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## Cultural Diversity and Digitalization of Marketing Communication: Agenda for Future Research

Salman Saleem

**ABSTRACT.** Drawing on cross-cultural research, the study highlights the applicability of GLOBE cultural framework for international digital marketing communication research (IDMC). The review of literature shows that we lack knowledge about what role culture plays in the use and effectiveness of several innovative digital marketing tools, namely consumer-generated advertising (CGA), consumer-generated brand communication (CGBC), firm-created advertising, and branding in digital space. The study proposes avenues for IDMC research by embracing the role of culture, the pursuit of which would be beneficial to both academicians and managers. Lastly, the study discusses the usefulness of several research methods for IDMC research.

**KEYWORDS.** Digitalization, Cultural Diversity, GLOBE cultural framework, International Digital Marketing Communication, Methodological choices

### DIGITALIZATION: THE MEGATREND

In the recent era, due to accelerating technological advancement, digitalization is regarded as a significant megatrend. Since the onset of the digitalization era, businesses, consumers, and public and private institutions have faced several problems such as security and privacy, the credibility of information, and uncertainty about legal rights, to mention a few. Therefore, during last few decades, several journals with specific focuses on the digital marketing area have emerged such as the *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, the *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, the *Journal of*

*Interactive Advertising*, and the *Journal of Direct Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, to mention a few. Moreover, the changes in the marketing landscape in the digital age has pushed digitalization of marketing to the forefront of mainstream marketing journals' agenda. However, understanding how companies can use the digital space to communicate with their consumers from diverse cultures will be useful to realize the full potential of digital technology and transform the marketing communication landscape (see Okazaki & Taylor, 2013; Karjaluoto, Mustonen, & Ulkuniemi, 2015). Thus, the aim of this study is to review the extent of the literature and explore the chal-

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allenges and opportunities for international digital marketing communication that would be valuable for marketing communication scholars and practitioners. The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, the study discusses the operationalization of culture in international marketing communication research to draw some implications for cross-cultural marketing communication research in digital space. This is followed by a review of studies that have examined the cross-cultural consumer behavior toward digital media and the profile and characteristics of digital media in a cultural context. Then the study will review pertinent literature on digital marketing communication, advertising, and branding in digital space and identify the ignored research areas. This is followed by a discussion of methodological choices for international digital marketing communication studies. In the last section, the study directs the agenda for future research and implications for marketing managers.

### **CULTURE AND INTERNATIONAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH**

In the realm of international and cross-cultural marketing communication research, scholars have frequently investigated the relationship between cultural values and marketing communication strategies (Zhang, 2014). The predispositions, perceptions, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the cultural values of their society (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, it is quite logical to expect that societal culture might also affect marketing communication practices as well (Quigley, Luque, & House, 2012). Literature reviews show that among several cultural typologies, Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been frequently used by international marketing communication advertising research (Chang et al., 2009; Koslow & Costley, 2010; Zhang, 2014; De Mooij, 2014). In an attempt to measure culture, H. Hofstede, J. Hofstede, and Minkov

(2010) asked the participants for their behavioral preferences; then they aggregated these personal responses to identify culture, assuming that individual values drive culture (H. Hofstede et al., 2010; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006; Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2010). However, values at the individual level are not similar to those at the societal-level (Fischer, Vauclair, Fontaine, & Schwartz, 2010), and most of the personal values are not shared within a culture (Fischer, 2006; Fischer & Schwartz, 2011). In other words, cultural classification based on aggregated individuals' values, such as Hofstede's, only limitedly predict societal culture and the reflection of the culture in marketing communications.

Culture is a multifaceted variable that can be reflected in a range of constructs such as norms, beliefs, values, and practices (Sun, D'Alessandro, Johnson, & Winzar, 2014). In one of the largest cultural studies carried out to date, in addition to Hofstede, the GLOBE team measured culture by asking people how things are and how things should be done in their society (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). By doing so, the respondents reported their societal practices and values respectively, and these represent the gestalt of culture (Javidan, House, Dorfman, Hanges, & Luque, 2006). While comparing and contrasting the GLOBE cultural framework with several other cultural frameworks, Terlutter, Diehl, and Mueller (2012) emphasized its usefulness for advertising research. GLOBE provides insights into values and practices at the societal level, which are sound from the theoretical and methodological perspectives and based on recent data. Some other scholars have argued that GLOBE cultural indices are relevant for advertising research (House, Quigley, & Luque, 2010; Terlutter et al., 2012; Quigley et al., 2012).

