

Is the Internet the Worldwide Cultural Catalyst? A Theoretical Approach



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"A powerful force drives the world toward a converging commonality ..."

(Levitt, 1983: 92)

"... through the mediation of information and communication technologies, new patterns of social and cultural organization are emerging."

(Martin, 1995: 11)

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become one of the buzzwords of the moment and even though its potential impact on social and economic structures is more than tangible (OECD, 1999; Orlowski, 1997), perhaps we are yet to appreciate its final repercussions on these structures.

In any case, the appearance of the Internet can be considered as key to establishing a "before and after" in the study of exchange relations among the different social agents in a given environment. This same reasoning can be transferred to the specific field of business in a way in which both companies and consumers can become involved in the processes of communication and marketing (for example Hamill and Ennis, 1999; Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Leverick et al., 1997; Peattie and Peters, 1997; Prabhaker, 2000; Weiber and Kollmann, 1998).

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We can find numerous contributions highlighting the need for work to create a framework of knowledge which allows a better understanding of the implications of this new communication medium over the behaviour of individuals and society in general (Leung and Lee, 2004; Wellman et al., 2001). In this line, this paper attempts to analyse its implications over cultures of different nations whose individuals make regular use of the Internet. We consider this research important in determining the repercussions that the Internet may have on the evolution of cultures, an area still largely unexplored.

Considering the key role that the adoption of technologies has had on fostering the globalisation of both economic processes and values (Levitt, 1983), the following question could arise: "Is the Internet the worldwide cultural catalyst?" Inasmuch as the world is increasingly interconnected by the Internet, the widespread adoption of this new communication medium must intensify and accelerate a cultural convergence among countries. It is important to determine if this cultural convergence happens because of the Internet and what are its main repercussions on cultures of nations.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse theoretically the effects of individuals' growing adoption of the Internet in their respective cultures. Moreover, we discuss the role that the Internet can play on rapprochement of cultures. As such, a key question in this study is to determine if the Internet can foster cultural convergence among countries.

To address these issues it is necessary to use several cultural approaches with the aim of providing a balanced view. Thus, we begin by discussing the pan-cultural approach, which is viewed as one of the more classic and cited cultural theories. However, in spite of the utility that this approach has demonstrated during previous decades, it seems to be insufficient to explain fully the cultural convergence argument prompted by the Internet. As a result, we will pay more attention to those cultural approaches whose essence is in agreement with a dynamic view of culture. This new perspective of culture is more modern than the pan-cultural approach and it is due to a cultural paradigm shift defended by several authors (see Hong and Chiu, 2001).

This paper, therefore, is organised as follows. First, we theoretically analyse the treatment of the culture variable as a determinant of individuals' behaviour. Next, a theoretical proposal is presented regarding the future cultural convergence that will take place among individuals belonging to different primary cultures due to the Internet-technology adoption. This proposal will be discussed based on several cultural theories, approaches and culture-related models. Finally, within the conclusions, we summarise our main findings, together with the most relevant implications to explain the current and future settings for this issue.

CULTURE, GLOBALISATION AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

The individual's cultural factors are defined in this paper as the group of beliefs and values shared by a group of persons. These factors have usually been considered by social psychology as behaviour determinants and as a guide for members

of the society to justify their choices. In fact, Schwartz's (1992) cultural-level values theory describes culture as a set of values being determined by an underlying "structure of interacting belief systems" (Watson et al., 2002).

Thus, Hong and Chiu (2001) point out that several studies have shown that the way in which individuals perceive their social environment is directly related to their cultural background. Their evaluation and regulation of day-to-day conduct partly reflect the cultural knowledge they have acquired throughout their lives. Therefore, it is to be expected that these values and standards that are typical in a certain society affect the daily decision processes carried out by the individual members of this society *in their condition as consumers*. In this respect, Liu and McClure (2001) go further in emphasising that culture does not only affect the consumers' present behaviour but also their intention to commit themselves in the future.

