

Are the cultures of the world becoming more similar or more different

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



This report will be divided in to the three main areas of culture identified by Johnson (1962), value and norms, cognitive elements and beliefs and signs, symbols and signs which relates to language. In addition to this it will comprise of work by Levitt and other issues such as language barriers.

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Executive summary

The report argues that cultures are becoming similar; however there will always be areas of differential. This is demonstrated by focussing on the work of Johnson in depth as well as other theorists who define culture differently.

Defining culture can be difficult, an approach taken by Max Weber is: "... culture to be a part of the 'cultural sciences', concerned with the values and meaning, developing concepts and interpretations relevant to the society in which they take shape".

Geert Hofstede had a take on culture which needs to be mentioned; his theory portrayed 4 cultural dimensions, these are: power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty and avoidance. There are a many different dimensions of values between cultures, but he believed these are the key cultural factors which need to be looked at in each country to establish any similarities or differences. However, it needs to be pointed out that this is a old study, as well as not taking in to account factors such as religion. As well as this not all countries were included. (Gillespie, K et al, 2004)

Another definition is by Johnson (1962), he splits up his explanation into 3 areas. These will be elaborated on in the report as well as taking language and religion in to account.

Values and Norms

Values and norms are important in every society as they evaluate how societies should be represented. Culture is patterns of human activity and symbolic structure that give such activities significance and importance. " Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster." (ITIM International, 2003)

Many people can consider themselves not having values at all, however a lot of people have cultural rituals involving simple behaviors, things that we do in our day to day lives. Culture is manifested in music, literature, religion, race, luxuries and brand loyalties etc. It not only refers to consumption of consumer goods but general processes which produces such goods that gives them meaning to some sort of social relationships. Individualistic cultures hold independence which show internal attributes and unique. Cultural differences show themselves in different ways with different levels of depth. Symbols are the most generally used manifestation of culture along with hero's, values and rituals. (See Appendix 1)

Values are very important when it comes to involving it in culture, as many of them can be long-term orientations due to them wanting to shape the future such as religion. Most people learn values at home, in church, in a synagogue or even at school. Values are something that matter to us as people.

" Norms point decision-makers in the direction of solutions that are considered effective and sensible by the relevant audience. They are templates that sort out how to assess a new situation and what kind of action to take." Atlantis international (2006)

Values are a big part in culture, without them there would be no expressed believes. Depending on what culture you come from will vary in which values you will believe in. These values may change as you get older, however some can last a lifetime.

Such as behavior learned from teachers, parents and peers, etc. some norms can be healthy, whereas some may not. Some contribute to the betterment of individuals, families and communities. However some are at high risk, such as mainstream American Societies where people would like to reduce or eliminate.

Norms are often ingrained in our every day life, that more of the time we are unaware of certain behavior. Youth centers contribute to reducing and improving cultural norms in some places, thereby improving cultural norms in some places thereby reducing alcohol, tobacco and drugs.

Cognitive aspects and beliefs

Johnson (1962) explains how cognitive elements are a different way of saying the norms and values of society that are passed down from generation to generation. Another way to define cognitive culture is by saying: " The cognitive culture system operates in each individual in accordance with its innately structured program... the functions of this system are the acquisition, exercise, and imparting of culture" (Talmy, L. 1995) . An example of this is, being polite and to teach children how to say please and thank you from an early age. For the purpose of this debate upon whether or not cultures in the world are becoming similar or different, we need to question whether the same set of cognitive elements and beliefs exist worldwide.

Talmy (1995) believes that there is a common ground for beliefs and cognitive values worldwide, and takes the example of men only marrying

woman and this ideology being the most socially acceptable in societies all over the world. However, Talmy also agrees in some differential when it comes to religion, and refers to them as 'taboos', for example Christians having the belief of not working on the day of Sabbath. (Talmy, L. 1995)

Religion does intervene with beliefs are involved. This does give a common ground to a group of people wherever they are in the world. Also, this can give a basis for a common daily lifestyle. However, different caste systems within each religion can differentiate beliefs themselves. Cultures are based on what we believe this can come from religion. The UK itself is known to be a multi cultural society. Therefore, businesses need to cater to these different demands and needs. Within religion itself there are differences too. For example praying is common, yet is carried out differently in different castes.

