

## **A Framework for Cross-Cultural Consumer Research**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this paper is to construct a conceptual framework for cross-cultural consumer behaviour research. A conceptual background of cross-cultural consumer research was investigated based on McCracken's culture and consumption theory and Hofstede's national culture theory. Two theories are compared and then an integrated framework is proposed for cross-cultural consumer research. The proposed framework suggests that Hofstede's cultural dimensions can be used to classify different cultural groups for macro level analysis and McCracken's cultural categories, principles, and movement of meaning can be applied to explain individuals' consumption behaviour for micro level analysis. The proposed conceptual framework offers considerable advantages for both marketing practitioners and researchers who are interested in studying consumption behaviour in two or more different culture groups.*

**Keywords:** Cross-culture, consumption behaviour, national culture, McCracken, Hofstede

### **1. Introduction**

Specific minority cultural groups' products and preferences are often showing up on their promotions and flyers in Canada and large grocery chain stores are dealing with products from all over the world. Consumers' preferences and consumption behaviours of different cultures didn't need to be investigated by marketers even two decades ago. The recent move to globalization and advancements in transportation and technologies like the Internet and satellite communication has given one the ability to learn about and compare different cultures to one's own. Therefore, pushing the boundaries of cross-cultural consumer research to gain a better understanding of consumer behaviour in a multi-cultural environment has created both opportunities and challenges for today's marketers. Cross-cultural consumer research is increasingly important and essential for the current globalized marketplace. Although several studies tried to build up integrative perspectives on cross-cultural consumer researches (Douglas and Craig, 1997), no integrated model is yet found in literature.

To meet the challenges of cross-cultural consumer research, a sound framework is needed. Building such a framework requires, first, understanding the term "culture." Culture (or it) can have one of several definitions: highly developed taste in fine arts and humanities; consistent habits of knowing, believing, and behaving; and sharing of aim, moral, values, and practices (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). The last of these three definitions provides the most specific interpretation of the word and emphasizes the notion of the group as the important element of culture. It allows establishing cross-cultural consumer researches as understanding two or more different groups.

In addition to understanding cross-culture as involving two or more groups, the relation between culture and consumption is required. This concept has been comprehensively developed in the work of McCracken. Consumer consumption is explained as a cultural meaning transfer procedure (McCracken, 1988). In addition to this, the national culture theory by Hofstede (1980) is one of the most classic and widely stated cross-cultural theories, which contributed in pioneering large scale cross-cultural research including over 70 countries.

Using the work of these two theorists, this paper analyzes the culture and consumption theory and the national culture theory, comparing and integrating them to construct a possible framework for cross-cultural consumer behaviour research.

## **2. McCracken's Culture and Consumption Theory**

McCracken (1988) defined a culture as a crowd of individuals participating in sharing values, rules, and traditions, which is similar to Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) third definition. Emphasizing the fact that culture influences an individual's behaviour toward other individuals, social relationships, and other environmental factors and processes, McCracken (1988) explained culture's role in two ways (Appelbaum & Jordt, 1996). First, he suggested that culture works like a "lens," through which we view our world and our preferred products. In this perspective, each consumer's view would differ according to his/her economic, social, and educational background. His/her perceptions would be based on his/her own outlook. Second, he compared culture with a "blueprint" of the world, inferring that culture shows how the world could be changed in the future. This perspective implies that culture can predict future trends and patterns of a society. The two analogies contribute to McCracken's "Movement of meaning" (McCracken, 1988).

Movement of meaning comprises a sequence of cultural meanings in three different phases: the culturally constituted world, the consumer goods, and the individual consumer (McCracken, 1988). In McCracken's model, the movement of meaning relates to an individual's daily experience as it falls in line with specific principles and perceptions of his/her own culture. Meanings transfer from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods through two kinds of systems, the Fashion System and the Advertising System. The Advertising System seems to be the most direct way to convey meanings or messages from producers or marketers to consumers because a company's marketers decide what sort of specific cultural meanings to deliver to their customers in their advertisements. Basically a cultural meaning transfer, this sequence gives marketers and companies better control over the whole procedure of influencing consumers by direct delivery.

