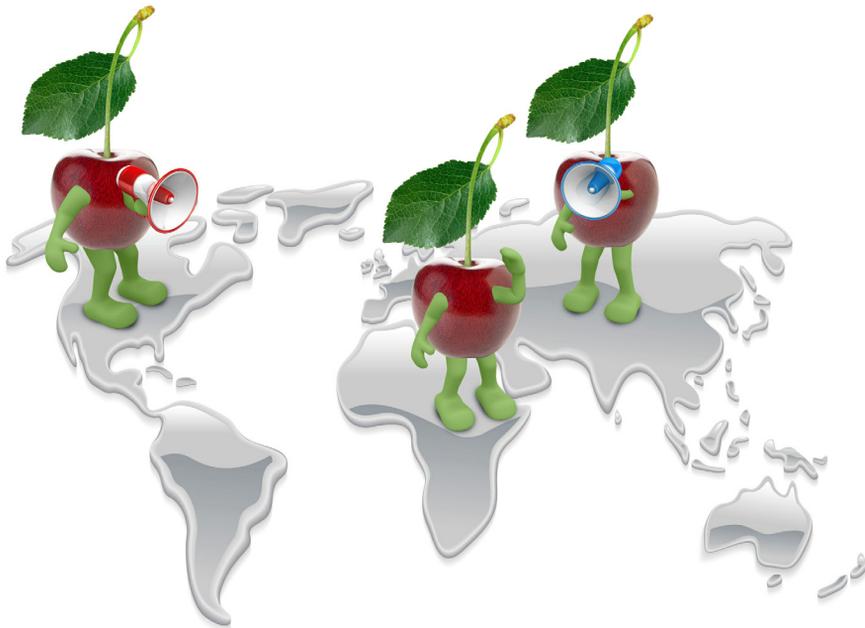


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## ***CULTURAL CONTEXT IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION ON INTERNATIONAL MARKET***



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## CULTURAL CONTEXT IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION ON INTERNATIONAL MARKET

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### Summary

The goal of this article is to show in what way cultural factors can determine decisions in international marketing. Particular attention is devoted to the decisions associated with marketing communication, that is, the way in which cultural factors influence our preferences concerning the style of communication and what two basic styles are distinguished within intercultural communication. On the basis of particular examples it will be shown on the one hand in what ways these styles are visible in various forms of marketing messages coming from various countries. On the other hand it will also be shown in what way these messages reflect (very often unwittingly) the culture and the system of values of an organization of the place where the messages originated. Before we start discussing the above-mentioned issues, the basic assumptions of the cultural marketing, as well as the term of culture, its models and dimensions will be presented.

**Keywords:** Keywords: cultural context, international market, internationalization, marketing communication, marketing strategy

## Introduction

Every year thousands of products and services are introduced to foreign markets. Countless marketing actions with an international reach are taken. Up to 85% of these actions fail, in most cases due to misunderstandings with an intercultural background.<sup>1</sup> The illusion of a world without boundaries made many companies and organizations disregard the role of intercultural differences in course of their international actions. As a result, the achieved results are in many cases far from expectations. These experiences have shown that taking all sorts of commercial actions (and not only) with an international reach, it is necessary to pay particular attention to the existing cultural differences in order to achieve success in the implementation of the planned strategy.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of this article is to show in what way cultural factors can determine decisions in international marketing. Particular attention is devoted to the decisions associated with marketing communication, that is, the way in which cultural factors influence our preferences concerning the style of communication and what two basic styles are distinguished within intercultural communication. On the basis of particular examples it will be shown on the one hand in what ways these styles are visible in various forms of marketing messages coming from various countries. On the other hand it will also be shown in what way these messages reflect (very often unwittingly) the culture and the system of values of an organization of the place where the messages originated. Before we start discussing the above-mentioned issues, the basic assumptions of the cultural marketing, as well as the term of culture, its models and dimensions will be presented.