Furthermore, research in management and social psychology also shows that societal practices are more suited to the identification of national culture (see Morgeson & Hofmann,

1999; Fischer, 2008; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; Wan et al., 2007).

The GLOBE team also found that, compared to societal values, societal practices better predicted several societal phenomena such as economic health, national competitiveness, and societal health (Javidan et al., 2006). Recently, Sun et al. (2014) proposed that for investigating country-level issues such as communication, societal practices are more appropriate than societal values.

Several studies show that GLOBE’s cultural dimensions such as assertiveness (e.g., Terlutter, Diehl, & Mueller, 2010) performance orientation (Diehl, Terlutter, & Mueller, 2008), gender egalitarianism and humane-orientation (Diehl, Terlutter, & Mueller, 2015) influence the effectiveness of marketing communication across cultures. Thus, we can say that the use of GLOBE’s cultural practices would be fruitful to international digital marketing communication research. Below the study provides a brief overview of the GLOBE cultural framework.

**GLOBE CULTURAL FRAMEWORK: OVERVIEW**

The term GLOBE is an abbreviation used for the “Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research” project initiated by House and coauthors in early 1990. More than 170 researchers with different cultural backgrounds worked together to conceptualize and measure of culture (Terlutter et al., 2012). In 1994, GLOBE conducted an empirical study, using responses from 173,000 middle managers working for 951 industrial organizations in three areas, namely financial services, food processing, and telecommunications, from 62 different societies, to uncover culture. Based on their data, they proposed nine cultural dimensions, namely Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, Societal Collectivism (Collectivism I), In-Group Collectivism (Collectivism II), Gender Egalitarianism, Assertiveness, Future Orientation, Performance Orientation, and Humane Orientation. For definitions of these dimensions, see Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of GLOBE Cultural Dimensions

Uncertainty avoidance refers to “the extent to which members of society seek certainty in their environment by relying on established social norms, rituals and bureaucratic practices” (House et al., 2010, p. 118)
Power distance “the degree to which members of a society expect and agree that power should be stratified and concentrated at higher levels of an organisation or government” (House et al., 2010, p. 118)
Institutional collectivism refers to “the degree to which organizational and societal Institutional practices encourage and reward the collective distribution of resources and collective action” (House et al., 2010, p. 118).
In-group collectivism “the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families” (House et al., 2010, p. 118).
Gender egalitarianism “the degree to which a society minimizes gender role differences while promoting gender equality” (House et al., 2010, p. 118).
Assertiveness “the degree to which members of society are assertive, confrontational or aggressive in social relationships” (House et al., 2010, p. 118).
Future orientation “the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies engage in future orientated behaviors such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying individual or collective gratification” (House et al., 2010, p. 118).
Performance orientation “the degree to which an organization or society encourages and rewards members for performance improvement and excellence” (House et al., 2010, p. 118).
Humane orientation “the degree to which members of a society encourage and reward individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others” (House et al., 2010, p. 118).

GLOBE's nine cultural dimensions uncover the patterns of fundamental problems that societies face and have consequences for the functioning of groups and societies. Owing to the criticism on previous cultural theories, such as Hofstede's cultural framework, the focus of GLOBE teams is "to develop an empirically-based theory to describe, understand, and predict the impact of specific cultural variables on leadership and organizational processes and the effectiveness of these processes" (House et al., 2004, p. 4). Later they expand it to the other aspects of national and organizational cultures (House et al., 2004). A detailed review of the project is clearly beyond the scope of this study. For details see the book *Culture, Leadership, and Organisations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* by GLOBE team. GLOBE teams have classified 62 societies regarding nine cultural dimensions and have assigned an index for each dimension. These indexes for some countries are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. GLOBE Cultural Practices Index for

Dimension	Few Countries	
	High Score Countries	Low score Countries
Uncertainty avoidance	Switzerland 5.37	Greece 3.39
Power distance	Argentina 5.64	Netherlands 4.11
Institutional collectivism	Sweden 5.22	Greece 3.25
In-group collectivism	India 5.92	United States 4.2
Gender egalitarianism	Sweden 3.84	South Korea 2.5
Assertiveness	Austria 4.62	Sweden 3.38
Future orientation	Singapore 5.07	Russia 2.88
Performance Orientation	United States 4.49	Greece 3.2
Humane orientation	Zambia 5.23	Spain 3.32

