77.6%
12. Sensitivity to advertising	0.841	5.3%	82.9%
13. Reputation and perceived credibility	0.738	4.6%	87.5%
14. Social influence and consumer mimicry	0.718	4.5%	92.0%
15. Modernity and perceived attractiveness	0.667	4.2%	96.1%
16. Overall satisfaction and loyalty	0.617	3.9%	100.0%

Principal component analysis identified sixteen perceptual dimensions that structure the representation of foreign brands in the minds of Kinshasa consumers. The first eight dimensions alone explain 60.8% of the total variance, reflecting the diversity of criteria considered in brand evaluation.

The first dimension, entitled Quality and Brand Image, represents the most decisive variable: it encompasses the perception of product performance, reliability, and brand awareness. It reflects the symbolic and international capital that foreign brands possess in the eyes of consumers.

The second dimension, Accessibility and adaptation to the local market, highlights economic and contextual criteria (price, availability, proximity of distribution), emphasizing the need for an effective territorial anchoring strategy.

The following dimensions complete this scheme: International Communication and Reputation (3rd) illustrates the importance of visibility and global brand messaging; Customer Trust and Satisfaction (5th) shows that loyalty depends as much on the consistency of the experience as on the marketing promise; finally, Cultural and Symbolic Resonance (8th) confirms that consumers value brands that can integrate local cultural codes into their image.

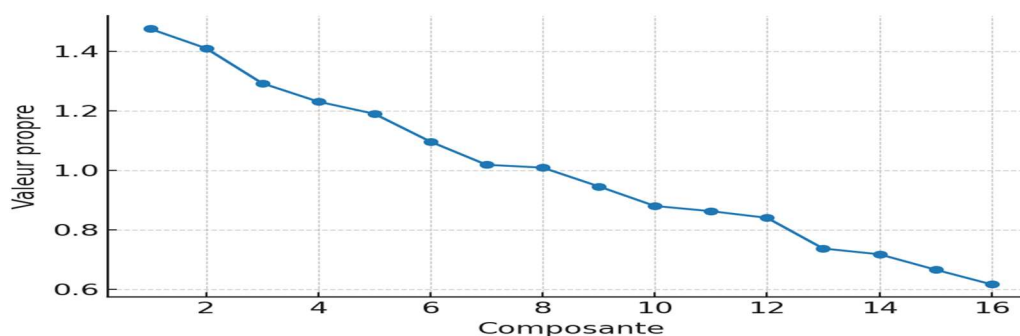
Thus, this factor structure highlights a complex dynamic where perceived quality, symbolic value, and local adaptation constitute the three major pillars of the strategic management of foreign brands. These results reinforce the logic of a glocal approach, reconciling the strength of a global identity with a heightened sensitivity to the cultural and economic realities of the Congolese market.

Table 2: Correlation validity test (KMO and Bartlett)

Statistical test	Observed value	Expected adequacy threshold	Interpretation
KMO Index (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin)	0.499	≥ 0.60	Weak correlation fit for an AFE
Bartlett's test (χ^2 , df, p)	$\chi^2 = 102.86$; df = 120; p < 0.001	p < 0.05 (expected if R $\neq$ I)	The correlations between variables are significant (non-identity matrix)

The KMO index (0.499) indicates a low-to-medium fit of the data for factor analysis, suggesting that some variables should potentially be removed or grouped. However, Bartlett's test is significant (p < 0.001), confirming the existence of sufficient correlations between the variables to consider a cautious dimensionality reduction.

Figure 1: Eigenvalue plot (Scree Plot) of the Principal Component Analysis (PCA)

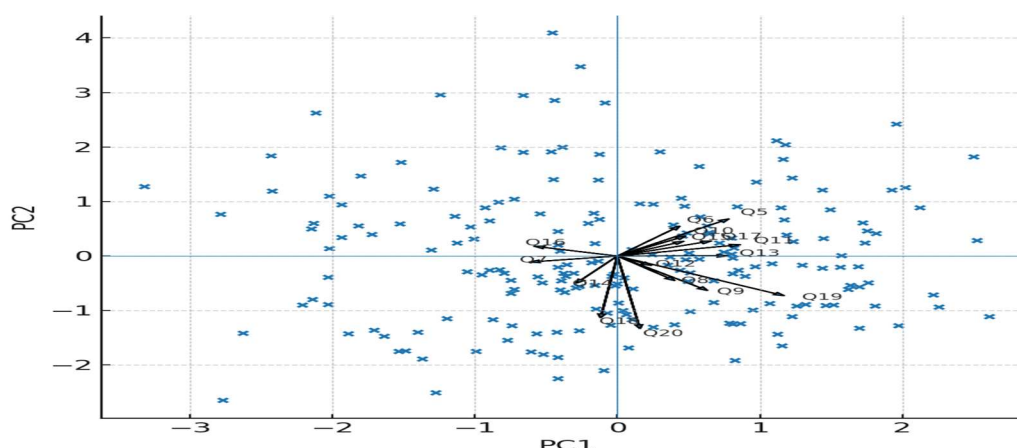


The KMO index of 0.499, below the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicates a low-to-medium fit of the sample to PCA and suggests that the factor structure should be interpreted with caution. However, Bartlett's test ($\chi^2 \approx 102.86$; $df = 120$; $p < 0.001$) confirms that the correlation matrix differs significantly from the identity matrix, thus justifying the application of PCA. Examination of the eigenvalues shows that the first eight dimensions (values ≥ 1) explain 60.8% of the total variance, revealing a multidimensional phenomenon where perceptions are not reducible to a single dominant axis. More specifically:

- **Dimension 1** –Quality and brand image(9.2%): captures the overall judgment on the performance, reliability and symbolic capital of brands.
- **Dimension 2** –Accessibility and adaptation to the local market(8.8%): includes price, availability and proximity of local distribution/communication.
- **Dimensions 3 to 8**(each 6-8%): Communication and international reputation, Price and perceived value, Trust and customer satisfaction, Innovation and differentiation of the offer, Distribution and availability of products, Cultural and symbolic resonance of secondary but relevant factors which complete the picture of perceptions.

