



The common threads of national cultures

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ABSTRACT

Culture related research in international marketing focusses largely on cultural relativism, that is, on cultural differences between countries. It examines the implications of national culture differences and how to manage the differences while doing business across national borders. These discussions are either framed within the emic versus etic debate, or under the rubric of national culture dimensions. Our paper addresses the equally important but largely ignored question of cultural universalism, that is, how nations are culturally similar. Using the GLOBE national culture dimensions data, we find significant similarities among the GLOBE nations. Our paper contributes to the cultural relativism versus universalism debate, and extends marketing theory with a “universal culture” approach that we believe can enhance understanding and cooperation among international business managers. Overall, our findings have important implications for scholars and practitioners.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

国际市场营销方面有关文化的研究主要侧重于文化相对主义，也就是国家之间的文化差异。它考察了进行跨境贸易时的民族文化差异和文化管理差异。以上讨论集中在主位与客位，或国家文化维度的框架下。本文阐释了文化普遍主义中一个同样重要但在很大程度上被忽视的问题-民族文化的相似性。通过观察GLOBE国家文化维度的数据，我们发现GLOBE各成员国之间有显著相似之处。本文对文化相对主义与普遍主义之争做出了贡献，并将营销理论延伸至“普遍文化”的做法，加强跨国商业经理人之间的理解和合作。总体而言，本文的发现对于学者和从业者都具有重要意义。

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1. Introduction

The eco-system within which people live consists of three broad systems – the physical, the biological and the cultural (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Unlike the physical and biological systems that are created by nature, the cultural system is a product of people's ideas and endeavors, that is, “Culture is the man-made part of the environment” (Herskovits, 1948, 17). Whereas common biology and human nature drives people to seek similar ways to satisfy their uniform biological needs, diversity in the physical and institutional environments in which people live often produces different modes of behavior to fulfill the necessities of life. Thus, there are drivers for both cultural similarities and differences across nations. Notwithstanding the concurrence of pressures for both cultural uniformity and diversity, culture related research in marketing largely focuses on cultural *differences* between nations, the reasons for these differences, and the consequences of these differences for international

marketing. For example, Steenkamp (2001) reviewed the common assumptions and theorisation underlying the conceptualisation and measurement of cultural *differences* in international marketing research, and the impact of cultural *differences* on decision-making.

The international marketing literature has identified many national level similarities, but normally outside the culture paradigm (e.g. Uncles et al., 2012) and many national level differences, including in culture (e.g. Kongsompong et al., 2009). We argue what has largely been ignored is evidence of significant cultural commonalities across countries. As Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952, 179) asserted: “Both (cultural) perspectives are true and important, and no false either-or antinomy must be posed between them.” For culture research to be relevant and useful, it is important that it comprehensively captures the totality of the culture phenomena that is manifested in international marketing, including both similarities and differences. This type of enquiry is common-place in the other sciences. For example, “Biologists have long taken this for granted about classes of organisms and yet have never stopped comparing them fruitfully. Only, their comparison means discovering their likenesses and differences, not looking merely for likenesses or merely for differences.” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, 176) (italics added). Given the significance of both national culture similarities and differences, and

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Table 1
Paradigms in culture studies.

Culture paradigm	Culture content/dimensions	Culture configuration/scores	Culture perspective
1. Emic (versus Etic)	Different	Different	Relativistic
2. National Culture (Etic)	Similar	Different	Hybrid
3. Universal Culture	Similar	Similar	Universalist

the focus of most extant marketing research on national culture differences, the objective of our research is to address a seemingly overlooked research issue of cultural similarities across nations.

There are two broad paradigms of cultural analysis and discussion in the international marketing literature (see Table 1). One is the emic (versus etic) paradigm (see Headland et al., 1990 for a review of the multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations in the emic–etic debate). In general, within the emic paradigm, it is assumed that the content/dimensions of culture vary across countries. The second, more popular paradigm for cultural analysis especially in the context of international marketing is based on national culture dimensions, which is an etic approach (e.g. Hall, 1977; Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Schwartz, 1992; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1993). In the national culture dimensions approach, the core characteristics of culture are considered to be universal and captured by a set of common national culture dimensions such as Power Distance, Individualism–Collectivism, etc. However, the configuration/scores of countries on these dimensions vary from country to country reflecting differences in national cultures. In this paper, we propose a third perspective for cultural analysis and discussion, namely, the universal culture approach which is based on similarity in the scores of countries on the culture dimensions. Thus, under our proposed universal culture paradigm, nations not only have the same culture content/dimensions, but also have similar culture configurations/scores on these dimensions.

