Starbucks is forbidden in the Forbidden City: Blog, circuit of culture and informal public relations campaign in China

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

This study offers an in-depth analysis on the closedown of a Starbucks café inside the Forbidden City, one of the most recognized historic sites in Beijing, China, under the pressure of a Web-based activist campaign. Adopting the circuit of culture model, this study illustrates the intricate role of culture in international public relations within an Internet-based media context, as well as the tension surrounding the conflicting identities between Starbucks’ global presence and the local sensitivity attached to the cultural heritage—the Forbidden City. This study also highlights the role of new media (e.g., blogs) in China and its impact on international public relations practice.

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Since the global coffee brand entered China in 1999, more than 400 Starbucks coffee shops have opened in China as of 2006, including 64 in Beijing, the capital city. Starbucks launched an outlet inside Beijing’s Forbidden City, known also as the Palace Museum,\textsuperscript{1} at the invitation of its management in 2000. This shop prospered until July 2007, when it had to close down under tremendous public pressure.

For those against the presence of this particular coffee shop, Starbucks represents low culture, an icon of Western “fast food” similar to McDonalds and KFC (Yang, 2007). It is not compatible with the “museum culture,” or with the refined taste of Chinese cultural legacy condensed in the Forbidden City. The museum reserves the highest achievements of the Chinese civilization over its long imperial history, and is regarded as the cultural symbol of China. This context cannot be farther away from the context where Starbucks has thrived. The clash was summarized by Lin (2007), in whose opinion “[t]he classic, unique silence in the Forbidden City was lost in the roaring tides of commercialization and the globalization driven by multi-national corporations.” For many, the Starbucks inside the Forbidden City is an affront to the awe-stricken palace.

To protect “national dignity” (Beijing News, 2007), thousands of Chinese Internet users participated in a Web-based campaign initiated by the personal blog of Chenggang Rui (hereafter, Rui), a well-known news anchor for the English-language programs at the state-run China Central Television (a.k.a., CCTV), the most authoritative Chinese news outlet, and eventually drove Starbucks away from the Forbidden City. This case raises several interesting questions: why was an individual’s blog so powerful? What theoretical frameworks can be applied to analyze this international public relations campaign, which seems to combine both brand globalization and Internet-based communication? And how could strategic

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\textsuperset{1} “The Forbidden City” and “Palace Museum,” “museum” or “palace” are used interchangeably in this article.

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public relations help manage the tension between the “coffee culture,” or more accurately the “fast food culture,” and the “museum culture” that is intensified by the new media?

To answer these questions, the present study employs the “circuit of culture” model to understand the complex situations of international public relations by explicating the tension between Starbucks and the Forbidden City, as well as to demonstrate how the Chinese public collectively and actively de-constructed and re-constructed meanings for the Starbucks shop inside the Forbidden City within an Internet-facilitated communication environment and its impact on global branding.

1. Circuit of culture

The circuit of culture model originated from cultural studies (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Curtin and Gaither (2007) elaborate the model’s application to international public relations. They stress situational particularities in constructing the existent meaning of a certain product, and point out the constraints within the larger sociological contexts in shaping the interaction of local factors.

The model consists of five discursive moments: regulation, representation, production, consumption, and identity. Although discussed separately, they have to be understood as a whole and as manifestations of various aspects of public relations within a given culture.

Regulation includes different types of control carried out through laws, policies and rules at various levels. It provides a sense of right and wrong, and what is considered acceptable and unacceptable within a given cultural context, and then “form[s] the context in which public relations takes place” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38).

Representation is “the form an object takes and the meanings encoded in that form” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 40). Objects obtain meanings depending on “how we represent them” (Hall, 1997, p. 3). This is a discursive process “socially constructed through a symbolic system, or discourse” (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 99).

Production covers the process of making a communication message, product, or campaign, commonly focusing on tactical levels of practice in public relations. It is also an imbibing or encoding (Hall, 1993) process influenced by various factors, such as cultural norms, specific circumstances, technological availability, and economic factors.

Consumption is the process of decoding the meanings encoded by producers, in which consumers engage in an active negotiation as co-creators of meaning to shape the ultimate outcome. They take in what resonate with them and reject what does not, based on the social context of their everyday lives and make sense of a product in alignment with their own cultural patterns and value systems.

Identity refers to the “meanings that accrue to all social networks, from nations to organizations to publics” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 41). An ultimate goal is to build a shared identity between organizations and their publics.