The Fashion System involves a number of indirect associations and multiple actors, making it much more complicated to convey meanings than the Advertising System. In fashion the process is more complicated because it involves numerous actors such as opinion leaders, magazines, newspapers and other mass media (McCracken, 1988). For example, the designer of new clothes for women or the designer of a new sports car will rely on the writing skills of a journalist to transfer the cultural meaning of the product to the consumers in a way that resonates with consumers. In a fashion system, there are usually two categories of people—product designers and fashion journalists/social observers (McCracken 1988). They work with each other to transfer the approved meaning of culturally constituted goods to the consumers. Sometimes this selection can create a lot of problems if the journalist or social observer does not understand the meaning of culturally constitute goods from a designer point of view. As a result, the wrong meaning of the goods can be conveyed to the consumer which in turn can be disastrous for the desired image of that particular product. In addition, meanings can be shaped by opinion leaders as well as journalists. Certain social groups can support a fashion trend or implication, spreading throughout a society. Therefore, meanings created or transferred by the Fashion System tend to be more complex and more diversified than those of the advertising system because meanings can be created by many actors and transferred in many different levels.

Meaning transfers from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods, then transfers to individual consumers by means of four kinds of rituals: the Possession Ritual, the Exchange Ritual, the Grooming Ritual, and the Divestment Ritual (McCracken, 1988). Each ritual represent different consumer behaviours in projecting personal meaning onto consumer goods. Feeling one to possess a product, even though it may not be useful anymore, can be explained as the Possession Ritual. The Exchange Ritual can be explained with consumers exchanging gifts in mandatory gift exchange or special occasions such as holidays, birthdays, and business relations. Another important ritual is consumer grooming, which exhibits the central idea of bolstering individual confidence and providing additional power. Participating in a special event like a wedding or going out to eat on a special Friday evening are good examples of this ritual. This ritual explains the preparation time and excitement a person experiences getting ready for the special occasion. These grooming activities will provide people with the feeling of being alluring, stimulated, and valuable transformation of these symbolic properties can be present in their most desirable consumer goods.

The last ritual is the Divestment Ritual that removes prior meaning from goods in order to create a personal ownership. This ritual has a two part structure. When a person buys a used item, the divestment ritual is used to remove the meaning of personal belongings to the last owner. For example, a house that was owned previously by someone else will often be decorated by the new owner with different colors in order to erase the memories of last owner, and also to create a new sense of belonging in his/her new house. The second Divestment Ritual happens when a person gives away something that he/she owned before. When that person, for example, sees someone wearing any old item of clothing, they have to work through discomfort that someone else is wearing their former possession. These Divestment Rituals are utilized to remove meanings of goods that have been in one's personal possession. In summary, all of the rituals discussed so far are used as tools of meaning to facilitate the transfer of this meaning from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods. The practical application of McCracken's cultural categories in the light of cross-cultural research suggests that consumer goods have a far greater importance that reaches beyond their practical and business significance (Appelbaum and Jordt, 1996). The importance of consumer goods exists in their ability to convey and communicate cultural meanings. This transfer is achieved by cultural categories. They are the agency of transforming this meaning, moving from a culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then to consumers. Cultural category is defined as "the fundamental coordinates of meaning" (McCracken, 1986, p.72), symbolizing boundaries in terms of time, space, and community. For example, culture establishes different concepts of time, "minute" as a short time and "millennium" as a long amount of time. Culture also builds distinctive categories of class, gender, profession, race, age etc. (McCracken, 1986). Although many social scientists studying consumer behaviour had a clear conceptual knowledge of linkage between culture and consumption, a lack of explicit terminology to talk about the linkage of culture and consumption was first noticed by McCracken (1986). To fill the gap, McCracken proposed the new terminology of cultural categories and cultural principles. Because cultural categories are dynamic by nature and are not fixed cultural realities or facts, they are in transformation, changing all the time under the influence of history, society, environment, economy, immigration, technological innovation and globalization.

