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## **The Rise of Consumerism in Kazakhstan**

### **The One Emerging Market Where Multinational Firms Should Go**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

What are the attitudes of consumers in transition economies towards Western companies and products? Are they willing to purchase Western products? Do they have any preference to specific brands, products, and companies? What channels are the most influential to consumers' consumption culture in transition economies? Are consumers in transition economies likely to be acculturated by Western consumption culture?

In recent years, many nations have liberalized their trade policies by removing trade barriers, which in turn stimulated the process of globalization. In addition to the increased trade volume, the growing foreign direct investment (FDI) and the advancing information technology, communications and transportations are further facilitating globalization. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) describes globalization as "the growing economic interdependence of countries worldwide through the increasing volume and variety of cross border transactions in goods and services and of international capital flows, and also through the more rapid and widespread diffusion of technology" (IMF 1999:45). The continuing progression from a world of distinct national markets to one of linked global markets is being fueled by the persistent forces of the homogenization of customer needs, gradual liberalization of trade, and the recognition of the competitive advantages of a global presence. Achieving conceptual clarity on such an all-encompassing idea is probably impossible, but pragmatic view of the challenges and opportunities faced by business in the era of globalization may help put the idea in a practical perspective. In practice, companies of all shapes and sizes throughout the world accept the globalization of business and economics as a fact of life.

The presence of the newly emerging markets, such as Russia, Kazakhstan, should be recognized as new opportunities for the future expansion of international marketing activities. Their large populations offer potential consumer demand and production supply unmatched by any other regions in the world. Furthermore, the knowledge of the international marketers about these transition economies may be particularly useful for them to penetrate foreign markets. However, one major challenge for the marketer is the lack of information about consumers in these economies, since capable market research is developing only gradually. The entire marketing discipline is founded on the basic objective of satisfying the needs and wants of consumers. Unable to ascertain the desire of consumers in transition economies directly, the international marketer might use secondary information at their best (see Table 1).

Kazakh consumers' purchasing power has greatly increased as a result of rapid economic growth. Dramatic economic growth and social changes have occurred in Kazakhstan and have brought prosperity to many. Increased contacts with Western countries and Western ideas, values and norms, through mass media may be responsible for some changes in consumer culture. When a change occurs in a culture as a result of contacting with another culture, acculturation may occur. Acculturation is the process by which people in one culture learn the norms, values, and attitudes of another culture. Consequently, this may affect Kazakhstan consumers' attitude toward products from Western countries. In addition, the degree to which Kazakh consumers adhere to traditional Asian values is likely to affect their attitudes toward products from Western countries.

**Table 1** Economy and Consumer Consumptions in Kazakhstan

Year	GDP Growth rate (%)	Inflation rate (%)	Unemployment Rate (%)	FDI inflow (Mil. US\$)	GDP per capita (US\$)	CPI	Retail trade turnover
1996	0.5	39.1	8.6	1137	1342	139	133
1997	1.7	17.4	7.3	1320	1432	117	129
1998	-1.9	7.1	13.1	1143	1457	107	119
1999	2.7	8.3	13.5	1584	1132	108	102
2000	9.8	13.2	12.8	1278	1231	113	105
2001	13.5	8.4	10.4	2861	1492	108	115
2002	9.8	5.8	9.3	2157	1658	106	108
2003	9.2	6.4	8.8	2300	2069	106	110
2004	9.1	6.5	8.5	2500	2300	106.5	105.2

- Note: Data for 1996-2002 represent the most recent official estimates of outturns as reflected in publications from the national authorities, the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development [EBRD] (EBRD 2004).
- Data for 2003-2004 are mostly experts' estimates from the industries.

Therefore, in order to explain Kazakh consumer purchasing behavior on Western products, it is important to understand the attitude of Kazakh consumers towards Western products and to determine factors that influence their attitude formation. Accordingly, the two objectives of this research are: (1) To investigate Kazakh consumers' attitudes toward Western products, multinational firms, and Western countries, and (2) To investigate consumption acculturation channels as possible explanations for Kazakh consumers' attitude toward Western products.