Applying the circuit of culture model, the present study addresses two research questions:

- RQ1: How did the Web-based informal activist campaign develop and finally achieve its goal in light of the “circuit of culture?”
- RQ2: What are the case’s implications for international public relations in the context of globalization and the digitization of communication?

2. Method

As a case analysis, this study is qualitative in nature. We collected all available materials from various channels, including Nexis-Lexis, Google search engine, official websites of Starbucks and Starbucks China, and relevant Websites and online forums in China that reported and discussed the case. Altogether, we have collected: (1) 5 major posts in Rui’s blog; (2) 5436 comments posted by Rui’s blog viewers in January, March–April, July–August and September, 2007; (3) media coverage: 30 in leading national and regional newspapers in China; 25 in U.S. newspapers, including New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Los Angeles Times, The Seattle Times and The Seattle Post-Intelligence. We examined these materials intensively to identify a clear pattern of the development of the case. Using the circuit of culture model as the theoretical framework, we paid particular attention to its five moments as well as how they negotiate the conflicting identities surrounding Starbucks and the Forbidden City.

3. The case

The Web-based activist campaign against the Starbucks branch inside the Forbidden City was initiated by Rui, a media celebrity blogger. Rui started his offline crusade as early as September 2006. However, he did not raise a public uproar until early 2007 with a blog post (Rui, 2007a) carried by http://www.sina.com.cn (hereafter Sina), the most popular commercial Internet portal in China (Han, 2007). Rui asserted in his post that the presence of a Starbucks coffee shop had “undermined the Forbidden City’s solemnity and trampled over Chinese culture,” and “all I want is that Starbucks move out of the Forbidden City peacefully and quietly. And we’ll continue enjoying Starbucks coffee elsewhere in the city” (Johnson, 2007, p. A2).

Since Rui’s initial post, his blog was visited by more than half a million people, generating “thousands, if not tens of thousands,” of e-mail responses and online comments (Rui, 2007b). He also had the support of most of the popular online forums in China in urging Starbucks to leave the historic site. Rui’s demand quickly turned into a national front-page story.
Various mainstream news media in China and overseas (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times*) covered this Web-based activist campaign and the conflict between a global brand and a local cultural symbol. This case even entered the convention agenda of the National People’s Congress in March 2007 (Xinhua, 2007).

On 13 July 2007, as an outcome of the mounting pressure from the government and the public, the Seattle-based Starbucks closed its Forbidden City outlet, ending months of controversy and negative publicity (Staff, 2007, p. C7).

4. Discussion

4.1. Regulation

The moment of regulation serves as the defined starting point to understand public relations communication. Regulation takes three analytic levels, national, organizational, and individual, in the Starbucks case.

First, the politics of national regulation determines what information can be accessed from the Internet. The Chinese government has been successful at exercising centralized ideological control over the Internet to limit the flow of online content or information (e.g., Harwit & Clark, 2001). Censorship has been in place to regulate licensed blogsphere in order to mute negative or critical content. This regulation, however, tolerates and even encourages the overflowing of online nationalistic discourses.

Second, profit-driven regulations at the institutional level assist blogsphere owners by using commercial leverage to increase the viewership for a better return on investment. Since September 2006, *Sina* launched a blogsphere, informally called “celebrity blogs (mingren boke),” where most bloggers are well-known public figures such as performers, artists, and writers. Using a ranking system, *Sina* promotes certain celebrities’ blogs and downplay others. This has significantly improved search efficiency and the traffic of viewers for particular celebrities’ blogs. As a result, the ranking system has also successfully increased the viewing frequency for *Sina*’s online advertisements.

Based on the mutually beneficial relationship between *Sina*, which boasts 100 million registered viewers (Yuan, 2006), and its celebrity bloggers, Rui launched and advanced his own cause against Starbucks. Rui’s argument was well boosted and spread due to the tremendous viewership derived from the public’s curiosity about celebrities’ personal life or thoughts, as well as the strategic promotion of the celebrity blogs by *Sina*. Without using *Sina* as platform, Rui’s voice would not have been so well received.

Third, this campaign took advantage of the cultural attributes of Internet use at the individual level in China. The Internet in the last decade has become a most popular channel for Chinese nationalists to vent their anti-West and anti-Japanese sentiment. In fact, given the degree of activism exhibited online, many international companies have considered China’s online forums, including blogs, a unique business challenge (Fowler, 2007). The Starbucks case illustrates the power of (celebrity) blogs in influencing public opinions and stimulating nationalistic attitude towards global brands.

