AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF CULTURE: HOFSTEDE’S FIVE UNIVERSAL DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT
This paper reviews the role and influence of culture in different countries. The author explores how culture may be integrated into society and reflects on the impact of culture in advertising. In addition, an analysis of Hofstede’s five Universal dimensions of culture is discussed, supported by the findings from various studies. The author emphasizes the need to recognize the importance of cultural analysis before embarking on any business venture overseas. This paper supports previous research and challenges marketers to be sensitive to a society’s culture before investing time and money to promote a product or service to a society. Studies have shown that failure to identify the difference in culture and ignorance in imposing a foreign culture into an ongoing and existing culture may lead to undesirable outcome. The five Universal dimensions are Individualism, Uncertainty avoidance, Power distance, Masculinity and Confucian dynamism.

INTRODUCTION
According to Solomon (1999), culture can be described as accumulation of shared meanings, rituals, norms and traditions among members of an organization or society. It includes both abstract ideas such as values and ethics, as well as material objects and services. In contrast, Hawkins et al. (1998) describe culture as a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of a society. The latter definition includes almost everything that influences an individual though process and behaviour. It should be realized that culture is not static and is constantly evolving.

In order to appreciate the study of culture the author intends to highlight some of the common attributes of culture. According to Hawkins et al. (1998), culture is learned rather than innate. It should be noted that the process of learning one’s own culture is known as enculturation and in the event that the individual learns of a new culture through the socialization process, that would be known as acculturation.

In this study, the author will analyze how cultures vary across nations based on power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity and short term vs long term as described in the study of Hofstede’s 5 universal dimensions.

A REVIEW OF HOFSTEDE’S FIVE UNIVERSAL DIMENSIONS IN CULTURE
In order to appreciate the study of culture, Hofstede (1980) as cited in the article by Ji and Neal (2001) described five factors to assess the culture within a society under the following dimensions;

a. Individualism: considers the degree of distance in social relationship. Describes the relationship between individual and collectivity that prevails in a given society. High individualism may be expressed through extensive appeal of enjoyment and pleasure in life.
b. Uncertainty avoidance: considers the level of discomfort with the unknown future. The focus will be on how societies deal with unknown aspects of the future.

c. Power distance: considers the degree of social inequalities e.g. wealth, status and talents. This may refer to the extent to which less powerful members of an organization or institution [like a family] accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

d. Masculinity: considers the tendency to value achievement, assertion and performance. This refers to the degree to which a society is characterized by masculine (assertiveness) versus feminine (nurturance) characteristics. It is a study of whether biological differences between the sexes should have implications for their roles in society activities.

e. Confucian dynamism [short term vs long term]
Reflects teachings of Confucius. The lower or negative end represents respect for face, tradition, social hierarchy, focuses on the past or near future. The higher or positive end represents values of thrift, persistence, loyalty and is future oriented. In the following study the above dimensions will be closely examined by the author.

APPLICATION OF CULTURE
A study by Nakata and Sivakumar (2001) asserts that marketing concepts may be established in a multinational together with the effects of national culture in that process. Their research reveals that cultural values shape interpretation and facilitate or hinder adoption and implementation of marketing strategies of international subsidiaries in the global market.

According to Clark (1990, cited in Nakata and Sivakumar, 2001), understanding national culture provides a powerful explanation and prediction of decision-making in international marketing contexts.

This is especially true if marketers intend to sell their products or services in a global market. In order to be successful, marketers need to adopt and adapt to the cultural environment of the host country. Occasionally, marketers may be able to standardize the way they operate and manufacture products similar to those in the home country while there are times when they have to adapt their ways they operate and produce the products to suit the local taste and preference.

It should be recognized that success will not come easy for marketers unless they are sensitive to the local needs. A good example will be operators of the fast food chain of McDonalds’ outlets. Franchisees are given standard policies and guidelines to follow but when it comes to taste and preference, McDonalds does play up the local favours e.g. to introduce the Maharani burger or the Prosperity burger or chicken porridge which may not be introduced in the American market.

