Mi Swing Es Tropical – But Not My Consumers: Economic Realism and Cultural Contradictions in Latin American Marketing of Apple’s I-Conic Products

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Due to geopolitics, regulatory regimes, and strategic factors, the highly desirable brands from Apple such as iPod and iPhone have poor availability, inadequate post-sales service systems, and high prices in most countries in Latin America. This creates feelings of resentment across the large range of Latin American consumers. Based on netnographic interpretation of a gadget oriented blog site and other sources, this paper presents a framework to understand the interplay of economically rational acts and culturally complex and contradictory flows that arise in Apple’s marketing of its highly sought iconic products.

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Economic Realism and Cultural Contradictions in Latin American Marketing of Apple’s i-Conic Products
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In this age of globalized media and densely connected ethnoscapes of USA and Latin America, consumers from Latin America are well aware of the features and iconic prominence of Apple’s electronics products. Their access to such products, however, is extremely limited due to macro-level or firm-level economic, regulatory and strategic factors. The constricted flows of Apple’s i-Conic products to Latin America juxtaposed with unrestricted and appropriated flows of cultural capital elements from these countries create feelings of neglect and resentment across the large range of Latin American consumers. This paper is driven by the following questions: What are the international cultural consequences of the perceived neglect of the Latin American market by Apple, and how can these be explained in terms of frameworks for unfolding globalization?

Given the economically rational corporate and consumer acts, as well as the cultural complexity and contradictory flows as consequences of Apple’s marketing of its highly sought iconic products, this paper presents a framework to understand the interplay of these forces. In the contemporary interconnected world with open social media, such contradictory cultural elements in the marketing of iconic brands attract notice and often very negative feedbacks, grounded in the center-periphery dynamics of the global cultural economy. Based on netnographic interpretation of a gadget oriented blog site and other sources, we find that the Apple’s affinity for Latin cultural themes in its marketing often produces patterns of resentment, stereotyping, xenophobia, appeals to economic realism and political digs from consumers.

As consumptionscapes globalize—via media, technology, finance and people connections—desirable objects of the global consumer culture and, even more importantly, the desire for such objects, cannot be confined to merely the center of the global economy. Desire and styles in a globalized world spill over quickly from the center into peripheral locations. Since the flows of desire have become relatively frictionless, consumers in the periphery resent situations where flows of objects of desire are constricted, as appears to be the case with Apple’s i-Conic products in Latin and Caribbean markets. The cultural dominance of the center, however, in part derives from the center’s ability to identify, appropriate, absorb, reposition and re-present appealing cultural elements derived from the periphery. The hit “Mi Swing es Tropical” iPod commercial is a vivid illustration of this process, as employed by Apple and its supporting advertising and media system.

In way of protest, lowbrow and crude Latin cultural elements (bandolier outfit, Mariachi-in-chief designation for Apple CEO, and references to his alleged penchant for tofu-stuffed jalapeños) are employed by the Gizmodo blog in the article “Apple to Latin America: We Don’t Care About You, Compadres.” Comments on the Gizmodo article from many in Latin American echoed the frustration expressed by the blog author but North American comments (including from Mexico) were either dismissive of the claims in the Gizmodo article, or blamed Latin American political regimes. In the Apple vs. Latin American consumers contest, the balance of economic power lies clearly in Apple’s favor. In fact, the consumers of the center seem to rise up in defense of the brand to squelch the attempted subversion from the (oft-aspirant) consumers of the periphery. This article highlights the complex relationships between the center and periphery, where the type and extent of negative consequences of consumerism evolve from the interacting consumptionscapes of the center and the periphery.

REFERENCES
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