4.2. Representation

From the surface, Starbucks’ meaning is represented by the green logo, the fine coffee drinks, music, cozy in-store settings and free Wi-Fi. Yet Starbucks is more than these materialized forms. In the would-be largest market outside the U.S. (former Chief Executive Jim Donald, see Harris, 2007, p. C1), Starbucks is making its way to become a household brand in China. Particularly, Starbucks is targeting affluent Chinese customers as well as the growing middle class, making itself ubiquitous in chic shopping malls and as a sign of gentrification in up-and-coming neighborhoods. Drinking Starbucks coffee has gradually become fashionable. For some, Starbucks represents Westernization or modernization, and is a window to the West and an opportunity to experience what it means by being an American.

What the Forbidden City projects is a sheer different representation. Located in the heart of Beijing, the Forbidden City is a 600-year-old complex erstwhile housing 24 successive imperial sovereigns of the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), covering an area of 720,000 m² with more than 9999 rooms.² It is a nutshell of the essence of China’s 5000-year-history that showcases the wonder and splendor of China’s past. The design of the Forbidden City, from its overall layout, as laid down in the *Classic of Rites* (*Li ji*), to the smallest detail of decoration, has symbolic meanings with underlying philosophical and religious principles. In all, it is not only an embodiment of imperial power but also a symbol of Chinese culture *par excellence*.

The following are but a few examples of how the Forbidden City artfully materializes sophisticated Chinese cultural concepts. In the Forbidden City, almost all roofs bear yellow glazed tiles in that yellow is the color of the Emperor. The main halls of the Outer and Inner courts are all arranged in groups of three – the shape of the *qian* trigram, representing the Heaven, while the residences of the Inner Court are arranged in groups of six – the shape of the *kun* trigram, representing the Earth. Decorations are meaningful as well. Marble was carved to look like waves and clouds, metaphors of tremendous power at the disposal of the imperial house. The images of specific animals and plants represent longevity and happiness. Most numeric patterns are even to convey the concept of *yin* and *yang*. Names of places in the Forbidden City contain such

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² Nine is considered a holy number in ancient China.
words as *ren* (benevolence), *he* (harmony) and *an* (peace), reflecting the essence of Confucianism. These symbolic meanings underscore the incompatibility between Forbidden City and Starbucks.

4.3. Production

Through various publicity campaigns, Starbucks has made sizable efforts to differentiate itself from traditional coffee drinks. Starbucks coffee is considered to have redefined the “coffee experience”. At Starbucks, consumers not only drink coffee, but also pursue a lifestyle and experience a “third place”. As Starbucks Chairperson Howard Schultz stated, Starbucks is a place where people can take a break from the mundane everyday life at work and home. It is the “third place” to relax, hang out, read newspaper, and make friends with the baristas behind the counter. Furthermore, “…when you visit a Starbucks—you get great people, first-rate music and a comfortable and upbeat meeting place…” (Starbucks, 2007). Just as the meaning-producer of Starbucks has intended, drinking coffee at Starbucks has become such a novel and sophisticated “coffee experience” that customers are willing to pay $4 for something used to be sold at $1.

Starbucks adopts a similar strategy in the Chinese market, where the company communicates the message that Starbucks coffee symbolizes a unique experience and effectuates an intimate contact with the Western culture. Starbucks has also gone all out to localize its brand to fit into the mainstream Chinese culture. For example, most Chinese people experience coffee as a social event rather than daily necessity. People come to Starbucks to socialize and spend hours chatting with their friends. As a result, Starbucks’ China stores intentionally increased their sizes to “accommodate all of the lollygagging chatters” (Bolt, 2005).

Moreover, in a country where tea is traditionally preferred, Starbucks has taken an “adaptive and reflexive strategy” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 85) to localize its menu to cater to the Chinese taste. For example, Starbucks has created green tea frappuccinos in Taiwan and have supplemented coffee with food in the Mainland. As Jim Donald explained, “[W]hat we're finding in China is that there's a sweeter palate. Those customers are telling us what they want in line. So it’s not necessarily just coffee, but ‘coffee plus,’ ‘coffee with,’ ‘coffee and’” (Allison, 2007a, p. H1). Likewise, Starbucks has also programmed cultural activities to celebrate traditional Chinese holidays with local people. Its menu, for instance, has incorporated mooncakes during the traditional Chinese moon festival (Harris, 2007, p. C1). Such strategies communicate Starbucks’ respect for Chinese culture while maintaining its branding advantage.