The combination of the subject of intercultural competence and marketing is exceptionally important. Intercultural competence is regarded as one of the essential skills of persons, teams and organizations functioning in an international environment<sup>3</sup>, Developing this competence makes it possible to exert influence also beyond the borders of one's own country, which is also recognized as one of the most important international competences.<sup>4</sup>

## Cultural marketing

Since the 1960's there has been a discussion concerning the role of local and global marketing<sup>5</sup>, as well as the benefits derived from the standardization and individualization of international marketing strategies.<sup>6</sup> Without going into details of

these discussions, it is worth pointing out that in case of theoretical deliberations, as well as particular commercial actions of an international character, including marketing activities, the focus was on international standardization and expansion, without appreciating the significance of cultural differences.<sup>7</sup> This happened to some extent because globalization has often been mistaken for homogenization. The effect of this kind of approach is a very long list of examples of activities associated with the introduction of products and services to international markets, which ended up with failure determined by the cultural background.<sup>8</sup> Such failures have been experienced both by small companies and organizations, as well as companies and institutions with a global reach.

At the same time the role of culture in marketing is coming back again in the vision of marketing of the future presented by Philip Kotler and called marketing 3.0.<sup>9</sup> Along with cooperative and spiritual marketing, cultural marketing is one of the components of marketing 3.0 which deals with worries and desires of global citizens.

According to authors, cultural marketing will play a major role also in the future, because globalization brings about the phenomenon of counterweight, which is the source of many paradoxes.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand globalization gives chances to countries around the world, but at the same times poses a threat, because countries try to protect their local markets. This way globalization provokes nationalism. Moreover, globalization is economic and not political in character. The political landscape is still highly nationalistic. This is a political paradox of globalization. From the economic perspective globalization helps some countries and harms others, which leads to the economic paradox of globalization. Finally, globalization doesn't create a homogenous culture, but a diversified culture, leading to the social-cultural paradox, where polarization leads to two mutually contradictory tendencies, namely, globalism and tribalism.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, cultural brands should aim to solve paradoxes in the society and cope with social, economic and environmental issues troubling the society.<sup>12</sup>

It is possible to agree with the claim that marketing 3.0 is a kind of marketing in which cultural issues should be in the very centre of a company's business model. For this reason, during work on international marketing campaigns, marketing specialists should understand basic issues from the area of sociology and anthropology and be able to recognize emerging cultural paradoxes.<sup>13</sup>

In the further part of the article the notion of culture, its models and dimensions will be presented.

## Culture, its models and dimensions

The simplest definition of culture are various lifestyles. Lifestyles can be understood as a countless quantity of details of daily behaviour, which are shared by most people forming a particular society. This means that most people from a particular social group will react to a particular situation in a similar way.<sup>14</sup> Such conformity of behaviour and its social acceptance creates a cultural model, in psychology also called the script of behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Culture is a collection of such models and for the members of every society it constitutes an indispensable guide to all issues of life. Without it we wouldn't be able to function efficiently. Culture gives the feeling of security and continuity. It also makes life foreseeable, as long as we don't breach the determined cultural models.<sup>16</sup>

However, it is necessary to remember that culture is not only the cause of human's actions, but also the effect of these actions, as it constitutes a certain collection of human's products.<sup>17</sup> Also, marketing messages, including all messages directed to our recipients, are a product of the culture we represent.

Culture is often compared to an iceberg. This model shows that the behaviours of members of a particular culture result from hidden and sometimes unrealized assumptions, values, norms and beliefs. Similarly as an iceberg, also culture consists of visible and invisible elements. The visible part of an iceberg or a culture is small, compared to the supporting, much bigger, invisible part. The visible elements of a culture are the reflection of its invisible aspects and it is impossible to understand the former without the latter.

The visible elements of culture are, for example, architecture, art, cuisine, music or language. The invisible elements may be, for example, history, norms, values, basic assumptions concerning space, nature, time, leadership, conflictsolving or communication. If our knowledge about culture is limited only to the knowledge about its visible elements, we will be able to have an insight into just a small part of it.

