Culture and Its Dimensions: Consumer Behaviour in Poland and Its Main Export Countries

Summary

This article, which takes the form of literature review, focuses on the significance of culture and its impact on consumer behaviour in Poland and its main export countries: Germany, the UK, the Czech Republic, France and Italy. In the first part of the paper, the author presents theoretical considerations concerning customers’ decision-making processes and consumer behaviour, the concept of self, identity and image and the perception of the customer value, all of which to a large degree depend on the culture people originate from. The second part of the paper is an attempt at presenting consumer behaviour, the similarities and differences between the motivations and behaviour of Polish customers and the nations of its main export countries. Theoretical considerations are supported with the findings of Geert Hofstede’s studies analysing six cultural dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation and Indulgence and the implications of the study results for the analysis and comprehension of consumer behaviour in the examined countries.

Key words: culture, nation, cultural dimensions, consumer behaviour.

JEL codes: M3, M39

Introduction

Behind every economic transaction, there are people making choices which are compliant with their value systems. Contemporary economic processes are strongly shaped by cultural value systems which are seen as dominant in particular societies. As Sagan and Smolak-Lozano (2015) claim, the analysis of value structures is most commonly related to the classifications of cultural values carried out with the application of measures and tools created by E. Hall (1976), G. Hofstede (2000), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2002), R.R. Gesteland (1999) and R. Inglehart (1990). Since the value systems may differ among individuals and nations, the same item may be perceived as highly valuable by buyers representing one culture and seen as holding low or no value by customers in another culture. The differing perception may concern the qualities or functionality of a product or service, its design or packaging or marketing communications accompanying the process of launching or further advertising of the goods.

As Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2012, p. 10) claim, our future economic success to a large degree depends on our understanding of the deepest motives and desires of our trade partners. They believe that in order to penetrate the complex sphere of other people’s
motivations and actions, good language skills and good manners are not sufficient. They further state that in every culture there is a hidden dimension, a set of subconscious beliefs, which are obvious for the representatives of a particular culture and taken for granted. As Hausner et al. (2013, p. 75) state, culture has a number of regulatory functions which are important with regard to maintaining specific order based on commonly accepted principles. As the authors emphasise, within every culture there exist formulated orders and prohibitions, resulting from several normative systems that refer to a variety of sources, such as morality, law or religion. Based on the results of the study conducted among 15,000 representatives of senior management, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2012) found that the values professed by individuals depend largely on the culture they originate from. As the authors claim, preferences or cultural values are a solid and permanent basis of national identity as well as a source of a particular country’s economic power. As Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2002, p. 43) reckon that “the deepest layer of culture, its core, are the beliefs of people professed by people belonging to a particular culture”, and these very beliefs induce people to interpret reality in a certain way, a way which is shared among a nation or an ethnic group.

**Underlying cultural attitudes and values shared by a community, society and nation**

The set of beliefs and a system of values lie at the core of people’s behaviour; they form the basis of their sense of identity. Identity may provide individuals with a sense of belonging and help them interpret the surrounding world and deal with the phenomena which are perceived as foreign or unknown, and thus sometimes also threatening. Thus, culture is thus seen as an explanatory concept to describe the reason we see differences in behaviour (Matsumoto and Juang 2013). It is also important to note that, as D. Throsby (2001, p. 13) indicates, “the cultural context of economics as a discipline relates not only to the conditioning of its practitioners, but also to the methodology of its discourse”.

In the cross-cultural research, researchers frequently obtain data from samples in different countries. Whenever they discover differences between the samples, they interpret the differences as a function of culture, not culture itself. Thus, as Matsumoto and Juang (2013, p. 18) claim, researchers tend to assume that culture underlies country. In general, this tendency may be a correct assumption in the study since “different countries and nationalities are associated with different cultures as we understand them”. However, the authors further stress that “equating nationality with culture is problematic in the sense that it ignores the possibility of multiple and equally important cultures coexisting within a nation”. Thus, it should be noted that even though there exists a specific multiculturalism within the nation, as Matsumoto and Juang stress, what is important about nationality in relation to understanding the people’s behaviour is not citizenship, but rather the underlying cultural attitudes and values that affect the individual and the group he or she belongs to. Moreover, as Steenkamp (2001) states, “a culture can be validly conceptualised at the national level if there exists
some meaningful degree of within-country commonality and between-country differences in culture” (as cited in de Mooij 2015)

Creating customer value: rationality and emotionality behind consumer behaviour

In recent years, models presenting and focusing on the rational aspects of customer decision-making enjoy less popularity since they tend to overestimate the role and level of rationality behind consumers’ choices. It is true that if the decisions which the customers make are important, in terms of the value of the purchase, the reliability or safety of the goods, and whenever they have enough time at their disposal, they tend to evaluate different alternatives and select the item which is perceived as the best available option.