Source: House et al. (2004)

## REFLECTION OF OFF-LINE CULTURE IN DIGITAL SPACE

Cultural diversity across the globe has inspired scholars to investigate the interactive dynamics between culture and user attitude and interaction with digital technologies. Therefore, in literature, a plethora of studies can be found that have examined the characteristics of digital platforms from a cultural perspective. Moreover, a large number of academic journal particular issues can be found exploring the relationship between the real world and digital world culture or virtual world culture (Jackson & Wang, 2013). Several consumer studies support the notion that online culture is the reflection of users' offline culture in which they are embedded (e.g., Jackson & Wang, 2013; Zorn, Bellman, Robinson, & Varan, 2016). The study by Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2012) shows that the behavior of the user of social media networking sites (SNS) from South Korea and the United States is aligned with their cultural roots. Using Hofstede's individualism-collectivism, Jackson and Wang (2013) found a significant difference in the use of SNS regarding time spent, motives for use, and the number of friends on SNS among the SNS users from China and the United States. More recently, Zorn et al. (2016) show that cultural uncertainty avoidance explains the difference in the effectiveness of interactive television (iTV) advertisements in the United Kingdom and the United States. Also, scholars have analyzed the content of digital platforms such as website, web advertising, and social media posts to examine the reflection of culture. For instance, a study by An and Kim (2007) shows that Hofstede's masculinity to a large extent supports the portrayals of gender roles in web advertising from the United States and South Korea. Analysis by Kalliny, Ghanem, and Kalliny (2018) of Arabic online news websites shows that in the Arab world the social media communication is consistent with the Arab world's collectivistic culture as described by Hofstede.

More recently, a study by Hamid (2017) shows that web pages of universities from Pakistan use visuals that are consistent with countries' cultural stance on Hofstede's six cultural dimensions. To sum up, we can say that digital media culture, consumer attitude, consumption, the motive to use digital media, and communication patterns on digital platforms mirror the culture in which they are implanted.

### **DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH**

A variety of promotional tools, such as advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, and sponsorship, are used by companies for marketing communication. Traditionally, print, television, and other broadcast media such as cinema and radio are used as mediums to implement the marketing communication plan. However, in the recent era, increasingly digital platforms such as social media, websites, blogs, and chatrooms are used to talk and interact with customers, employees, and other stakeholders. The digitization has also enabled more direct communication between the companies and customers and from customer-to-customer. Some marketers view digital platforms as an additional tool that supplements traditional marketing communication tools (see Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Trainor, Rapp, Beitelspacher, & Schillewaert, 2011; Tsotsou & Vlachopoulou, 2011).

On the other hand, some scholars have ascertained that due to the interactive characteristics of digital platforms there is a paradigm shift in marketing communication (see Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Liu, Karahanna, & Watson, 2011; Järvinen, Töllinen, Karjaluoto, & Jayawardhena, 2013). The marketer has always solicited the consumer in planning their advertising and branding. However, with the advent of digital media, there is a shift in the control of marketing communication from the company to the consumer. The advancement

and access to multimedia software, Internet, and digital platforms have enabled the consumer to create and disseminate their advertisements and brand stories (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Ertimur & Gilly, 2012; Lawrence, Fournier, & Brunel, 2013).

Also, integration of consumer-generated contents from social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram in a company's communication mix is now widespread (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Lawrence et al., 2013). We can say that at the onset of the digital age, a significant innovation in the marketing landscape is that marketers have started to use consumer-generated advertising (CGA) and consumer-generated brand communication (CGBC) (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2013; Knoll, 2016). Scholars have examined the difference in the effectiveness of traditional company ads CGA (Pehlivan, Sarican, & Berthon, 2011; Lawrence et al., 2013). However, they seem divided on whether CGA is useful or not due to mixed findings and inconclusive evidence (Steyn, Wallström, & Pitt, 2010; Steyn, Ewing, van Heerden, Pitt, & Windisch, 2011; Knoll, 2016). Consequently, more empirical research is needed to explore under what circumstances CGA and CGBC affect brand success in the marketplace (Gensler et al., 2013). In this regard, we lack knowledge of what role culture plays in the effectiveness of consumer-generated marketing communication (CGMC), firm-created ads, and brand communication in digital space.