## METHODOLOGY

### Qualitative Analysis

To capture consumers' perceptions of the Western products and ideas, this study collected qualitative data from Kazakhs MBA students regarding their opinions of the individual perceptions and attitudes. Seven focus groups were conducted, a written assignment was given in a marketing class, and the resultant data contents were analyzed. This methodology was employed to provide an in-depth understanding of the individual perceptions and attitudes from the respondents' perspectives. Independent moderators of KIMEP MBA students conducted the seven focus groups during the time of September 2004 in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Respondents were promised anonymity from the instructors. The first three focus groups of 7 students each enrolled in the first semester, the second two focus groups of 6 students each enrolled in the second semester, and the third two focus groups of 5 members were students of the third semester. After explaining the purpose of research and backgrounds of questions, the instructor gave these students a written assignment that asked them to discuss and write down their perceptions and attitudes. The resultant transcripts were usually 5 or more pages. Since, in the subsequent analysis of the transcripts suggested no significant differences among these seven focus groups, the responses were treated as one data set.

Analysis of the qualitative data followed the guidelines of Lincoln and Guba's (1985:203) categorizing process by "sorting units into provisional categories on the basis of 'look-alike' characteristics." Both authors read and examined these transcripts several times independently in order to identify recurring thoughts, ideas, and respondents' perceptions. After several iterations and discussion of the data, the authors agreed that the comments could be organized into several overall categories discussed below.

Our analyses of the qualitative data derived from the question "What do you think about Western corporations in Kazakhstan?" suggest that the respondents consider Western corporations in Kazakhstan to possess advanced business practices, providing quality products and services,

promoting competition as well as economic development to local markets. On the other hand, some student respondents consider Western corporations as profit seeking organizations without considering local people and environment.

**Table 2** Individual Perceptions of Generation Y on Western Corporations in Kazakhstan (October 2004, Almaty, Kazakhstan, KIMEP Student Respondents: 43)

Constructs	Indicators	Analyzed Results & Respondents
	Questions: “What do you think about Western corporations in Kazakhstan?”	
Advanced Business Practices	(1) “They are useful because of their investments, creating new jobs for local people, positive influence on market, helping to build good relationships with foreign countries” (2) “Bring up advanced knowledge, experience and international standards”	(1) 60.5%, 26 respondents (2) 32.6%, 14 respondents
Quality Products	(3) “Provide KZ with some new products/services that local companies can not produce yet. Their products are of high quality”	(3) 32.6%, 14 respondents.
Competitive Development	(4) “Positive, because they help KZ to develop through investment and technology” (5) “Motivate local companies for further improvement and competition”	(4) 6.9%, 3 respondents (5) 9.3%, 4 respondents
Profit seeking oriented	(6) “They are targeted only on their profits. They are aggressive. They don’t follow KZ laws. And they make KZ to be dependable on them” (7) “They don’t care about local people and environment” (8) “Negative, because they taken out KZ money and don’t give opportunity for local companies to be on market with own products”	(6) 25.6%, 11 respondents (7) 6.9%, 3 respondents (8) 6.9%, 3 respondents

Our generation Y respondents view Western countries as global partners helping Kazakhstan to grow; and they aspire to visit, live and experience Western countries and cultures. On the other hand, about one-third of the respondents regard Western countries as exclusivists wanting to influence local cultures.

The analysis of the data derived from the question “What do you think about Western products in Kazakhstan?” lead us to conclude that the generation Y respondents consider Western products to be attractive brands and of competitive quality but high price goods. A small number of respondents view Western products as a mean of “acculturation.”

**Table 3** Individual Perceptions of Generation Y on Western Countries in Kazakhstan  
(October 2004, Almaty, Kazakhstan, KIMEP Student Respondents: 43)

Constructs	Indicators	Results and Respondents
	Questions: "What do you think about Western countries in Kazakhstan?"	
Global Partners	(1) "Western countries are friends because they help KZ to develop through investments, technology, and experience" (2) "They motivate KZ to grow, build its economy"  (3) "They make positive influence on KZ society"	(1) 20.9%, 9 respondents (2) 25.6%, 11 respondents (3) 16.3%, 7 respondents
Western Aspirants	(4) "Western countries are nice places to live, because of their stability, safeness, and high living standards. It is nice place to travel and study" (5) "These countries are nice because of their interesting culture, traditions, and nice business climate"	(4) 18.6%, 8 respondents (5) 20.9%, 9 respondents
Exclusivists	(6) "These countries try to influence developing countries, try to control them. They have power to do everything they want. Sometimes they are aggressive. They influence local culture by implementing their own"	(11) 32.6%, 14 respondents

**Table 4** Individual Perceptions of Generation Y on Western products in Kazakhstan  
(October 2004, Almaty, Kazakhstan, KIMEP Student Respondents: 43)

