

Bhangramuffin Style: Global Brands, Local Consumers

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1 Introduction

The relationship between the local and the global has long been a topic of debate in marketing and advertising, as well as more broadly in social theory and cultural studies. As brands increasingly operate on a global scale, marketers and advertisers are faced with the question of how to project a consistent image across different markets, and how much freedom should be given to local and regional marketing activities. Too much local variety might confuse and dilute the brand; too little local freedom could result in marketing and advertising produced centrally (which usually means in Europe or the USA) which has limited relevance to other regions.

These questions are particularly relevant to the marketing of youth brands. It is frequently argued that young people around the world possess similar values, aspirations, and goals in life, and are therefore attracted to the same global brands. Whether in London, Munich, Bombay or Rio, there is thought to be an increasing convergence among young people who can be marketed to as global segments rather than representatives of a national or regional culture.

Not surprisingly, then, much energy has been expended searching for “global teens”, “global tribes” or “Euro youth.” Simplifying somewhat, the most common conclusion arrived at by studies of the operation of global brands in local markets is that people are similar in some ways and different in others, but that the differences are getting smaller. There are similarities in the aspirations and values of young people around the world, but locally based cultural systems still prevail and account must be taken of these if global brands are to be promoted successfully.¹

Whilst this model of the local-global relationship no doubt does match some empirical realities, it also has important limitations:

- It suggests that global cultural products are the active ingredient in the relationship, entering and changing local cultures; the consumer is largely passive;
- It does not allow for an analysis of how local cultures incorporate and use global brands in ways not imagined by the brand’s producer;

¹ See for example, Troiano, ESOMAR 1993; Thomson and Woodham, ESOMAR, 1997; Ryan and Baker, ESOMAR, 1995 .

- It implies a narrative of change in which local differences become weaker and eventually succumb to the all pervasive power of global cultural production.

Thus, the way in which the interactions between global cultural products and local contexts are usually explored closes off other avenues of analysis which might provide different revelations. The oft quoted injunction is to “Think global, act local.” While this may offer a useful starting point, I shall argue in this paper that successful marketers will increasingly need to think global and local simultaneously if they are to understand how global brands come to life in local markets. In contrast to these approaches centred on the brand producer, I shall suggest an alternative perspective centred on the active role of the local consumer. This approach will focus on:

- An understanding of what consumers do with brands, rather than what brands do to consumers;
- The re-interpretation of global brands to meet specific local needs;
- The active role of consumers in providing global brands with local meanings.

By focusing on the interaction between the local consumer and the global brand, I argue that we gain a better understanding of how brands come to life in specific cultural contexts, and how they acquire meanings which were not those intended by the brand producer. These insights can then be fed back to the brand producer and used to guide marketing strategies which are in tune with how the brand lives in the mind of the local consumer. Via an analysis of a specific case study, this paper makes three key points:

- Marketers should focus on the meanings and uses which local consumers give their brands, and see these as an asset rather than a potential cause for concern;
- In analysing both consumer identity and brand identity, we need to focus on the interaction between the global and the local, rather than attempt to prioritise one above the other;
- In order to do this, qualitative research will need to make greater use of observational and ethnographic methods which show what really happens to brands in context.

I shall make this argument via a detailed analysis of a specific group of British Asian young people, showing how they use global cultural resources to construct an identity which is simultaneously local and global. This form of identity is sometimes

described as “bhangramuffin”, combining aspects of Asian culture (*bhangra*, traditional Punjabi music²) and black youth culture (a pun on the term “raggamuffin”, a Jamaican style of music). The discussion is not restricted to brands, but also covers other cultural forms such as music and speech patterns, as I believe that a broader cultural perspective can be helpful in thinking about how brands work in global markets.

2 The Case Study

This paper is based on an extended ethnographic study of a group of young men of British Bangladeshi origin in inner London, conducted in 1996 – 97. The study included approximately 100 young people aged between 14 and 25, and used a range of methods including group discussions, in depth interviews, and participant observation. It included work in youth clubs, schools, housing estates and other public places where young people congregate. The research was conducted in a participatory fashion, with the young people given the opportunity to comment on the findings to ensure that they were as accurate as possible. Through using these ethnographic methods, I believe that a richer quality of data was gathered than would have been accessible through either group discussions or interviews alone.