### **ADVERTISING AND BRANDING IN DIGITAL SPACE AND CULTURE**

Digitalization has enabled us to communicate across the national and cultural boundaries. Digitalization is merely providing us tools that open up the opportunity to interact in many different ways, such as Business-to-Business, Business-to-Consumer and consumer-to-consumer, by using a wide array of digital media such as online forums, social media networks,

blogs, videos, photos, and news sharing on the Internet. Digitalization has not changed the cultural expectations about how and what needs to be communicated to the customers (De Mooij, 2014). Because the ways people interact are aligned to their cultural norms of society, marketing communication such as branding and advertising usually carries and reflects culturally relevant values (McCracken, 1986; De Mooij, 2014). A brand may have different meanings in different markets across the globe. For instance, a study by Foscht, Maloles, Swoboda, Morschett, and Sinha (2008) shows that consumers from several different cultures perceive the Red Bull brand differently according to their cultural roots. In this regard, Gensler et al. (2013) rightly raised the question of how managers can ensure that a single marketing communication plan, such as brand story, on social media or a company website site is appropriate for all consumers in countries around the globe, which might have different meanings for a particular brand. As culture influences how the consumer interacts with digital media (Qiu et al., 2012; Jackson & Wang, 2013) and their attitude towards technologies (Zorn et al., 2016) and digital media content (An & Kim, 2007; Hamid, 2017), it is plausible to say that culture might also influence how the consumer and the firm communicate in digital space. However, research on culture's impact on digital marketing communication, such as branding and advertising, is nonexistent and the area needs further exploration. Such understanding is essential especially in light of the evidence that CGA and CGBC impact brand performance (Ertimur & Gilly, 2012; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013) and firm performance (e.g., Muñiz & Schau, 2007). A thorough understanding of the influence of culture on digital marketing communication might help the manager to determine how to react CGMC in digital space and what type firm-created marketing communication are useful to engage with the consumer in different cultures. As

mentioned earlier, scholars in the field of marketing communication have asserted it is a culture-dependent phenomenon (see De Mooij, 2014; Diehl et al., 2015). Recently Karjaluoto et al. (2015) have emphasized that "implementing social media also requires knowledge of the culture of communication" (p. 708). In the same vein, Okazaki and Taylor (2013) emphasized that "the social media content needs to be adapted to local markets so that cultural factors are taken into account" (p. 61). To sum up, international digital marketing communication should take into account the receiver's cognitive, social, and cultural background. Thus we can say that GLOBE's culture dimensions may affect the way consumers interact with innovative digital marketing communication tools and their contents across cultures.

#### **METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES FOR INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH**

Previous studies on digital marketing communication such as social media advertising have mainly used three research methods, namely content analysis, experiments, and surveys (Knoll, 2016). It is notable that multi-method studies are more valuable for cross-cultural advertising research (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Belk, 2017). For instance, descriptive analysis of advertising content can also be supplemented by incorporating consumer perceptions through surveys and experiments (Taylor, 2014; Samiee & Jeong, 1994). In addition, combining evidence from different sources ensures the analytical enrichment and triangulation of findings (Taylor & Bowen, 2012; Davis, 2012). In other words, mixed-method and multiple methods are valuable for international digital marketing communication research. In doing so, scholars can address several shortcomings of mono-method research, such as methodological rigor, validity, and reliability, or quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, experiments, and content analysis) in research

on digital marketing communication. For instance, scholars can use a multimethod research program to examine whether and how culture influences the consumer-generated and firm-created advertising and branding in digital space and whether, why, and how the effectiveness of consumer-generated versus firm-created advertising and branding vary across cultures. Perhaps at the starting phase, the content analysis of CGA, FCA, and CGMC in digital platforms such social media (e.g. Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube), blogs (e.g. Wix.com, WordPress) and websites can be performed. The content analysis method helps in exploring what are firm-created marketing communications in digital space. In doing so, future studies may identify how CGA, FCA, CGMC, and branding communication mirror the culture in which they are embedded. Also, comparison of content in digital space from different countries may explain potential differences and similarities in the prevalence of the CGA, FCA, CGMC, and branding communication across target countries. Moreover, a comparison of branding and advertising content in digital versus traditional media (TV, Print, or Radio) can be used to identify the potential influence of offline culture on online culture.