Constructs	Indicators	Results and Respondents
	Questions: "What do you think about Western products in Kazakhstan?"	
Attractive Brand	(1) "Products are of high quality, famous brands, nice advertisement, durability, and attractive packages" (2) "Prefer products and services of local producers"	(1) 58.1%, 25 respondents (2) 6.9%, 3 respondents
Competitive Quality	(3) "Presence of Western products motivates local producers to improve the quality of their products" (4) "Some products categories of Western products are good (cars and high-tech)"	(3) 18.6%, 8 respondents (4) 9.3%, 4 respondents
High price goods	(5) "Their goods are artificial, tasteless, and genetic-modified. Also the prices of all products are high"	(5) 29.9%, 15 respondents
Acculturation	(6) "They increase the presence of Western culture in oriental KZ"	(6) 4.76%, 2 respondents

**Quantitative Analysis: Sampling and Questionnaire**

To achieve an appropriate sample size and statistical power, 500 survey questionnaires were distributed to KIMEP undergraduate and MBA students in classes during the period from October to November 2004 in Almaty, Kazakhstan. A total of 498 respondents completed the survey. After screening and removing those missing values, non-response errors, and intentional respondent errors, the researchers obtained a total of 495 useable survey questionnaires in the final data set for statistical analyses.

A questionnaire was designed to measure consumers' perceived attitudes towards Western cultures with 16 variables, which were selected through focus group interviews with students. In addition, these respondents received some open-end questions about their opinions on certain products and brands. Finally, some relevant demographic items were also obtained. To measure the acculturation variables, this study employs interval scaled questions (Crask and Fox 1987). The scaled-response form used in this study is a modified Likert scale, in which respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on each of a series of attitudinal statements and their responses were based on a symmetrical scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree).

**Consumers' Attitudes toward Western Cultures and Things**

The demographic profiles of the sample consumers are generally young, college-educated with rather high family incomes, that is, they are under 20 years old (33%), 21-25 years old (59%), over 26 years old (8%), 40% of male and 60% of female, and the average family incomes are 1,200 US dollars per month. They spend average 193 US dollars (Standard Deviation=152) for their shopping per month.

A majority of these respondents expressed a favorable attitude towards Western countries, companies, products, and brands. Especially, students wanted to travel to Western countries, to work at Western companies, and purchase Western products and brands. However, they do not want to be deculturated from their traditional culture and lifestyle such as food, nationality, and family concerns (see Table 5).

**Table 5** Consumers' Attitude toward Western Cultures and Things

Acculturation variables	The Mean (Standard Deviation)
I like to travel to Western countries	6.0 (1.327)
I like to work at Western companies	5.9 (1.239)
I like to study in Western countries	5.8 (1.446)
I like Western clothes	5.8 (1.356)
I like Western brands	5.7 (1.352)
I like to see Western films	5.6 (1.353)
I like Western music	5.4 (1.599)
I like Western products	5.2 (1.466)
I like to read Western magazines	4.8 (1.375)
I like Western sports stars	4.6 (1.763)
I like Western sports	4.6 (1.408)
I like Western people	4.5 (1.392)
I like Western styled drinks	4.4 (1.693)
I like Western foods	4.1 (1.549)
I like to be Westernized	3.8 (1.730)
I like to marry with Western spouse	2.7 (1.940)

A majority of students were looking for Western products and represented a favorable attitude toward Western products and brands: 414 out of the 495 students, or 83.4%, students provided answers about products to which they want to purchase; and the remaining 16.6 % of students are still under consideration. Among Western products, students showed a preference in the order of car (52.9%), fashion clothes and cosmetics (15.2%), electronic goods and computers (12.3%), Western styled apartment (5.1%), and others.

For car brands, students showed a preference in the order of Mercedes (36.4%), Toyota or Lexus (22.7%), BMW (19.7%), Ferrari or Porsche (10.6%), and others (e.g., Peugeot, Renault, Volkswagen, Nissan, and Rover). For the brands of clothes or cosmetics, students had a preference for Armani, Calvin Klein, Versace, Chanel, Christian Dior, Gucci, D&G, Boudoir, and Sisley. For the brands of electronic goods and computers, students had a preference for Sony, Panasonic, Toshiba, HP

(especially for laptop), and Intel. For the brands of other products, students had a preference for IKEA for furniture, Nike and Adidas for sport goods, Samsung for camera, Nokia for mobile phone, Harley-Davidson for motorcycle, Swatch for watch, etc.

### **Channels for Consumers to Learn Western Consumption Culture and Things**

This study applied a linear regression model to investigate which channels have the most impact on consumers' acculturation toward Western cultures and products. Consumers in transition countries are influenced the most by Western films (mainly through TV) and by people who return home after studying in Western countries. Consumers in transition countries like to imitate what they saw in Western films and act like those people who return to their home countries after studying in Western countries. See table 6 for the details.