However, in spite of the importance of this variable as a determinant of consumer behaviour, Johnston and Parminder (1999) state that on many occasions the difficulties entailed in its measurement have meant that it has been included in research as an explanatory variable of a residual nature and thereby relegated to a secondary position.

Recently, the consideration of the inherent cultural factors in the diverse national markets has taken on special relevance for companies that intend to address the consumer on a global scale. Thus, on the one hand there are the manners in which firms interact and communicate with their customers and, on the other hand, there are the ways in which they develop the processes of marketing in the countries of reference (Seth and Parvatiyar, 2001). As such, we can summarise the contributions into two different groups:

1. The first group deals with the phenomenon of the firms' global positioning with a certain reticence. Certain precautions are taken which allow the differences between countries of origin such as that of the cultural component to be saved;
2. The second group is concerned with the existence of a market homogenisation process regarding shared values among consumers from different countries. The principal catalyst in this case is the widespread diffusion of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), i.e. the growing generalised adoption of the Internet.

Regarding the first group of contributions, Malhotra et al. (1998) note that there is still a broad debate about the suitability of market globalisation. Although the ICT contributes to the convergence of preferences among consumers from different countries and cultures, in a "multicultural world" the cultural heterogeneous nature will be the most significant barrier to the development of global market strategies (Kale, 1995). In a similar vein, Walter and Shyan (1999) consider that despite the market's globalisation process, it is necessary to consider the differences between countries by looking at several factors, including the cultural factors, as these are partly responsible for the marketing environment in any market. Along these lines, McGorry (2000)

points out the fact that companies must be aware of cultural and social movement in different national markets, with the aim of adequately addressing the needs of the global consumer. As Raju (1995) affirms, despite the generalisations made with regard to consumer behaviour in global markets, one must not forget that each country is unique. So it can be argued that in spite of the inevitable globalisation of markets due to the convergence of values, differences still remain (Watson et al., 2002). Mattila (1999), for example, supports this idea by stating that as global competition increases, firms will require a greater understanding of consumers from different cultures. This supports the argument that cultural differences among countries are still obvious.

On the other hand, the ideas defended by the second group give rise to the following question:

Could the Internet be considered as the medium which unifies and generates shared values and beliefs among consumers or, in a broader sense, individuals from different cultures and places of origin?

In his renowned article, "The Globalization of Markets", Levitt (1983) focused on technology, arguing for its role in the inevitable homogenisation of the needs and desires of consumers from different countries and regions. In fact, the "ubiquity of the desire" idea might be a consequence of the emerging global economic and cultural ubiquity. Hence, if we specifically focus on the Internet technology and expand the essence of Levitt's reasoning, we could pose the following proposition:

The Internet represents a fundamental force able to integrate and approximate different cultures, each of them with their own values and beliefs, corresponding to all those countries and regions that make regular use of it.

Though it is a simple idea, Tonn and Ogle (2002), based on a revision of academic contributions regarding the globalisation phenomenon, found that some authors maintain that it will encourage a process of loss of both values and specific characteristics of world regions. As a result, this would unavoidably finish with the supremacy of a hegemonic culture and language, whose seed is being compounded by the omnipresent American culture and the English language.

However, our approach to this question is going to be substantially different. It is important to be aware that cultural globalisation is not necessarily supported by a standardisation of values, but also by a pluralism of cultures (Ning, 2002). Moreover, as countries balance their economic development, their respective cultural values will also become stronger (Mooij and Hofstede, 2002). As a result and in opposition to the classic globalisation postulates, a certain (national) culture would have more difficulties in predominating over the rest, not only on a global context, but also on a world increasingly interconnected by ICT.

In sum, the core of this proposal is that the ongoing development phase of ICT is the main factor for bringing together values across countries. This

happens, however, not by the appearance of a hegemonic culture (the former idea of globalisation), but by the emergence of a *new paradigm of globalisation* (see Tonn and Ogle, 2002). This paradigm poses that the ICT and especially the Internet provide the ground for the integration and respectful co-existence of cultures. In the following section, we will discuss this question in more detail.