Globalization, to a large extent, takes place above the surface, that is, it affects the visible elements of culture, such as clothes, music, technologies, but less frequently it affects the level of the system of values. Preparing our marketing activities targeted at international recipients, we should take a look at our messages from the perspective of the iceberg of these recipients, in order to understand what part of our message and in what form the message actually reaches them.

Comparing cultures and analyzing intercultural differences, we very often apply the method of so-called psychological dimensions of culture. These are certain general trends, which influence human behaviour and reflect significant aspects of cultural

variability.<sup>18</sup> Dimensions make it possible to reduce cultural diversity to a limited number of variables. At the same time they are the effect of concept works and the construction of measuring scales, thanks to which cultures are organized and described in a systematic way.<sup>19</sup> Taking advantage of cultural dimensions allows us to interpret cultural differences without resorting to stereotypes, assessments or opinions. This process is also called the unpacking of culture.<sup>20</sup>

Definitely the most popular and most frequent dimension in most intercultural research works is individualism and collectivism.<sup>21</sup>

In individualist cultures the smallest survival unit is an individual. People identify themselves above all with themselves and the needs of individuals are more important than the needs of groups. Independence and personal freedom are precious values. At the same time, in collectivist cultures, the primal group, usually the closest family is the smallest survival unit. The identity of an individual is to a large extent formed by its membership and role in a group. Thanks to recognizing the needs and feelings of others an individual protects himself. Harmony and interdependence are significant values.<sup>22</sup>

Others often applied dimensions of culture are, for example, the distance of power, sequentiality and synchronicity as various forms of organization in time, long- or short-term orientation, or avoiding uncertainty.

In the further part of the article dimensions of culture associated with styles of communication will be discussed.

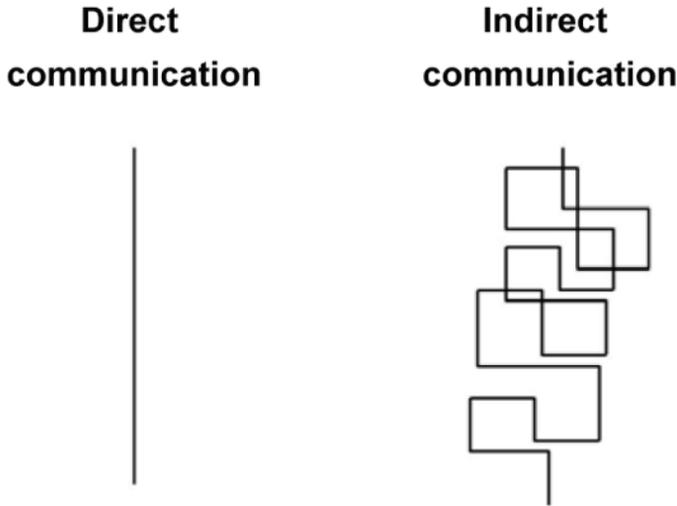
## Direct and indirect communication

Anthropologist E.T. Hall in the work *Beyond Culture*<sup>23</sup> refers to his experiences in Texas in the cultural borderland between the United States and Mexico, where cultural difference didn't boil down to just structural differences between English and Spanish, but were expressed in various ways of using language for interpersonal communication. These experiences led Hall to work out a communicative dimension called high and low context, or direct and indirect communication<sup>24</sup>. This dimension determines the role of context in the reception of message.

In low-context cultures the message is often expressed directly and free of context, that is, the message can be understood without the need to interpret it. What is important is what was said and not by who, or under what circumstances.<sup>25</sup> The expressiveness of the message to only a small extent takes into consideration the current situation. This way, most information is conveyed by means of direct verbal messages. People from low-context cultural areas prefer clear and direct messages. The goal of

direct style of communication is transferring information and facts. The goal of the sender is to make it easy for the recipient to correctly understand the message. This is possible thanks to precise formulation of the message. Interpersonal relation is simplified and to a small extent influences communication. Written communication is preferred. The one who speaks is more important than the listener.

