A Cross-National Observation of Counter-Cultural Consumer Behaviour

by

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Executive summary

Many empirical studies in cross-cultural marketing show that consumer choice and behaviour are driven by cultural values. As a result, the international marketing literature focuses on the appropriate degree of adaptation to foreign markets. Heretofore, it was believed that adjustments—if necessary—conformed to local cultural values. In the present paper, we claim that consumer behaviour can also systematically contradict—rather than conform to—local cultural values. We propose that counter-cultural consumer behaviour is a context-specific phenomenon that occurs in an environment that justifies or even triggers nonconformity. Here, we suggest an experiential consumption context that provides hedonic benefits for a limited period, thus possibly offering a temporary refuge from the monotonous routines of everyday life, in which the general human need for social acceptance fosters conformity.

As a prototype of an experiential global service brand, we chose Starbucks as an object for our study. An observation of 3,710 customers of the American coffee house in ten countries supports consumption patterns that oppose the values comprised in two cultural dimensions of the Hofstede concept. Specifically, we find in this context that consumers from individualistic cultures such as the Netherlands and the UK (i.e., cultures with an emphasis on independence), compared with their counterparts from collectivistic cultures such as China and Brazil (i.e., cultures with an emphasis on mutual dependence), engage more in joint consumption (i.e., are accompanied more often or converse more with companions). Furthermore, consumers from restrained cultures such as Russia, China, and India (i.e., cultures with an emphasis on strict social norms), compared with their counterparts from indulgent cultures such as the UK, Brazil, and Chile (i.e., cultures with an emphasis on enjoying life and having fun), engage more in extensive consumption (i.e., longer stay). These findings provide evidence of a phenomenon that stands in sharp contrast to the majority of cross-cultural marketing studies and enriches the standardization vs. adaptation debate with a novel, seemingly counter-intuitive option to account for cultural differences.

As a takeaway for practitioners, we suggest that global experiential service firms such as Starbucks could leverage these findings and add counter-cultural elements to their format that would allow consumers to escape from culture-bound routines. For example, Starbucks could consider an adaptation of its store design; it could offer tables for more persons in individualistic countries such as the Netherlands and the UK, but individual booths that provide intimacy in collectivistic societies such as China and Brazil. Starbucks can further facilitate length of stay (i.e., consumption extensiveness) in restrained cultures such as Russia, China, and India by offering comfortable armchairs but install bar tables in indulgent cultures such as the UK, Brazil, and Chile, in which stays are short and seating comfort is less important.