

# “The Singularities of the Cultural Element in Consumer Behavior”

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## The Singularities of the Cultural Element in Consumer Behavior

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### Abstract

The analysis of recent processes reveals the concept of global consumer culture, based on global homogenization of the consumption. On the one hand, scientific literature proposes that global culture determines the convergence of consumer needs and priorities. On the other hand, the scientific research gives the different opinion emphasizing that the globalization helps local cultural identities to survive in different parts of the world. Taking into consideration the lack of unambiguous interpretation of the influence, where the idea of global culture makes up consumer behavior, we may state the necessity of deeper theoretical studies on cultural factor in the expression of consumer behavior. Based on presented reasoning, this paper examines and summarizes the theoretical statements of the correlation between culture and consumer behavior and projects the possibilities of empirical grounding on the example of Lithuanian consumer.

**Key words:** consumer behavior, culture, convergence, divergence, Lithuanian consumers.

### Introduction

The development of information technologies, the expansion of multinational corporations and the liberalization of many markets have been stimulating competition, decrease of prices and more effective cost management. These processes have not only influenced the conversion of previous luxury goods into commodities, but, together with changed lifestyle, determined consumer behavior changes.

Within the classical consumer behavior model, the consumer behavior elements are considered in psychological and social science aspects, which are the background of consumer behavior theory. However, M. de Mooij (2004) predicated that the research of consumer behavior cultural variables demand integrated approach. Each of these science directions analyses cultural processes from different viewpoints.

First of all, we should mention the concept of global consumer culture. According to Belk (1996), the global culture determines the homogenization of global consumptions. "Consumers almost all over the world have the possibility to eat the same food, listen to the same music, wear the same style clothes, watch the same TV programs and movies, have lunch in the same restaurants and stay at the same hotels". Assael (1998), Bullmore (2000), Czinkota and Ronkainen (1993), Jain (1987) agree with this approach. The global consumer culture comprises not only the homogenization of global consumption, but also the prosperity transatlantic companies. Alden (1999), Steenkamp (1999) and Batra (1999), who analyzed the expression of global consumer culture in advertisement, treat the global consumer culture as the common set of consumption related symbols (product categories, makes and consumption activities), which is meaningful to the members of target segment. The promotion of mass media, coming mainly from United States, has played a significant role in creating, learning and sharing such symbols. However, the global symbols not necessarily comprise the homogeneity of personal habits and values.

According to M. de Mooij (2004) in practice, notwithstanding the prevalence of world-wide television and internet, members of different nations still keep different habits, flavors and commitments in their consumption and occupation, would it be music or sports. Instead of influencing the homogenization, the globalization gives the reason for local cultural identities in different parts of the world to survive.

Recent scientific studies don't provide unambiguous assessment of the globalization impact on the levels of consumer behavior convergence and divergence. Within the context of for-

malization of global markets and disappearing of the traditional geographical market boundaries, the cultural consumer behavior variables and their singularities became the actual object of theoretical and empirical studies.

Regarding the current level of the examination of the issue of present research, in our article we are aiming to analyze and summarize culture and customer behavior correlation illustrating theoretical rules and foresee their empirical grounding Lithuanian telecommunication service consumer example opportunities.

### **Theoretical grounding**

In order to reveal and summarize the singularities of cultural factor expression in consumer behavior at the theoretical level, the priority is devoted to two theoretical analysis aspects – consumer behavior and culture.

### **Globalization and consumer needs**

Both in scientific works and practical discussion there is an opinion that one of the globalization attributes is convergence of incomes, media and technologies. Assael (1998), Bullmore (2000), Czinkota and Ronkainen (1993), Jain (1987), assured of that determine consumer needs, hobbies and mode of life homogenization. Levitt (1983) in his popular article “Market globalization” argued that new technologies determine consumer needs and desires homogenization, therefore consumers seek for and prefer standard high level and low price products. His arguments were based on the opinion that the customer’s behavior is rational. However, more and more often the scientists notice that there are different attitudes in different countries. That is because the consumers are not always rational and do not make decisions about the purchase who bring the greatest benefit. The opinion about the consumers’ rationality is more and more often considered as unreal and ousts consumers from cultural context (Antonides, 1998, Mc Cracken, 1989; Suerdem, 1993).

**The theory of convergence** states, that together with the industrialization and modernization of the nations become more and more similar, despite different cultural and historical inheritance, political and economical systems. Social-economical convergence aspects are social links schemes, production models, also growing dependence on science and technologies, political and economical control systems. Industrialization and modernization are supposed to bring universal civilization, i.e. universal values and approaches models. Regarding the fact that the majority of universal civilization consuming symbols are American, global cultural homogeneity is also called as Americanism or cultural imperialism.