Another way of looking at the three paradigms is through the cultural relativism versus universalism lens (Gaertner et al., 2012). Viewed from the cultural relativism–universalism framework, the emic paradigm is based on a relativistic perspective since it regards the cultures of different countries to be unique and non-comparable. On the other hand, our proposed universal culture paradigm is founded on a universalist perspective since it considers cultures to be similar across nations in terms of both their culture content/dimensions as well as their configuration/scores on these dimensions. In contrast, the popular national culture paradigm is based on a hybrid perspective. It uses similar national culture dimensions but describes and distinguishes national cultures on the basis of differences in their national culture configurations/scores. These alternative perspectives are set out in Table 1.

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we present our “universal culture model” based on theoretical arguments underlying national cultural similarities. This is followed by an empirical test of our “universal culture” concept using the national culture dimensions data from the GLOBE study. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for culture related theory and practice.

2. A model of universal culture

“Culture” has hundreds of definitions with varying connotations, encompassing both subjective norms and beliefs and objective artefacts. It is therefore important to clarify its meaning in the context of our “universal culture” model. In most general terms, “culture” refers to the characteristics that are shared among people (Breidenbach and Nyíri, 2009; Hofstede, 2001). The three key words in this description are characteristics, shared, and people. The “characteristics” aspect of culture may be viewed through Herskovits's

(1948) broad definition: “culture is the man-made part of the environment”. Thus, everything that is not part of the natural world constitutes culture, including values, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions since these are created by people in the course of their living in societies (Triandis, 2004). The second aspect of culture is “sharing” which implies uniformity or commonality among people on one or more characteristics of interest to the researcher. The greater the uniformity of a characteristic among people, the more they are part of the same culture, all else remaining the same. For example, the use of the internet for communication is part of our contemporary universal culture since this characteristic is shared widely among people around the world. The third aspect of culture is the group of “people” who share similar characteristics. In the national culture paradigm, the focus is on the average characteristics of people within countries, and the similarities and differences between countries on their average characteristics. However, the national culture approach overlooks the possibility of people sharing similar characteristics across countries (in addition to within countries) and therefore belonging to the same culture irrespective of their country of origin. It is this notion of similarity among people across countries that we capture in our “universal culture” model. Thus, we define “universal culture” as “the characteristics that are shared by people across the globe, irrespective of their country of origin or residence”. Although Tooby and Cosmides (1992) simply used the term culture to refer to “any mental, behavioural, or material commonalities shared across the entire species...”, we use the term “universal culture” to differentiate among cultures at different levels of aggregation. Since “... the lines of demarcation of any cultural unit chosen for description and analysis are in large part a matter of level of abstraction and of convenience for the problem at hand” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, 185), we examine culture at the global level, which is consistent with our research problem of examining cultural similarities between nations.

Our proposed universal culture model is shown in Fig. 1. In this model, universal culture results from complex interaction among four key factors – human biology, human nature, global polity and global economy. In the past, culture was considered to be simply an outcome of adjustment “to the biological and psychological demands of the human organism.” (Murdock, 1940, 367). However, recent research shows that human biology and culture co-evolve through complex interaction “in which culture is generated and shaped by biological imperatives while biological traits are simultaneously altered by genetic evolution in response to cultural innovation.” (Lumsden and Wilson, 1981, 1). Hence, human biology and human nature also undergo changes, albeit over long periods of time. For example, changes in human biology with evolution from apes to Homo sapiens occurred over millions of years. Similarly, changes in human nature from tolerance to intolerance of gender and race discrimination, slavery, cannibalism and the death sentence have occurred in many parts of the world over several hundred years. However, for the most part, these two characteristics can be assumed to remain largely constant over the planning horizon of business managers spanning a few years. The coevolution of universal culture with the globalisation of institutions and economies partly follows a similar logic to human–culture coevolution. And in some respects, the two-way effects between universal culture and globalisation may even be contemporaneous and difficult to tease

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