Fairy tales of global consumer culture in a polarizing world

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to respond to the essay by Cleveland and Bartsch in this issue. The paper also aims to counter argue the various drivers of global consumer culture (GCC).
Design/methodology/approach – Based on many findings from the study of consumer behavior, the assumed drivers of GCC are discussed and a suggestion for new research is made.
Findings – Instead of globalization processes that drive GCC, the most dominant process is a local-global-local cycle of global products and brands.
Originality/value – It offers a different approach to the study of global vs local products and brands. It is suggested that instead of continuing abstract discussions of GCC, scholars do more service to international marketing by researching developments in the real world.
Keywords Global consumer culture, International marketing, National cultures, Heterogeneity, Global media
Paper type Viewpoint

This is a response to Cleveland and Bartsch's essay on global consumer culture (GCC), a magnum opus covering literature between 1962 and 2018. Why do I view this as a collection of fairy tales? Because it covers tales of a past world with one dominating North-American culture that is increasingly turning inward in a polarizing world with growing nationalism.

What is global consumer culture?

What this essay shares with the many other writings on GCC is that the term "global consumer culture" is open to multiple interpretations. The authors define it as a "consumer group not associated with a single country, but transcending national cultures." Would this mean these people are stateless? Does it refer to cultural values or to brand or product-related consumer dispositions or attitudes? Does the term "culture" refer to the practices of culture, as in cultural and media studies, referring to local, everyday activities as in the definition by Alden *et al.* (1999), who define GCC as shared sets of consumption-related symbols (product categories, brands, consumption activities and so forth) that are meaningful to segment members. The principal drivers of GCC are said to be the global media and multinational marketing activities that position brands by using symbols that are supposed to appeal to groups of similar people worldwide. Often used examples are age groups like the young and millennials. By western companies young Asians may have been portrayed as consumer groups that have readily embraced a lifestyle that is reflected in so-called western lifestyles, but Wee (1999) writes that "the image of a fun-loving, brand-conscious, and free spending Western-type teenager is a myth in many countries in Asia, including Singapore. […] The promotion of products based on the typical youth themes of rebellion, individuality, freedom, confidence, sexiness, and even Americanness, as typified by brands such as Levi's, may communicate very little to teenagers in Asia." Age groups like the millennials also tend to be viewed as global cosmopolitans and a prime target for luxury goods, often considered culture-free goods. Yet a recent study among millennials from Germany, Poland, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Stępień *et al.*, 2018) found that millennials demonstrate strong country-specific differences in evaluating luxury value drivers.

The GCC narrative started in 1983 with Theodore Levitt's (1983) article on the globalization of markets, which had high impact on the marketing and advertising world as

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the possibility of standardizing marketing and advertising strategies around the world was attractive. However, global standardized advertising appeared not to be equally effective in all markets, because markets are people and people are not standard. Twenty years later Kevin Roberts, CEO worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi, stated, "Anyone who wants to go global has to understand the local – their own local and the locals of all their customers. People live in the local. I've never met a global consumer. I never expect to" (Roberts, 2002). The whole idea of a global consumer contradicted the original marketing paradigm of "markets are people."

Most articles on GCC – and this one in particular – include drivers of GCC from the perspective of the past century that have been repeated ever since. Also, because the driving forces of globalization have their origins in the West, GCC is Western in character, which basically makes the term GCC a misnomer.

The drivers of GCC
The drivers generally mentioned are the influence of global, mostly North-American media, the internet, increased travel and English language speaking.

The media
Marshall McLuhan (1964) tends to be quoted as having said that the "revolutionary electronic media system would metaphorically shrink the planet in a global village whose denizens would be acutely aware of their communal cosmopolitan identity." Yet, McLuhan mainly pointed at the role of TV and when he coined the concept of the global village, he was referring to Plato's definition of the proper size for a city – the number of people who could hear the voice of the public speaker. By the global village, McLuhan meant by means of electricity, people everywhere could resume person-to-person relations, as if on the smallest village scale. McLuhan said the opposite to convergence – that uniqueness and diversity could be fostered under electronic conditions as never before.