Different diets being in religion also differentiates culture too. For example being vegetarian is essential to some Hindus where as some believe that it is only important for a few days within a week.

However, an argument bought forwards by Talmy (1995) that some values, which are passed down to each generation, are general moral and societal values, which are not culture dependent, and are just based on the socially acceptable aspect in that surrounding. " Such values as truthfulness, honesty, justice, chastity etc. are simply aspects of sympathetic impartiality, and do not differentiate morality from culture to culture."(Talmy, L. 1995)

Levitt argues that culture is becoming more similar, this being due to the internet and new technologies which allow more communication. He refers to this as the 'global village'. Another aspect which he explains as a way of the cultures becoming more similar is that brands are becoming global and standardised, so we can all share a similar experience of the brand through physical experience or through their website.

An opposing view is taken by Heald (1982, 1993), and believe customisation is a better option. The frame reference needs to be taken in to account, such as the style of communication. This view supports the ideology to think globally and act locally.

Another viewpoint is taken by Becher suggesting that in some cultures it is easier to stop talking and communicating with those who have different beliefs and have been brought up with different cognitive thoughts. Becher goes further to say that there is a divide between orthodox and unorthodox people even those who are well educated. (Becher, T. 1990)

People who may be sophisticated still see a difference in society for those who are orthodox/ unorthodox.

Symbols and signals

Symbols and signals are interpreted in many different ways around the world. In order to solve this problem and make it easier for businesses to communicate with a larger variety of people from different parts of the world

it would be helpful for researchers to spend sufficient amount of time to communicate with them through their native language.

There are increasing concerns that there is not enough attention given to symbolism in the market place and consumer life. 'The field so far lacks solid theoretical base and is mired in inherently descriptive research (Hirschman 1981 and Holman 1980 have made similar claims).' (Evans et al, 2006)

Looking at the meaning transfer model, suggested by McCracken (1986), the model was resided in order to understand the translation of symbols around the world. The meaning then is disengaged and transferred onto consumer goods through macro mechanisms such as advertising and fashion systems. The meaning of the symbol is then transferred to individual consumers through a range of symbolic actions. These steps are required in order to translate symbols in the correct manner in different culture around the world. Davies and Fitchett (2003), found emotional, symbolic and pragmatic issues related to crossing cultures. (David Glen Mick, 1986)

Signs and Languages

Individual countries can speak different, similar or the same languages. This is a set of rules used for communicating and generating speech between people of different or same cultures. For example in low context cultures, some words retain what they mean in all situations, however in high context cultures, words can mean different things dependent on the situation and who is being spoken to. This can create misunderstandings and can be as a

result of cultural differences where some words, phrases and signs mean different things. (Gillespie, K. 2004)

Arguably it can be said that cultures are becoming alike in some aspects and different in others. In terms of language, cultures of different countries are adapting to English as it is one of the most popular language in the world. Many countries are seen now trying to learn English as a second language while others already have. (O'Neil, D. 2007)

However, language is not the only means of communication between people; when foreigners are in different countries with different languages from them, signs and emotions are used to express words rather than language itself; even people of the same language also use signs and emotions as a form of expression, for example making eye contact in the USA is seen as a sign of trust worthiness, however in Asian countries is a sign of disrespect (Gillespie, K. 2004). Some organisations use body language to replace language in adverts as a way of sending products across to consumers. Pictures are also used as a form of language understanding for product communication.

Emotions are used sometimes to communicate as they can be used to express excitement, frustration, fear and other things. However, some expressions mean different things to different people because of cultural differences. An example is the HSBC advert in Thailand where feet were exposed which is seen as a taboo because of their language and culture of what is right and wrong (Evans et al 2006).

However, countries strong in ideology because of their language and culture are conscious of what the world has to offer and the issue of product standardization wouldn't apply to them rather a customisation would be preferred. This is common in countries high in collectivism and cultural differences in terms of tradition, norms, language, habits, lifestyle and perceptions; because of these products offering/ads mean different things to different people.

Conclusion

Whilst there may be similar ground for culture emerging in society today with tastes for brands, there will always be a differentiation. This is mainly due to differentials in language and societies feeling the need to preserve its roots. Therefore to conclude, cultural similarities are occurring but at a slow pace.