In the same way when Euro Disneyland was launched in Paris in April 1992, the management faced difficulties at the introduction stage since the French people have their own cultural identity and to adopt the American style theme parks may not blend in well with the local culture. In fact, the management of Euro Disney took a bold step forward by introducing wine and beer in the theme park though the corporate culture for Disney was to restrict serving of any alcohol at the theme park. It was a radical change in Disney’s culture in order to gain the acceptance of the local community.

SOCIALIZATION: THE PROCESS USED IN LEARNING THE CULTURE (LONG TERM PERSPECTIVE)
In an intergenerational study by Carlson,
Laczniah & Walsh (2001) it is stated that the adoption of a society’s culture may be introduced through socialization of children via television. In the socialization process children learn society’s values and lifestyle through the broadcast media. During the broadcast, children may identify themselves with certain role models that they observe and imitate.

Based on the study, it was found that parental styles may determine children’s consumer socialization. In addition, socialization may be regulated by the degree that parents allow children consumption autonomy and exposure to media.

According to Peterson and Leigh (1986, as cited by Carlson, Laczniah & Walsh 2001), parents may influence children by serving as examples, nurturing parent-child relationships, conveying values and directly controlling children’s behaviour. In certain cases, parents may use the relationship with children to fulfill their own social and emotional needs.

Carlson, Laczniah & Walsh (2001) further asserted that both parents and television exert influence on children’s development as consumers. It also explains how children gain knowledge from commercials and why they view products claims with scepticism.

This again bring us back to the Hofstede’s model i.e., to view culture from the long term perspective, as marketers need to advertise to influence parents (mothers in particular) to exert influence over their children.

It should be realized that if the right cultural values are integrated into the advertisement, the probability for a product or service to be adopted by parents and children increases. This is true especially when parents restrict the type of programmes watched by children.

The limitation of this research study by Carlson et al. (2001), was that the research was done on the relationship of the child and his/her parents. It should be recognised that parents may have much influence on the child at the early age of development but this might change as the child grows up. A teenager may be more influenced by peer groups and other social influences including the exposure to college life.

MASCULINITY VS FEMININITY

In a study conducted by Milner and Collins (2000), in line with Geert Hofstede’s framework, it was found that countries may be classified along a continuum from masculine to feminine. In their study, it was found that television advertisements from feminine countries featured more relationships between male and female characters than did masculine countries.

Based on their research, it was noted that Turkey, Sweden, Netherlands and Russia were classified as feminine countries in contrast to America, Australia and Mexico. It was found that Turkey was more likely to feature relationship themes and portray minimal differences between male and female.

The research also established that masculine societies strive for material success, achievement and productivity while feminine societies value relationship.

It is interesting to note that even though America is classified as a masculine country there may still be cultural differences in terms of the subculture of the country.

This is reflected in the article by Tharp et al. (2002) which seeks to determine “What is the cultural context of Advertising targeted to US Latinos.” In the article, Mexican and US Latino advertisements showed men and women in more traditional roles while mainstream American advertisements showed more diversity in male-female roles. The study also confirmed that the man was placed in more active control of his destiny in all American
advertisements as compared to a “predetermined fate” of Mexican ads in America.

POWER DISTANCE (HIGH VS LOW)
According to Ji and McNeal (2001) on how Chinese children's commercials differ from those in the United States and China, power distance is a social norm which originated in the early socialization by family, school and other institutions of society which influence the way people accept and give authority.

In their research findings, it was noted that in comparison to Americans, Chinese people in China have a stronger respect for authority and were prone to accept authority figures without question.

Therefore, it may be beneficial for marketers who operate in China to adopt the idea that adults, older people and family elders may be considered as role models/ opinion leaders and spokesmen in commercials in contrast to their American counterparts.

In a similar manner, Mueller (1987), as mentioned in the study of Lin (2001), quoted that the Japanese in their advertisements have a greater tendency to illustrate the importance of social status and the oneness of nature appeals as important cultural values in contrast to their American counterparts. This is especially true since the Japanese consider respect for elders or authorities and nature as an important cultural value. This further supports the view that marketers who operate in high power distance countries should develop their advertisements using creative strategies that are endorsed by authoritative figures.

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE (HIGH VS LOW)
In addition, Ji and McNeal (2001) also established that China has a high index of uncertainty avoidance in contrast to the United States, with little tolerance for ambiguity.

