

# Integrated Marketing Communication and Importance of Culture in Development of Communication Strategies in the Overseas Markets

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**Abstracts:** Marketing and culture exchanges between different countries have become increasingly close, establishing effective communication between companies and consumers is one of the important ways to increase brand performance. This essay will discuss the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and the importance and influence of culture in development of these IMC strategies for overseas markets, and evaluates its importance to international marketing. In addition, in the second part of this essay will use an example to evaluate the role and importance of culture in the development of communication strategies in the overseas markets.

**Keywords:** International marketing communication; Culture; Overseas market

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of technology and economy, trade, marketing and culture exchanges between different countries have become increasingly close. Promotion is one of the most important aspects of marketing because it defines and establishes the means of communication that marketers promote to communicate specific aspects of their brand and product (Tadorova, 2015)<sup>[31]</sup>. Therefore, adoption of adequate has become more and more important because it helps to establish consistency and coherency in the adopted promotional practices (Andrews & Shimp, 2017)<sup>[11]</sup>. This essay will discuss the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and the importance and influence of culture in development of these IMC strategies for overseas markets, and evaluates its importance to international marketing. In addition, in the second part of this essay will use an example to evaluate the role and importance of culture in the development of communication strategies in the overseas markets.

## 2. Definition of integrated marketing communication

Marketing communication as defined by De Pelsmacker and Kitchen (2004)<sup>[8]</sup> and Dahl et al (2015)<sup>[6]</sup> refer to all the means used by organizations in order to communicate to their target stakeholders and groups, in order to provide comprehensive communication about products or the companies. The concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) can be explained based on the definition of marketing communication, in which IMC can be said to be the integration of coherent communication strategies across different channels of communication (Dahl et al, 2015)<sup>[6]</sup>. Although there is no universally acceptable definition of IMC, over time, academics have adopted different definitions to explain the concept. One of the important definitions was presented by Tadorova (2015)<sup>[31]</sup>, who defined it as the process that involves the management of all the different sources of information with respect to a product or service that it can facilitate purchase behaviour of customers and can also generate high customer loyalty. There is a more common definition were used by Floor and Van Raaij (2011)<sup>[12]</sup> establishes and explains IMC to be the process that integrates different tools as well as messages for communications, so all these elements tend to strengthen and support each other to create higher customer value.

While it has been often argued that implementation of IMC can be extremely complex for the markets, its important lies in the fact that it promote consistency in creation of brand positioning. It does seem to be suitable and effective at the strategic level, but its practical implementation is usually considered to be a major challenge or issue (Ots & Nyilasy, 2015)<sup>[26]</sup>. However, Kotler (2015)<sup>[17]</sup> has explained the concept based on the systematic approach that it offers towards development of strategies for influencing the buyers. Kotler (2015)<sup>[17]</sup> defined that IMC includes all the marketing practices and strategies that help to make ensure that customers go through all the buyer readiness phases to the end stage of making their final purchase. Buyer readiness stage includes awareness of existence, knowledge of benefits, initial interest, preference over the competing products, conviction of suitability to purpose and purchase. Focus of the communication processes that needs to be on generating awareness and knowledge among customers followed by a liking towards the product, followed by conviction and purchase (Duralia, 2018)<sup>[11]</sup>. It is certain to argue and criticize that the marketing communication alone is not enough to promote such purchase behaviour among customers because the personal characteristics of customers and that of products would also have a strong impact on these stages (Duralia, 2018)<sup>[11]</sup>. However, Camilleri (2018)<sup>[5]</sup> explained that IMC strategy refers to marketing practices that are aimed to facilitate the movement of buyers across different readiness stages for better outcomes. The point can be further supported based on the discussion by Mihart (2012)<sup>[24]</sup>, who have explained the concept of IMC as

the processes that help in facilitate their learning and their actions in the purchase process.

The basic practices of the IMC concept can be further explained based on the tools that are adopted for the promotional practices. The discussion by Luxton et al.(2015)<sup>[22]</sup> believed that IMC as a practice that facilitates the use of tools of advertising, personal sales, public relations(PR), sales promotion and direct marketing for communicating brand messages to the target audiences. Although Holland(2016)<sup>[14]</sup> suggested that companies must integrate all tools related to IMC in order to enhance and improve their effectiveness and ability to reach a large number of customers, Valos et al.(2016)<sup>[33]</sup> made other recommendations. According to the discussion by Valos et al.(2016)<sup>[33]</sup>, IMC is not only about using all the different tools and mediums for promotion and communications, but also refers to the process that involves careful selecting of specific tools that related to the brand and related to the target groups of customers. However, despite the choices made regarding the tools for marketing, the messages is used for communication must be standardized across channels.

