

Tiger Takes on the World: A Cosmopolitan Beer or a Traditional Brew?

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1. Introduction

As more Asian products advertise internationally, it is worthwhile to examine one of these products and see how it is doing on a global stage. Tiger Beer, which ranked second in brand strength at the Singapore Brand Award 2003, is studied for this research. Tiger Beer publishes two versions of their product web site: one version caters to Asian countries, and the other to non-Asian countries. More specifically, I am interested to examine the cultural elements that are on the product web site to find out if the culture of the country of the origin is presented accurately to the international audience.

2. Experiments, Results, Discussion and Significance

Four cultural elements (language, visual elements, music and the links on the home page) in both versions of the web site's home page are examined to focus my research and qualitative content analysis was used to compare them.

The Singapore web site for Tiger Beer is in English. All navigational tools and information were written in English. Singapore's web site has a blue background on its home page; users are randomly assigned to any of its four "places" – the verandah, bar, club, or lounge. No matter which "place" users are assigned to, similar visual composition is shown. People are shown enjoying time with friends in relaxed atmospheres. The models shown are young, well-heeled, trendy and professionals, portrayed as having a good time dancing, chatting with friends, or "chilling out" with a bottle of Tiger Beer. Colors are bold and vivid; the style is hip and chic. Loud dance music with strong beat blasts from the web site as one views the page. It is the same genre of music that one expects to hear when stepping into a dance club. The following are main links that are found on Singapore's Tiger Beer web site: The Bar, The Club, The Lounge, The Verandah. There are also small icons at the bottom of the page where users can click to go to any of the following links: Leisure, Promotions, New!, Get a Tiger, My Tiger Beer, Recommend or Sign up.

For the United States (U.S.) web site, there was a mix of English as well as Mandarin used. English was used for navigating and presenting information within the web site. But each English word link found at the top of the home page was accompanied by a Mandarin word with parallel meaning. Right in the center of the home page, a circle of Mandarin characters rotates in a 3-dimensional sphere unaccompanied by English translations. They are the same as the Mandarin characters shown at the top of the page and function navigational guide to other content pages in the web site. For users with no background in Mandarin, they may have to compare the characters with those that have English translations at the top of the page to understand the meaning. The background of the U.S. web site is made up of Tiger Beer's logo intricately intertwined. It looks like a mosaic of logos elaborately linked, like designs on oriental rugs. Users are also directed to different "places" which are framed by a rectangular box that resembles a television screen, complete with volume control. Users who load the U.S. site are randomly assigned to any of the following "places": a market place with old Asian architecture; a street scene with an urban landscape that has billboards with neon lights and Chinese words; or a garden with traditional Chinese architecture in the foreground. All these "places" are outdoors and composed using computer graphics, giving it a surreal atmosphere. None one of these "places" includes real human figures. The colors used are dull and faded, like a scene on television about a long forgotten era. However, the color red, an auspicious and commonly used color in the Chinese culture stands out. Chinese characters are used prominently on the U.S. site. Since most of the users for the U.S. site do not know Mandarin, the use of these characters is more symbolic than as a practical tool. The style of the web site is oriental and exotic. Cultural artifacts of the Asian culture are scattered throughout the web site. Users are "transported" to places in the Far East when they view this site. No music is played in the background as users view the page. But while the page is loading, a five note refrain is repeatedly played using percussion instrument and it sounds very much like Gamelan music. Once the page has loaded, the music stops. But when users roll the mouse over the Chinese characters on the center of the web page, a single note sound from a percussion instrument is produced. The following are main links that are found on the U.S. Tiger Beer web site: History, Culture, News, Places, Play, and Contact. An interesting link is where users can get their "East West" horoscope reading which is a combination of Chinese astrology and western horoscope.

For the Singapore web site, the use of English is appropriate and reflects the brand's country of origin, Singapore, because Singapore is a society that has different races and English is the language that is used primarily for communication among Singaporeans. For the U.S.'s web site, Chinese characters are used prominently throughout the web site to reinforce the idea that the product is exotic. Users may not be able to understand the denotative meanings of the Chinese characters; however, they will recognize that the characters belong to a culture in Asia. The Singapore's web site features real "places" and real "people", having a good time. The United States' web site uses computer-generated pictures of places in a forgotten era, with no human figure featured in the web site.

The Singapore's web site uses visuals that are consistent with the Singapore culture to appeal to their targeted audience; the U.S web site intrigues their audience with scenes and tales from the "mythical orient".

The volume of the dance beat helped create the image of trendy dance spots in Singapore's web site. The web site imitates this façade of clubbing by blasting loud music. The U.S. web site plays soothing, Zen-like tunes while loading. After loading, single note sound that evokes imagery of monks praying in temples in Asia is played when users move their cursors over the Chinese characters. The music is typically Asian, and users will be able to identify that because of the meditative mood of the music which is distinctive of Asian religions.

The main links on Singapore's web site denote places that one can go to in reality to enjoy a Tiger Beer. The links are cleverly named to reinforce the idea that Tiger Beer is enjoyed in places where people go to socialize and relax. The smaller links focus on positive and fun themes that appeal to the target market. By echoing the themes in young people's lives, Tiger Beer tells their target market by saying "this beer is for you". The links on the U.S. web site does not seek to build congruency with the lives lived by their targeted consumers. The links provide information about Asia such as history, culture and news. There was no mention that Tiger Beer was from Singapore. Perhaps there was a concern that Singapore is not "exotic" enough given that Singapore is a cosmopolitan city. By emphasizing that Tiger beer is from a faraway land with fascinating culture, history and places, the brand is differentiating itself from other beers.

From my findings, it was clear that the brand presents itself differently to the Asian audience, and the Western audience. In its home region, the Beer is promoted as a hip and trendy drink for the young and trendy. In its export markets, the Beer is sold as an exotic, oriental, alcohol beverage which is steeped in Asian tradition. The juxtaposition of the Beer's marketing strategies bring to mind one glaring question: What is Tiger Beer?

One very important element found in this study is that advertisers have to recognize that cater to different audience on the web, the unique characteristic of the Web counters that effort. A user can simultaneously access all the various web sites. Therefore, is it really necessary to have separate web sites base on nationality for online advertising? It not only is ineffective as a marketing tool, it also promotes segregation base on regions and racial identity for consumers.

The web site for Tiger Beer's home and regional market is accurate in portraying the image of Singapore. But the web site for the international audience is far from depicting the truth about Tiger Beer's "origin". By influencing the perception of an international audience's image of Asia, the web site has misrepresented the "Other".

One possible detrimental effect to society of playing up stereotypical images of Asia is the fostering of prejudice towards the region. One concern is that repeat exposure on the web will foster stereotypical images of Asia will increases discrimination and prejudice.

3. Conclusions

As Asia presents her goods to the world, it is critical that we sell products and not our culture or integrity. We should heighten our awareness of advertisements' role in shaping society and encourage the proliferation of literature on this subject so that societies can avoid falsely branding themselves unwittingly.

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