

# Culture convergence

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## **Introduction**

In recent times, globalization topic is one of the most discussed issues across the world. With globalization, countries have started to build stronger economic ties and be increasingly reliant on each other as it has never been. Some researchers argue of cultural convergence; that is, as two countries become closer with each other, they will be more likely to influence each other's culture, thereby bringing the two different cultures to be more similar.

For example, the popular culture, which originates from Western European and America, is often to be said to influence the developing Asian countries' culture, and is often dubbed as Westernization (Leung et al, 2008). Conversely, there are many that argue also of cultural divergence; which is the belief that each nation's culture are deeply rooted in the countries' history, so that even if outside culture try to influence the belief and attitude of the people, the difference between cultures can still be maintained, and can even increase over time (Axelrod, 1997; Turnbull & Sheehan, 2012).

Hofstede (1980) defined four dimensions of culture that describes the fundamental similarities and differences of human behavior and decision making process that forms part of culture. These dimensions will be valuable for measuring cultural convergence or divergence. They consist of masculinity/femininity, power distance, individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. Power distance is the dimension of which inequality of power is expected and accepted as normal by the less powerful members of organization and society.

Masculinity/ Femininity is the measure of which society is oriented towards 'masculine' value: competitiveness, assertion, success, good performance, etc. instead of 'feminine' value: kindness, caring, empathy, etc. Individualism/Collectivism measures to what extent society lets each individual care for their own: more individualism means that the ties between individuals in the society is more loose. Uncertainty Avoidance is the measure as to how much the members of the society avoid risky behaviors and stay the conservative way.

This essay will try to discuss whether countries has experienced cultural convergence or divergence, by first looking to the cultural divergence phenomenon, and then the cultural convergence phenomenon, and finally comparing both and giving recommendation as to how the risks of the phenomenon observed can be mitigated. Discussion Cultural Divergence Axelrod (1997) argued in his model that local convergence may cause global polarization. He contends that the convergence in society will stay in local area only, as the culture converge in a region that have nothing in common with neighboring regions.

This causes local regions to have culture convergence, but in the bigger area, the difference between cultures remain stable, thus increasing polarization or cultural divergence. Axelrod (1997) also argues that polarization level gets higher if there are a few dimensions of the culture, many alternative traits on each dimensions, and if the size of the region is large enough to allow for many cultures, but small enough for the change process to finish before all cultural boundaries are dissolved by the spread of

cultural traits. Further, Klemm et al. (2003) argued that the level of perturbation to a culture influences how the culture drifts.

They argued that perturbation, up to a level, will bring a culture to converge together, but when the perturbation or influence is high enough, the culture will split into several sub-culture, meaning the culture has been polarized or diverged. This phenomenon can be attributed to several reasons, such as preference for more extreme views, geographical isolation, social differentiation (tendency for groups to differentiate themselves compared to other groups), drift, the in and out of fads and fashions, specialization and changing environment or technology (Axelrod, 1997).

There are some examples of this phenomenon in the real life. For one, Turnbull & Sheehan (2012) argued that due to historical and cultural differences, the chain fast food company McDonald have to alter their strategy and brand imaging in Canada and Japan. This happens even though they are a company that is trying to build a similar image in every country they are established in. Furthermore, they also found that some of Australia's public relations policy clearly rejects that their culture has been assimilated to the US culture.

Another example is given by Darling-Wolf (2004) interview with Japanese women about foreigners, in which he found that Japanese women are still viewing Western women as shallow, vain and selfish. Martin (2010) also found that Japanese people found foreign actors and actresses to be more likeable if they exhibit some Japanese characteristics. This indicates that Japanese women still hold their cultural values highly, and not influenced by

the Westernization that may happen as a result of the strong ties between Japan and America.

Finally, Anderson et al. 2000) found that there are significant differences between Indian and American aerospace scientists and engineers, especially in the power distance, individualism and uncertainty avoidance dimension, indicating cultures still at the very least maintain their differences, if not diverging from each other. Cultural Convergence The theory behind cultural convergence notion is that a nation's culture is viewed as a subsystem of a global culture, and that culture is an open system that can exchange input and outputs with other cultures.

Given this, to avoid entropy a system needs to reach an equilibrium, which is the state where all cultures are assimilated, and hence forming a culture convergence. This theory proposes that if two cultures interact frequently, they will most likely be converged together (Bergiel, 2011). One example that comes to mind when discussing convergence is Westernization, which is the phenomena where non-Western (typically Asian) culture are often changed and influenced with Western cultures through the exposure by media such as TV and Internet, as well as from various other interaction between the two cultures.

The ever increasing global marketing, as well as the increasing number of businesses that expands their business to foreign countries, only serve as a vehicle for cultural assimilation to happen, as the two cultures will mesh together and form a stable equilibrium according to this notion. This notion of cultural convergence also gain some support from researchers.

