

## **Disney's Glocalization in Shanghai: the emotional branding strategy**

Wenjie Yuan<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Monash University, Melbourne, 3800, Victoria, Australia

[wyua0001@student.monash.edu](mailto:wyua0001@student.monash.edu)

**Keywords:** Glocalization; Emotional Branding; China; Shanghai Disneyland; Cultural Symbol; International Disneyland;

**Abstract.** This paper applies the emotional branding strategy to analyze Shanghai Disneyland's successful adaption in China. After Paris and Hong Kong Disneyland all hard to make decent profits for years, Disney executives attempted to take new branding strategy to create emotional attachments to the brand. This strategy successfully prompted Disney glocalizing its brand under a Chinese cultural context. The adaption process of Shanghai Disneyland will be analyzed by using the framework of four antecedents for creating emotional attachments for brands: Sentimentality and emotional memory; Socialization; User-derived benefits; Traditional customer outcome.

### **1. Introduction**

The question of how to make the business succeed in the global market under the different cultural context, has always been a puzzle to multinational corporations. This issue was historically discussed around whether, in what kind of situation should branding strategies across the national border be standardized or localized (Wilken & Sinclair, 2011) [1]. As one of the world's largest entertainment corporations, Disney also perplexed with the situation of whether keep the original cultural elements and settings of American ways, or make specific adaptations to each different market. Since the 1980s Disney company began to open the oversea Disneyland theme park every decade, with Tokyo Disneyland in 1983, Paris Disneyland in 1992, Hong Kong Disneyland in 2005 and Shanghai Disneyland in 2016. After finding success in Tokyo, Disneyland in Paris and Hong Kong are all hard to make decent profit and culturally connect with local in classical American culture way (Matusitz, 2011) [2]. For Shanghai Disneyland, rather than taking the same branding strategy that has proved not profitable in Paris and Hong Kong, Disney blurred the line between American and Chinese culture by removing cultural and contextual references to America from Shanghai.

By utilizing "Authentically Disney, Distinctly Chinese" slogan, Shanghai Disneyland did run a considerable financial success compared to Paris and Hong Kong. This paper argues that Shanghai Disneyland takes emotional branding strategy as an effective tool of being glocalized, and distinguish itself by creating new attractions to emotionally connect with Chinese consumers. Therefore, this paper will firstly illustrate the theory of glocalization and emotional branding strategy. And then giving a comparison of different oversea theme park's historical effort at connecting with local consumers. Finally, based on the experiences Disney

learned from previous international parks, this paper will use emotional branding as a framework to analyze how Disney glocalized and formed a visceral resonance with Chinese visitors in Shanghai Disneyland. The analyzing of is based on author's personal play experience of Shanghai Disneyland in June of 2017. The challenge faced by Shanghai Disneyland will be discussed at the end of the article.

## **2. Glocalization & Emotional branding**

After a series of cartoon image created and released by Disney studios like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Alice's Wonderland, Disney has gradually become a famous media company that emphasis on delivering the message of loves, family and classical America culture (Bryman, 2004) [3]. Getting a remarkable success in America, Disney begins to conduct a wild expansion plan to expand Disney's media landscape and being globalized. By taking both vertical and horizontal integration, Disney had numerous TV channel, purchased Lucas, Pixar and recently 21st century Fox, ventured into tourism sector to open theme park all over the world [3]. However, Disney faces a dilemma that the audience may feel familiar to its cartoon character, but the image is always being interpreted and perceived under a specific cultural context. Like what Winseck and Pike (2007) [4] questioned that the American culture has successfully globalized other local culture is debatable. Since a cultural product is historically and continually being understood in a specific culture thinking mode. To better target local audience and created a culture resonance with visitors, Disney must accommodate local culture background and specific conditions though glocalization.