Later, mass media programs flowing primarily from the USA were said to play a major role in the creation, learning and sharing of consumption symbols. An example of 1999 was MTV, which at the time was more or less the same across the world, but now has completely localized. Counter to the suggestion that ethnic diasporas will watch global media are the many satellite dishes to receive programs of their country of origin seen in neighborhoods with immigrant populations in European countries.

For some time, it was assumed that watching North American television soaps would lead to cultural homogenization, or that watching television programs from other cultures would change basic values. In their study of "Dallas" across cultures, when Liebes and Katz (1993) asked for the meaning derived from this soap, respondents from other cultures derived all sorts of different meanings than those intended by the producers, and the meanings were related to their own culture.

About the internet, it is said that "Billions of consumers can instantaneously transmit and receive information from the other side of the world." The possibility to do so is indeed enormous, but there is plenty of research that demonstrates that people do not do so. Ghemawat (2017) calls it "globaloney," stating "International interactions are dampened by distance along cultural, administrative, geographic, and, often economic dimensions." Several comparative studies have found that everywhere the main usage of social media mostly concerns contacts with friends and family. Chatting does not necessarily make global communities. Social media have become increasingly local. Nigel Hollis argues that what Facebook calls global pages is a misnomer as people get to see local content since Facebook automated the ability to serve a localized view of the site. Local versions of a brand's page are translated and marketers can customize the content (Hollis, 2012).

A Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey (2010) has shown that the percentages of people who use social media to make a purchase decision vary enormously, with the UK, Canada, the USA and New Zealand at the top users and Indonesia, Taiwan, South Korea and Malaysia at the bottom. Also across Europe – by North-Americans often depicted as a homogeneous region – the use of social networks every day or nearly every day varies strongly, between 27 percent in Poland to 59 percent in Denmark (European Youth, 2016). Whereas Ghemawat provides relevant facts to support his arguments, many authors on GCC do not do so, as for example, Strasser (2003) who mentions in her paper that her generalizations are primarily based on American examples and scholarship. She states "I am surely ignorant of some of the ways the United States is unlike other countries. But it is not controversial to suggest that global consumer culture has homogenized regional differences."

Travel
People do not travel to the extent that they are frequently confronted with other cultures.

In 2007, only 27 percent of the inhabitants of 25 European countries said they had traveled abroad three times in the previous three years (Eurobarometer, 2007). In 2016, the total percentage of young people not willing to study or work in another EU country was 61 percent; this was 33 percent in Sweden, 67 percent in the UK, and 52 percent in Italy (European Youth, 2016).

English fluency
Although English is the most spoken second language in the world, fluency varies widely, and advertisers have to understand that even in countries where most people seem to be able to understand English, this knowledge is often only superficial. Few Germans understand English language slogans like "Be Inspired" (Siemens) or "Impossible is Nothing" (Adidas). Colloquial British or American expressions will not be understood (Paulick, 2007).

English language fluency often is overstated. Even the Dutch who are supposed to be fluent in English have misunderstood much of English words in advertising. Sobol (2008) notes that "the Dutch do not identify to GCC, [...] read and listen almost exclusively to national media, although 70% is supposed to be fluent in English."

The importance of national culture for international marketing
In the essay under consideration I have found no data supporting the opinion that the importance of the nation-state as the basis for international marketing segmentation and research is clearly receding. International marketers tend to rely on national statistics and measurements of consumption and consumer behavior, and such data are available from national governments and research agencies that have evolved from local to global players and compare national data on consumption, values and attitudes. Most nations (exceptions are nations with artificially drawn borders by colonial powers) are historically developed wholes that usually share one dominant language, mass media, a national education system, and national markets for products and services.

Several scholars reject the importance of national culture for international marketing because of increased ethnic heterogeneity of populations, but the degree of heterogeneity varies strongly by nation. Fearon (2003) compiled a list of fractionalization scores (data on heterogeneity that show that African nations are very heterogeneous, as well as Canada (0.71), Switzerland (0.53) and the USA (0.49), as compared with Germany (0.17), the UK (0.12), the Netherlands (0.10), with Japan as most homogeneous (0.01).