THE INTERNET AS A WORLDWIDE CULTURAL CATALYST

The growing communication processes developed through the Internet can be identified as a brand new and essential factor among all those contributing to the rising of hybrid cultural areas, either in physical or virtual environments (see Thompson, 2002). In fact, it can be seen as an electronic environment which favours frequent cultural contacts.

As the Internet becomes more available and the adoption rate increases throughout the world, individuals belonging to different cultures will have to generate and reach a consensus on a set of new symbols and values in order to obtain meaningful exchanges. As a result, a process with diverse degrees of transference will take place among different cultures. In this way, although the nuances of each culture of origin will basically remain in place, there will be an assimilation of part of the culture surrounding the exchanges carried out over the Internet. This assimilation will be due to the values acquired by the Internet users belonging to a certain culture, as well as to the new values transferred by them, fruit of the interaction process.

In an attempt to specifically discuss and support this argument, we will develop a series of reasoning based on different cultural theories, approaches and culture-related models: the Pan-Cultural approach, the Dynamic Constructivist Approach, the Adaptive Culture Model, the Theory of Culture Hybridisation and the Tensor Product Model. Our aim is not to analyse these cultural approaches in depth but to treat their main idea in order to provide a theoretical basis to the cultural convergence argument.

The structure of this section follows several cultural approaches and cultural models mentioned above. These can be grouped into two sets: 1) views culture as a static entity, i.e. the pan-cultural approach; 2) includes those cultural approaches characterised by their dynamic view of culture. In this respect, we will expand on the dynamic constructivist approach, as it is currently the more challenging and contributing proposal that defends a paradigm shift in the study of culture (Hong and Chiu, 2001). At length, we will use and briefly present other cultural theories and culture-related models whose essence is similar in order to better place our proposal.

In sum, we not only pursue to theoretically justify our proposition based on certain cultural theories, approaches and culture-related models, but we also aim to provide a balanced view for readers to appreciate how the more recent dynamic approaches are the most appropriate for addressing this issue.

In Table 3.1 we present a summary of the cultural theories and approaches including: their main starting assumptions; whether their basics can support our

Table 3.1: Culture Theories and Approaches Used to Support our Theoretical Proposition

Cultural theories and approaches used	Starting assumptions	Does it support our theoretical proposition?	How does Internet culture assimilation take place by individuals (consumers/Internet users)?	What is the process of values transference from the Internet culture to the original cultures?	Contributions related with each stream
Pan-cultural approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals' values (culture) are static dispositions. - Individuals acquire cultural theories from their primary culture. - It follows an "etic" approach, i.e. it reduces cultures to a set of universal dimensions. Hence, cultural diversity exists in the form of integrated universal dimensions. - It does not allow a domain-specific cultural view of cultures. 	No	—	—	Hofstede (1980) Schwartz (1992)
Dynamic constructivist approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals' values are dynamic in time. - Individuals are potentially multicultural. - They may receive and assimilate different cultures as a consequence of the acculturation process. - Individuals are able to change (or create) their cultural prism depending on the context. 	Yes	Internet users, due to the online exchange processes carried out, assimilate and adapt their cultural framework (change of cultural prism) to the existing set of values on the Internet (new context).	- Initial consideration: Internet users are culturally closer than those individuals belonging to different cultures which do not use the Internet.	Hong et al. (2000) Hong et al. (2001) Hong and Chiu (2001) Lau et al. (2001) Orlowski (1997) Sperber (1996)

Table 3.1: Culture Theories and Approaches Used to Support our Theoretical Proposition (Continued)