The scientific discussion about convergence comes from modernization theory of the seventh decade. The supporters of the convergence theory that all or almost all societies move at almost the same speed to the same point basically due to industrial person appearance. Whereas the supporters of divergence emphasize the idea that there are different modernity forms and there is no convergence. In order to avoid confusing of American consumer symbol spread with the convergence we need to understand different modernization aspects, which are based on global convergence hypothesis.

The analysis of convergence theory shows that in this context macro and micro levels are distinguished; however macro and micro dichotomy are not still clearly defined.

The analysis of different products consumption data show, that at the macro and micro levels both convergence and divergence take place, only the level in different regions is different. If the products converge among the countries, the convergence is the weakest in economically heterogeneous regions and the strongest on economically homogeneous regions. However even in economically homogeneous regions, as for example Europe, only a few true convergence cases may be found. In the majority of cases the differences are constant or the country converge. The people may have the same modern technology, but use it differently. Therefore, if the convergence takes processes at macro level, there may be found significant differences at micro level.

According to M. de Mooij (2004) micro level data are more interesting – what people really do with products they have. There are still no world-wide data about convergence-

divergence evaluation at micro level. There is only part of the data collected in Europe, but only for short terms. These data prove divergence existence.

Having studied different industrialization and modernization effects on social convergence, Alex Inkeles (1974) did not find any proves of homologous convergence, but he distinguished several convergence and divergence forms and levels.

Summarizing, we can make a conclusion that still there is no undivided opinion about the globalization influence and cultural effect in this context. Disregarding the culture influence enabled many companies to centralize actions and marketing. However, instead of expected growing of effectiveness that awoke reduce of profitability. According to M. de Mooij (2004) that looks more like created international marketing myth. International marketing researches would like us to believe that in new Europe with single currency the consumers will become more similar, they will eat similar food, wear similar jeans and watch similar television programs. But the reality is different. There are a lot of differences among the consumer values systems in different European countries that have deep historical background and it can not be changed so soon. Although there may be some convergence signs, there are few value system convergence signs. Contrarily, there are signs of consumer behavior divergence in Europe, reflected in thoughts and consuming of many products.

### Interaction of culture and consumer

Every individual's behavior is the result of the system of his cultural values under certain circumstances. The behavior of an individual consumer is valued by people surrounding him/her, who give advice and begin to imitate or reject it as unacceptable. It may become the norm for all the group and the part of that society culture. According to J.C. Mowen (2000), certain meanings or values may be removed from environment world to consumed products by means of marketing (Figure 1).

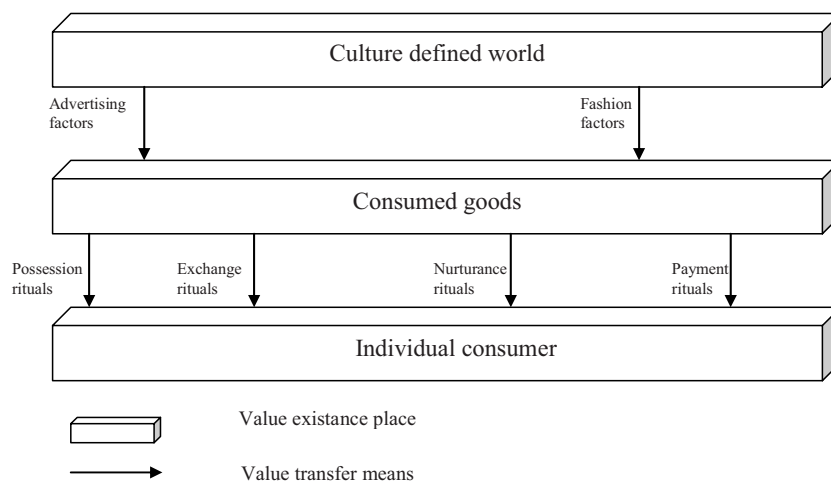


Fig. 1. Transfer of cultural value

Figure 1 presents the relations among consumed goods, individual consumers and culture-defined environment. The importance of products is reflected in their ability to transfer and convey their cultural value. J.C. Mowen (2000) stated the goods are equated in "wayside stations" value transfer process. The cultural values are transferred from culture defined environment to consumed goods and then to individuals.

The interpretation of surrounding world by the individuals is based on their culture. These are habits and rules typical for certain society. In this way they form a certain scheme for people's

behavior. We can see from Figure 1 that value transfer from culture to the object may be carried out by advertising and fashion factors. Different rituals may transfer rituals from consumed goods to individuals, i.e. possession, nurturance, exchange and payment.