**Table 6** Learning Channels of Consumers' Acculturation

Dependent variable: Purchasing Western Products	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t-value
Acculturation channels	B (Std. Error)	Beta	
Western films	0.057 (0.015)	0.209	3.825***
Sports	-0.004 (0.014)	-0.015	-0.278
Western people	0.012 (0.014)	0.044	0.844
Sport stars	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.026	-0.494
Travel Western countries	-0.025 (0.017)	-0.091	-1.541
Study in Western countries	0.034 (0.014)	0.132	2.428**
Western magazines	-0.001 (0.014)	-0.004	-0.067
Western companies	0.002 (0.016)	0.006	0.108

\*\*\* Significant at  $\alpha < 0.01$ , \*\*significant at  $\alpha < 0.05$  respectively

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION AND DISCUSSION**

### **Economic Development Facilitates Positively Global Consumerism in Transition Economies**

Economic development by definition implies growth and increased consumption of an ever-larger supply of products. One of the most obvious changes brought about by economic development is a marked increase in consumerism and a dramatic change in what people consume, where they acquire consumer products, and how they relate to each other and the rest of the world. Societies throughout history have attempted to improve the quality of life for their people. Usually, greater access to more food, clothes, better housing, and the acquisition of various products that make life easier and more enjoyable are common measures of better life. Many of the benefits are obvious.

Consumerism increases as countries develop, partly because they manufacture many of these products. As American, European, Japanese, Korean, and other local factories in transition economies produce electronics, appliances, automobiles, apparel, footwear, household furnishings, and other consumer items, people become more aware of these products, develop the need to acquire them, and are better able to purchase them because of the jobs and salaries these industries create. Industries such as tourism dramatically alter consumer tastes and desires. They also bring aspects of their own culture with them that influence people in the transition economies to acquire a similar lifestyle. Visiting or studying in Western countries profoundly changes consumption patterns. Most individuals are greatly influenced by the behavior and the habits of others around them. When students and travelers return home from Western countries, they not only take new ways of living with them, they also help to replicate consumption patterns of rich societies in their own countries. This consumerism is also a positive influence because it contributes to further economic growth and increased economic opportunities (Payne and Nassar 2003:172).

People throughout the world are increasingly connected to each other by television, telephones, the Internet, and other forms of communications. Movies, videotapes, books, and magazines allow many people, even in remote villages to see how people in developed countries live. They are also exposed to seductive advertisements that equate the acquisition of products with personal achievement and character. Traditional values are under pressure everywhere as multinational companies promote the homogenization of consumer tastes and culture values. To the extent that most people in the transition economies cannot afford to purchase Western consumer goods and services, they aspire to acquire as many of them as possible.

### **Generation Y is Emerging as a Working Consumer Group in Transition Economies**

Members of a specific subculture possess beliefs, values, and customs that set them apart from other members of the same society. The subculture is usually defined as 'a distinct cultural group that exists as an identifiable segment within a large, more complex society' (Schiffman and Kanuk 2004:438). It is not difficult to understand why each major age sub-grouping of the population might be thought of as a separate subculture. Age subcultures are generally classified and examined into four age groups, from youngest to oldest: generation Y, generation X, baby boomers, and seniors. These four age segments have been singled out because their distinctive lifestyles qualify them for consideration as subculture groups. The generation Y market, also known as 'echo boomers' and the 'millennium generation,' is the age group of individuals who were born between the years 1977 and 1994. Members of generation Y are often described as pragmatic, savvy, socially and environmentally aware, and open to new experiences (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski 2001). Their values in transition economies are progress and achievement, activity, education, materialism, and hedonism (Lee and Tai 2005). They have grown up in a media-saturated environment.

It is reasonable to assume that the age of consumer innovator is related to the specific product category in which person innovates, however, past research suggest that consumer innovators tend to be younger consumers especially in the areas such as to fashion clothing and new automobiles. Consumer innovators have more formal education, have higher family income, and are more likely to have higher occupational positions than late adopters.

Education, either formal or informal, plays a major role in the passing on and sharing of culture. Educational levels of a society can be assessed using literacy rates and enrollments in secondary or higher education – information available from secondary sources. Multinational firms also need to know about the qualitative aspects of education, namely, varying degree of emphases on particular skills, and the overall level of the education provided. If technology is marketed, the level of production sophistication tends to depend on the educational level of future consumers. Product adaptation decisions are often influenced by the extent to which targeted customers are able to use the product or service properly.