As firstly stated and developed by Robertson (1994) [5], glocalization is a term mixed by the words globalization and localization. Glocalization refers to glocalize the brand or business by accommodating the global cultural under a local culture context (Lam, 2009) [6], a process of cultural hybridization to penetrate global culture into local (Bryman, 2006) [7], and an adjustment to local cultural setting and mindsets by changing of norms and practices (Kraidy, 2002) [8]. According to communication scholar Kraidy (2002) [8], glocalization successfully questioned the invasion of western mainstream culture. Although glocalization to some extent contributes to cultural homogenization, it triggers the consciousness of local cultural identity and not erases the uniqueness of specific culture. Glocalization, in other word, is relocalization (Archer, 2008) [9]. The Glocalization is successful only when the adaption to the local market is successful, and the adaption here means flexibility and acquaintance of local culture [9]. For Shanghai Disneyland, since Disney corporation is considered foreign to Chinese consumers, they are well aware that the mechanical cloning of Disney's whole setting will not fit this market. As a result, Disney utilized emotional branding strategy to better glocalized "American Disney" into "Chinese Disney" through creating new attractions with Chinese symbol to attract consumer's emotional attachment to Disney.

According to Oswald [10] (2012)'s definition, a brand is a symbol that communicates with its target consumer through a symbolic process underlining a shared-value and connection that cannot receive and benefit from other competitors. Often the cases, when this symbol satisfies consumer emotionally, the brand can easily set up resonance with consumer and be rewarded by considerable profits [10]. In the 1990s, emotional branding

became popular in replacing the traditional benefit-driven marketing strategies and gradually influenced a brand's glocalization process (Morrison and Crane, 2007) [11]. As argued by Cheung (2012) [12] in his article about emotional branding of Wuliangye and Absolut Vodka in China, a brand's domestic setting and signify can set limits on its connection with new audiences. Therefore, Glocalization and branding process must be paid attention to cultural and historical adaptation in the global market [12]. Emotional branding uses narratives and tactics to establish a consumer-brand line that enables companies to create a long-lasting relationship and brand loyalty [11]. Grisaffe and Nguyen's (2011) [13] raised four antecedents that create emotional attachments to brand include: Sentimentality and emotional memory; Socialization; user-derived benefits and traditional customer outcome which will be used as the theoretical framework in this paper to analyze Disney's branding effort in Shanghai compared to others overseas theme park.

### **3. Disney's glocalization effort at Tokyo, Paris and Hong Kong**

Disney's effort and approach to local cultural issues in each international Disneyland has helped Shanghai Disneyland to build its unique positioning in terms of glocalization and branding strategies. Tokyo Disneyland is Disney's first international park which opened in 1983 (Brannen, 1999) [14]. Disney cooperated with a Japanese local company called Oriental Land Company [14]. Rather than integrating Japanese cultural elements into the park design and construction, OLC hopes to keep the Tokyo Disneyland the same as American one [14]. Brannen (1992) [14] described this decision as "keeping the exotic", which enabled the Japanese to enjoy a foreign culture when they still in Japan. The park's special edition for Japan's consumer culture by integrating Omiyage customs (gifts for relatives) into the park's retailing store, was loved by Japanese visitors [14]. Before the park's opening, Japanese media made a prediction that it won't last long. However, the park significantly won considerable profits at its first opening month with 1 million visitors (Yoshiomi, 2001) [15]. Disney easily won the first war in Tokyo Disneyland which largely encouraged their other expansion around the world. So, there comes with Paris Disneyland, the second international park of Disney.

The Disney company encountered a lot of obstacle in connecting with France visitors which began with its original name: Euro Disneyland. While "Europe" in American perception implied style and a sense of glamor, Europeans only perceived the terms as commerce and business (Matusitz, 2010) [16]. Disney assumed that European may have the same eating habits with American, that is, prefer grab-and-go breakfast and beverage. But the thing tended to become a totally contrary side with hotel eateries always crowded with people waited for service [16]. Moreover, souvenirs produced by Disney was loved by the Japanese, while the French think it is waste of money [16]. Rather than enjoying a foreign entertainment culture provide by Disneyland, the French think Disney did not suited French's behavior and consuming culture. This undoubtedly lead to Paris Disneyland keeps loss-making operation for a long time. However, Disney did not stop its step of expansion. They decided to choose Hong Kong as a third perfect location to achieve it ambitious of globalization.

