The Influence of the Cultural Diversity on International Business Strategies Formulation.

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Abstract

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Nowadays, as countries and economics are getting more integrated due to high numbers of exchanges, companies constantly need to deal with cultural differences. It represents an opportunity for these firms to aim for new markets and potential customers. However, organizations and their strategic management are facing a lack of non-domestic market knowledge.

This study aims to highlight critical cultural aspects an organization would need in order to properly formulate and implement an adequate international business strategy to penetrate a foreign and relatively unknown market. By analyzing a large amount of already existing academic productions on the cultural subject, and a face to face comparison between two culturally very different countries, France and the Kingdom of Thailand, a correlation between five independent cultural variables, respectively being the Organizational Culture, the Country's Culture, the Consumer Culture the Cultural Diversity, and the Context of a Culture, and the way International Business Strategies are elaborated has been found.

The main goal of this study was to find a clear framework, a company could follow in order to not omit the crucial cultural variables, and gather a necessary amount of data, as to elaborate an adequate and tailored strategy. The study finishes with enlargement of the subject, and a thought about what cultures could look in the future.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity, International Business, Strategy Formulation

Approved by

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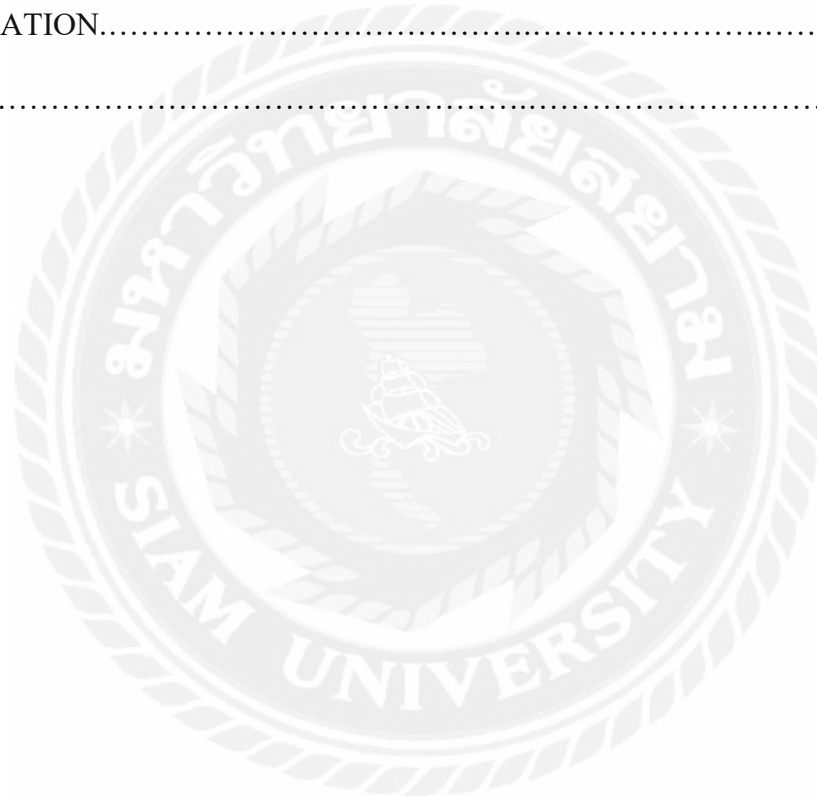
Introduction

Research Background

Nowadays, most of the global population lives in a consumerist environment, in which everything is made to increase consumption (Dauvergne, 2008). By consequence, consumers' needs and wants are continually evolving, and companies have seized the opportunity to cross borders and conquer new markets. In fact, due to the globalization, which is the internationalization of markets and corporations (Wheelen, Hunger, Hoffman, Bamford, 2018), and the recent technological breakthrough, geographical location is no longer a limit for firms. Indeed, the economic systems are encouraging them to get beyond their national boundaries as the globalization brings economies and societies closely integrated (Nilson, 2010). As a result, the global marketplace has become more accessible, regardless of a firm's size or turnover, which means that a company's competitiveness must be both domestic and global. It involves additional costs of doing business in a foreign and unfamiliar environment, but it is worth for companies evolving in small, restricted, or saturated home markets, or to survive, for organizations facing difficulties. However, they also face challenges like unfamiliar political and economic systems, new competitors, laws and regulations, an unknown culture, as well as a different demand and expectations from the customers (Amal, Awuah, Raboch & Anderson, 2013). As Cleveland, Naghavi, and Shafia (2017) argued, the fundamental shape of consumer behavior is culture, which means that customers will not have the same requirements, and their purchasing process may differ from one culture to another. Even though culture is learned and not genetically inherited (Daramola and Oyinade, 2015), it is hard to catch all the subtleties it may offer. This is why Mantovani (2000) considers that "cultures", in the plural, is more appropriate to emphasize on the multidimensional aspect of the term. To penetrate a market and gain customer's trust and loyalty, companies need a competitive advantage over the local and international competition, as for customers to perceive an added value. Ultimately, they must identify which strategy will fit best their market, culture, target, and objectives.

