

Acculturation to the global consumer culture: Scale development and research paradigm

Mark Cleveland^{a,*}, Michel Laroche^b

^a *Management and Organizational Studies Program, Social Sciences Centre, Room 2233, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C2*

^b *Royal Bank Distinguished Professor of Marketing, John Molson School of Business, Concordia University (Montreal, Quebec), Canada*

Abstract

The globalization of the marketplace and how this process is shaping the cultural characteristics of people around the world is arguably the most critical issue facing international marketing managers today. Powerful forces such as capitalism, global transport, communications, marketing and advertising, and transnational cosmopolitanism are interacting to dissolve the boundaries across national cultures and economies and in the eyes of some, accelerating the emergence of a homogeneous global consumer culture. The conventional method of using countries as the cultural unit of analysis or as a basis for market segmentation, is increasingly ill-advised, given that most of the world's countries are already multicultural and growing ever more so, and even within relatively homogeneous nations, individuals vary substantially in the extent to which they identify with, adhere to, and practice cultural norms. Many researchers argue that increasing globalization is reducing the homogeneity of consumer behaviors within countries, while increasing communalities across countries. Despite the importance of and widespread sociological discourse on this topic, (1) a scarcity of studies exists that have simultaneously considered both global and local cultural influences on consumer behavior, and (2) a scale for measuring how individuals acquire and become a part of this emerging global consumer culture is lacking. This article focuses on the development and validation of a multidimensional scale for the measurement of acculturation to global consumer culture, and is part of a larger international study examining the complex interaction and contextual nature of local and global cultural influences on consumer behavior. The article concludes with a proposed research paradigm intended to model such phenomena.

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1. Introduction and rationale

Among all the challenges facing organizations, the globalization of the marketplace is perhaps the most critical. Interactions between cultures and markets are accelerating in the global economy. In order to prepare for the many opportunities and avoid the many threats afforded by globalization, marketing managers must make informed decisions building from valid assumptions about cultural influences—the broadest, deepest and most enduring influences on consumer behavior. Globally, the culture scene is now witnessing two opposing, yet simultaneously occurring and reinforcing movements: the homogenization and heterogenization of cultures.

International consumer research fundamentally focuses in one of two areas: (1) understanding consumer differences from the perspective of cultural, social, economic, and other marketing environment elements; and (2) the search for common groups of consumers across countries, for international market segmentation purposes. The latter focus suggests the possibility of the existence, or imminent emergence, of global consumers.

What is the impact of globalization on consumer behavior around the world? On the one hand, capitalism, global transport, communications, marketing and advertising, and transnational cosmopolitanism are interacting to dissolve the boundaries across national cultures and economies (Ger, 1999), and in the eyes of many, accelerating the emergence of a homogeneous global consumer culture. On the other hand, the “differentiating impact of globalization strengthens or reactivates national, ethnic, and communal identities; and the pattern of interrelationships fuels a hybridization of social life” (Ger, 1999, p. 65).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 519 661 2111x81464.

E-mail addresses: mclevela@uwo.ca (M. Cleveland), laroche@jmsb.concordia.ca (M. Laroche).

Rather than suppressing differences, this new global cultural system may actively promote them. Wilk (1995) argues that cross-cultural researchers must examine the “...complex interplay between local context and global content, rather than arguing for the primacy of one over the other” (p. 111).

Beyond largely anecdotal accounts and sociological discourse, the literature reflects a dearth of empirical studies that simultaneously considers local and global cultural influences on consumer behavior, particularly in cross-cultural settings. The utter absence of a scale for capturing global consumer culture (specifically, how consumers acquire global consumer culture, hence acculturation to global consumer culture, or AGCC) complicates the efforts of market researchers and practitioners to measure and accurately develop the profiles of so-called emerging global consumer segments, or to determine the extent of their existence relative to segments derived on the basis of other characteristics (e.g., demographics). The focus of this paper is on developing and validating a scale for the measurement of AGCC. The current research is part of a larger international study examining the interaction and contextual nature of, local and global cultural influences on consumer behavior.

