

CULTURE THEORY IN GLOBAL MARKETING RESEARCH: AN ASSESSMENT FROM THE LITERATURE

Cheryl Nakata, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA
Yili Huang, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT

Global marketing research is an expanding body of work on the complex enterprise of marketing goods and services in a range of geographies and political/economic/socio-cultural conditions. From 1976 to 1982, only 112 empirical papers on global marketing were published, whereas from 1983 to 1990 the number more than doubled to 230 (Albaum and Peterson, 1984; Aulakh and Kotabe, 1993). While a rise in the volume of scholarly work is evident, less apparent is whether it is achieving the goal of knowledge advancement. In an often cited review, Albaum and Peterson (1984, pp.161-162) concluded that the global marketing literature is “fragmentary, generally atheoretic, and not sufficiently programmatic to offer anything than simplistic and incomplete insights....”

In 1990 Clark proposed a solution. He argued that culture theory, because of its inherently integrative nature, could bring coherence to and direct the expanding knowledge. More specifically, culture offers a mechanism for explaining similarities and differences in marketing phenomena at the country, region, or other socio-political-geographic level and for a host of buyer and managerial concerns. The specific purpose of this study was three-fold: 1) describe the presence and types of culture theories appearing in global marketing studies from 1990 to 2000; 2) identify the research domains or topics that have incorporated culture theories; and 3) to discuss the future direction for culture theories in global marketing research.

The methodology used in this study was content analysis of the literature, an approach considered appropriate for and frequently applied in assessing states of knowledge (see Boddewyn, 1981; Clark, 1990; Sekaran, 1994). Since the primary thrust of this study was to understand conceptualizations of culture, we first identified the leading scholarly outlets in marketing, international business, and international marketing using the most recent quality rankings (Dubois and Reeb 2000; Hult, Neese, and Bashaw 1997). Next all global marketing articles appearing in these outlets from 1990 to 2000, a total of 468 studies, were content analyzed.

One of the major findings was that culture theory was present in a minority of studies, approximately one-quarter (26%). Importantly, though, inclusion increased significantly in the second half of the decade over the first half. A fifth (22%) of the studies in the first half applied a culture theory, and this proportion jumped to almost a third (31%) in the latter part of the decade. The findings suggest that, while culture theory is likely far from being the lead theory in global marketing research, it is moving toward a prominent role. A second major finding was the greater application of culture theory to buyer behavior, especially among consumers. This pattern might be in response to an urgent need to understand social influences on individual traits and actions and the resulting patterns by geography. Nonetheless, there remain many relatively under-explored topics using culture theory, such as marketing strategy, pricing, entry modes/operations, and market structure. Thirdly, we determined that culture theory is used mostly implicitly (59%) rather than explicitly. Knowledge advancement was likely constrained by implicit use, which does not stringently test the utility of theories. The culture theory predominantly found used analog (82%) and double empirical (81%) forms (81%), which are less preferable to others in terms of rigor, complexity, comprehensiveness, and empiricism. The most commonly found theory was Hofstede's universal factors.

All in all, we learned that culture theories are making significant inroads, offering the potential to advance the field as suggested by Clark. Nonetheless for culture theories to fulfill their promise, they need to be applied more broadly and systematically. A greater variety of culture theories, especially with stronger ontological and epistemological bases, would likewise strengthen their contributions to the field. We recommend also recommend a greater emphasis on theory development.