CULTURE'S IMPACT ON PRODUCT ACCEPTANCE: KEY INTERFACES BETWEEN INVOLVEMENT AND ADOPTION

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ÖZET: Tüketici davranışları ile kültür arasındaki ilişki literatürde kanıtlanmıştır. Bu araştırmada, bu ilişki, tüketicilerin mamulle olan bağlantıları ve yeni ürünü tüketime kabul etme hızları açısından incelenmiştir. Çalışma ayrıca, uluslararası pazarlamacılara, yabancı Pazarları anlamada ve uygun pazarlama stratejilerini oluşturmalarında faydalı olacak önemli bir matris de sunmaktadır.

I-INTRODUCTION

The issue of globalization and standardization has been a major research interest for several researchers since the late 1960's [i.e.,3]. Many agree that emerging similarities in tastes and preferences of consumers across nations are real since consumers have more access to telecommunication, technology. international media and transportation facilities which make them more subject to the information about products and services used in other countries. It is inevitable that this trend in the convergence of world preferences and tastes forces firms to design and implement standardized marketing strategies. However. the degree of standardization remains to be contingent upon the extent to which national cultures are in tune with the rudiments of global marketing since culture affects consumer behavior immensely. Douglas and Wind [1]. for example. postulate that the adaptation of products or marketing programs is a necessary condition in international markets as consumers in different parts of the world carry the peculiarities of their culture. In fact. cultural values and culturally determined needs. preferences, and tastes [2] are often regarded as a major hindrance to success in a standardization strategy. Zou et al.. [3] posit that standardization might not be a feasible alternative in those markets where cultures are significantly different.

In the literature. there is sufficient evidence to suggest that consumers have different consumption patterns toward a product depending on whether it is the reflection of their cultural norms. Cultural factors have a major impact on guiding consumers when they make a purchase decision [4]. "Clothing, transportation. food. housing exteriors and interiors, adornment. all serve as media for expression of the cultural meaning according to which our world has been constituted" [5].

Various definitions of culture are present in the literature. In this study. however. culture is defined as " a learned. shared. compelling. interrelated set of symbols whose meanings provide a set of orientations for members of a society" [6]. Hofstede [7] regards culture as a determinant of the identity of a human group and of the human collectivity. Although the present literature provides sufficient evidence on culture's impact on product choice and acceptance. the area needs to be further explored in light of nations' degree of consumer involvement with a particular characteristic of a product. The present study attempts to compensate the literature by particularly examining the two elements of a new product acceptance in a global setting; namely involvement and adoption. Dismantling the key interfaces between adoption and involvement is of special importance in determining the degree of global success because they determine the rate of product acceptance. The study also aims to outline a general guideline for designing marketing strategies with an emphasis on the idiosyncrasies of nations. This study does not attempt to achieve an empirical work. but rather it conceptualizes a general framework in the area of cross-cultural buyer behavior.

II-CULTURAL VALUES: ONE OF THE KEY DETERMINANTS OF NEEDS, AND MOTIVATION

Values are important elements of beliefs. perceptions. and attitudes that individuals confront with life and material things. They consist of a set of norms that guide individuals in their actions and their evaluations of surrounding objects [2].[6]. Values are learned during the process of human development along with culture-specific behavior [5].[8] and they are prioritized whenever a person faces a dilemma. The dimensions of values evoke from the fundamental priorities that cultures saliently determine. Hofstede's [7] four dimensions of culture -power distance. masculinity, uncertainty avoidance. and individualism- are considered as the important elements of cultural values. The first reflects how societies deal with human inequality; the second. how a society adopts male and female behaviors in its culture; the third. the way people cope with uncertainty. and the fourth. individuals' relationship [i.e.

"I" consciousness versus "We" consciousness). Hofstede's four dimensions account for the vast differences in individuals' value systems in the world. For example, in a nation where individualism is high, values toward self-achievement, freedom, and non-unity prevail. Likewise, if there is a high power distance in a society, collectivism tends to occur. Interestingly enough, the existence of particular lexica in a language depicts individual's value systems in a distinct cultural setting [9]. For instance, some nations have abundant words for love, caring, and belonging whereas others have a rich vocabulary for describing self, trade or success. Hall [9] distinguishes cultures as high context cultures in which communication messages flow in an implicit manner and low context cultures in which the messages are transmitted more explicitly. According to Hall, the context of cultures describes the nature of the relationship in a particular setting. The former has more cohesive relationships, and non-verbal communication. The latter has more self-oriented social life, and contains heavy emphasis on clear messages. To a certain extent then, languages suffice to provide some insights into how countries differ in their value patterns around the globe.