Different from Tokyo and Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland was built to fulfill both the global dream of Hong Kong and Disney (Choi, 2012) [17]. The underlying assumption of Hong Kong Disneyland was that it is constructed to achieve Hong Kong's desire to be China's world city, meanwhile, providing mainland visitors an opportunity to experience a foreign culture. Hong Kong Disney was then being built almost in an American way and it cannot tell any difference from American one at its opening day. Hong Kong Disneyland did win a profitable success for years, then a significant drop occurred in 2015 since local competitor take over a big part of the market share (Hong Kong Disneyland 2018) [18]. Disney was then perceived as American import and cultural imperialist compared to Ocean Park [2]. To differentiate Shanghai Disneyland from the previous Disneylands, Disney decided to use emotional strategy to position itself as "Distinctly Chinese" rather than "American import".

#### **4. Disney's emotional branding in Shanghai**

##### **4.1 Sentimentality and emotional memory**

According to Grisaffe and Nguyen [13] (2011)'s argument, sentimentality and emotional memory was the first thing to consider in creating brand bonding with consumers. It contains elements of childhood memories, nostalgia, culture identity, and recall of positive memories. Disney adapted a series of changes to integrate Chinese symbols into park's original setting, which is unique to Shanghai Disneyland. The slogan of "Distinctly Chinese" appeared in every corner of the park to arouse and recall the familiar cultural memories. Different from Paris one, Chinese food and snacks are ready in each amusement facility waited to serve. Hua Mulan, a Chinese traditional woman warrior, depicted in Disney's Voyage to the Crystal Grotto, Dream fireworks, Mickey's Storybook and Enchanted Storybook Castle. Moreover, The Garden of Twelve Friends use the signs of the Chinese zodiac (Chinese 12 traditional animal portrait) as Disney's displayed characters to make visitors feel they are consuming Chinese traditional culture. The most popular amusement facility in Shanghai Disneyland: soaring over the horizon, which initially inspired by the American version, replaced the original sight showing fireworks over Disneyland in California and Epcot in Florida (Disney California Adventure park, 2019) [19], with featuring fireworks over Shanghai skyline and World Financial Center. Ending with the view of the Great Wall in China, Horizon film successful showcases the majesty of China in the past and its prosperity and wonders now, which triggers the cultural resonance with Chinese visitors.

##### **4.2 Socialization**

As what Iger (the CEO of Shanghai Disneyland) announced in the opening ceremony of Shanghai Disneyland, Disney park's core design concept is always family-centered (Frater, 2016) [20]. Disney is keen on creating a place where the family can share their happy memory together. As Grisaffe and Nguyen (2011) [13] stated, socialization is another emotional attachment since it connects with family. Familyism and social belonging is a key variable when a brand hopes to emotionally connect with the consumer. Historically, Chinese people attach great importance to family and community, it is common that Chinese traditional family always formed

with three generations, that is, grandparents, parents, and children. For Chinese grandparents who don't quite enjoy with the exciting events and need a place to relax and take a break, there are 3 gardens called Love, Music, and Nature having indigenous trees that come from different part of China recalling Chinese garden's main function: family gathering and socializing. Since the Chinese are used to chat and relax after a meal, most of the restaurants served Chinese food and well-decorated for seating and relaxing. Moreover, Disney created and designed abundant of fireworks, live shows and entertainments accompany with Mandarin to let the elderly join in (Liu et al. 2019) [21].

### **4.3 User-derived benefits**

While emotionally connect with consumers, a brand should take brand user's personal and functional goals into consideration, achieving a safety and comfort consuming environment and offering identifying support [13]. In US Disneyland, with providing an artificial reality and escape from an evil world, the main street was symbolizing the purity and innocent's character of American (Disney California Adventure park, 2019) [19]. The Disney's original storyline like Pirates of the Caribbean can easily remind visitors about their previous memories and experience in Disney, but it still represents foreign culture and cannot provide consumers a sense of security and identifying support. Historically, The Western powers did not leave positive impression in the Chinese modern history. To avoid unnecessary association and emotionally connect with visitors, Disney removed the programs that contain political factors, colonialism, racism, and imperialism. The Disney's most popular program in America, Disneyland railroad [19], is canceled from the Shanghai Disney's construction, possibly because it may relate to the exploitation of Chinese-American labor who built the transcontinental railway in the 19th century and Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The Pirates of the Caribbean in Shanghai Disneyland was designed on a totally new narrative featuring fantasy locales or unidentifiable places to minimize the "America reference" and create a "purely" amusement park.

