A Categorization Approach to Analyzing the Global Consumer Culture Debate

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Given the ongoing globalization debate and lack of agreement about whether consumer cultures are predominantly globalizing, glocalizing, or localizing, we propose a conceptual framework designed to help clarify discussion and facilitate theoretical progress. By applying Rosch’s (1975) categorization theory, we demonstrate that arguments for global consumer culture are most easily made at the superordinate level. However, their strength (versus glocal and local consumer culture) at the basic and subordinate levels is moderated by whether meanings associated with the consumption factor are primarily functional or symbolic. Managerial implications and future research possibilities are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

More than 20 years ago, Ted Levitt (1983) predicted the demise of local market customization. His provocative and frequently cited paper has stimulated a debate over whether globally standardised marketing is a viable strategy in today's market environment. This debate has led to various theoretical positions along a continuum associated with managerial actions that range from worldwide marketing mix standardization to national customization with hybrid approaches in between, e.g., "glocalization" (Ritzer 2004). Along with this debate over the most viable marketing strategy to target global markets has evolved a discussion about whether consumer cultures are predominantly globalizing, glocalizing, or localizing. On one side of this globalisation debate are scholars who have found support for an emerging global consumer culture (Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra 1999). On the other end of this globalisation debate are proponents of local consumer culture. This group hypothesises that global forces drive the revitalization of local economies, politics, technologies, and cultures rather than promote one homogeneous consumer culture (Jackson 2004; Watts 1996). Still others have argued for increasing numbers of glocal consumer cultures, in which the global interacts with the local and produces unique hybrid outcomes (Ritzer 2004).

While each group on this globalisation continuum finds empirical evidence to support its viewpoint, analysis of the literature indicates that the hierarchic categorisation level is not always consistent. We believe that the strength of evidence in favor or against each form of consumer culture varies within this hierarchy. For this reason, an additional framework is needed, which will facilitate analysis by maintaining equivalent comparisons. Using Rosch's (1975) categorisation theory, we propose such a conceptual framework that we believe will enhance the analysis and subsequent understanding of whether consumer cultures are globalizing, glocalizing, or localizing. In addition, we demonstrate that the degree of globalisation within a particular category level may differ depending on the category's functional and symbolic meaning system.

Specifically, we demonstrate that all forms of consumer cultures exist, but that the evidence for their existence is relatively stronger or weaker depending on the level of categorisation (e.g., superordinate, basic, subordinate) and the respective category’s meaning system (e.g., functional versus symbolic meaning). For example, we argue that evidence on behalf of global consumer culture (GCC) is more likely to be found across all levels of the categorisation hierarchy for consumption-related factors that are associated with functional meanings. On the other hand, evidence for GCC from consumption-related factors that are associated primarily with symbolic meanings is likely to vary more depending on the level within the categorisation hierarchy.

In this paper, consumption-related factors refer to different components of the marketing mix that directly affect consumers, such as products (fast food), distribution venues (shopping malls) and marketing communications (advertising). While arguments for GCC are most easily made using the superordinate levels for these consumption-related factors, argument strength at the basic and subordinate levels (versus glocal and local) is moderated by whether or not meanings associated with the consumption factor are primarily functional or symbolic. Specific examples of how and why this occurs are provided for each of the three consumption-related factors: fast food, shopping malls and advertising. We hope that this proposed conceptual framework will provide international marketing scholars and practitioners with a new tool, which helps structure the global consumer culture debate. Drawing on well-established categorisation theory, our framework is unique in that we approach this ongoing debate from a demand side rather than a production side. Ultimately, we hope to stimulate additional research based on this framework that will shed additional light on the ongoing evolution of consumer cultures.

REFERENCES


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