As an example, Bergiel (2011) found in his study about Japanese and US culture that in regards of individualism, masculinity and power distance the trend of convergence has been found to be very extreme, as the role of the two country reverses in between the two decades since Hofstede released his study in 1980. In 1980, the US society were said to be holding up the value of individualism, have low power distance and masculinity, while in this study it was found that now Japan culture has now moved from collectivism to individualism, surpassing the US score in the dimension, have lower power distance compared to the US, and is more masculine.

However, this may be also influenced by the politic-economic factors in the two country, and not solely by the fact that the two culture interacted with each other. Also, in the long-term orientation it has been found that the two cultures converge, sporting similar score in that dimension. Further, Nieves et al. (2006) also found from their study that Mexican and American engineers has converged their culture in the individualism dimension, compared to when Hofstede did his research in 1980.

Convergence Vs. Divergence Hence, while cultural convergence theory contends that over time and different cultures that interacts with each other will form a stable equilibrium eventually, the cultural divergence theory contends that cultures will maintain its own unique identity, as culture needs big enough perturbation to have a lasting change, and they typically maintain their difference despite the influence from foreign cultures/countries.

Some researchers argue that globalization will make cultures to converge, as globalization means that information is very easily accessible, and cultures

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are exposed to other cultures constantly, so that in cultural convergence theory this will cause those cultures to form an equilibrium, and that the world is converging into a 'global village'. (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). However, some researchers also argue that globalization may not necessarily cause convergence. Inglehart & Norris (2009) argued that the globalization may even cause polarization of the cultures.

They argued that the values that the rich country's public hold usually changes rapidly, while poorer countries generally are slower in adapting change in culture. This opens up a gap in culture difference between rich societies and poor societies. Further, they also found that richer countries also differ in culture in religiosity to poor societies. Richer countries are becoming more and more secular in these days, while poorer countries are typically more traditional and religious.

Similarly, richer countries are also moving towards gender equality, while many poorer societies still hold patriarchal values highly (Inglehart ; Norris, 2009). Further, this can also apply not to nation's cultures, but also its subcultures. Typically, the richer societies in the urban area adopt new values more rapidly, and rural society sticks with their traditional culture and adopt changes slowly. Finally, convergence theory is argued to be exaggerating the level of consensus of core value between US and other countries, thereby reducing the actual level of assimilation barrier that exists in the real world.

Hence, it is most likely that cultural divergence and polarization is what actually happens in the world. Organizations should take note of this divergence phenomenon in order to successfully conduct a global or

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multinational operation. Some researchers argue that the national cultural difference may bring problems in an organization in the integration process and consequently knowledge transfer (Vaara, 2003). The reason this happens is cultural difference is often thought to impede cooperation between the members.

Further, Hogg & Terry (2000) argued that similarity are often a factor in deciding attractiveness and trustworthiness, and having different culture makes an individual automatically less attractive and trustworthy compared to someone from the same culture. However, Sarala & Vaara (2009) argued that with different culture, organization may benefit from having different knowledge and repertoire that could be shared around. Hence, with cultural difference, knowledge transfer can potentially be more effective as there are more knowledge to go around.

Although the knowledge potential is great, what is more important is to actually manage to spread it around the organization and make sure that individuals from different cultures are comfortable with each other. Sarala & Vaara (2009) argued that the way for organization to do this is through facilitated communication, in order to reduce uncertainty and increase trust between the members of the organization. Also equally important is that the organization management practice must be aligned with the nation's culture that they are in, in order to operate smoothly in the face of cultural difference (Nieves et al, 2006).

Hence, to be successful, an organization must proactively try to make the members of the organization increase their trust with each other, as well as changing their managing practices, depending on the culture that they are



currently residing in. Conclusion In conclusion, cultural convergence is the theory that different cultures that interact in a regular basis will influence each other and form a stable equilibrium, thus converging the two cultures, while cultural divergence is the theory that states that cultural differences will be maintained, and even grow apart from each other even though they interact in a regular basis.

The basis of cultural convergence theory is that the member of society will try to imitate and assimilate the new foreign culture, while the cultural divergence theory contends that group tends to stay within themselves and differentiate themselves from other groups. In real life, it seems likely that the cultural divergence theory is correct, as even if a culture is experiencing change from foreign culture, the rate of change in the different part of society may be different, thus creating a gap as well.

For example, richer societies tend to adopt new values quickly, while poorer societies might hold to their traditional value, hence creating a cultural divergence overall. To overcome this issue, organization needs to actively try to facilitate communication between the members of their organization if they have different cultures, as well as altering their management practice to fit the culture of the society that they are currently residing in.

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