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Research Problems

The research problem is to find the influence of cultural diversity over the formulation of international strategies. Firms are aware that local business strategies will generally not work on a global scale because of the cultural differences (Gupta & Santhosh, 2017), meanings that they must elaborate a new strategy to figure out the most effective ways to penetrate a targeted market and guarantee the company a minimal risk of failure. This effort is worth, as Grant argues (2003), that companies will greatly benefit from strategic, after the strategy formulation and implementation.

Objective of the study

- To analyze the role of the cultural differences and their impact on a company strategy formulation
- To highlight the key cultural aspects, one firm must not overlook while elaborating its foreign business strategy to maximize its expansion on the market and integration in the local business sphere.

Scope of the study

This study brings face to face two countries with similar populations, around 67 million each, but unalike cultures, lifestyles and business habits, home markets, customers, and demand trends. The first one, France, founding and pre-eminent member of the European Union (EU), and the second, one Thailand, a founding member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). France is an industrialized and established power since the 18th century and has economically been steadily and effectively adapting to globalization until being of the main actors of it. It is the 7th world's largest economy with a GDP of $2.778 trillion and has a low poverty rate, reflected in its GDP per capita $41,469.92 (World Bank, 2018). But nowadays, the country appears to be declining, recently overtaken by the UK and India in terms of GDP. Thailand, on the other hand, is a newly-industrialized country and an emerging power that has become the 8th biggest Asian economy, and the ASEAN's second-largest, behind Indonesia. It is ranked 26th largest economy in the world, with a GDP of $504.993 billion and a GDP per capita of $7,273.563 (World Bank, 2018).

Research significance

There are already existing research papers about cultural differences and how to manage them, but none have brought face to face Thailand and France, to factually highlight cultural aspects not to be missed. According to Mayrhofer (2004), when conducting international business, it is crucial to consider the political, economic, and legal environment; however, the socio-cultural context is an even more essential aspect. This research could support companies looking to extend their activities in new foreign markets and cultures, or those already set up. For instance, France is the 3rd biggest EU investor in Thailand, with over 350 companies employing around 70,000 persons (FrancoThai Chamber of Commerce, 2018). The results of the study would also help future researchers in their studies related to cultures or our two countries.

Literature Review

Cultural diversity

"Sometimes it seems to refer to any approach which recognizes differences in education, such as the distinction between feminist, intercultural and integrative education, each of which focuses on gender, immigration and disability respectively as sources of "difference" (Prengel, 1995).

In 2002, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, in which its first article states that "cultural diversity is the common heritage of humanity, and by consequence should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of current and future generations." This declaration also explains that it is an excellent source of exchange, innovation, and creativity, "cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature" (UNESCO, 2002). As such, global strategies must be framed by studying the culture of a particular group, because each group has different needs according to their income, customs, and traditions (Kaur and Chawla, 2016).

Country's culture

"Culture affects everything people do in their society because of their ideas, values, goals, attitudes, and normative or expected patterns of behavior. Culture is not genetically inherited, and cannot exist on its own, but is always commonly shared by society and its members" (Hall, 1976).

Mantovani (2000) argues that an increasingly multi-cultural world is particularly challenging to apprehend and manage, as we hardly see the cultural dimensions, since we are constantly immersed in it. To answer that, the Dutch Professor Geert Hofstede, his son Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov and their research teams (1991) have created a model, based on data collected while conducting in-depth interviews with thousands of IBM employees, in more than 40 countries and 60 cultures, between 1967 and 1973. We will analyze below the model's results for our two studied countries.

Both populations fairly accept inequalities in society. Less powerful members accept that the elite rules and enjoys privileges. To some extent, it means that they are not expected to show disagreement with their supervisors, and the latter is not expected to ask its subordinates' opinion in a critical decision-making process. Thailand is a very hierarchical society, and most Thais believe that everyone must have a clearly defined rank in the social hierarchy.

The first gap appears in the individualism criteria, where France clearly appears as an individualist country, where people define themselves as "I" and where self-interest comes ahead. However, it is one of the rare countries combining a high score in both power distance and individualism (Hofstede, 2001) which explains why family kept a strong position in the French society, regardless of the individualism, and also the special relationship French have with power. On the other hand, Thailand is a robust collectivist country, following a general regional cultural trend (Bhasin, 2011), where people consider themselves as "we," strongly committed to the group, often prioritizing the group's interests, to the detriment of thiers. Family is usually the most important and central group, where decisions are collectively made, in a consensus way, satisfying most members.