Consumer behaviour tends to be entrenched in particularistic socio-cultural conditions (Appelbaum and Jordt, 1996). This recognition constitutes a first critical step in the area of cross-cultural consumer research. A prime example comes from Appelbaum and Jordt's ethnographic research in which they observed many things over an extended period of time, specifically how an arranged marriage service in Japan got access in the Japanese dating industry. The research evaluated a Japanese dating service firm to create a relationship between the service itself and consumer-internalized cultural categories. Pro Nakodo, the matchmaking service, placed connections between marriage success and cultural categories such as "hometownism" and "groupism". The research concluded that consumers were making an effort to satisfy varied, multidimensional and even sometimes contrary goals in a variety of settings. This interpretation supports the argument that McCracken's culture and consumption theory can have real world applications. His work forms a significant contribution to the literature of cross-cultural discipline in consumer behaviour because it shows not only its explanatory capability but also that the theory applies to cross-cultural consumer researches.

### ***3. Hofstede's National Culture Theory***

Hofstede's national culture theory offers a second body of thought for cross-cultural work. Hofstede's perspective on culture provided distinct description on culture compared to other theorists in the field of cross-culture (Merrit, 2000). He defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1983, p.75). Emphasizing "mental programming," he argues that culture is something we learn and have enforced in our childhood by family and school. Therefore, one person's culture comes from his/her social environments, not from his/her genes (Hofstede, 1983).

The concept of multiple dimensions of a national culture based on Hofstede's large scale research, which ultimately included surveys of more than 117,000 employees, located in over 70 countries, who worked in one multinational organization - IBM (Hofstede, 1980). The survey was performed between 1967 and 1973, and included 40 countries for the first analysis. This research found four cultural dimensions—Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism, and Masculinity. In his initial work, Hofstede's (1980) research classified four dimensions of culture and assessed 53 countries on a scale of 0 to 100 for each dimension. It is important to note that he made linkage between national culture and past economic growth (Gannon & Newman, 2002).

The first dimension is Power Distance which indicates how a culture perceives allocation of authority or power (Hofstede, 1980). A key example to people's perception of equality or inequality of power sharing, and includes the level of democracy awkward sentence, seems like something is missing. People who can elect their own president or power holders would consider less power distance than people who do not have voting right to choose their power holders. Hofstede (1980) found there are Power Distance predictors for each dimension and climate, population, and distribution of wealth. Mild and cold climate cultures were likely to have low power distance, while cultures from tropical climate showed a tendency to have high power distance. When culture has a larger number of people, it usually has a greater power distance among its people. In addition to this, if the wealth is unevenly distributed among the people of a culture that implies the power distance is also greater among its people.

The second dimension deals with the concepts of individualism and collectivism, which are significant in terms of whether or not a culture has preference for or tendency toward self-reliance or group action (Hofstede, 1980). These concepts of individualism and collectivism are significantly predicted by economic development and climate (Gannon & Newman, 2002). For example, wealthy and more developed countries' systems are built on emphasis for being individualistic while less developed countries usually have systems emphasizing on being individualistic, while less developed countries' systems tend to be more collectivistic. Cultures situated in cold climates usually show more individualism tendency whereas cultures in warmer climates are usually more collectivistic. If there is a conflict situation, individuals from collectivistic cultures will tend to avoid conflict and rely on group elders to solve problem rather than confronting others directly. Conversely, individuals from individualistic cultures do not have a large degree of psychological association with other members in the group and are usually very independent when conducting their business (Hofstede, 1980).

The third dimension measures the Masculinity-Femininity scale that places emphasis on the role being male or female. In most cultures, this dimension is based on traditional practices of the past (Hofstede, 1980). In the context of so-called masculine culture, people admire qualities like aggressiveness, self-confident, goal-oriented, and the acquisition of wealth and other material assets. On the other hand, in the context of so-called feminine cultures, people admire qualities like social support, caring for others, relationships, emotions, and overall quality of life. Feminine cultures favour equal opportunity for both men and women, and despise rigid role behaviour related to either men or women. The culture is almost corporative in nature. In addition, people in masculine cultures usually live in warmer areas, whereas people in feminine cultures live in colder areas.