Advertising transfer value from culture defined environment to goods. Advertiser provides grandstanding goods with certain value. Advertising message repeating not only emphasizes product rendered benefit, but also makes the consumer expect from the similar goods the same characteristics in the future. Fashion factors make up more difficult value transfer complex. They include magazines, newspapers, opinion leaders etc. Fashion factors are moved by innovation spread principal.

As Figure 1 shows, consumed goods and services transfer cultural values to individuals. J.C. Mowen (2000) noted that people consume goods so that to identify cultural values with themselves and show people what they are.

Advertising and fashion factor cultural values may move from culture defined world to certain goods, from which the rituals transfer them to individual consumers. That makes cultural values transfer process. Further we need to analyze what is the influence of cultural factor on consumer behavior.

M. Solomon, G. Bamossy and S. Askegaard (1995) state, that relations between consumer behavior and culture may be equated to two-way road traffic. On the one hand, goods and services, which correspond to culture priorities at some certain moment, have better chance to be accepted by the consumer. Furthermore, new goods studios and goods design innovations, successfully performed in the culture at certain time create possibility for basic cultural ideals to arise. For instance, ready-to-cook and made-up food reflects family structure changes and house holder number reduce.

D. Luna and S.F. Gupta (2001) reflect such duplex culture and consumer behavior interaction in the model, presented in Figure 2.

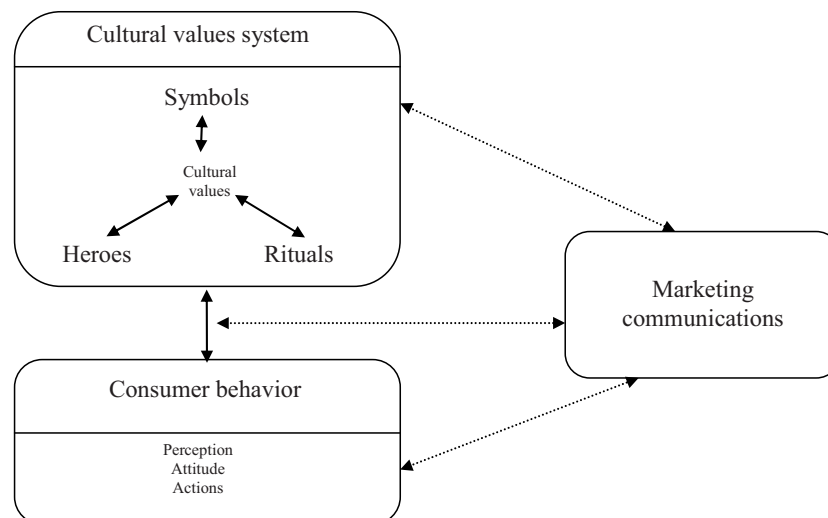


Fig. 2. Culture and consumer behavior interaction model

In the model presented in Figure 2 the authors distinguish Hofstede (1991, 2001) culture expression forms, which are symbols, heroes, rituals and cultural values. Cultural values and their typical interaction with other cultures expression forms are the main part in consumer cultural value system. Symbols usually reflect cultural values. Due to certain consumption rituals certain goods become cultural values symbols. Moreover, symbols may strengthen cultural values or even replace them. Therefore, there is bipartite link between them in the Figure 2.

Heroes express cultural values. They are individual personalities or groups of them, who reflect society member's credo. Between them and cultural values bipartite interaction also may take place. Rituals are important cultural valuable prove. However, at the same time they may influence them, by modifying them and changing the cultural values.

In the model presented in Figure 2 we can see distinguishing of three major compound elements of consumer behavior: perception, attitude and actions. Perception involves memory and thoughts structures and processes. Attitude means certain points of view and intentions formation process, its results-attitude to material (for example goods) and abstract (for example ethical groups) issues. Actions are classified as individually chosen activity, certain behavior models; for instance, usage of mass media means or food purchase.

D. Luna and S.F. Gupta (2001) model shows culture and consumer behavior interaction. It reflects each culture expression form's influence on consumer behavior compound elements.

Culture and consumer behavior interaction analysis is closely connected with ethnocentrism effect. It appears due to usual people's typical tendency to think that their world-view is "right", "suitable" and "the only way to understand the world". People, who belong to the highest ethnocentrism level, suppose other people's ideas susceptible or even mistaken, whereas their own culture they think is understandable itself. According to G.R. Foxall (1998), ethnocentrism values priorities, behavior at the table, hygienic habits and sexes' roles especially strictly.