Moreover, it is important to note that at present purchasing decisions are no longer concentrated on a simple value for money ratio, product or service quality, their features or functionality. Nowadays, customer experiences tend to take different roles, for example, since they can “educate, entertain, and provide an opportunity to display some particular knowledge, values or behaviour socially, or offer an escapist, visual or aesthetic encounter” (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1998; Holbrook 2000). The enterprises offering goods and services provide these experiences (Pine and Gilmore 1998; Schmitt 1999; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) in which customers can “participate actively or passively and connect either by being absorbed or immersed”. According to Prahalad (2004) “value is not added to goods, or created by services”, but rather it is “embedded in the actual personalised experiences created through active participation”.

Geert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions as a Tool to Analyse Consumer Behaviour

Under the conditions of hyper-competition and wide availability of similar products and services offered internationally or globally through local brick-and-mortar or online shops, in order to create profits and customer equity, it is necessary to communicate and deliver superior values for customers and build authentic customer relationships. This can be put into effect only when enterprises undertake the effort to understand the values, as perceived by the contemporary customers, and then create, communicate and deliver the superior value to its customers (Fandrejewska 2017).

In order to understand the values shared by communities and nations, it is necessary to understand culture-dependent behaviour which, to a large degree, determines the way the value is perceived by an individuals and groups.

Culture, as defined by Geert Hofstede, is “the collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another”. The scholar further claims that “programming influences patterns of thinking which are reflected in the meaning
people attach to various aspects of life and which become crystallised in the institutions of a society” (https://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html). However, one needs to bear in mind that this does not imply that each member of a particular society is “programmed” in exactly the same way. However, it is still possible to use the country scores, as presented by Hofstede, based on the law of the big numbers as well as on the fact that “most of us are strongly influenced by social control”.

In his study, Geert Hofstede has created a universal matrix of six cultural dimensions and applies the same scale to evaluate the cultural conditionings of countries worldwide. His tools make it possible to compare and contrast countries which achieve differing scores, focusing on the differences in the approach towards the phenomena presented on the axes where contrasting ideas are found on the opposing poles: high versus low power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, high or low uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint. The Hofstede model (Hofstede 2001) provides scales from 0 to 100 for 76 countries for each dimension, and each examined country has a position on each scale or index, which is relative to other countries analysed in the study.

It is important to note that although the country scores were originally produced as early as in the early 1970s, many replications of Hofstede’s research carried out on different samples have proved that the rankings pertaining to the analysed countries are still valid (de Mooij and Hofstede 2010, p.88). In his book Culture’s Consequences (2001), Hofstede comments on more than 400 correlations between his scores and data from other sources which support his findings and indexes. As Magnusson et al. (2008) write, the comparison of different models for the purpose of measuring the cultural distance between nations shows that more recent cultural dimensions analyses provide only limited advancements to Hofstede’s original work.

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions in the context of Consumer Behaviour

The cultural dimension for each country is expressed as a score on a 0-100 point scale. The six dimensions, i.e. measures used by G. Hofstede to describe national cultures and distances between them, are defined as follows: 1) Power distance is the extent to which the lower ranking individuals of a society “accept and expect that power is distributed unequally”; 2) Individualism is the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members; 3) Masculinity is what motivates people, i.e. wanting to be the best (Masculine) or liking what you do (Feminine); 4) Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these; 5) Long-Term Orientation is how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future and the last dimension, 6) Indulgence represents the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010).
Hofstede’s dimensions of national cultures labelled Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Orientation and Indulgence refer to a much wider context, however, for the purposes of the present study, the author will focus on the aspects of the study which are most relevant to the context of consumer behaviour.

The scores for particular indexes for Poland and its main export countries are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hofstede’s cultural dimensions</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Italy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power distance</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty avoidance</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term orientation</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indulgence</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on: Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov (2010); Hofstede (2001) [access: 15.03.2017].