Picture 1. Direct and indirect communication



Source: Own materials.

The direct style of communication is usually associated with a linear, logical and inferential way of thinking focused on solving problems.<sup>26</sup> This is a style of communication typical of task-oriented cultures, in which honesty is an important value and direct communication is supposed to lead along the shortest path to a pragmatic goal, which is achieving something particular or completing a certain task.<sup>27</sup> This is associated with the preference for focusing on one task at a time, that is, with sequential organization of tasks in time, which are carried out in a sequence, one after another.

Moreover, research has shown that low-context style of communication is suitable for people with independent identity, from individualist cultures discussed earlier.<sup>28</sup> Direct style of communication dominates in the Scandinavian countries, Western Europe and North America.<sup>29</sup>

In high-context cultures the verbal message plays a comparably small role in communication, as a major part of information is contained in the person and the

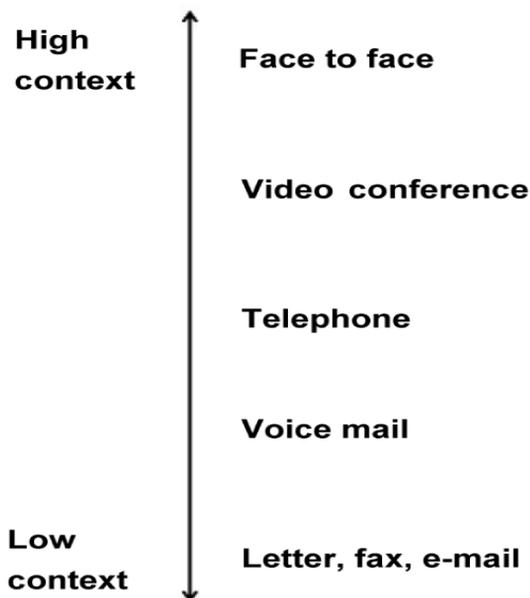
context. The meaning of gestures, posture, voice and context in which the interaction takes place, are appreciated. Not only information included directly in the message, but also the reference to the assumed, even if unspoken community of events, have an impact on achieving understanding.<sup>30</sup> It is above all this general context that provides many pieces of information necessary to understand the message. People communicating this way often refer not only to the spoken words, but also the way in which and where they were uttered. For people communicating in an indirect way most messages are easily understood, even if they are not fully verbalized.<sup>31</sup> It is enough to place a message in the right context and its intended meaning will be properly understood. In high-context countries non-verbal signals can determine communication in up to 90%. People communicating in a direct way may not notice these signals at all.<sup>32</sup>

In indirect communication very often proverbs, allusions, hidden meanings, statements going beyond the scope of a particular issue, digressions and decorative elements are used. The goal of high-context communication is building relations and maintaining harmony in interpersonal relations, which is often more important than honesty. For this reason it is typical of this style of communication to avoid speaking directly. Verbal communication is preferred. The sender and the recipient have similar contribution to the quality of communication. People communicating indirectly often prefer multi-tasking, that is, synchronous organization of many tasks at the same time. Moreover, the indirect style of communication is most often associated with lateral, holistic, systematic and deductive style of thinking and acceptance of difficulty.<sup>33</sup>

This is a style of communication typical of people with dependent identity occurring in collectivist cultures, where We dominates over I. Thus, in communication people avoid emphasizing their own self — I. This is a style of communication present in Arabic countries, in Latin America and in most Asian countries. Countries of the Mediterranean, as well as Central-European and Eastern-European countries are described as transitory countries with an inclination towards indirect communication.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, it is worth noticing that what determines the preferred style of communication is not only the country of origin, but also, for example, belonging to a particular professional group. Engineers, lawyers and accountants often communicate in a more direct way than other people from a particular cultural circle. At the same time, artists, teachers or marketing specialists have an inclination to communicate more indirectly than other people from their cultural environment. The high- and low-context dimension influences the choice of appropriate means of communication. The choice may be associated with the fact that some means of communication are more suitable for certain types of communication, as can be seen on the picture below.