"Cultural values usually determine what activities people perform and what contingencies they perceive" [10]. This, in turn, creates in people's certain needs and preferences. Needs and preferences are usually congruent with individuals' *learned* or *culturally determined* behavior patterns. In other words, people desire to fulfill those needs that they learned from their socialization agents [i.e., parents, siblings, friends, etc.]. Some people might have needs in a cultural setting that do not exist in another. In a similar manner, the motivation to satisfy needs finds its source in cultural values [6]. For example, a product that promotes a high personal achievement is less likely to motivate people in a country where collaboration and cooperation prevail, because no need exists for personal achievement and the correspondent word for personal achievement is missing in that country's lexica.

Generally speaking, a search for the satisfaction of needs and desires requires more than a utilitarian character and commercial value. The significance consists largely in the ability to carry and communicate cultural values [11]. Need recognition usually stems from an internal stimulus or motive that directs individuals when they make a selection [10]. At this stage, consumers seek in a product a reflection of their cultural values and evaluate a product based on its compatibility with ongoing patterns of life [11]. Equally important, the reflection of a self-image that is gained as a result of cultural education [based on sex identity, age, region ethnic background and social classes] appeals to individuals to make a favorable evaluation of a product.

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It is the process of connecting product to *self.* For example, one of the reasons for the failure of Gerber processed baby food in Brazil was the underestimation of the power of the family nurturer image of Brazilian mothers [12]. In some cultures social pressure is exerted on a person [13] to attach to certain features of a product. By conforming with the expectations of other members of the society, consumers anticipate to attain some social benefits (usually approval).

What a product means to a consumer describes a set of behaviors towards fulfilling needs with it or with another. The determination of standardization has to be contingent on the identification of the psychological meaning that a product or a brand carries [14]. If the psychological meaning of a product or a brand is in concert with consumers' particular needs that they acknowledge in a cultural context, then consumers will likely to evaluate the product more positively and accept it for their use. Otherwise, the product will be categorized as highly risky. The ambiguity of accepting a product for consumption is even accelerated when a society has a low uncertainty avoidance which leads to more resistant to different adventures. Therefore, if a product satisfies culturally determined needs and has an ability to carry cultural values and meanings, it is more likely to be accepted in a global market.

III-INVOLVEMENT

The concept of involvement is originated in the writings of Krugman [15]. He defined involvement as the number of personal connections that a person has with a given stimulus. In general, involvement implies the relevance of a product to an individual's personality, lifestyle patterns, self-image, identity, and his/her social role in the society [13],[16]. There is an agreement among researchers that in high involvement conditions consumers make more personal connections with a product or a message than in low involvement conditions [13],[17],[15]. Thus, if involvement is high, consumers are more prone to devote their cognitive effort to evaluate the promises of a product or a message and expand their effort to make a connection between the promises of the product and their cultural values. Petty and Cacioppo [18] view the effects of involvement on the consumer decision making process as part of the Elaboration Likelihood Model that they developed. The basic hypothesis of the theory is that persuasion of consumers is confined to whether the characteristics of a product or issue-relevant thought is a significant link to a person's values and thoughts. According to this theory, there are two routes to persuasion; central and peripheral. In the former, people exert an excessive cognitive effort to assess the meaning of the promises that a product

assures. They form an attitude based on the information-processing activity and the quality of argument. In the latter, people's attitudes are less affected by the quality of an argument. Instead, people engage in less cognitive effort and information processing and use peripheral cues such as expertise, attractiveness of an endorser, and credibility when they form their attitude. In a later article, Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann [17] argue that when consumers are highly involved with a product, central route to persuasion is a critical component of the communication. Alternatively, when the level of involvement is low, consumers are persuaded by peripheral route.

In an international context, it is crucial to assess the importance of product attributes and the extent to which consumers choose products based on these attributes' relevance to their cultural norms and values. Some cultures exert a social pressure on a person [13] to adhere to certain features of a product. Thus, it can be suggested that the level of involvement is determined by social forces. The same product might have a little personal relevance to a customer (low involvement) in a culture and a high personal relevance (high involvement) in another. In most of the third world countries most purchase decision involves a high ego involvement for certain products that do not have any significance in advanced nations. As aforementioned, the failure of Gerber processed baby food in Brazil mainly resulted from the underestimation of ego involvement of mothers in this country which contrasted with that of American mothers.