2. International segmentation

Conventionally, marketers derive international segments based on clustering countries according to specific similarities along several pertinent aspects. However, a growing number of researchers have argued that marketers should consider both differences within countries and similarities across countries. First, very few countries of the world are culturally homogeneous, and this number is shrinking due to increasing immigration in many nations in order to supplement low population (and/or workforce) growth. Smith (1991) estimated that at least 90% of the nations of the world are multiethnic. Second, even within relatively homogeneous countries, individuals vary in the extent to which they identify with, adhere to, and practice cultural norms. Third, many authors have argued that increasing globalization has reduced the homogeneity of consumer behaviors *within* countries, while increasing communalities among consumers *across* countries. Roth (1995) contends that “...as trading nations reduce and eliminate structural, political and economic barriers, the search for similar consumers will become more important than national differences.” (p. 166). Firat (1995) asserts that “...market segments transcend national borders, forming global alliances of consumers” (p. 114). “Country and culture are not synonymous” (Furrer et al., 2000, p. 356); behavioral differences—which are due to the life experiences of people from different cultures—would exist even if the planet did not include nation-states. Worsley (1990) reminds us that all individuals belong to communities, which are both smaller and wider than the nation-state. As Furrer et al. (2000) advocate, “a model of international market segmentation has to take into account differences within countries as well as similarities across countries” (p. 357). In this era of globalization, market researchers and practitioners should not utilize countries, but rather, individuals as the cultural unit of analysis or as the basis for market segmentation. This will be the approach followed in the current research.

3. Culture, consumption, and culture change

More than any other factor, culture is the prime determinant of consumers’ attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles, and therefore, the needs that consumers satisfy through the acquisition and use of goods and services. Culture by definition, is very abstract and complex, and consequently, few have agreed on a common definition for the concept. However, among the many existing definitions of culture, several common threads are identifiable: culture is a learned, transmitted, and shared phenomenon. Anthropologists envision culture “...as a construct at once pervasive, compelling, and elusive, from which a person’s sense of reality, identity, and being emerge” (Peñaloza and Gilly, 1999, p. 86). From a social phenomenon standpoint, culture is an amalgamation of individual processes (including individual expressions of identity and affiliation: Roosens, 1995). Hofstede (1984) defined culture as “...the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group from another” (p. 201). The transmission of culture does not occur genetically; therefore, any human being that is in the right place at the right time can technically acquire culture.

Most contemporary researchers agree that ethnicity arises from the notion that certain individuals belong to or identify with certain cultural groups. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), “the self or identity is critical because it is the psychological locus of cultural effects...it functions as a mediating, orienting, and interpretive framework that will systematically bias how members of a given socio-cultural group will think, feel, and act” (in De Mooij, 2004, p. 94). Ethnic identity is adaptive and malleable; a product of affiliations to the past and of adjustment to present circumstances (Costa and Bamossy, 1995). Indeed, as remarked by Usunier (2000), “culture is much more a process than a distinctive whole” (p. 5). While identity formation is “...intimately bound up with the social context within which the person grows up and matures” (Epstein, 1978, p. 144), as political or economic conditions, and/or social situations change, so also do the identifying aspects of ethnicity (Costa and Bamossy, 1995). Cultures are neither pure nor timeless; rather cultures constantly evolve due to either internal dynamics or external forces (Venkatesh, 1995). Across different times and places, some cultures change more quickly than others, and some cultures are more open or resistant to change. Once largely a consequence of wars and colonization, culture change today results from immigration, international trade and finance, global media and technological flows, and business travel and tourism. While history records many exchanges and instances of global cultural flows, never before have these occurred with the “...sheer speed, scale, and volume” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 301) of the present time.

Acculturation refers to the process in which individuals learn and adopt the norms and values of a culture different than the one in which they grew up. In the past, most theorists conceptualized acculturation as a bipolar, unidimensional process: as the individual progressively acquires the cultural traits of another culture, s/he gradually loses part, or the entire, heritage of their culture of origin (i.e., assimilation). The assumption underlying the latter is that the “...strengthening of one requires a weakening of the other; that is, a strong ethnic

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