1. **Power Distance**

Considering the first cultural dimension, *Power Distance Index*, it is important to note that in large power distance cultures, individuals are perceived as holding their rightful place in a social hierarchy. The scores obtained by particular countries in the ranking are as follows: Poland – 68, Germany – 35, the UK – 35, the Czech Republic – 57, France — 68 and Italy – 50. Germany and the UK have recorded the same Power Distance Index score (35 out of 100 as a maximum score) which means that the societies believe that inequalities among people should be minimised. By contrast, Poland with its score of 68 points is seen as a hierarchical society. This means that people accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. As de Mooij and Hofstede (2011, p. 182) write, the rightful place concept is important for to understand the specific role played by global brands since “in large power distance cultures, one’s social status must be clear so others can show proper respects”, and global, luxurious brands tend to serve that very purpose (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Youngseon and Yinlong 2014).

2. **Individualism**

The second index, the dimension presented on the axis of *Individualism/Collectivism Index*, explains why individualistic cultures, such as the USA, assume that their values are universally valid. The differences with regard to this dimension are also reflected in different roles of advertising: persuasion (individualistic cultures) versus creating trust (collectivistic cultures). The style of communicating marketing messages (low-context versus high-context
communication) and the time needed to build relationships with customers also differ to a considerable extent (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011).

In addition, among more individualistic nations (the indexes in the case of all countries examined in this analysis exceed 50; however, France, Italy and the UK obtain the highest scores) a consumer is seen as “an autonomous entity with a distinctive set of attributes, qualities or processes). Among the representatives of more collectivistic societies, the self may not be seen as separated from others, and the surrounding social context to a large degree determines people’s behaviour. And since individual behaviour is situational, as Markus and Kitayama (1991) claim, it may vary depending on the situation, the circumstances or the time. Moreover, in individualistic societies, as de Mooij and Hofstede write (2011), feeling good is associated with interpersonal distance, such as individuals feeling superior or proud (translated into increased demand for products enhancing status), while in collectivistic countries satisfaction is derived from interpersonal situations and relations to others. In the case of the second dimension, Individualism Index, Poland achieves a score of 60 points which means that Poles are an Individualist society with a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves as well as their immediate families. This may be reflected in focus on the purchases aimed at satisfying the daily needs of their household.

Another aspect of the created customer value which needs to be taken into consideration while discussing the relation between more individualistic and collectivistic cultures is the self, and its perception, namely, identity and image, since identity (the idea people have about themselves, their characteristic properties, their body and appearance (Etcoff et al. 2006), the values they believe to be important) and image (how others see and judge them) are part of the self, in more individualistic cultures “identity and image are and should be the reflection of a unique self” (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011, p. 185). In individualistic countries, as Belk (1984) claims, the identity of self and others is based on personality traits and on other individual characteristics such as age and occupation, and on material symbols. Another significant finding of the study is that “in individualistic cultures, brands have to be unique and distinct with consistent characteristics, whereas in collectivistic cultures the brand should be viewed as being part of a larger whole, a product of a trusted company” (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011, p. 186).

3. Masculinity

The Masculinity/Femininity Index differences between countries consist in the differing focus and motivations determining consumers’ buying decisions. Since in masculine societies, performance and achievement are highly valued and must be demonstrated, status brand and products which serve a similar purpose are important to show how successful a particular person is. The second aspect of consumer behaviour which needs to be taken into consideration in this context is the fact that in feminine cultures, men do more household shopping, and thus, they also make more purchasing decisions concerning the selection of brands and products which constitute basic everyday necessities. Masculinity also explains
the variation of the self-concept among the representatives of particular countries. As de Mooij and Hofstede (2011, p. 184) claim, “in feminine cultures modesty and relations are important personal characteristics, in masculine countries self-enhancement leads to self-esteem”. The European Social Survey (Jowell and the Central Co-ordinating Team, 2003) requested respondents from both Western and Eastern European countries to point to the importance of gaining respect from other people. As the findings show, collectivism accounts for 47% of the variance and high masculinity index explains an additional 13%. Young people in individualistic societies need to develop an identity, which enables them to function independently in a number of social groups apart from the family, in contrast to collectivistic groups where the development is largely based on the adaptation to complex familial and social hierarchical relationships (Triandis 1995 as cited in Mooij and Hofstede 2011).