The fourth dimension describes the concept of uncertainty avoidance and explains how much anxiety an individual member of a culture will endure to avoid uncertainty (Hofstede, 1980). When a culture scores high on the uncertainty avoidance index, people of that culture would prefer explicit rules and usually have a low acceptance of vagueness. In these cultures, people tend to stay with one employer for a longer period of time. On the other hand, in cultures with low uncertainty avoidance, people of that culture tend to prefer flexible rules and less formal arrangements. On the whole, there is no exact predictor, but cultures with high uncertainty avoidance characteristics are usually just entering the innovation and transformation of advancement stage. These societies are changing quite rapidly. On the contrary, cultures with low uncertainty avoidance characteristics have already reached the maturity level of innovation and transformation; therefore, pace of change is slower, they exhibit economic and social stability (Gannon & Newman, 2002). Cultures with high uncertainty characteristics usually have to work on making and creating many rules and guidelines to control social manners and activities, whereas cultures with low uncertainty characteristics do not need many rules and guidelines to control their social settings because they already have well-established institutions with concrete rules and guidelines.

In 1991, Hofstede's piece called "Software of the Mind" examined cultures and society in light of important new developments regarding behaviours. He specifies that certain things like the way we think or how we feel or act in certain situations are well established during our early lives. "Culture" becomes a combination of various experiences in specific environments and defined social surroundings where these experiences are shared with people of a particular group. Differentiating individuals of one group from another group forms the human mind as a combination of programs. It is also influenced by the concept of context (Hofstede, 1991, citing Hall, 1977), which suggests that selection of communication pattern can categorize a certain culture into a distinctive group. Societies with individualistic values usually prefer "Low-context" interaction, while societies with shared values usually prefer "High-context" interaction (Hall, 1977).

People in “Low-context” cultures do not have a high degree of interaction and contact among each other; as a consequence, communication has to be very clear and detailed. A high degree of direct communication in “Low-context” cultures is required when exchanging official information and quite often happens via writing. On the other hand, with “High-context” cultures, people usually have closer ties and are more familiar with each other; therefore, information is already shared among people and they prefer to interact more in informal ways.

Merritt (2000) replicated Hofstede’s indexes of national culture in a study in which he carried out two sets of analyses. To find out if Hofstede’s indexes of national culture were applicable to high technology and airlines industry, a database was built with 9417 participants who were airline pilots with 26 different airlines in 19 countries worldwide: These airlines were from the different continents of North America, Australia, South America, Asia, Europe, and Africa. There was a wide range of cultures among pilots who were from different countries with various cultural backgrounds. In the part of the first study based on Hofstede’s Work Values Survey, Individualism and Power Distance were replicated successfully, but the part based on Masculinity and Uncertainty was not.

On the other hand, a second study had a more successful replication rate because its analysis eliminated the constraint of item equivalence for both time and population. Merritt’s (2000) findings confirm that these pilots are influenced by the distinct local cultures in which they are brought up. One specific type of pilot training is therefore not sufficient for all the pilots as a result of cultural differences. In sum, Hofstede’s work (1980) was successfully applied and contributed in discovering national differences which proved his work is highly significant.

#### ***4. Comparison between McCracken and Hofstede’s Theories***

McCracken (1988) and Hofstede (1980)’s approaches are compared and analysed in this section in order to discover possible linkage for a framework. McCracken’s theory focuses on explaining the influence of culture in consumers’ consumption behaviour, while Hofstede theory aims at identifying, comparing, and contrasting an organization’s employees by their differing national cultures. Marketing perspectives are supported by McCracken’s approach. Organizational behaviour perspectives are associated with Hofstede’s. McCracken (1988) defines a culture as a crowd of individuals participating in sharing values, rules, and traditions. One’s behaviour toward family, friends, work, education, consumption, and other important concepts and processes are directly influenced. In this sense, the notion of ‘culture’ has multiple and various inclusive definitions. Sometimes the description “culture” is applied exclusively to what is observable or recordable. Hofstede’s alternative conception of culture is featured as being seen as “subjective” or “implicit”. He describes culture as “mental programming,” as “software of the mind”. It is described as “subjective” in the same sense that McSweeney (2002) defines it. When comparing McCracken’s and Hofstede’s definitions of culture, a notable difference in formation of cultural value becomes apparent. McCracken’s definition of culture infers that an individual’s values are shared by other people in the same group and could be explained as mutual interaction between group members. Hofstede’s definition emphasizes that individuals learn from childhood and are mentally programmed from an early age. This notion of mental programming can be viewed as individuals’ values are shaped by the group culture, but individuals’ values do not influence the group culture as much.