4.4. Consumption

However, the aforementioned Starbucks’ efforts were not necessarily fully appreciated by Chinese consumers. As Curtin and Gaither (2007) maintain, “What is being consumed is the symbol, not the manufacturing reality” (p. 125). Chinese online activists singled out Starbucks as an object of attack not because of its coffee but its underlying meaning—Western and in particular American.

As mentioned earlier, Chinese consumers view Starbucks as a destination restaurant rather than a coffee take-out joint, since its Day One in China. In the eyes of many Chinese people, the image of Starbucks is encoded with meanings that might convey, like many fast food brands introduced from the U.S., “America, Western values, modernity,” a fashionable lifestyle, as well as “the idea that a modern superstructure is arriving” in China (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 85).

However, something “Western” associated with “modernity” may inherently contradict the meaning of the Forbidden City decoded by the Chinese, who regard the palace as a miniature of a traditional and well-protected society where they hold unchallengeable sovereignty. The presence of any foreign brands or products in this place may imply invasion of the Western culture assisted by Western corporate power.

4.5. Identity

The Forbidden City Starbucks shop aimed to share the same identity along with other Starbucks outlets across the country. However, Rui, through his personal blog, brought up his own meaning-making of the Starbucks shop inside the Forbidden City. His message strategically activated the collective memory of China’s humiliation in the 19th and 20th century. For example, a blog viewer commented,

[A]fter all, the Forbidden City is a representative of the Chinese culture. The [presence] of a foreign business always makes me uncomfortable. When I see the Starbucks against the repaired broken wall inside the Forbidden City, I cannot help recalling the invasion of the Eight-Power Allied Forces, as well as the burning, killing, robbing, and plundering in the Old Summer Palace exercised by the British and French Allied Forces [in the late Qing Dynasty] (Sun, 2007).

Similarly, another viewer wrote, “the Starbucks [inside the Forbidden City] indeed was an affront to the image of traditional Chinese culture, and it should go away as soon as possible. Good job, Chenggang [Rui]” (Comments on Rui’s post, 12 January 2007). Still, one more said, “[w]e ceded the country's sovereignty under humiliating terms, [w]e have suffered from military invasions before, now again from the economic invasion. They are the same. Why do we have to have a coffee shop [inside the Forbidden City], instead of a tea house? Are the former superior to the latter” (Comments on Rui’s post, 12 January 2007)?
As these comments illustrate, to Rui and other online activists, projecting Starbucks coffee as a representative of a Western experience jars with the Chinese national pride innately associated with the Forbidden City. They consider Starbucks’s “coffee culture” to be the equal of Western-style “fast food culture,” which they argue is inferior and has eroded or insulted the stateliness of the “museum culture” embedded in the Forbidden City (Yang, 2007). The identity of Westernization is incompatible with the nationalistic identity that the Forbidden City is pinned down to. This Starbucks shop “might represent another ‘ugly American’ who lacked respect for cultural norms” (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 106). Web-based activists’ meaning-making of the particular Starbucks shop revealed that the issue has never been about coffee or drinks per se, but a venue exuding tension and conflicts, where “a culture of corporate power competes with traditional Chinese cultures and values” (p. 86). It is the American corporate culture that has invaded into the heart of Beijing without any resistance from its business partners and its consumers in China. It is also the Starbucks shop that enforces a form of neo-colonialism, through the expansion of its business in China.

As a result, the collaboration between Rui and his blog viewers jointly created the perception that the identity intrinsic to the Starbucks shop contradicts the identity that the Forbidden City represents and intends to preserve. This resonates well with what Curtin and Gaither have elaborated, consumers “drank a brand for what it stood for and what it said about them—for the identification it fostered between the product and their own lives” (2007, p. 47). Starbucks, a U.S. company, is imposing its product and image on China, even if it is running a legitimate business. Therefore, Rui and his supporters believed that the Starbucks coffeehouse inside the Forbidden City was out of place and should be removed.

A look at the five moments of cultural circuit as a whole reveals that in this informal public relations campaign, Rui served as an opinion leader utilizing his blog to elaborate what it meant to have a Starbucks outlet within the Forbidden City. Web activists’ comments and discussions further facilitated Rui’s meaning-making of the Forbidden City Starbucks shop. The unique nature of Weblogs in a nationalistic context additionally played out the tension surrounding the conflicting identities between the Starbucks shop and the Forbidden City. As Rui observed, “What?! Where did this come from? I see it as a pollution of the integrity of the Chinese culture” (Rui, 2007a). Similarly, many Chinese blog viewers have concurred that they do not resent coffee, the physical product itself. Rather, they resent the message hidden in the Starbucks coffee: traditional Chinese cultural assets are being threatened by U.S. popular culture.