Cultural theories and approaches used	Starting assumptions	Does it support our theoretical proposition?	How does Internet culture assimilation take place by individuals (consumers/Internet users)?	What is the process of values transference from the Internet culture to the original cultures?	Contributions related with each stream
Theory of culture hybridisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals' values are dynamic in time. - When interaction among individuals from different cultures takes place, a set of new hybrid cultural forms emerges. 	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication processes carried out by individuals belonging to different cultures of origin in Internet generates new hybrid cultural forms (Internet culture). - It facilitates cultural convergence among groups while maintaining diversity. 	- A two-stage process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Firstly: Internet users, who are part of certain original cultures, have already adapted and taken them. - Secondly: When Internet users 	Alasutari (2000) Portella (2000) Thompson (2002)
Tensor product model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared representations (cultural stereotypes) within a group. Though they tend to be collectively maintained while being used, cultural stereotypes are changing over time because of new emerging relevant information. - Shared values are generated due to periodical interactions. - Shared representations evolve over time when individuals repeatedly find new and important representations, inconsistent with the primitive. 	Yes	Shared values existing on the Internet are set up as new "representations" for the individuals from different cultures of origin, which tend to influence and to alter their primitive representations, fruit of repetitive interactions developed in this medium.	"come back" and interact with those individuals of their respective original cultures which do not have any contact with the Internet, they make a transference of the new values acquired in this new context.	Kashima (1999) Kashima (2000a) Kashima (2000b) Kashima et al. (2000)

Table 3.1: Culture Theories and Approaches Used to Support our Theoretical Proposition (Continued)

Cultural theories and approaches used	Starting assumptions	Does it support our theoretical proposition?	How does Internet culture assimilation take place by individuals (consumers/Internet users)?	What is the process of values transference from the Internet culture to the original cultures?	Contributions related with each stream
Adaptive culture (extended) model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals' values are dynamic in time. - Individuals tend to become similar due to the communication and interaction process developed through networks. - This trend could generate a set of shared values, so a dominant culture could emerge. - Individuals not only interact locally, but also globally thanks to the development of communication media. 	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Due to the exchange processes developed on the Internet. - Individuals imitate better performances of others. - It facilitates cultural convergence among groups while maintaining diversity. 	<p>Additional consideration based on the Shibantai et al. (2001) extended model:</p> <p>Due to the factor "global information feedback", individuals adapt to their cultures of origin the information acquired when interacting on the Internet.</p>	Axelrod (1997) Shibantai et al. (2001)

theoretical proposition; and a description of how the process of values transmission from the Internet to the original cultures takes place.

The Pan-Cultural Approach

Cultural psychologists have usually used certain pan-cultural dimensions (for example individualism v collectivism; masculine v feminine, etc.) to explain cross-cultural differences among national cultures. The pan-cultural approach derives from an *etic* perspective of culture. The neologism “etic” was introduced by the linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s and it is associated to a perspective of cultural system. This system “relies upon the extrinsic concepts and categories that have meaning for scientific observers” (Lett, 1996). As such, this approach gives standard units and categories for a cross-cultural comparison. In other words, it reduces cultures to a restricted set of universal psychological dimensions.

However, despite the fact that the pan-cultural approach has been usually applied by many cultural studies (for example, those studies which used Hofstede’s cultural dimensions), it has also been recently criticised for several reasons:

1. Currently, due to globalisation, individuals are involved in complex social processes which fall outside the scope of universal cultural dichotomies (Hermans and Kempen, 1998) defended by this approach;
2. The pan-cultural approach is characterised by a static view of culture (Hong et al., 2000);
3. Consequently, it is not aware of the dynamic aspects of cultural influence (Hong and Chiu, 2001);
4. The pan-cultural approach does not consider that the influence of culture can be determined by the context of knowledge application (Hong and Chiu, 2001).