### **4.4 Traditional customer outcome**

To create emotional brand bonding with consumers, a brand must be identifiable and have unique differentiation from other competitors [13]. Compared to previous Disneyland, Shanghai Disneyland was unique and exclusively created for the Chinese. According to the speech given by Disney's CEO Iger, Disneyland's music was composed jointly by Disney and Chinese composer for shared dreams and great friendship (Frater, 2016) [20]. What is more, Iger announced that he hopes Shanghai Disneyland can be regarded as a partnership between Disney and China, not America. This is totally different from Hong Kong's opening speech emphasizing that Disneyland is a friendship between Hong Kong and America [20]. What Disney wants is to culturally and emotionally connect with Chinese visitors, making them proud of Disney and having a sense of ownership [20]. And this is completely a new strategy compared to other international Disneylands all positioned to be a cooperation and friendship with the United States of America.

## **5. Discussion and Limitations**

Shanghai Disneyland was totally a new international park, a Disneyland belongs to China rather than Disneyland in China. Taking emotional branding's four aspects have successfully given a new direction for Disney's glocalization in China. In terms of cultural adaption in glocalizing a global brand, Shanghai Disney used Chinese symbols like Chinese string in designing Disney's music, integrating zodiac into Disney's original character, building Chinese restaurant and picnic area to especially comfort the elderly. While in Paris Disneyland, it was the culture misunderstanding that caused the hard operation in the end. What is most important, Shanghai Disneyland minimize the political reference or narratives in Disneyland. The Western powers did not leave positive impression in Chinese memory. The unequal treaties and economic concession caused by Opium Wars was consistently perceived as humiliation in China's history. To avoid unnecessary association, Shanghai Disneyland positioned it as new to give Chinese a sense of reassurance and comfort through the whole setting. The brand positioning between Shanghai Disneyland and other international parks was different. Previous Disneylands positioned to be the cooperation between the American and the local, it did work in Tokyo but proved to be failed in Paris and Hong Kong. Shanghai Disneyland was designed to be China's Disneyland and it is cooperation between China and Disney, not America.

However, Disney is about to face a lot of challenge although it made outstanding achievement in China. Even if Disneyland conducted successful glocalization in China, Disney still represents a Western brand. Like what Wasko (2001) [22] argues that the ubiquity of Disney's cultural product accompanying culture homogenization will undoubtedly faltering Citizen's right and culture identity. The prevalent of Disney's culture can be understood as a kind of western cultural invasion, it will affect the inheritance of Chinese mainstream traditional culture. As What Barboza and Brooks (2016) [23] stated in the article, a culture affairs director in Anhui province suggested in a political gathering, "we should not allow Disney built more attractions in China, since if Children follow Western culture to grow up, they will end up preferring Western culture rather than Chinese traditional culture. It is hard to say whether Disney can achieve a sustained success in Chinese market. There are already Chinese local companies see Disney as a competitor such as Wanda Group and Evergrande Group who both keen on developing culture tourism project around China (Xiao, 2015) [24].

## **6. Conclusion**

This essay demonstrated that global brands have to show adaption and adjustment to local preference and culture customs in remaining competitive in the global market. As illustrated before, Hong Kong and Paris Disneyland have learned a lesson from ignoring the importance of understanding the local culture. On the contrary, Shanghai Disneyland utilizes emotional branding as a tool of its glocalization strategy, which has proved to be successful: emotional and sensory memory through integrating Chinese traditional elements, designing for family socialization, removing sensitive political reference to take user benefit into consideration, positioning and differentiating Shanghai Disneyland. Globalization has to be localized through

various strategies according to a different region. Emotional brand considered to be a suitable solution regards to Chinese's collective and parotic consciousness. Disney's experience indicates that the current upward trend in the glocalization of global companies in China should not just adapt brand themes, products or service, but closely linked to the local contexts and the sociocultural environment.