Furthermore, Rui’s blog posts not only brought out much coverage, but also invoked a heated debate in mainstream news media on the presence of Starbucks in the Forbidden City. Although there were opinions divergent from Rui’s expressed in Chinese newspapers (e.g. Zhu, 2007; Beijing News, 17 January 2007), Rui’s protest was so strongly supported that it had become the predominant voice (e.g., Lin, 2007).

To respond to Rui and other online activists, the Starbucks shop did make efforts to merge into the overall theme of the Forbidden City. For instance, its exterior design features a façade resembling that of other Forbidden City buildings, giving no indication that it housed a Starbucks (Johnson, 2007, p. A2). However hard did it try to be unobtrusive, unfortunately, Starbucks failed to appease the public.

Moreover, the online protests were captured on the radar screen of government officials and legislators. For instance, according to Xinhua News Agency (2007), state legislator Hongbin Jiang proposed a bill in March 2007 asking “Starbucks to move out of the Forbidden City…because its presence is challenging Chinese national identity and dignity”.

News media and legislators jointly intensified their pressure on the management of the Palace Museum, one of the stakeholders involved in this issue, urging it to work with Starbucks in order to find a solution in response to the protesters. The Palace Museum carried out a “change or go home” policy, calling for Starbucks to restructure its independent operation and to join a kiosk where other beverage vendors would sell their drinks together with Starbucks. Starbucks would be allowed to continue selling their coffee only under the “Forbidden City” brand. No surprise that Starbucks did not accept the offer (Landsberg, 2007, p. C1). In July 2007, Starbucks decided to terminate the lease agreement with the management of the Forbidden City and close the small outlet.

Noteworthy is that during this process Starbucks adopted a low-profile public relations strategy to handle the activist pressure, by minimizing its media publicity, in which it reiterated that it respects the culture of the host country as well as public opinion. In his unofficial e-mail message to Rui (2007b), Jim Donald said Starbucks has “shown and continued to show [its] respect for the local history, culture and social customs, and [has] made serious efforts to fit in the environment of the Forbidden City” (also see Iritani, 2007, p. C1). In an interview conducted by The Seattle Times in April 2007, he also stressed that the Starbucks’ Forbidden City store was there for a combination of reasons: Forbidden City officials, the government and Starbucks. “We’re there because they asked us to come in, and we went there with all the respect for the culture and the heritage and history of the Forbidden City” (Allison, 2007a, p. H1).

Upon the closedown of Starbucks’ Forbidden City outlet, a written statement from the Starbucks headquarters circulated in the media, saying “we fully respect the decision of the Forbidden City to transit to a new mode of concessions service to its museum visitors” (Allison, 2007b, p. E1). “We will not be successful if we do not respect the local culture. How can you be a part of their lives if you don’t respect their culture? There is no reason to believe this decision will affect other stores in China.” (Wang, President of Starbucks Great China, see Harris, 2007, p. C1).

From the point of view of critiquing its public relations strategy, Starbucks failed to perform a constant environmental scanning to create a shared identity between consumers and producers. Nor did it successfully communicate what it means to the Chinese within a changing media environment and in alignment with the strategic location of the Forbidden City.
Starbucks was at a further disadvantage at a time when international sentiment towards the United States was sour, and when hostility can be easily put to action thanks to the Internet.

5. Implications

Analyzing an Internet-based communication case through the lens of the five moments of cultural circuit, the present study demonstrates the complexities and opportunities in international public relations when the global interacts with the local, evident in the tension between Starbucks as a global brand and the Forbidden City as a cultural symbol of China. Rather than adopting a linear model, this study interprets a particular case engaged in a meaning-making and -negotiating dynamic, and reveals the implications of this Web-based activist campaign.

First, this case study suggests that the public empowered by the new media receive due attention in public relations research. Traditionally, public relations literature addresses organizations' concerns whereas the public is more or less regarded as either beneficiaries or victims of organizations' particular behavior. The present study demonstrates the active role the public plays, and highlights the imperative need of giving voice to the public and taking their perspectives into consideration, as well as the negative consequences when such efforts are not made. What further complicates the situation is the involvement of new media such as celebrity blogs in the present case. Examining public relations nowadays may require us to adopt a holistic approach that considers a broader realm of agents involved in a particular situation.