Both societies are considered feminine, meaning that quality of life, care for others, and self-fulfillment are dominant values. In France, even the system may appear as feminine, where everything is done to guarantee the population a decent quality of

life through an efficient health care system, a law to regulate the working hours or a minimum of five weeks of holidays per year. In Thailand, competitiveness is not a core value, and face one of the most important in the country, self-fulfillment through the group. In feminine cultures, both men and women almost share the same values, unlike in masculine ones, where men, primarily, are raised with performance, success, and ambition values, like in China, or Germany (Hofstede, 2001).

Another gap exists between these countries when it comes to uncertainty avoidance. The French don't like surprises even more than the Thais and prefer structure, clear regulations, planning, top-down guidance, and emotional safety (Hofstede, 2001). Like Thais, they need a stable government to implement strong regulations and laws to structure the country's life and minimize the unexpected. The French Culture has Latin origins, so when they face uncertainty, adversity, failure, or even bad luck, they can become demonstrative and let their emotions take over their mind, leading to frontal confrontations. In contrast, Thais will try as much as they can to avoid frontal confrontation in order not to get embarrassed and lose their face and temper. They can even let a problem go off only to prevent a situation in which they could lose their calm and embarrass themselves.

Thailand is a normative country where the present and the past are closely linked, and traditions last and are respected. Thais have a small tendency to save money to prepare for the future. On the other hand, French are pragmatics, adapting their traditions to new contexts, and saving and investing money for the future. Thrifts in modernity are encouraged, anticipating the future (uncertainty avoidance), making France an adhocracy culture.

Indulgence refers to *"the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses based on their education."* Both countries' scores are too intermediate to determine anything (Hofstede, 2001).

It is also important for a company to understand the way a country's authorities work. The Thai constitutional Monarchy is ruled by King Maha Vajiralongkorn, Rama X, who has no legislative powers and only plays a ceremonial role. His father, Rama IX, ruled for 70 years and was seen by the Thais as a divine being, showing him unconditional respect. He brought Thailand into a new economic dimension, turning it into an investment destination for multinationals and Foreign Direct Investments

(Rochananonda, 2006), which has led to a long economic growth until the Asian financial crisis of 1997. In 2014, Prayuth Chan-O-Cha, leader of the Thai Royal Army, led a coup, overthrowing the democracy, instituting martial law, and suspending the Constitution. Since then, Thailand has experienced the longest period of total military rule since the years 1958-1969 (Paul Chambers, 2016). On the other hand, The French constitutional Republic is governed by a President; currently, Emmanuel Macron, directly elected by the population for five years. He has full control of the executive, legislative and judicial powers, leads the military forces, is responsible for the Constitution, signs international treaties, and appoints the Prime Minister. Unlike the Thai King, he does not enjoy the demigod status. The power perception differs between countries as the French do not hesitate to publicly show their disagreement towards the President and his policies, as shown by the "*yellow vests*" movement.

Where Thai is only spoken in Thailand, French is, with English, the only language to be spoken on all five continents, and will continue to grow with the demographic explosion in French-speaking African countries. The investment bank Natixis reported that 300 million people speak French, including 235 million daily, and this number could go up to 750 million in 2050 (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, 2018). It would make French the most spoken language on earth, based on native speakers only.

Consumer culture or Consumer Behavior

"It points to the impact of mass consumption of everyday life which has led to the gearing of social activities around the accumulation and consumption of an ever-increasing range of goods and experiences" (Featherstone, 1983).

Consumer culture is a crucial aspect, as it studies the process involved when individuals or groups analyze, select, purchase, use or abandon products and services, to fulfill their needs and desires (Solomon, Russell-Bennett, Previte, 2013). It introduces the concept that purchasing decisions might be taken by groups, and not only by individuals. Kaur and Chawla (2016) believe that people's choice and demand trends of services and products depend upon customs, traditions, and cultural values of a specific region or community.

Unlike its neighbors, who choose a product according to its price, Thai are brand loyal, which means that they are committed to repeated purchase of specific brand's products or services, and spread a great word of mouth around them (Dick and Basu, 1994). In other words, they are willing to pay more to get their favorite brands' products. Thais are the most brand-conscious and brand-loyal consumers in Southeast Asia and will be loyal towards a brand, regardless of the type of products (BCD, 2017). According to the BCD survey, 75% agreed with the statement, "I look for my favorite brand and purchase that," compared with 40% in Vietnam and 39% in the Philippines. Like Thais, 72% of the French consider themselves as being loyal towards their favorite brands, but 48% of them also confess that they sometimes buy other brands' products at the expense of their favorite ones' (OBCONSO, 2018). These results show companies that, this loyal character trait of both consuming populations, can help them to develop, or maintain, a robust loyal consumer base.