Majority of consumers who faced goods that come from other cultures, simply do not want to know if their cultural expectations are universally "right", getting interested in other culture goods provided values, or understand new goods. For many of them it is easier to choose familiar goods, which values are clear and reject strange ones, which values are unknown. In the opinion of G.R. Foxall (1998) the majority of consumers behave this way. World practice knows the facts when the goods were unsuccessful in a foreign country only due to the fact that marketing specialists did not understand local cultural conditions. Even when the cultures are similar historically, the same goods may be rendered completely different values. Consumers' ethnocentrism conditions their local and foreign goods perception, attitude and actions.

In scientific researches great attention is paid to cultural values. That one more time proves that they are basic culture expression form. Language influence on consumer behavior is one of mostly often researched of all the symbols. D. Luna and S.F. Gupta (2001) described how heroes influence on consumer behavior process corresponds to culture values transfer process shown above in Figure 2.

Having applied culture and consumer behavior interaction model by D. Luna and S.F. Gupta (2001) we still have not got enough comprehensive knowledge about consumer behavior, in order to make wider impression, further analysis of individual consumers variable behavior is necessary. M. de Mooij (2004) presented a peculiar attitude. According to her, personality and culture are integral. The issue how people learn was studied at individual's level, but the issue how people's life change in the society where they live hasn't been studied enough. Culture is something more than social and environmental influence. Instead of perceiving culture as the environment of consumer behavior, anthropologists suggest that culture is "internal". In the opinion of M. de Mooij (2004), people should get used to seeing themselves in culture; culture should be in their heads. Instead of distinguishing behavior aspects according to different disciplines, we should get used to seeing themselves in culture, culture should be in their heads. Instead of distinguishing behavior aspects according to different disciplines, we should integrate attitude to individual, culture and society.

**Intercultural consumer behavior model by M. de Mooij.** M. de Mooij (2004) claims, that consumer behavior components may be outlined as personality: Who I am? What kind of person I am? How people feel, how people think and learn and what people do. Social science definitions for feelings, learning and action are "effect", "attitude" and "behavior".

To understand culture influence on consumer behavior, culture must be integrated into different individual's behavior components. American marketing scientists Marai and Manrai (1996) define culture as a complex concept. Majority of components would be defined as culture result, also art effects (for example clothes, food) or abstract elements (rules and values) are frequently included into culture definition. That must be distinguished so that consumer behavior

values background for culture may be defined under different behavior types that unconditionally included into culture definition. Cultural values should be included as integrated consumer part, not as environment factor. M. de Mooij (2004) does not classify national incomes to environment factor as other authors, so he does not use economical environment definition. Incomes influence consumer values and culture in certain post-scarified society. Here M. de Mooij refers to Suerdem (1993), who defined economical rationality as “values system” typical for certain social systems.

According to M. de Mooij, consumer behavior may be explained and even foreseen if we find out what it is and how it is influenced by surrounding environment.

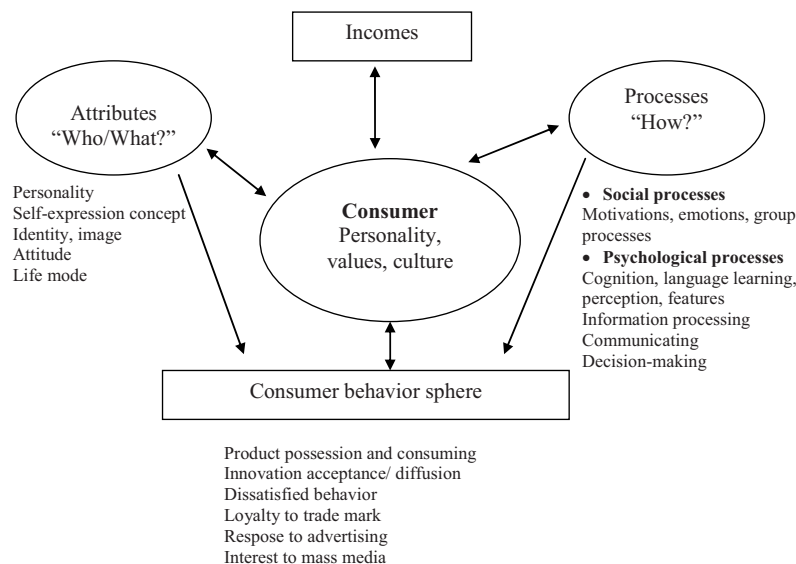


Fig. 3. Intercultural consumer behavior model by M. de Mooij

In the model shown in Figure 3 culture components for consumer behavior in consumer behavior sphere are also systematized into cultural person's components expressed as consumer attributes and processes. Welfare is influenced by culture, but on the other hand it influences culture, therefore incomes are put in separate “box” and shown as interaction of consumer with culture.