Most of these limitations increase the difficulty in using the pan-cultural approach to support the role that the Internet can play in fostering the cultural convergence among different primary cultures. In fact, it does not support a contextual knowledge application. That would mean that, for example, values of individuals’ primary cultures could not remain in a latent state when developing their communication processes on the Internet. This is an important constraint for individuals to generate a set of shared values on this medium. Moreover, as this approach does not view cultures as open dynamic systems, it presents some insufficiencies to explain how values acquired on the Internet can be transferred to their primary cultures.

The Dynamic Constructivist Approach

This cultural approach comes from the social psychology research. It argues that the individual’s cultural factors do not remain static in time, as claimed by the pan-cultural approach (Hong et al., 2000). They are expected to influence the individual with different levels of intensity depending on the context in

which the behaviour occurs. Furthermore, cultural factors may even take on another form. This is because cultural theories are not static dispositions in time; rather, they are latent knowledge structures potentially able to influence individuals' self-cognitions in certain contexts (Hong and Chiu, 2001). The latter idea is explained because the dynamic constructivist approach considers the individual as potentially multicultural, i.e. certain individuals may receive and assimilate different cultures because of interactions with other individuals. This assimilation may take place in frameworks away from their primary culture, for which they have the capacity to change their "cultural prism". This happens with the aim of adapting them to a determined context or performance framework. In this respect, the Internet may be considered a new economic and social context with its own values, rules and forms of communication, which are assimilated by the users from different cultures in the interactive processes¹ developed in the medium.

In keeping with this argument, Schlegelmilch and Sinkovics (1998) sustain that the Internet has not only broken down the cultural and geographic barriers between countries but also contributed to the creation of new ones. In the same way, Johnston and Parminder (1999) consider the Internet as a "cultural region" with its own distinguishing marks, being made up of a mass of individuals who share a wide number of beliefs and values. Specifically, they apply the cultural dimensions defined by Hofstede (1980) to explain this medium's characteristics. The results showed that the cultural aspects of the virtual society are:

1. Low power distance;
2. Low uncertainty avoidance;
3. Collectivist becoming mixed;
4. Feminine becoming mixed.

In addition to this, they refer to the Internet as a virtual country in itself. Recent works (for example Howard et al., 2001; Johnston and Parminder, 1999) have highlighted that one of the effects that the use of the Internet produces in the user is the emergence of a feeling of belonging to a group or community, in this case the new virtual community.

Furthermore, Sperber (1996) and Lau et al. (2001) defend the idea that the communication developed in a certain community, especially one formed by members from different cultural environments, tends to 1) generate mutually acceptable values, language and a system of symbols and 2) consolidate a series of common ideas and beliefs with these community-shared values.

Therefore, if we take into account the assumptions of the acculturation process (see Hong et al., 2001), closely connected with the dynamic constructivist approach, the extent to which individuals (consumers) adapt themselves to the Internet culture will depend on the degree of cultural activation experienced. This, however, is directly related with the degree of cultural knowledge acquired on the Internet (the host culture).

Similarly, it is not unusual, considering the high number of connected users worldwide – slightly higher than 935 million (Computer Industry Almanac, 2004) – that some academics such as Orlowski (1997) point out the likelihood that the values acquired by the users in the “cyberspace culture” will be passed on to the general society. The contribution of Steidtmann (2000) follows this line of reasoning when he points out that the Internet may be considered as the maximum catalyst of what he calls the “Consumer Nation” (CN). This is related to the growing social mass that, independent of places of origin, shares a series of values (such as immediacy, technology and novelty) and characteristics (i.e. interactive, ubiquitous, decentralised, libertarian and open). Moreover, centring on the US market, it is noted that in the future, the CN will be dominated by two differentiated demographic segments: the generation of the “Baby Boomers” (currently around 50 years old) and the generation “Echo of Baby Boomers” (currently around 20 years old). This latter group of individuals truly has an interactive global community on the Internet, so we may expect a more than considerable impact to be made on their current cultural values.