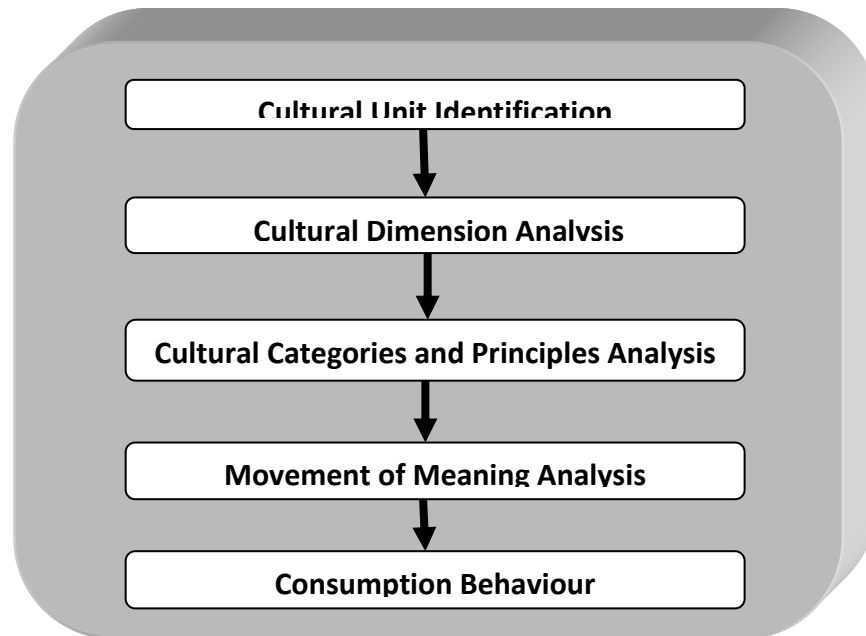
The scope of a cultural unit as common for a certain group was agreed by two theorists. Hofstede’s cultural group identified as to a nation, however, limiting his theory to the local fixation of culture (Hermeking, 2005). Culture is the product of a nation only, regardless of the relativity of national borders and the ethnic or cultural diversity within them. This simplification makes culture into a complex, influential soft factor more comprehensible and operational for international management and international marketing theories than for trends in individual behaviour. On the other hand, McCracken’s theory applies better to smaller groups. As he explains it, for example, even within one nation, there could be different consumption cultures between younger and older generations. Cultural units are narrowed down to age groups. Overall, Hofstede’s approach can be considered to be a macro approach to a culture, while McCracken’s approach can be viewed as a micro approach to a culture. The former is suitable for identifying the dimensions of a nation’s general culture, and the latter explains more individual cultural values. Some of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions can, however, be related to McCracken’s cultural categories as well as his movement of meaning through rituals. For example, Individualism/Collectivism, one of the Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, can be associated with McCracken’s exchange ritual.

If there is high tendency of collectivism in a group or a nation, there would be high exchange rituals, and consignment individuals' high gift consumption behaviour. On the other hand, if a group or a nation has high individualism, the major determinant of consumption is more likely to be that of Possession Ritual.

### **5. An Integrated framework for Cross-Cultural Consumer Behaviour Research**

The process of comparing both of McCracken's culture and consumption and Hofstede's national culture shows us that the two theories have different strengths for analysing cross-cultural perspectives. Coordinating them provides an integrated framework for examining cross-cultural consumer behaviour that would significantly expand the content and value of research on consumer behaviour. In figure 1, a relational sequence of factors for examining consumption across cultures is proposed. It provides a means of consumption and culture in different groups across multiple sites.