Before entering into a detailed discussion of the data, a little background about the British Asian³ community will be helpful. The main British Asian communities are the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations. Most Indian and Pakistani people migrated to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, whilst the Bangladeshi population migrated in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. The British Bangladeshi population come mainly from Sylhet, which is a predominantly rural area in the North East of Bangladesh. Most British Bangladeshis are Moslems and come from rural backgrounds, where access to formal education is limited. In Britain, the Bangladeshi population tends to live in overcrowded housing, in socially deprived areas, and suffers from much higher rates of unemployment and lower levels of educational achievement than the national average.

3 Images of British Asians

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the media and academia portrayed British Asian communities as largely self contained populations. They were viewed as culturally

² Bhangra originally is traditional Punjabi folk music played in the villages, but in the UK it has developed into a more “pop” style, often played at weddings and parties.

³ In the UK, the term “Asian” is used to refer to people who have their origins in the Indian sub-continent – principally India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

highly distinct, having different languages, religions, rituals and family structures from the white British populations. A common stereotype was that Asian people “kept themselves to themselves”, did not mix with the existing local populations, and were only slightly influenced by mainstream British culture. As such, they fitted neatly into theories of ethnicity prevalent in the 1970s, which tended to present ethnic identity as a static cultural artefact, linked to a specific geographical area, and subject to limited change from the outside.

The British Asian communities were also seen as passive and physically weak. In the 1970s there were many high profile incidents of racist attacks by “skinheads” on Asian people, and the phrase “Paki bashing” was coined by white racists and Far Right Wing political groups such as the National Front to describe these attacks. This was in contrast to the image portrayed of the black communities, who at the same time were characterised as a criminal sub culture likely to engage in “muggings” (street robberies, which were a high profile policing issue in the 1970s in London). Finally, Asians young people were generally portrayed as lacking any “youth culture”, and this was attributed to their strong and self contained family traditions, which were thought to insulate the younger generation from more fleeting fashions.

Thus, through the 1970s and 1980s Asian ethnic minorities in Britain had an image of being a self contained, culturally distinct community, avoiding contact with the indigenous white population, unfashionable, weak and passive, and frequently the victims of racist attacks. However, the younger British born and educated generations have increasingly resisted these stereotypes and worked to develop different British Asian forms of ethnic identity, using local and global cultural resources. These forms of identity do not fit into the older notions of ethnicity as a fixed cultural artefact, but rather are hybrid and dynamic. They are in a constant state of change and flux, incorporating global cultural resources with different origins, and re-interpreting these within specific local contexts. The two particular cultural resources drawn upon by the young men I worked with were:

- “Black youth culture”;
- Global designer fashion brands.

For the remainder of this paper I want to show how these two cultural resources – both global, although in different ways – were incorporated and given specific, new meanings within the context of the British Bangladeshi community in North London. By doing this, I shall show how global brands acquire local meanings which cannot

be predicted or controlled by the brand owner, and that consumers are the active ingredient in creating these meanings.

4 “Black Youth Culture”

I use the term “black youth culture” to refer to the flow of cultural forms that travels along what Professor Paul Gilroy has called “The Black Atlantic” – clothing, body language, speech patterns and music which are transmitted between black communities in the cities of the US, the West Indies, and Great Britain. Clearly, not all black young people exemplify these cultural forms, and in fact they appear specific to particular groups of urban young men. As has frequently been commented, black youth culture has a high status among urban youth of all ethnic origins, and indeed white and Asian youngsters in Britain and the US have adopted some of its more high profile aspects. Forms of speech, dress and body language associated with black young people have become “cool”, “sexy” and desirable and are widely imitated. And they are particularly common among young men, as black men are often portrayed in the media as physically strong and sexually desirable.

Thus, black youth culture – derived from the global transmission of music, clothing and TV icons – offers a powerful asset for Asian youngsters to resist being portrayed as a physically weak, victimised community. The young men I worked with had adopted various forms of expression associated with black youth, and invariably these were used to project a more forceful, or “sexy” image.