Also at the starting phase, qualitative methods are also valuable, as in-depth personal interviews with consumers may provide us with an understanding of how consumers perceive the consumer-generated and firm-created marketing communication and how they connect digital marketing communication with their societal culture. The cross-cultural comparison of qualitative interviews will help us to understand the universal and cultural aspects of appreciation, processing, and persuasiveness of consumer-generated and firm-created marketing communication in digital space. Furthermore, the findings of qualitative research will help to develop more coding categories and constructs for subsequent experiments and studies employing content analysis. In further

studies, researchers may use experiments to validate the theoretical frameworks empirically. Based on gained insights from qualitative interviews and content analysis studies, scholars may develop and test a more comprehensive conceptual framework to gain insights into how consumers' psychological, social, and cultural factors play a role in their comprehension, appreciation, and response towards consumer-generated and firm-generated marketing communication. To sum up, exploring consumers' unconscious minds, digital marketing communication content and consumers' response to digital versus traditional marketing communication in distinct cultures may provide deeper, richer and generalizable findings for marketing communication academics and practitioners.

#### **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

International marketing managers are confronting the changes in digital space that have made it more complicated to control marketing communication such as brand image, customer relationship management, and customer equality, to mention a few. This complexity further increases as the digitalizing of the international marketing communication requires an understanding of cultural issues to persuade consumers in different countries. Even if the role of culture has been acknowledged to be relevant for digital marketing communication research, still little attention has been paid concerning the usefulness of various facets of culture. The study has discussed various cultural frameworks in the context of international marketing communication. In doing so, the study has drawn implications for the use of GLOBE cultural practices for international digital marketing communication research. For managers, the implication is that they can rely on the GLOBE's cultural practices to gain insight into the digital marketing communication that



might be more appealing to consumers from distinct cultures.

Increasingly, researchers in marketing are giving greater attention to marketing communication in digital space (Knoll, 2016). For instance, marketing scholars have highlighted the use and effectiveness of several innovative digital marketing communication tools such as CGA, CGBC, CGMC, to mention a few (e.g., Steyn et al., 2010; Lawrence et al., 2013; Knoll, 2016). Despite the emerging interest, research on the influence of culture on digital marketing communication is in its infancy. For instance, only a limited number of studies shows that the characteristics of digital media, the motive to use digital media, and communication patterns on digital platforms mirror the culture in which they are implanted (e.g., Jackson & Wang, 2013; Zorn et al., 2016). To sum up, online culture is the reflection of off-line culture and marketing communication in traditional spaces are also influenced by the culture. Therefore, there are several intriguing questions that worth to be answered:

To what extent do firm-created and consumer-generated advertising and brand communication (such as brand stories and advertising characteristics and messages/appeals) reflect the offline culture in which they are embedded?

To what extent are cultural differences among countries reflected in the consumer-generated and firms-generated advertising and brand communications in digital space?

To what extent are firm-created and consumer-generated advertising and brand communication produced in one culture useful in other cultures?

Does a culture influence the effectiveness of firm-created versus consumer-generated advertising and brand communication in digital space?

Lastly, the study discuss several methodological choices that can be useful for examining the influence of culture on digital marketing communication. Specifically, the study has

discussed the significance of content analysis, experiments, and some qualitative approaches for international digital marketing communication research. In future research, it recommended exploring the link between GLOBE's cultural practices and CGA, CGBC, and other digital marketing communication, empirically by relying on the content analysis of a variety of digital media and cultural context. In doing so, the researcher may assess whether the digital marketing communications are in line with the GLOBE's cultural practices. Also in further studies, it is recommended to use experiment and survey to explore how consumer related their culture and digital marketing communication. The implication for managers is that there are a variety of methodological approaches that help them to address their managerial quest of tailoring international digital marketing communication. As usual, this study has some limitations. The study suggests using GLOBE's cultural practices for international digital communication research. However, culture is an elusive concept and every approach to conceptualize and operationalize it has some limitations.

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