Picture 2. Means of communication in the high- and low-context dimension



Source: P. Rosinski, *Coaching międzykulturowy*, Wydawnictwo New Dawn, p. 189.

Representatives of high-context values often perceive directness and rapid action of people communicating in a low-context manner as impatience and aggression. At the same time the acting of representatives of the transitory style is often associated by the representatives of the direct style with dishonesty and disrespect. Thus, understanding these differences in styles of communication and the values hidden behind them makes it possible to avoid misunderstanding. Thanks to the development of intercultural competence and flexibility in the change of communication style depending on the circumstances and the preferences of our interlocutor we will be able to take into consideration the communicative preferences of international recipients of our messages (marketing), going beyond the scope of our own preferences.

Concluding the discussion concerning cultural dimensions, it is necessary to mention that apart from the dimension of direct and indirect communication, the way in which we communicate also differs in terms of the degree of emotionality and formality of expression. The dimension of emotionality and restraint (also called neutral and affective communication) indicates the level of acceptance for showing emotions during communication. In affective cultures expressing emotions and cordiality during

communication is expected and desired. At the same time in neutral cultures, people avoid excessive expression of emotions during communication, as composure, facts, logic and objectivity are precious values. Excessive emotionality can be perceived as a trait of weak character and lack of composure.<sup>35</sup>

The dimension of formality and informality refers to the significance of protocol and rituals in communication. In very formal cultures, like Japan, protocols and rituals are strictly followed. Forms of address, ceremoniousness, titles, honors or formal rules of behaviour are very important. At the same time in informal cultures, such as for example the American culture, spontaneity and familiarity are preferred. People don't feel free, when they have to remember about strict rules all the time.<sup>36</sup>

In the further part of the article the way in which the above-mentioned styles of communication are reflected by various forms of marketing messages, will be discussed.

### **The influence of preferences in communication on marketing messages**

The above-mentioned differences in styles of communication are also visible in various marketing messages, such as company presentations, advertisements, mailing, newsletters, information presented on websites and in the social media. Our (often unrealized) preferences concerning the style of communication are visible in all messages that we direct to the recipients. The way we communicate also says a lot about our system of values and the system of values of the organization we represent, which is often hidden below the surface of our cultural iceberg. The reflection on our preferred style of communication and its adequacy in messages directed to an international audience is the basis for all marketing activities conducted on an international scale.

The presentations of companies, organizations, products or services take various shapes, depending on whether they come from a person or a high- or low-context organization (and a deeper intercultural analysis concerning the styles of communication hasn't been carried out).

In case of low-context messages, texts are usually longer, with a direct description of a company, service or product, they contain a large number of details making it easier for the recipient to make a decision, they also contain references to facts, statistics or research. Such messages have a smaller number of photographs and the photographs rarely show people, more often they show just single people (often people viewed from the back, or a long distance), which is a reference to

individualist values. In case of presentations of companies and organizations, there are often photographs of buildings, equipment or the way in which products are manufactured or services are provided.<sup>37</sup> Demonstrations of products and services are presented more often.<sup>38</sup>

From the point of view of people preferring indirect manner of communication such messages can be perceived as dry, boring, lacking emotions, and disregarding what from their point of view is most important, that is, the quality of interpersonal relations.

At the same time in case of messages originating from high-context people or organizations, texts are often shorter and less detailed, they contain smaller amount of data, facts and statistics (if they appear at all), but they more often refer to interpersonal relations, metaphors, allusions or metonymy. These messages contain more photographs, which more often show groups of people (a reference to collectivist values). Visual metaphors are also used more often. For example — presenting products or services using only photographs. At the same time, comparisons are used less often, for fear of facing a retaliation of the competition.<sup>39</sup> As a rule, also in such messages communication is supposed to establish a relation and not transfer information. For example, mailings or newsletters in high-context cultures serve not that much the purpose of providing detailed information concerning some event, but constitute an excuse to establish a more direct contact, such as a phone call or a meeting.