The Adaptive Culture Model

In line with some of the postulates of the dynamic approach, Axelrod (1997), in his adaptive culture model, establishes that members of a certain society will tend to bond together as regards to their values due to the communication and interaction processes developed through the local networks. Individuals tend to imitate their neighbours based on their better performance, i.e. if your neighbour has a better solution to a certain problem than you do, you try to be more like them. Hence, if we assume such a trend, Axelrod highlights that traits of individuals involved in such processes could converge and a dominant culture could emerge.

Shibanai et al. (2001) go further and claim that individuals not only interact with their closest fellow beings but also, thanks to the current state of development of communication media, with all the members of a growing global society. The authors extend Axelrod’s model including the “global information feedback” factor (or the function of the mass media), whereby it is considered that individuals adopt into their cultures of origin the information acquired when interacting with those communication media.

The Theory of Culture Hybridisation

The adaptive culture model can also be complemented by the essentials of the theory of culture hybridisation. This theory was previously mentioned when adapting Thompson’s (2002) reasoning, whereby mixing of cultures produces a set of new hybrid cultural forms (see Alasuutari, 2000). In this sense, the key factor is the interactions taking place when individuals from different cultures carry out exchanges via the Internet (for example when browsing for information, shopping or just realising communication processes), especially those developed inside virtual communities. As the philosopher Portella (2000) poses,

"interaction is the hallmark of culture". This interaction of cultures should necessarily lead to a hybridisation of them being represented by the emergence of a brand new group of shared values (in this case, the Internet culture) different from the originals. This, however, does not imply that the respective identities of the original cultures have to be lost.

The Tensor Product Model

Kashima's tensor product model (TPM) principles (see Kashima, 1999; Kashima, 2000a; Kashima 2000b; Kashima et al., 2000) can also be adapted to the digital context to look deeply into explaining how different cultures can evolve and converge thanks to the interactive communication processes carried out through the Internet. In essence, the TPM is a connectionist model of memory and learning which is used to describe the process of group impression formation and change. In this respect, it emphasises that such impressions are context-related and dynamically evolving over time (Kashima et al., 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that social studies have traditionally paid attention to the study of culture and its evolution. The understanding of this factor is very helpful in knowing how individuals behave. This research topic has not only been of interest to researchers belonging to the area of sociology, but to the social sciences in general including the areas of business sciences.

The focus of this paper has been to analyse, in theoretical terms, the consequences that the growing adoption and use of the Internet by individuals can produce over the evolution of their cultures of origin. To do that, we have made use of several cultural theories, approaches and culture-related models. Most of them have a subjacent and essential view of culture, i.e. its dynamic entity. We have posed that this view of culture is necessary to address fully this issue. However, we have also discussed the pan-cultural approach, characterised by its static view of cultures, with the aim of offering a more balanced stream of reasoning to the reader.

Specifically, we would like to emphasise two main contributions of this paper. Firstly, it demonstrates that the Internet is a relevant factor which may strongly foster the culture convergence among countries. Secondly, it shows how such convergence may take place, whereby a process of new values assimilation and transference on the Internet to the primary culture is suggested. In accordance with the above, individuals belonging to countries making regular use of the Internet will probably accelerate their cultural convergence, i.e. the continuous interactions carried out over this medium will aid both development and maintenance of shared values.

Moreover, the claim that the dissemination of the Internet throughout the world population will foster the transmission of values to the cultures of origin and that it will promote the convergence of cultures does not necessarily imply that cultural diversity is going to disappear. We rather expect that

there will be certain groups of countries – those with access to the Internet – that will achieve a higher degree of convergence than others.

Although it has been theoretically shown how the Internet contributes to the rapprochement of cultures we are still in an early phase of its worldwide adoption and development. Nevertheless, it is expected that future cultural convergence will be more plausible and intense for those countries that make higher and regular use of the Internet for developing their exchange processes.

- 1 As Hoffman and Novak (1996) maintain, the technical properties of the web allow it to develop an interactive bi-directional communicative process both between the parts or agents that develop the electronic exchange process, and between each one of the parts and the medium.

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