**Figure 1. Proposed framework for cross-cultural consumer behaviour research**



First, the cultural unit to be analyzed should be identified. This cultural unit can be a nation or a large group sharing the same cultural values. This beginning stage is important because a nation can be identified as one culture, two cultures, or multi-culture. For example, Canada is a multicultural nation, including various ethnic cultural groups. This diversity is also present in a number of other countries such as Latin American countries. Second, this identification can be analyzed at a macro level using Hofstede's cultural dimension (1980). This stage is concerned with categorizing subjects according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and generally distinguishes one subject from other subjects. Based on the findings of the second stage the next phase of micro cultural level analysis should be carried out by using McCracken's cultural categories and cultural principles. Within this stage, each subject culture is analyzed and evaluated separately in order to identify its cultural trends and characteristics. Then, using the findings of the third stage, subjects can be analysed using McCracken's theory of the movement of meaning. This stage is concerned with how individuals behave in each subject's culture. Different segments of consumers can be determined and looked at separately and together. Finally, relationships between subjects' cultural values and consumption behaviour can use findings of the fourth stage to identify and explain them. This framework gives us the means to compare individuals' consumption behaviour from two or more different cultural groups, applying it to each cultural group and then comparing it to other individual consumption behaviour from other cultural groups. Significance extends the range of data and the accuracy of understanding.

### **6. Conclusion**

An integrated framework is proposed to provide a tool to explain and build relations between consumption behaviour and culture based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1980) and McCracken's cultural categories, principles, and movement of meaning perspective (1988).

In culture studies, there are frequent debates among academic scholars how cultures affect our lives on the family, national, and international level (Luna & Gupta, 2001). In this paper, an attempt was made to introduce the McCracken's culture and consumption theory and the Hofstede's national culture cross-cultural theory to enhance understanding of cross-cultural research. Despite the criticism, there are various researchers like McCracken (1988) and Hofstede (1980) who made great contributions over several decades to the discipline of culture studies, especially in the area of culture and consumption and cross-cultural studies. Moreover, many of these scholars emphasized the importance of cross-cultural research and have also admitted that still there are many challenges to overcome. This framework presents macro level cultural analysis should be first applied to identify and categorize different cultural groups. Micro level cultural analysis should be followed in order to connect cultural categories and principles with consumption behaviour and explain individuals' consumption behaviour based on their cultural background. In order to compare individuals' consumption behaviours from two or more different cultural groups, this framework should be applied to each cultural group and then compared with other individuals' consumption behaviour from other cultural groups.

### **7. Limitations and Implications**

One of the key factors in studying culture is that it is constantly changing no matter what type of culture is being considered. According to McCracken (1988), one of the biggest challenges in exploring and describing cultural phenomena is the dynamic nature of culture; it inevitably evolves. Cultures are always transitional, always taking different shapes and forms. This characteristic condition applies especially in light of the recent globalization and immigration movements across different continents. Cultural change is a rich, high-context process in which people's lives are dynamically changing because of slights in demographics, economic activities of a country, and environmental disasters in geographical regions (Williamson, 2002). Finally, a major concern will be the effect of the passage of time. Cultural change over every ten-year period of time shows a lot of differences from the previous ten years. Individual and group responsibilities will have changed from decade to decade; and changes in technology, transportation, and communication will have affected individuals' behaviour and activities. In addition, the way people and individuals interact and communicate among themselves will have altered, and the same will have happened in relation to those outside of their cultural group change over a decade. The proposed framework offers considerable advantages for both marketing practitioners and researchers who are interested in studying consumption behaviour in two or more different culture groups. This framework could, for example, offer an international company interested in locating markets similar to their current ones in other locations. This framework can also be applied to management evaluating and comparing markets. For example, if a firm is considering which foreign markets to enter and with what marketing mix, it may want to evaluate which markets possess similar cultural characteristics and which markets do not have similar characteristics. Once this is decided, the firm could start working on offering relatively similar marketing mix in those cultures possessing high similarity according to the framework.

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