### **Hedonic Dimension of the Consumption is a Main Stream in Transition Economies**

The results of this study further suggest that global consumers share a culture of achievement orientation, hedonism, and materialism. A lack of cross-cultural differences for this value was observed, a finding consistent with past research suggest that some consumption values, including status, may be equally important among Asian and American consumers (Eastman *et al.* 1997). As expected, the respondents in the study also rated the importance of fun and excitement as life values. A researcher found out that Western consumers rated enjoyment and pleasure in luxury hotels significantly higher than did their Asian counterparts (Mattila 1999). In the same token, the working consumer group in transition economies, with their cultural value of status-seeking, achievement orientation, enjoyment, and materialism, might be more attracted to the hedonic dimension of consumption objects.

### **Films and Television Accelerate the Globalization of Consumer Culture**

Globalization affords marketing managers new opportunities as well as threats. One opportunity is the growth of global consumer segments that associate similar meanings with certain places, people, and things (Caudle 1994; Dawar and Parker 1994; Hassan and Katsanis 1994). Paralleling the growth of global segments is the emergence of global consumer cultures, shared sets of consumption-related symbols such as product categories, brands, consumption activities that are meaningful to segment members (Terpstra and David 1991). Duncan (1992) and Shocker, Srivastava, and Ruekert (1994) hypothesize that building a global image may derive their additional power and value. In part, brands with a global image may derive additional power and value from consumer attributions of enhanced self-worth and status through purchase of brand (Friedman 1990). That is, consumers may purchase certain brands to reinforce their membership in a specific global segment, such as teenager, business professional, elite (Hannerz 1990). In addition, globally positioned brands are likely to have special credibility and authority (Kapferer 1992).

Mass media programming has played a major role in the creation, learning, and sharing of such consumption symbols (Appadurai 1990; Walker 1996). Appadurai (1990:299) proposes a particularly relevant framework of diffusion for global consumer culture using five paths of global cultural flow, including "mediascape, especially in their television, film which provide large and complex repertoires of image." Walker (1996) provides evidence to which mass media in general and televisions in particular are playing central roles in the creation of global consumption symbols, and concludes that worldwide access to television is creating a global culture of consumption, which he refers to as a "global mall." Because of the diffusion of such imagery and the desire for real or imagined participation in the consumer culture it creates, certain product categories become signs of global cosmopolitanism and modernity. Simultaneously, it is likely that brand managers seek to capitalize their brand as symbolic of global consumer culture. The objective would be to have consumers identify the brand as a sign of membership in the globally cosmopolitan segment.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This study has shown that the income level of Kazakh consumers have been increasing over the last 10 years since its independence, as indicated by the \$2300 GDP per capita in year 2004 which was a more than 70% increase of the \$1342 per capita in year 1996, see Table 1. In general, the capacity to consume increases as consumers' incomes increase. We found that this is the case as supported by the rise of consumption figures in Kazakhstan. In other words, we conclude that economic development facilitates consumerism in Kazakhstan, a country of transition economy.

In addition to the increased purchasing power, Kazakh consumers also possess positive attitudes toward Western products and corporations. This study found that our generation Y respondents consider Western products to be attractive brands and of competitive quality with somewhat higher prices. They also view Western corporations in Kazakhstan positively. That is, they regard Western corporations to possess advanced business practices, providing quality products and services as well as offering competition and economic development to local markets. These positive attitudes, in turn, resulted in the willingness of these consumers to purchase and did actually buying Western products.

We have demonstrated, in our quantitative analysis, that a majority of students expressed favorable attitudes toward Western countries, companies, products and Western brands. Almost all respondents "like to travel to Western countries," "like to work at Western companies," "like Western clothes, brands, music, products, etc." Furthermore, we found that Kazakh consumers or consumers in transition economies are influenced the most by Western films and by those who have studied in Western countries.

In conclusion, the rapid economic development and increased income leads to growing numbers of middle classes in transition economies such as Kazakhstan. The growing middle classes increased consumptions. Due to the influence of Western films, TV programming, increased contacts with and

studies of Western cultures and things, most of these middle classes can afford, like to and actually do purchase Western products. Thus, Kazakhstan is one emerging market where Western multinational firms should go.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

The results of this study are exploratory and preliminary in nature and should be reviewed with further studies. Because this study was conducted within a single segment, generation Y, validation of these findings in the other segments will require further research. In addition, the particular sample group clearly limits the generalizability of the findings. Different sample groups need to be tested for validation purposes. The research design also poses some limitations: this study was limited to the cognitive responses of customers.

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