## **References**

- [1] Wilken, R & Sinclair, J 2011, 'Global marketing communications and strategic regionalism', *Globalizations*, vol.9, no.1, pp.1-15.
- [2] Matusitz, J 2011, 'Disney's successful adaptation in Hong Kong: A glocalization perspective', *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, vol.28, no.4, pp.667-681.
- [3] Bryman, A 2004, *The Disneyization of Society*. London: Sage.
- [4] Winseck, D & Pike, M 2007, *Communication and empire: Media, markets, and global communication 1860–193*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- [5] Robertson, R 1994, 'Globalisation or glocalisation?', *Journal of International Communication*, vol. 1, no.1, pp. 33–52.
- [6] Lam, S 2009, 'Global Corporate Cultural Capital as a Drag on Glocalization: Disneyland's Promotion of the Halloween Festival', *Conference Papers - International Communication Association*, vol.32, no.4, pp. 1-31.
- [7] Bryman, A 2006, *Global implications of McDonaldization and Disneyization*. The reader.
- [8] Kraidy, M 2002, 'Hybridity in cultural globalization', *Communication Theory*, vol.12, no.3, pp. 316–339.
- [9] Archer, K 2008, *Cultures of globalization: Coherence, hybridity, contestation*, New York: Routledge.
- [10] Oswald, LR & Oswald, L 2012, *Marketing semiotics: Signs, strategies, and brand value*, Oxford University Press.
- [11] Morrison, S & Crane, FG 2007, 'Building the service brand by creating and managing an emotional brand experience', *Journal of brand management*, vol.14, no.5, pp.410-421.
- [12] Cheung, M 2012, 'The branding of a quality liquor as a symbolic effort toward bringing China forward culturally: A comparative study of Wuliangye and Absolut Vodka', *Semiotics*, pp.471-499.
- [13] Grisaffe, DB & Nguyen, HP 2011, 'Antecedents of emotional attachment to brands', *Journal of Business Research*, vol.64, no.10, pp.1052-1059.

- [14] Brannen, MY 1992, 'Bwana Mickey': Constructing cultural consumption at Tokyo Disneyland', Remade in Japan, pp.216-234.
- [15] Yoshimi, S. 2001. Japan: America in Japan/Japan. In *Dazzled by Disney? The Global Disney Audiences Project*, ed. J. Wasko, M. Phillips, and E. Meehan, 161–81. London: Leicester University Press.
- [16] Matusitz, J 2010, 'Disneyland Paris: a case analysis demonstrating how glocalization works', *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, vol.18, no.3, pp.223-237.
- [17] Choi, K 2012, 'Disneyfication and Localisation: The Cultural Globalisation Process of Hong Kong Disneyland', *Urban Studies* (Sage Publications, Ltd.), vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 383-397.
- [18] Hong Kong Disneyland. 2018. Hong Kong Disneyland annual business review for the fiscal year 2018. [http://hkcorporate.hongkongdisneyland.com/ahongkongdisneyland.disney.go.com/media/hkdlcorp\\_v0100/en\\_US/aboutOurCompany/AnnualBusinessReview18.pdf](http://hkcorporate.hongkongdisneyland.com/ahongkongdisneyland.disney.go.com/media/hkdlcorp_v0100/en_US/aboutOurCompany/AnnualBusinessReview18.pdf) (accessed 5 April 2018).
- [19] Disney California Adventure park. 2018. Soaring Around the world. <https://disneyland.disney.go.com/attractions/disney-california-adventure/soarin/>(accessed 6 April 2018).
- [20] Frater, Patrick. 2016. Bob Iger on Disney Park in Shanghai: 'We Built China's Disneyland' *Variety*, June 14. <https://variety.com/2016/film/news/bob-iger-shanghai-disneyland-1201795768/> (accessed 8 April 2018).
- [21] Liu, Y, Guo, C, Zhang, M, Wu, X & Zhou, Y 2019, 'How to Tour Shanghai Disneyland Park', *Journal of Internet Technology*, vol.20, no.1, pp.25-38.
- [22] Wasko, J, Phillips, M & Meehan, ER 2001, *Dazzled by Disney? The Global Disney Audiences Project*, London: Leicester University Press.
- [23] Barboza, D & Brooks, B 2016. Disney's Magic fails in China. <https://cn.nytimes.com/business/20160614/c15chinadisney2/> (accessed 6 April 2018).
- [24] Xiao, Y 2015, Wanda Group's cultural tourism goal: Surpass Disney in 5 Years. *Sina News*, July 24. <http://finance.sina.com.cn/chanjing/gsnews/20150724/061922779231.shtml> (accessed 9 April 2018).