- **Speech patterns:** words and accents associated with the British Black community – a dialect which has been termed “London Jamaican” by Mark Sebba – were commonly used by the young men. “Chat” instead of “speak”, “yard” instead of “home”, “safe” used as a greeting, “Ra!” as an expression of surprise, or “Bro” to refer to a friend – all derive from London Jamaican. For example, an argument between two of the young men about the merits of a particular pop star resulted in one saying to the other “Don’t chat to me, come to my yard and listen and then you’ll see!” On another occasion I heard one young man adopt a heavy Jamaican accent when describing his attempts to chat up a girl, indicating to his friends that this was how he spoke when he wanted to appear “cool” and attractive.
- **Body Language:** forms of walking, gestures and hand movements, similar to what one might see on a range of MTV videos featuring black rap artists, were also common. The young men would typically “bowl” along the street, a

word used to refer to a style of walking where the shoulders are rolled and the arms held slightly away from the body. This style of movement was interpreted as “hard” and tough, and when other young men walked in this way it was often seen as a deliberate challenge. For example, when one of the boys was describing why black and Asian pupils in his school came into conflict, he replied: “The way they bowl along the corridor with their pens in their mouth – it’s disrespect, innit?” However, they themselves often “bowed” when they wanted to look hard, showing that they had assimilated this aspect of black youth culture into their own ways of behaving.

- **Musical Styles:** musical styles associated with black young people – rap, ragga, hip hop, jungle – were very popular, and again were often used by the young men to distance themselves from older, unfashionable versions of Asian culture. For example, I discussed musical styles with a group of the young men and asked if they listened to *bhangra*, a form of Punjabi folk music which has been adapted by some British Asian young people and is commonly performed at weddings. One young man replied disparagingly: “*Bhangra?* We don’t listen to *bhangra*, we don’t get on with the Asian culture. Nothing but jungle for us!” Clearly, then, forms of music associated with the black communities were seen as having a higher status than more traditional Asian forms, and the young men adopted these in order to distance themselves from older and less appealing images of Asian people.

The young men’s use of black youth culture might be interpreted as an example of a “global tribe” – of young people around the globe aspiring to the same icons, speaking in the same way, listening to the same music. To some extent, that may be true, but what is missing is an understanding of how these global cultural products are used locally. When the young men listen to Snoop Doggy Dogg, or “bowl” down the corridor at school, they are simultaneously placing themselves in global and local contexts: globally, they are buying into forms of expression which are produced and marketed to young people as global tribe, but locally they are using those resources to resist the stereotypes of Bangladeshi people as passive, weak and unfashionable. Having discussed the uses of global cultural products, I now want to give some examples of similar processes in the specific area of global brands.

5 Global Designer Brands

The other main cultural resource which the young men used to distance themselves from stereotypes of Asian communities were global fashion brands. Labels such as

Kickers, Reebok, Armani, Nike and Valentino were the most popular, and being seen in unbranded clothing was likely to mark people out for ridicule. Once again, the use of the same styles of clothing in different countries could be considered an example of the convergence of aspirations and values among young people – they all want to buy into the brand values of freedom, self expression and ostentatious consumerism. However, once again that is only half the story. The other half is to look at the local significance of these values– to ask what they are doing with the brands, rather than what the brands are doing to them.

The wearing of designer labels was used by the young people in London as a sign of status, wealth and fashionability. They commented on how wearing such clothing made them feel superior and provided emotional satisfaction by provoking envy and desire.

“If you walk down the street and people are behind you, they say like, ‘Yeah!’ And if there are people sitting on a pub bench and you are wearing an expensive top, you feel like, a bit higher. Like, people around you wear it, you don’t want to feel the odd one out. It sort of like makes you look posh and higher than the people around you. Put it this way, people would rather be rich than poor, so if you wear a nice Ralph Lauren shirt and Armani jeans, people look at you and they think ‘I wish I had that.’ ”

There is nothing specific to young Bangladeshi men about this attitude, and we might expect that similar feelings would be described by young people around the world. However, this feeling of superiority is given a specific significance by the local context. These young men frequently made disparaging comments about other Bangladeshi people who wore clothing which might be thought fashionable in Bangladesh, but which was considered highly embarrassing in the UK. They wanted to distance themselves from this imagery, and to position themselves at the cutting of global culture, rather than the tail end of rural unfashionability. The following quotation is from a British Bangladeshi man in his mid-20s. He reflects on the changes he has seen in the British Bangladeshi community, and he clearly understands the local significance attached to global designer brands:

“They (Bangladeshi young men) have changed a lot, like when we were young we would never have dreamed of wearing an £80 pair of jeans, or a pony tail.

Now they do. But then that's good, because Bengalis⁴ are getting the same as everyone else. The only reason you notice it now because we didn't use to do it before. If you see a white person wearing an expensive pair of jeans and a Bengali person wearing market clothes, that's bad... now they (white people) cannot say anything."