### **3. Marketing communication is important to international marketing**

The concept and practices of marketing communication as described above do not only apply in case of domestic markets, but are actually said to be highly relevant and important to international marketing as well. The key importance of marketing communication for international marketing can be explained based on the fact that such communications help in entering into and targeting the global market(Luxton et al 2015)<sup>[22]</sup>. As discussed by Levitt(1983)<sup>[19]</sup>, globalisation across the world has resulted into development of a uniform global market and hence effective marketing communication is needed to make sure that a global entity is created for promotions of the same product and characteristics across different markets. The point can be strengthened based on discussions by Leonidou et al(2018)<sup>[18]</sup> who explain that awareness of customers towards international brands and products is usually low and hence effective communications is important for international marketing such that the brand is able to expand its market by effectively targeting customers across different markets.

Batra and Keller(2016)<sup>[3]</sup> also discussed several challenges and limitations associated with the integration of marketing communications in international marketing. While earlier discussions have established the role of communications for development of global brands, Batra and Keller(2016)<sup>[3]</sup> on the other hand argue that global brands are myths and marketing communication in international marketing can only add complications and complexities for the companies. Douglas and Yoram(1987)<sup>[9]</sup> even established and communicated globalisation to be a myth, which would suggest that international marketing is itself not needed. But majority of studies (Kotler et al 2015; Zentes et al 2017)<sup>[17][35]</sup> on the subject have confirmed and established that the marketing communication strategies help to identifying and understanding the different needs and requirements of different customers, which help to increasing sales across different markets and nations. In fact, academics (Petersen et al 2015)<sup>[28]</sup> have also established that communication is much more important than other marketing mix elements such as product, price etc. in international marketing because of its focus on identifying and understanding cultural differences among customers, which are then utilised to develop and adopt different promotional practices across markets. Duffett(2017)<sup>[10]</sup> also adds that effective communications in international marketing is needed to create a positive attitude of customers from across the world towards the brand such that higher sales and a positive brand image can be accomplished.

Therefore, communication is important that can create awareness, relationships and benefits. Marketing communication can be said to be relevant and important for international marketing as well, because it contributes to the creation of global brands and it helps in identifying and catering to the individual needs of customers across markets. It can be said that market culture can be an important factor at the time of developing these communication strategies. Further discussions focus on the relevance of culture in developing communication strategies in an overseas market.

### **4. Culture: importance in developing international communications**

Culture as explained by De Mooij(2019)<sup>[7]</sup>, refers to the key values and beliefs that dominate a particular group of people, which has a strong impact on their behaviour and adopted practices. Although Okazaki et al.(2010)<sup>[25]</sup> and Levitt (1983)<sup>[19]</sup> have promoted the concept of global culture in which customers around the world do not show similar values and preferences, Vrontis et al(2009)<sup>[34]</sup> argue that culture does remain a key factor that influences the practices adopted by the marketers in the international domain. This has been explained based on the argument that the culture affects the preferences of customers with respect to different messages and tools of marketing that are adopted by companies and hence can be said to be relevant in case of development of international communication(Vrontis et al 2009)<sup>[34]</sup>.

A common model that is adopted to explain the underlying culture of people in a given country is the Hofstede's model of culture, which has defined five dimensions or factors that can explain the underlying culture of people in a given setting. The dimensions have been defined in the model are power distance, individualism, long-term orientation, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance(Bakir et al 2015)<sup>[2]</sup>. Some of the examples undertaken by Okazaki et al(2010)<sup>[25]</sup> have established that despite of cultural similarities between the US and the UK as measured via the Hofstede's dimensions, commercials adopted by companies in these two organisations tend to be largely different. However, there are a large number of studies have established the importance of culture in developing international communications based on the significance and influence of the Hofstede's model of culture on consumer preferences with respect to marketing communications.

Culture as discussed by Liu et al(2016)<sup>[20]</sup> and Thussu(2018)<sup>[30]</sup> has a strong impact on preferences of customers with respect to the type of communications that they prefer.

For example, countries that score high on collectivism, such as China, prefer to have communications that are directed at the masses whereas countries that score high on individualism, such as the US, tend to prefer communications that are directed at individuals instead of mass markets(Liu et al 2016)<sup>[20]</sup>. The point can be definitely criticised based on the discussions by Jain(1989)<sup>[15]</sup> and Petersen et al(2015)<sup>[28]</sup>, who discuss that the world is moving towards a globalised situation wherein there is growth of a standardised culture. It

has also been discussed that culture in countries like China and India are highly becoming westernised (Tsai and Men, 2017)<sup>[32]</sup>, which would make the importance of culture in development of international communications very low. But Khang et al (2016)<sup>[16]</sup> have argued that cultural factors also make different advertisements and underlying messages relevant or irrelevant in different markets. Khang et al (2016)<sup>[16]</sup> explain this with the help of the dimension of power distance as defined under Hofstede's model. Power distance defines the extent to which people place importance on the social status and hence customers in a high power distance are said to be more attracted towards advertisements that communicate the brand to be more unique and associates a social status with them. Similar differentiation has been presented by Middleton (2015)<sup>[23]</sup> who establish the need of adopting advertising focused on ambition, achievements etc. in a masculine culture and relationship based advertising in a feminine culture.