Implicit in the term international marketing is that concerns national markets. Segmenting groups within nations is a matter of national marketing as these segments are

not the same across markets. Most nations consist of different ethnic groups, even if they are of the same ethnic origin. Next to the language of their home country German Turks speak German and Dutch Turks speak Dutch. Few expatriates are able to speak the language of the country where they reside.

In a nation like the USA, with ethnic groups so large that they can be compared with nations, much research has been done on acculturation of these groups with respect to their values and behavior. Over the generations these groups appear to be converging with respect to most of their core values, yet differences in language speaking and behavior are persistent in particular with respect to media use (De Mooij and Beniflah, 2017). A recent report by the Center for Multicultural Science (2018) shows differences with respect to use of classic media and internet, in particular the various social media.

Marketers have to reach consumers one way or another, and this is generally done via mass media through which individual consumers cannot be identified. Larger groups, as in the USA who have their own media or communication channels, can be reached with targeted messages. Nowadays data-driven marketing techniques can help reach specific individuals or groups, but the costs are high. Tracking individual customers' value orientations or motives is also costly and time-consuming, and may only be conducted for high net worth or frequent customers (Steenkamp and Ter Hofstede, 2002).

The local-global-local cycle

There is evidence that products, brands, ideas and trends travel the world and that some of these are adopted by consumers across countries. There is little evidence of cultural homogenization. Most examples of assimilation are in fact examples of what is called glocalization, because they concern adaptation to usage differences and motives. Basically there are three glocalization processes:

(1) A national product or brand goes global and to improve sales the company adapts the product to different cultures. This is what happened to brands like Coca-Cola, McDonalds and Starbucks.

(2) Migrating people crave for the tastes of their home country, import the products, and indigenous populations adopt these, adapt them to their own tastes and appropriate them so they become part of their culture. This is what happened to Italian Pizza in the USA and elsewhere. Such variations can be very different from the original. It is an autonomous process, not driven by a global company. Other examples are more regional, such as Turkish döner kebab, popular in European countries with large Turkish populations.

(3) A third category is a mixture. Consumers across countries, following a specific trend or lifestyle may adopt products from other countries, adjust them to fit their taste and appropriate them so they become part of their culture. Global companies may view opportunities to turn such products into global brands, but adjusted to local preferences. So the local becomes global and changes to the local again.

An example of the third category, how a food product has been adopted and appropriated in different ways across nations is hummus, a chickpea paste. Across countries it is used and sold in many different ways, adjusted to local customs to make it feel "owned" by different cultures. Next to a classic version are various tastes like lemon taste, or Greek-style, Lebanon-style, Israeli style, Thai coconut curry hummus, Indian spiced hummus or so-called organic humdrum British hummus. It is mostly sold unbranded in supermarkets but also marketed to many countries by Sabra dipping company, a joint venture of US-based PepsiCo, Inc. and Strauss Group Ltd, headquartered in Israel. Its origin is attributed to various areas and countries in the Middle East, but two countries that claim to be its origin

most are Lebanon and Israel and the question of where hummus comes from has become a matter of patriotism and identity, ending in a so called Hummus War between Lebanon and Israel[1]. An example of how US consumers appropriate foreign food is in a blog saying that Hummus is an American dish created by the founding father Thomas Jefferson.

A new area of research might be this local-global-local cycle in the globalization discussion. For some products, the degree of national pride – as measured in the World Values Survey – can be an important variable. There are quite a few studies of related phenomena such as consumer ethnocentrism and consumer animosity, but these usually concern a few specific countries. Studying the local-global-local cycle would give a new perspective to the discussion.

Finally, the purpose of this essay was "to guide future academic research and managerial practice." At the end of their essay the authors express the hope that it may inspire marketing professionals to do research in this area. Yet, this appeal may not reach them because of the obscure academic language used in many papers on GCC which is not easy reading for professionals, and in particular for non-native English speaking international marketing professionals.

Note

1. see www.bbc.com/travel/story/20171211-who-invented-hummus; http://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/food-fights/index.html; www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jun/28/hummus-taste-test-which-supermarket-brand-raises-the-pulse

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Further reading

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