Beyond Dimension 8, the variance explained by each component becomes marginal ($< 6\%$), limiting their analytical value. In short, the extracted structure suggests that managing foreign brands must simultaneously integrate quality and image, local accessibility, and communication/cultural adjustments, rather than relying on a single dimension.

Figure 2: Biplot of the first two main dimensions “Quality & Brand Image” and “Accessibility & Local Communication”



The biplot above illustrates the joint representation of variables and individuals according to the first two dimensions derived from PCA. The first dimension, entitled "Quality and Brand Image," groups together variables associated with perceived performance, brand awareness, and the symbolic value of foreign brands. It expresses the overall value attributed to the brand by consumers, linked to the trust and satisfaction generated. The second dimension, designated as "Accessibility and Local Communication," reflects how consumers perceive the adaptation of brands to the realities of the Congolese market, through criteria such as price, distribution, proximity, and the relevance of the advertising message.

The dispersion of individuals on the factorial plane reveals a heterogeneity of perception profiles: individuals located on the positive side of the first dimension demonstrate a strong adherence to the reputation and perceived quality of major international brands, while those positioned on the second dimension express a preference for accessible, contextualized and culturally close brands.

This dual factor structure highlights the strategic duality of international marketing: companies must simultaneously preserve the coherence of their global identity and ensure a strong local presence to meet the specific expectations of the Congolese market. These results confirm the importance of a glocalization approach, reconciling global prestige and contextual proximity in the strategic management of brands.

2. Multiple regression – H2 test

Setting	Coef. β (std)	SE	t
Constant	-0.000	0.070	-0.00
Culture Index	0.015	0.116	0.13
Economic Index	0.217	0.095	2.30

Adjustment: $R^2 = 0.026$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.016$, $F = 2.64$ ($N = 201$).

The multiple regression model aims to assess the respective influence of cultural and economic factors on consumer preference for sustainable brands. More specifically, the dependent variable of favoring sustainable brands was modeled as a function of two standardized explanatory variables: the cultural index and the economic index.

The results indicate that the constant is practically zero ($\beta = -0.000$), reflecting the absence of a systematic effect outside the variables included in the model. The cultural index has a low and non-significant coefficient ($\beta = 0.015$; $t = 0.13$), suggesting that, in the sample studied, cultural differences do not have a direct impact on the stated preference for sustainable brands. In contrast, the economic index is positively and significantly correlated with the dependent variable ($\beta = 0.217$; $t = 2.30$), meaning that improved economic conditions, particularly income level, purchasing power, and market stability, increase the likelihood of embracing foreign brands perceived as sustainable and high-quality.

The model fit ($R^2 = 0.026$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.016$; $F = 2.64$; $N = 201$) shows that the proportion of variance explained remains modest, which is common in behavioral models based on individual perceptions. This suggests that other variables—such as brand trust, user experience, or sensitivity to communication—could also influence this preference.

These results lead us to conclude that, in the context of the Congolese market, economic factors are the primary determinants of adherence to foreign brands, while cultural factors act indirectly or in a complementary manner.

Conclusion

The study on the strategic management of foreign brands in the Congolese market has provided a better understanding of the challenges associated with their adaptation to a local environment characterized by significant cultural diversity and specific economic constraints. The results show that the success of an international brand depends not only on its global reputation, but also on its ability to integrate the social, economic, and cultural realities of the host country into its positioning strategy.

Factor analysis revealed several key dimensions in the perception of foreign brands. The first, related to quality and brand image, reflects the strength of symbolic capital and the trust inspired by certain globally recognized brands. The second, focused on accessibility and adaptation to the local market, underscores the importance for companies to adjust their pricing, distribution, and communication policies to suit the specificities of the Congolese market. These two dimensions reflect the need for a balance between global consistency and local flexibility in brand strategy.

The results of the multiple regression also confirm that economic factors have a significant influence on consumer preference, while the effect of cultural variables appears more indirect. This suggests that purchasing power and economic conditions are key drivers in purchasing decisions, without neglecting the importance of cultural elements, which strengthen brand proximity and legitimacy.

From a strategic perspective, it appears that companies operating in the Congolese market would benefit from adopting a "glocalization" approach, combining a strong international identity with thoughtful local adaptation. Such an approach would maintain the consistency of their global positioning while fostering greater acceptance among local consumers.

In summary, this research highlights that the effective management of foreign brands relies on the ability to reconcile global prestige, economic accessibility, and cultural resonance. It contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of international marketing in emerging markets and opens avenues for future studies on the impact of cultural values, emotions, and digital technologies on brand building in Africa.

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