The Masculinity Index for Poland amounts to 64 points, while Germany scores 66, UK reached exactly the same score, the Czech Republic obtains 57, France 43 and Italy 70. Poland scores 64 with regard to the Masculinity dimension, and, according to Hofstede, may be regarded as a Masculine society. In such countries people “live in order to work”, and the emphasis is on equity, competition and performance and conflicts are resolved directly, i.e. by “fighting” them. Its opposite, Femininity, shows a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. The quality of life, seen as seeking pleasure and enjoyment in life in the form of appreciation of art and beauty, entertainment, family gatherings, cuisine, catering and tourism services arising from the need to rest and relax are especially visible in the case of France and translates directly into consumer behaviour in this country.

4. Uncertainty Avoidance Index

The subsequent index, Uncertainty Avoidance reflects people’s need for rules and formality. Countries exhibiting high Uncertainty Avoidance maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour. Consumers in those societies search for truth and belief in experts as well as show greater resistance with regard to change, such as for instance switching brands. They also tend to be intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas (this may also apply to marketing communications) as well as distrustful towards new and unknown products or services. Hofstede further explains that in cultures with high Uncertainty Avoidance scores one may observe an emotional need for rules and predictability, and in the context of consumer behaviour, it is important to indicate that among the representatives of those nations innovation tends to be initially resisted.

In those countries which display high uncertainty avoidance (and low power distance), the attributes of brands being seen as “friendly” are highly valued. “Prestigious” brands and products are in demand in high power distance countries, and “trustworthy” brands are most appealing to consumers in high uncertainty avoidance cultures.

As de Mooij indicates, risk perception may be related to high uncertainty index in certain specific product categories, such as food products. Eurobarometer (2010) examined the degree to which respondents are concerned about the potential risk of food damages to their...
health. The percentages of the surveyed individuals who worried about the food-related risks correlated significantly with high uncertainty avoidance.

Poland scores 93 on the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance Index. Also, it is important to note that “security is an important element in individual motivation”. The quality of information presented to the customer may be critical to perceptions of usefulness, satisfaction, and ultimately consumer loyalty (Karahanna et al. 2013), and the most important feature of the product communicated to consumers might be the quality, reliability and durability of the goods. On the opposite end, one may note the score obtained by the United Kingdom respondents, who are seen as less risk averse, willing to experiment and likely to try new things, and their purchasing decisions may be more affected by the general pleasure and enjoyment derived from the purchase.

5. **Long-Term Orientation**

Long-versus Short-Term Orientation score, as indicated by Geert Hofstede, describes the consumers’ general approach towards the future, a pragmatic future-oriented perspective or a conventional historic or short-term point of view. The values of individuals advocating long-term orientation are perseverance, maintenance of status, order, thrift and a sense of shame. Short-term orientation, on the other hand, implies pursuit of personal happiness rather than the general pursuit of a peace of mind.

Poland’s low Long-Term Orientation score of 38 means that Polish society is “more normative than pragmatic”. People show respect for traditions, and simultaneously “a relatively small propensity to save for the future” as well as “a focus on achieving quick results”.

Societies who score low in the case of this dimension prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those with a culture which score high on the Long-Term Orientation axis, take a more pragmatic approach. Namely, they “encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future” (https://geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html). Moreover, the score may also translate into consumers’ engagement and support for CSR activities of particular businesses and brands, whose impact reaches beyond marketing or PR activities (Pabian 2014; Kotler and Lee 2005). The long-term orientation may have a positive significant impact on environmentally conscious consumer behaviour, as supported by the findings of Misra C. Gul (2013).

6. **Indulgence Index**

The last dimension exhibiting a low score of 29, means that Polish culture is one of Restraint which does not put emphasis on leisure time and tends to control the gratification of their desires. As Hofstede claims, individuals with such orientation “have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms”; moreover, they have the sense that indulging themselves is “somewhat wrong”. (Hofstede 2010). The last dimension appears to be most directly correlated with spending and buying habits. Hofstede findings point to the fact
that Indulgence Index evaluated the degree to which a society allows “relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun”. Restraint, on the other hand, stands for a society which tends to suppress gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms (https://geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html). This, in turn, is related to general customer satisfaction and consumers’ self-confidence connected with making the right choices, viewed as such by individuals and the society. In addition, the feeling of interconnectedness among customers may facilitate the emergence and retention of the higher level of consumer self-confidence pertaining to the buying behaviour. Resonating with cultural values enhances the customer value, as perceived by the consumers, and further strengthens purchaser’s conviction of the right decision being made.

Conclusions

In recent years, the economists have started to notice that transaction costs are decreasing when instead of manipulating the marketing, PR and advertising communications, businesses try to act ethically and create and deliver the values which resonate with their clients’ motivations, needs and expectations. (Parker Follett M. as cited in Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2012). Bearing this in mind, the findings presented above have consequences for brand positioning.