The literature suggests that the involvement is often confined to a product type. Usually, non-durable and daily consumed products do not appear to activate consumers' involvement level. Therefore, the more repetitive the purchase, the lower the involvement level [19],[16]. However, if the product stimulates the personal characteristics of a user, the level of involvement will be accelerated and the commitment to the product or brand will increase. The product acceptance, thus, is a function, largely, of the level of involvement. The higher the involvement, the less likely the product will be accepted in a given cultural setting (unless it is adapted to culture). It is, therefore, crucial for international marketers to determine at what level consumers are making a link between themselves and products.

IV-ADOPTION OF A NEW PRODUCT

In his landmark study Everett Rogers [20] argued that people and societies have different rate of diffusion of innovation that attempts to change the way people live. Like adoption of new technology or innovation, adoption of a new product brings about a phenomenon in dealing with changes in ordinary lifestyle or tastes. The main element in the diffusion of innovation embodies an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by the members of a society. In fact, Wasson [21] argues that a new product is only new if the consumer perceives it to be new. He further posits that it is not a physical change that determines the concept of "new product" rather it is "what it does to a consumer; to his habits, his tastes and his pattern of life". Some nations easily and deliberately accept a change in their society, but some reject it strongly. This difference in behavior towards change is largely accounted for by the degree of fatalism that nations practice. In countries, where Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance (UAI) rate is low, individuals are usually reluctant to adopt any new improvements into their life. The belief in external locus of control [21] mainly plays the major determinant role. Thus, the message of a new experience may cause an immediate negative reaction in low UAI countries. On the contrary, new challenges might lead to a positive evaluation in those nations where openness to changes is more explicit [7],[22].

Further, the product acceptance in a country coincides with the certain degree of perceived risk. Consumers often categorize a product highly risky, if it does not reflect their cultural values and peculiarities in a proper way. The complexity of the product even accelerates the likelihood of resistance to new changes in tastes and consumption patterns. Specifically, consumers will develop simple heuristics to make a faster selection when the perceived risk is low. However, they expand their cognitive effort to accumulate some information about a new product in a highly risky condition [19]. Information gathering might be performed by intercommunication between the members of the society and by mass media tools in high and low context cultures respectively. The assessment of risk is again culturally bounded and it may vary from country to country depending on how people cope with the changes taking place in their societies.

V-THE CRITICAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN INVOLVEMENT AND ADOPTION

The key interfaces between involvement and adoption are illustrated in Figure 1. The four quadrants refer to (I) high involvement/high adoption, (II) low involvement/high adoption, (III) high involvement/low adoption, and finally (IV) low involvement/low adoption. Plotting the nature of host countries in this matrix helps marketers to develop and design more effective

marketing programs. because the matrix discerns the likelihood of the acceptance of the product or product groups.

The quadrant I presents a high level of involvement and adoption situation. Consumers in this quadrant tend to be sensitive to the attributes of a product when they assess whether or not the characteristics of the product are in concert with their values and personalities. If the product reflects the required characteristics and if culture allows changes in the society, the chance of product acceptance, other factors being held constant, will increase. Renault's strategy in different countries illustrates the importance of understanding the meaning of a product to cross-cultural consumers. Having studied the market and found out that the Germans are highly involved with cars, Renault introduced a car by emphasizing safety, modern engineering, and comfort in Germany [23]. When markets are placed in the quadrant I. the marketing communication program should reinforce the brand efficacy and target the innovators in the market. In a high context culture, mostly Asian countries, personal selling methods are significant because these types of cultures put a tremendous emphasis on cohesive personal relationships. In addition, the power of interpersonal communication must be highly recognizable due to the fact that the product information is attained through friends or relatives in high context cultures. Unlike in high context cultures, in low context cultures a clearly stated message can be effective in mass media. Cars and some fashion clothes are appropriate examples for this quadrant.