For this young man, wearing expensive branded clothing was an explicit act of resistance – a refusal to be positioned as a lower status person, and a break with the past images of Bangladeshi people. Previously, white people would have worn fashionable clothing and Bangladeshis would have bought cheap clothes in local street markets. Now Bangladeshis, he points out, are getting the same as everyone else, including access to global fashion brands. Interestingly, white young people also understood this meaning quite clearly. A white youth worker told me that one of the reasons for the conflicts between white and Bangladeshi youngsters in the area was that white boys thought the Bangladeshis were “getting too flash” (i.e., ostentatiously stylish).

As a final example, the function of branded clothing can be seen in a brief exchange between a Bangladeshi young man aged around sixteen and a younger white boy. The white boy was wearing a Nike T shirt and pale trousers. He was a little overweight and his trousers were slightly crumpled. The Bangladeshi boy was wearing Valentino jeans, trainers and a denim jacket. The exchange opens the Channel Four television documentary “Bengali Backlash”:

White boy: “You're not even English.”

Bangladeshi Boy: “I wouldn't even want to be English, you are a low life.”

WB: “Listen, you have to come here because your country is poor and it stinks and everything.”

BB: “Sort your weight out, man, sort out your weight.”

WB: “All that says is, I can afford to eat too much.”

BB: “At least I aint wearing dirty clothing like you” (stands up and indicates his own smart outfit).

WB: “At least I don't live on curry powder.”

BB: “You love our curries!”

⁴ The words “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi” were often used interchangeably by the young men, although more properly Bangladeshi should be used to refer to people from Bangladesh, whilst Bengali could refer either to Bangladeshi people or to Indian people living in the Indian State of Bengal, which shares a border with Bangladesh.

Here we can see the white boy using various racist arguments – the Bangladeshi does not belong, he is poor, dirty and smelly – and the Bangladeshi boy resisting these stereotypes. Indeed, the Bangladeshi young man tries to invert the stereotype, suggesting that it is the white young man who is a “low life.” His justification for this argument is that he, the Bangladeshi boy, is wearing fashionable designer clothing, whilst the white boy is not. The use of branded designer clothing to give the wearer a feeling of social superiority is a phenomenon probably found in different markets and countries. But in addition the Bangladeshi young man is using the brand images to counter the very local stereotypes of the Bangladeshi population. He is re-interpreting them locally and using them for his own purposes, and showing us how local consumers negotiated their own meanings for global brands.

6 Conclusions: Bhangramuffin Style

“Bhangramuffin style” is a form of ethnic identity which is simultaneously local and global. Older models of ethnic identity, based on the idea of a reasonably fixed core of beliefs tied to a specific geographical area, no longer do justice to the complex and hybrid forms of identity which young people are developing. In the multi cultural, multi media world, it is probably more useful to think of consumer identity as the point at which a range of cultural resources, some local and some global, converge in a particular social context or interaction. These global cultural resources will always have two aspects – firstly, the global contexts from which they derive, and secondly the local cultural contexts in which they are used. But rather than thinking of the brand owner as the principal producer of meaning, we also need to look at how meanings are re-interpreted locally, at the point of consumption.

As I have shown, “bhangramuffin style” draws upon global cultural resources, including black youth culture and global designer brands, and outwardly may appear similar to the styles adopted by many young people around the globe – a local example of a “global tribe.” However, to leave the analysis there misses what happens to global brands and cultural products when they enter local cultures and are re-interpreted locally. The apparent similarities of “global tribes” may conceal the true nature of the brand’s relationship with consumers, which draws simultaneously upon global and local frames of reference. Bangladeshi and white young men both wear Nike trainers in London, and probably both identify with the global values of the brand at some level. However, the Bangladeshi youngster may be using the brand to tell local white youth that he is just as good as them, whilst the white youth may have quite a different relationship with the brand. If marketers and brand owners are to capitalise on the potential of these relationships, and to maximise the effectiveness of

global brand marketing, they will need to focus as much attention on the local uses of their brands as on their globally projected values.

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“Bhangramuffin Style”: a new model of ethnic identity

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Biographical Note

Philly Desai is an independent researcher specialising in social policy and communications research. Over the last ten years he has conducted many studies among ethnic minority populations in Britain. In the public sector he has worked for local government, the Home Office, the Department for Education and Employment, the Ministry of Defence, the Army, Navy and RAF, as well as the Arts Council and the Museums and Galleries Commission. In the private sector Philly's clients have included major utilities companies, media companies, and advertising and PR agencies. Philly has a doctorate in sociology from the University of London and has lectured widely on social research and ethnic minority issues, in the UK, Europe and Asia.

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