From the point of view of people preferring direct style of communication, such messages can be perceived as not factual enough, too emotional or not associated with the subject. In order to illustrate the differences discussed above, below two examples of presentation of scientific institutions — one from Argentina and the other from Switzerland — are provided. These messages are a visible expression of cultural scripts typical of places of origin of these institutions.

Paul Scherrer Institute from Switzerland presents its activity on its website in the following way:<sup>40</sup>

*Paul Scherrer Institute is the biggest research centre in the area of engineering and natural sciences in Switzerland. Research works are focused on three main subjects: matter and materials, energy and protection of environment, as well as human and health. The Institute designs, builds and manages complex installations on a big scale. Every year 2000 scientists from Switzerland and the whole world come to the Institute to conduct in this exceptional place their experiments, which couldn't be carried out*

anywhere else. The Institute employs 1500 people and has an annual budget worth about CHF 365 million. It is financed mainly by the Swiss Confederation. The Institute belongs to the association of scientific-technical universities and research institutions of the Swiss Confederation (ETH-Bereich), which includes also ETH Zürich and ETH Lausanne, as well as research institutes Eawag, Empa and WSL. The Institute is located in the Aargau canton on the territory of the Communities of Villigen and Würenlingen on both banks of the Aare river. The Institute contributes to raising the qualifications of future generations by educating professionals, as well as students and doctoral students. The Institute offers the iLab laboratory to students.<sup>41</sup>

Switzerland is classified as a country with an inclination towards direct style of communication. The script of direct communication focuses on clear and factual message, which can be easily understood by the recipient and which provides all the necessary data to make a decision. Analyzing the above presentation it is possible to conclude that it satisfies the expectations present in low-context locations. The presentation contains a lot of factual data supported with figures and is focused on the substantial presentation of the Institute.

The presentation of the Science and Technology Park FAUBA from Argentina looks somewhat different<sup>42</sup> :

*Science-Technology Park FAUBA in cooperation with Area Science Park and the University of Parma-PcyT Fauba was established in order to implement research results in companies from the agricultural and food sector. The activities of the Park cover the creation of a network between companies from this production sector or ancillary sectors, as well as research and innovation companies and units, which facilitates the creation of an engine in which specialization of production can be maintained and developed over time. Relations between PcyT Fauba and public institutions, credit institutions, as well as national and international research centres make Park a point of reference for innovations, development and internationalization of small and medium companies from the food and agriculture sector in Argentina. Additionally, PcyT Fauba takes advantage of the support of the Council of Advisors, which consists of personages from the public and private sectors, who cooperate in order to help Park satisfy the real needs of the country.*<sup>43</sup>

Argentina is classified as one of the countries with an inclination towards indirect style of communication. The script of indirect communication focuses on establishing and maintaining social relations and going directly into the essence of the matter could be regarded as a breach of the rules of interdependence and

reducing the contact to the impersonal layer. In this presentation we can see that the focus is on mutual relations. There are also such expressions as “networks”, “engine”, “relations with institutions”, “Park as a point of reference”, the “support of the Council of Advisers”. However, unlike in case of Switzerland, we cannot find here any figures, which could give the recipient an insight into the actual functioning of the Science Park.

The discussed differences are apparent not only in the written texts, but also in videos, which have become a very popular form of presentation of organizations, companies or services. Also here, the choice of form, style of communication determines whether our message will be received and understood by international recipients. The following two movies can serve as a good example: one of them promoted Poland and the other promoted Germany. A few years ago a series of short films promoting Poland as a modern country and at the same time presenting Polish values was made. In one of the videos titled “Polska–Creativity–Poznań”<sup>44</sup> the plot takes place in Poznań and the presented value is creativity. The film is only just over one minute long and apart from the title and the presentation of Michael from Germany, there are no words in the whole video.