Individual's attributes show what people are – “Who?” and the process shows what moves people – How? The main question is “Who are you?”. Individuals and how they define themselves, their personality, features and identity linked with Who? There is an attitude to life mode, because they are central individual's part. As people think, understand, learn and motivated – How? Definition “I” process to behavior – are defined as processes. Intercultural psychologists Marku and Kitayama (1991) claim: individual and identity are determined as there is cultural effects psychological locus. In function orientated and interpretation system that will make systematic error as given socio-cultural group member will see, feel, etc.

Individual is a form of cultural context, and directed strong influence on social behavior through many means, among them there is also individual's perception, evaluation and values. This indirect individual's cast makes him/her change behavior understanding.

Personality, self-expression and viewpoint related theories have their roots in the psychology. Even if ideally emic attitude must follow the study of the consumer behavior in different countries, from this point of view it would be more pragmatic to determine the cross-cultural utility of the existing constructs.

Summarizing present theoretical study of cultural factor definition of consumer behavior based on global culture and consumer needs convergence theoretical provision, and contrary cul-



ture and consumer behavior interaction illustrating models may enable us to foreseen cultural factor definition singularities.

- Till now there is no unambiguous evidence of convergence, although there are some convergence signs of economical systems. However, we may find only a few convergence indications of values systems.
- Researched models, analyzing the interaction between culture and consumer behavior, one more time prove that culture makes a great impact on consumer behavior. Even in case the cultures are very similar, the same goods may receive totally different meaning.

### Propositions for empirical research

Needs analogues differently self-actualize in different nation's context by influence evaluation on consumer behavior cognition attitude certain research and methodology are essential, they are associated with model by Luna Gupta (2001) and supplemented with the model by M. de Mooij (2004).

On the basis of identified culture factor definition singularities may be foreseen by their empirical examination opportunities on the example of Lithuanian consumer. Taking into consideration global and Lithuanian market tendencies, in the article we may make an assumption about telecommunication service consumers' behavior cognition actuality and timeliness. In nowadays information and high technologies development time earlier luxurious goods such as mobile phones and fast wireless Internet now become everyday consumption goods. According to the data, provided by Lithuanian Connection Regulation Institutions at the moment there is one consumer per one mobile phone, every fourth uses fixed telephoned connection and every sixth Lithuanian uses Internet at work or at home. Choice of these goods for the research at the cultural level is reasonable, because service sphere is developing most rapidly, that creates very wide consumers circle.

**The target of intended research** – To determine features of Lithuanian telecommunication service consumers and their decision-making, conditioning social and psychological processes on the basis of cultural consumer behavior changes analysis.

#### Research tasks:

- To identify Lithuanian telecommunication service consumer features taking into consideration personalities, self-cognition, image, identity, attitude and life mode characteristics.
- To summarize cultural changes, such as social and psychological processes, singularities of definition of Lithuanian telecommunication service consumers.

Data collected will be useful not only for Lithuanian scientists and businesspeople, but also for representatives of other countries to get familiar with Lithuanian telecommunication service consumer.

### Conclusions

Having analyzed and summarized theoretical cultural singularities definitions in consumer behavior, following conclusions have been made:

1. Scientific studies showed that culture is a factor that determines consumer behavior, has different definition forms in different countries, therefore that issue needs deeper empirical studies. Supporting scientists' opinion that globalization processes are the strong factor at present, it is emphasized that it does not limit cultural singularities definitions. Therefore intercultural differences are still significant object for scientific research.
2. Having analyzed culture and consumer behavior correlation according to the provision of scientists who carried out research in this field, the conclusion is made that between culture and consumer behavior there is complicated bipartite interaction. Cultural definition forms determine consumer behavior, influencing consumer cognition, attitude and action.
3. The analysis of scientists who carried out research on culture factor definition in consumer behavior showed that existing models do not allow to make up enough deep opin-



ion about the factors influencing consumer behavior, so that is essential to carry out complex research. To carry out present empirical research model by Luna Gupta and model by De Mooij were chosen to supplement collected by Gupta data.

4. Present empirical research will enable us to get deeper information about Lithuanian telecommunication service consumer behavior singularities; chosen telecommunication service consumers will reflect intercultural consumer behavior divergence and convergence the best.

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