Figure 1. The Interaction Matrix Between Involvement and Adoption
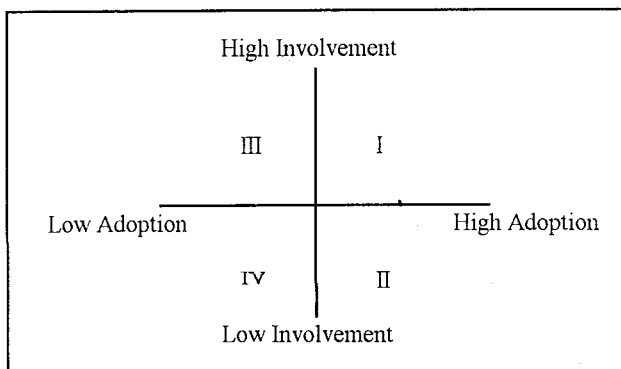
In quadrant II (high adoption, low involvement), the product category does not require consumers to engage in a significant search and cognitive effort. Since consumers are not highly involved and are more open to changes. they are more opt to accept a new product. A fast entry into the market and the introduction of a new

product through either a pull or a push strategy (based on the context of the culture) might give an opportunity to be leader in the market. As aforementioned, a pull strategy might be appropriate for a high context culture while a push strategy might work better in a low context culture. The quadrant II is a very favorable situation.

The quadrant III (high involvement. low adoption) presents the most problematic situation. Products hardly attract consumers' attention. The product characteristics are difficult to be recognized as the reflection of the values of culture and thus, the perceived risk is relatively high. New product acceptance is substantially low because of the traditionalist characteristics of the market. In this quadrant, consumers desire to obtain information on new products to reduce the level of perceived risk associated with it. The cognitive effort will be made either through interpersonal communication (in high context and low UAI cultures) or through mass media (low context and high UAI cultures). A marketing program must emphasize the matching characteristics of the product with the cultural norms. The communication messages might be effective if they reinforce the social approvals that consumers attain as a result of purchasing the product. The strategy that Procter&Gamble formulated for the Japanese diaper market illustrates the case. After an intensive market research, the company found that Japanese mothers are concerned with keeping their babies clean and dry and tend to change diapers more often than American mothers. In response to this consumer characteristic, Procter&Gamble introduced Ultra Pampers which is a more absorbent and less messier diaper product [23]. The marketing strategy was a success that put the company in a leadership position.

When markets have high involvement and low adoption rates. some price promotion tactics might help to gain a better shape in the market. American Express, for example, introduced its credit cards in Japan successfully, although the Japanese felt embarrassed if they do not make their purchases by cash. American Express turned this problem to its advantage by offering some cash rewards if credit card is used [24].

Finally, the quadrant IV contains countries that have low involvement and low adoption rates. The product might not require a great familiarity. But, the way it is consumed or the way it is produced might cause a reaction by potential users. Also, the contrary attributes of the product to cultural norms and values might deteriorate the success in the market. For example, the Barbie doll was accompanied by her brother instead of her boyfriend in India. The major reason for this adaption to Indian culture was that the concept of boyfriend was not acceptable while brothers and sisters

exhibit more close relationships in India than its Western counterparts [23]. As this example illustrates. a communication message should be proper in informing consumers that the product is congruent with their cultural norms and rules. Also, brand comparisons might increase the likelihood of adoption. Since the adoption is rather slow. a penetrating marketing strategy might be effective.

VI-CONCLUDING REMARKS

The success in international markets lies largely in understanding consumer behavior. Consumers often seek products which are in harmony with their cultural norms and values that are established during the long process of cultural learning. Consequently, general expectations from a product are usually a function of a common culture and social life that attaches the symbolism to the product. Thus, the successful and effective. marketing strategies capitalize on markets' peculiarities and make products more meaningful to customers.

Based on two dimensions of a new product acceptance- involvement and adoption-, marketers can assess the likelihood of success in foreign markets. They can. further. tailor their product attributes to a specific culture and accelerate the speed of acceptance. The bottom line is to characterize the level of involvement and adoption figures for a particular product across nations and then locate nations in the map presented in this study. This will provide marketers a rational assumption that no product carries the same messages across borders and it will preclude them from some of the devastating blunders that many companies experienced.

The present study analyzed culture's effects on consumer behavior with the assumption that they do not change over time. However, culture and cultural values tend to change over time. The increasing traffic in political and social arena in the world has a primary impact on slow or sometimes vast shifts in values. It is imperative to identify trends in social, political, and economic structures of countries and then investigate if there is a fit between changing values/norms and a company's goods or services. International marketers must carefully analyze the changes in cultural values before they construct their marketing strategies.

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