Generally companies want to be consistent in their messages across international and global markets. However, it is important to note that even though the businesses carefully formulate brand positioning statements, as de Mooij and Hofstede (2011, p. 185) write, “consumers attribute personalities to brands that fit their own cultural values, not the values of the producer of the brand”. Moreover, as the authors claim, brands tend to be increasingly seen as augmented products and “values or personal traits are in through communication strategy” (a practice which has been developed in the Western world). The correlation between greater customer satisfaction and profits results in higher level of customer retention, limited price elasticity, lack of interest in competitors’ offer, lower costs of customer acquisition or advertising as well as enhanced company reputation and better reception of new products (East et al. 2014, p. 215). Anderson et al. (2004) indicated that the increase in the level of customer satisfaction is linked to the increase in the value of the company, claiming that higher customer satisfaction may lead to the increase of the bargaining power of the business, which in turn may affect the profit margin and level of sales.

However, in order to create, deliver and communicate customer value it is crucial to understand the value system of the target market representatives, to be able to properly examine the needs, wants and expectations of potential customers and properly interpret their consumer behaviour. Since the customer value appears to be less and less relative to the actual characteristics of the product, its price and value ratio, quality, features or functionality, it is very important to offer the customer the value which is in line with their value system. Emotional attachment, shared lifestyle and loyalty can be further enhanced with the properly
formulated offer, emphasising the aspects which are regarded as particularly important by representatives of a given culture.

Bibliography


Kultura i jej wymiary. Zachowania konsumentów w Polsce oraz w krajach będących głównymi odbiorcami polskich towarów eksportowych

Streszczenie

Artykuł o charakterze przeglądowym koncentruje się na zagadnieniu znaczenia kultury i jej wpływie na zachowania konsumentów w Polsce oraz w krajach będących głównymi odbiorcami polskich towarów eksportowych, tj. w Niemczech, Wielkiej Brytanii, Czechach, Francji i we Włoszech. W pierwszej części przedstawiono rozważania teoretyczne dotyczące procesów decyzyjnych i zachowania konsumentów, kwestii własnej tożsamości i wizerunku oraz postrzegania wartości dla klienta, które w dużej mierze zależy od kultury, z której wywodzą się konsumenti. Druga część artykułu zawiera próbę prezentacji zachowań konsumenckich, podobieństw i różnic między motywacjami i zachowaniem polskich konsumentów oraz konsumentów w krajach będących głównymi odbiorcami polskich towarów eksportowych. Rozważania teoretyczne są poparte wynikami badań Geerta Hofstede’a analizującymi sześć wymiarów kultury: dystans władzy (Power Distance), indywidualizm (Individualism), męskość (Masculinity), unikanie niepewności (Uncertainty Avoidance), orientację długoterminową (Long-Term Orientation) oraz pobłażliwość (Indulgence). Autorka przedstawia również wpływ wyników powyższych badań na analizę i zrozumienie zachowania konsumentów w opisywanych krajach.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura, narodowość, wymiary kultury, zachowania konsumentów.

Kody JEL: M3, M39

Культура и ее измерения. Поведение потребителей в Польше и в странах, являющихся основными импортерами польских товаров

Резюме

Статья, представляющая собой обзор литературы, сосредоточена на значении культуры и ее влиянии на поведение потребителей в Польше и в ее основных странах–импортерах польских товаров: в Германии, Великобритании, Чехии, Франции и Италии. В первой части работы автор представляет теоретические рассуждения, касающиеся процессов принятия решений клиентами и поведения потребителей, концепцию этого, тождества и имиджа, а также восприятие ценности для клиента – все это в большой степени зависит от культуры, в которой берут свое начало люди. Вторая часть статьи – попытка представить потребительское поведение, сходства и различия между мотивировками и поведением польских клиентов и наций, являющихся основными импортерами польских товаров. Теоретические рассуждения подкреплены результатами исследований Герта Хофстеде, анализировавшего шесть измерений
культур: дистанцированность от власти, индивидуализм, мужественность, стремление избегать неопределенности, долгосрочная ориентация на будущее и потворство своим желаниям, а также импликациями результатов исследований для анализа и понимания поведения потребителей в обследованных странах.

Ключевые слова: культура, национальность, измерения культур, поведение потребителей.

Коды JEL: M3, M39

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