Thus, as these discussions establish the differences in preferences of customers in different cultures, it can be said to be important in development of international marketing communications by the firms. Okazaki et al (2010)<sup>[25]</sup> however have supported the use of global consumer culture positioning (GCCP) for marketing communications. Based on a test-based study of six different advertisements from Japan and the US that are considered to be culturally different, the authors have confirmed the adoption of GCCP theory. Okazaki et al (2010)<sup>[25]</sup> establish that despite the culture differences, there is higher preference for soft-sell advertising in both Japan and the US. This can suggest that culture does not play a strong role in international marketing communications, but there are also examples that demonstrate failure of brands due to lack of cultural communication. KFC for example translated its famous slogan incorrectly in the Chinese market wherein the slogan "Finger-licking good" was translated as "Eat your fingers off" in China (Lu, 2016)<sup>[21]</sup>. As language remains an integral element of culture in any given market, it is necessary for firms to understand the culture to be able to develop suitable marketing communications strategies across different markets. Vrontis et al (2009) and Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos (1997)<sup>[27]</sup> have however tried to find a middle way wherein companies need to integrate both standardisation and adaptation depending on market and organisational characteristics to ensure higher success.

It can be thus said that culture is definitely an important factor in development of marketing communications. While companies can keep some aspects of their communications similar across markets based on similarities, they do need to change their adopted tools, advertising strategies and messages of communications depending on the underlying culture of the customers. This is being explained further based on the example of a global company that has adopted different marketing communications across different cultures.

## 5. Example of Ikea

IKEA is one of the largest retailers of furniture and home décor items. Originally being a Swedish brand, the company has received massive success across the world. Though the products and underlying concepts of low-price, good quality and self-assembled furniture, remain the same across markets, IKEA has been indeed found to adapt its marketing communication strategies in different countries in order to accomplish higher success (Burt et al 2011)<sup>[4]</sup>. The communications strategies of IKEA across two culturally different countries, China and the US, are being analysed here to illustrate if culture has an impact on international marketing communications in different markets or not. IKEA has achieved major success in the western country of the US, but its problems in the Chinese market started with its initial strategy and communication. IKEA for example in the US is considered to be a brand that offers low-priced furniture. But Chinese customers, who exhibit high power distance, viewed it as a western brand that would offer high-priced, unique products (Prange, 2016)<sup>[29]</sup>. The focus of the communications adopted by the brand in the Chinese market thus had to be on communicating this unique position to the customers wherein it had change its focus on defining it as an affordable, regular brand to a unique, high-price brand (Prange, 2016)<sup>[29]</sup>. In addition, to the focus of communications, the communication tools are adopted for promotions also different in the US and Chinese market. IKEA's key promotional tool in the US and in other western countries remains its catalogues. Catalogues by IKEA usually provide all information and details regarding the products along with prices and product numbers etc. The analyses by Burt et al (2011)<sup>[4]</sup> establish that the catalogue based promotion by IKEA are suitable in individualist cultures such as the US because people make their decisions individually. The company's promotions in the US do not focus on personal selling and customers are given the information and motivated to decide on their own regarding the products that they want to buy (Burt et al 2011)<sup>[4]</sup>. China's culture is however different as compared to this culture in the US. It has been found that customers in China are more collectivist in nature and tend to prefer having personal assistants in the stores to help them make decisions (Giunta, 2016)<sup>[13]</sup>. IKEA thus had to focus more on personal and direct selling in case of China to be able to increase its sales in the country. It has also paid special attention towards adoption of strong PR practices that help it in obtaining higher publicity and creating a positive brand name in the Chinese market (Giunta, 2016)<sup>[13]</sup>. The influence of cultural differences on adopted marketing communications can also be explained based on different mediums of advertising as chosen by IKEA. The company focuses on catalogue based advertising in the US, but internet and micro-blogging sites like Weibo have been the key mediums as adopted in case of China. The advertisements also introduced a unique concept called IKEA Family in the Chinese market in order to cater to the collectivist needs of the customers (Johansson, 2013)<sup>[14]</sup>. These discussions thus reflect and confirm that the global company of IKEA has definitely managed to keep some aspects of the company and business such as products and store formats the same across the culturally different countries of US and China, it has definitely altered and changed its communications focus and strategies in these two countries to be able to attract the customers. It can be thus said that international firms do need to consider cultural differences to avoid failure due to cultural differences.

## 6. Conclusion

This essay confirms and establishes that culture is an extremely important factor in defining the adoption of integrated marketing communication strategies in international marketing. Integrated marketing communications are relevant and important for international marketing because these communications help in communicating the product and brand's attributes and characteristics to the target audience and also helps in making sure that higher awareness of the foreign brand is created among the potential customers. While the



adoption of integrated marketing communications is important for international marketing, the essay also leads to the conclusion that culture is one of the most important factors that affect the IMC strategies that are to be adopted by firms. There are several arguments and discussions on the subject that establish that international firms do not need to change their IMC strategies based on the culture because standardised marketing is needed in the globalised world. But the essay leads to the conclusion that even though international firms do need to adopt standardised IMC strategies, they also need to alter these strategies based on the culture for ensuring higher success.

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