Recognizing the fluid nature of the public, the circuit of culture model gives credit to the power inherent in consumers' meaning-making of a given product. Consumers become co-creators during this process when the two moments of consumption and production overlap. In fact, as discussed above, the meanings encoded by Starbucks should not expect to have ready acceptance among the Chinese audiences in the Chinese context. Additionally, the messages that Starbucks tried to deliver universally through its shops in China were not applicable to a particular branch inside the Forbidden City. Curtin and Gaither (2007, p. 47) argue “if shared norms are challenged strongly enough, the group holding them often feels empowered to act, even in the face of corporate power and clout.” In the Starbucks case, activists spread their opinions directly through blog and indirectly through mainstream media; and they succeeded in utilizing the power of mass media to fulfill their goals. In this respect, the circuit model has demonstrated its usefulness in examining public relations campaigns involving cultural complexities, new media, history and political perspectives in a globalized context.

Second, this case exemplifies the interplay of two aspects essential to international public relations: new communication technology and globalization. International public relations practice becomes more complex when new technologies are involved as a democratizing platform for historically excluded publics to voice their concerns (Heath, 1998). As Curtin and Gaither (2007) note, “In the digital world, the roles of producer and consumer collide. . . . Consumers can use new technology to become producers of texts and transmit, produce, and distribute messages at low cost” (p. 146). Rui and online activists indeed played the double role of both consumers and producers when they are engaged in game playing with a global brand operating in a local market: on one hand, they are the target audience of Starbucks and receive Starbucks' message when they drink coffee; on the other hand, they decode Starbucks’ meaning in a way that undermines Starbucks' intentions as they refuse to accept Starbucks' physical existence inside the Forbidden City. They thus took advantage of the popularity of online forums or blogs to re-produce, if not “co-produce” the meaning of Starbucks in the Chinese market as well as the meaning of traditional Chinese culture in the cyber space. Such meaning-making has consequently altered the global brand's marketing strategy. The case vividly illustrates the interaction between brand globalization and individual resistance empowered by Internet–base media. Without blogs, or online opinion leaders or activists, whom we called “new influencers,” this case would not have happened.

Third, this case may prompt public relations practitioners to think more strategically about international brands in similar negative situations, when individual bloggers can demonstrate their mobilizing power and magnify themselves through publicity on the Internet. The private or one-on-one correspondence between Rui and Jim Donald, for example, were quickly on the rise online. Rui successfully inserted his viewpoints into the public agenda. Clearly, dealing with bloggers is different from dealing with traditional media. The Starbucks case underlines what makes consumer blogging particularly challenging for companies in China. One strategy for organizations to handle blog crises may be to monitor blog posts regularly and stem negative trends in the budding stage before they get out of control. That requires organizations to engage in responsive listening, active participation in online conversations, and constant environmental scanning to manage its relations with online communities.

We thus believe that “informal PR” does matter. That is, on one hand, the informal public relations campaign initiated from a personal blog can be influential and affect the business of multinational corporations or organizations. On the other hand, organizations should resort to unconventional approaches or means to counter negative messages, or to deal with individual or informal activist campaigns.

Last but not least, this case invites a reconsideration of international public relations practice amid the tensions between the “coffee culture” and the “museum culture,” and between East and West in a new media environment. Traditional or local culture needs to learn how to get along with or at least in tolerable coexistence with the consumer culture and Western materialism embodied in global brands. A meaningful question to ponder is whether this has to be a zero-sum game wherein either the host country closes the door and says “no” to multinational corporations, or just welcomes them in without hesitation. In other words, local market shall benefit from brand globalization while strategically protecting the integrity of...
local culture. As Rui asked, “how do we absorb and embrace the Western world without losing our own identity. This is an issue that everybody is thinking about. I just happened to write about it” (Fowler, 2007).

On the other hand, foreign businesses need to learn how to well understand the nuances of local culture and local people’s meaning-making toward Western culture symbolized in global brands, especially under the new communication circumstances. When the global meets the local, Starbucks is not alone. Many U.S. brands, KFC, McDonalds, to name a few, have encountered similar challenges due to China’s nationalistic sentiment. And likewise they had to wrestle with consumer’s resistance or boycott. The “circuit of culture” thus sheds light on the possibility of negotiating a shared identity of global brands among multiple parties with unique cultural attributes. To establish and maintain a healthy relationship between local stakeholders and multinational corporations requires public relations practitioners to play a constructive role as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1979) to facilitate a favorable flow of information at international settings. By helping to build shared identities, international public relations practice may serve as a cultural bridge in today's globalized and digitized society.

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