It was noted that advertisers in China are better off when they demonstrate how products are used, emphasizing concrete functional and utilitarian product benefits. This implies that to be effective, advertisers should provide detailed information when they advertise their products in China.

INDIVIDUALISM VS COLLECTIVISM
In contrast to the earlier research mentioned in this project, Lin (2001) did a study that made a comparison of advertisements that used individualism vs collectivism to distinguish the cultural values of different countries.

Francis Hsu (1981, cited in Lin, 2001) asserted that Americans prefer to have a life that focuses on “individual – centreness”; this was characterized by greater emphasis on self-reliance, equality, resentment of class-based distinctions and rejection of the past. In contrast, the Chinese way of life tends to centre on a set of relationships defined by Confusian doctrines, including women’s chastity, fidelity and virtue, benevolent fathers and filial sons, submission to authority and ancestor worship.

Based on the study of Lin (2001), American advertisements tend to emphasize individualism, manipulation of control over nature and a person’s social status that can be reflected by the person’s material possessions.

In fact, in the western culture, the display of wealth is perceived as an individual tendency rather than a social expectation.

In addition, it was interesting to note that the study of Lin (2001) established that collectivism and tradition were found to represent the typical eastern culture values while individualism and modernity were typical of western culture.

It should be recognized that group consensus would be an effective commercial appeal for Chinese audiences in contrast to
advertisements originating from the West that emphasize values such as individualism or youth and modernity.

An example of group consensus will be the purchase of an automobile in China where the decision to purchase may reflect conformity to family preference rather than individual choice. This is in contrast to the American culture where individual identity is seen to be prominent and the tendency is to be an “I – conscious” society. Therefore, it will not be surprising that American advertisements are more likely to use individualism/independence appeals than the Chinese counterparts in their advertisements.

Even though, the initial findings from Lin (2001) suggest that the differences in cultural values of the Chinese and American tend to emphasize collectivism and individualism respectively, the booming youth market in China has slowly changed its original cultural values.

It should be interesting to note that the one child policy introduced in 1979 has produced a generation of only children, branded by some as the little “emperors” / “empresses”. With the development of this Chinese youth market, the tradition of collectivism has been shifted to a more western outlook that values the image of wealth and fashion.

According to a market survey by Gang, (2001, cited in Lin 2001), Chinese youth in more affluent urban areas have taken up a large proportion of the family income in purchasing brand-name clothing as well as imported food and clothing. With the changing trend, marketers in China have adopted a more modern and youthful appeal to target these teenagers.

It should be recognized that even though the general understanding is that countries may be categorized to have a specific cultural orientation such as individualism or collectivism, it would be unavoidable to acknowledge that cultural values can change as society becomes modernized or industrialized. Many of these countries would “localize” the imported Western culture and make it adaptable to the local customs and traditions. For example, according to Yan (2000, cited in Lin 2001), fast-food products in China have been largely localized and are actually a Chinese version of the American culture and fast foods.

CONCLUSIONS
This paper established the importance of the role of culture in advertising and marketing of products and services. In the process of reviewing the five Universal Dimensions mentioned in the study of Hofstede, the writer reviewed various journal articles that supported Hofstede’s original work.

It is interesting to note that every dimension discussed posed opportunities and threats to marketers to ensure that any advertisement developed must consider the relevance of each dimension highlighted.

It would be a challenge for marketers to be sensitive to a society’s culture before investing time and money to promote a product or service to the society. Failure to identify the differences in culture and ignorance in imposing a foreign culture into an ongoing and existing culture in a society may only lead to undesirable outcomes.

It should also be recognized that in certain countries the acceptance of new cultural values may be easier while in others there may be high resistance to adopting the new cultural values. For instance, Japan is more inclined to adopt western culture in contrast to China which is more conservative and tradition-bound.

As discussed earlier, time could change the way of life and the acceptance of new cultural values as society becomes more industrialized and modernized.
In conclusion, the writer has no doubt of the importance of the study of Hostede’s five universal dimensions of culture and would recommend that all marketer analyse these dimensions before committing to any business venture overseas. It is believed that Hostede’s framework may be a good model to initiate further research for marketing and advertising of products and services.

REFERENCES