In the video we can see that it is possible to come to Poznań by train or plane. Next, the viewers can see a modern building which could be a research or a design centre. In the hall of the building Michael from Germany is greeted by Polish hosts. After the greeting, during which the Polish hosts talk about something with passion, a creative-looking meeting takes place. The meeting ends up with the signing of a contract and joint celebration of the started cooperation. What we have here is a high-context message, which outside Poland, based on the author's own experiences, is hardly ever fully understood. In order to understand the message it is necessary to have a big amount of contextual data, such as the location of Poland, the fact that Poland and Germany are neighbours, that Poznań is a Polish city located in the West of the country, close to the Polish–German border, where it is possible to get quickly from Germany by train, which in turn makes it possible to boost business contacts. International recipients very often lack this knowledge, which makes the material incomprehensible for them. Thus, such message can on the one hand give the general impression that we are dealing with a modern place, encouraging the recipient to learn more. However, it may also be irritating for the recipient who doesn't fully understand what the whole thing was about, especially if these are people used to high-context communication.

At the same time a video message from a low-context country, like Germany, may be completely different. In the video promoting Germany titled "Destination Germany - Diversity in the Heart of Europe"<sup>45</sup> we are dealing with a direct style of communication. The video is over 10 minutes long, apart from images, we can hear a voice, which in detail describes what we are looking at. Already in the first minute of the video there is a reference to statistical data, in particular, to the fact that in 2009 the number of Chinese tourists tripled. Next come historical data, statements by specialists and foreign guests visiting the country, as well as detailed presentation of the best-known tourist locations in Germany. This kind of message provides all details which the recipients may need, however, for people preferring high-context style of communication this attention to details may cause irritation, for example when the reader mentions some obvious things, like the fact that there are mountains in the background.

Also the preferences of creative advertising strategy can be predicted on the basis of cultural orientations. The differences with regard to high and low context are visible also in advertisements. As research shows, unclear — from the informative point of view — and indirect communication in an advertisement may suggest a high context. The content of information generally tends to be higher in individualist cultures communicating directly.<sup>46</sup> For example, American advertisements usually present particular traits of products appealing to the rational mind at the same time Japanese advertisements often refer to imagination.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Zheng and Gelb have proved that collectivist countries tend to receive advertising slogans with collectivist rather than individualist messages more effectively. For example in such countries, a slogan advertising digital equipment, which goes like this: "Share the moments of joy and happiness with the close ones" is more effective than an individualist slogan: "Come and try to discover yourself".<sup>48</sup> In the end it is worth recalling the fact that the differences between direct and indirect communication are also visible on Facebook. On the profiles of people and organizations with an inclination towards direct communication there are more texts and links to texts. At the same time, on profiles of people or institutions preferring indirect communication there are more photographs, video and audio recordings. Research has shown that these preferences are apparent also in the used profile pictures. Whereas profile photographs of people from individualist cultures are very often close-ups of a person's face (or its part), in case of people from collectivist cultures, there is often some sort of background on the picture (context).<sup>49</sup>

Summing up, it is possible to conclude that when recipients read messages which don't correspond to their cultural scripts, they may be irritated, as such messages don't provide them with elements, which from their point of view, determine the efficiency of communication.

## Conclusion

This article is an attempt to show that the ongoing process of globalization hasn't led to the homogenization of cultures. For this reason, taking into consideration cultural differences will be essential, also in case of marketing activities. Communication is the basic element of these activities. The development of flexibility in the applied styles of communication, that is, the ability to adapt the style of communication to the preferences of our recipients is regarded as one of the basic international competences. This also allows exerting influence on the international arena, which also constitutes one of the most important skills in international activity.<sup>50</sup>

Managers and specialists preparing international messages should be able to make an analysis of the preferred style of communication of their foreign recipients (also from the perspective of preferences and cultural values) and appropriately adapt their messages, if it is necessary. A broad spectrum of applied styles of communication enables effective and appropriate interaction with people of various cultural backgrounds.

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