Convenience stores, like 7-Eleven, which has around 11,000 stores in Thailand (Bangkok Post, 2017), are the fastest-growing shopping channel in Thailand, reporting a Compound Annual Growth Rate of 10%, a trend expected to continue, following the survey results (BCD, 2017). Consumers tend to buy less, but more frequently and spontaneously than in a supermarket. Despite the fact that these shops only have a limited range of products available, Thais perceive that they offer better service and greater convenience by offering most of the essential daily products and freshly prepared meals (BCD, 2017). It is the opposite in France, as 72.2% of people total dietary spending take place in supermarkets and 14.9% in specialized shops or grocery stores (INSEE, 2011). This trend has not changed over the last decade, which draws a clear trend of the way French consume.

As in the rest of the world, e-commerce has boomed in Thailand, and according to Statista (2020), the e-commerce revenues in 2018 was estimated at $6,921 million (Electronics and Media is the largest segment with a market volume of $2,321 million in 2020), and are expected to show an annual growth rate of 11.2 % over the next years, resulting in an expected market volume of US$6,384 million by 2023. Thailand has 25.1 million e-commerce users (Statista, 2020), made of urban (27.2%), suburban (21.6%), and rural consumers (20.8%) (BDC, 2017). In France, 37.5 million French people shopped online at least once in the year (FEVAD, 2018), and 68% of the

population already shopped online (Statista, 2018). The e-commerce revenues have been estimated to 92.6 billion € in 2018 (+13.3%) and will continue to follow this expansionist trend, which has seen online sales sharply increase by more than five times over the last decade (Statista, 2018). 66% of French e-commerce purchases are related to clothes or fashion (FEVAD, 2018). France is ranked 4th in the world, behind the USA, UK, and Germany, in terms of internet traffic shares attracted to e-commerce websites (SEMrush, 2017). The market in developed countries has reached its maturity phase, and the competition among e-commerce players is extremely high and cost-intensive (Statista, 2018). Among more than 182,000 active merchant sites, Amazon.com has an average monthly coverage of 55.1% of the global French population (FEVAD, 2018).

Two cultures like the French and the Thai are actually closer than initially thought, as it is shown that, even if the traditional consumption habits are different, they follow the same modern global digital trends.

Context

Edward Hall categorized cultures into two categories, high and low-context. According to Tung (1995), 70% of the world cultures are high-context, Thai being one of them. Hall (1976) explains that "*a high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, or transmitted part of the message.*" The message is implicit, and the feelings and thoughts are not explicitly expressed (Deresky, 2008). Within groups, higher context communication will be favored as they rely on a shared cultural background (Hall, 1976). He also assumes that high-context cultures tend to be more stable and established, through the hierarchy, tradition, norms, and common roots. Low-context cultures are more direct and precise, where the message is almost fully and explicitly conveyed by words, with only a little room for interpretation and might be more confrontational due to this specific aspect (Deresky, 2008). According to Hall (1976), low-context societies tend to change quickly and deeply by adapting traditions to a contemporary context. Many western cultures, like English-speaking and German-speaking countries, are considered to be low context, but the French hold a particular position. Indeed, it is considered as being a low-context

culture (Hall & Hall, 1990) but holds a rather central position on the classification scale, which means that depending from which culture it is seen, the perception might differ. Where a German might see the French as being a high-context culture, a Thai may see it as a low-context one.

From a corporate perspective, contextual differences can lead to embarrassing situations, as showing sensitivity to similar concerns may not be a priority for a low-context culture person (Harada, 2017). From the opposite point of view, a high-context culture person may not understand why employees or colleagues act in a particular manner (Taras et al., 2009).

Organizational Culture or Corporate/Business Culture

"The organizational culture is a set of shared assumptions that guide what happens in organizations by defining appropriate behavior for various situations" (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

Philp Schrodt (2002), says the organizational culture influences the way people and groups interact with each other, clients, stakeholders, and shareholders. A deeply established culture may also play a role in the level of employees' identification and dedication towards their company (Schrodt, 2002) and guarantee a higher job satisfaction when employees feel supported in reaching their goals (Tsai, 2011).

As France and Thailand are two feminine cultures, the work-life balance, which is the balance needed between time allocated to work and time dedicated to private life (Delecta, 2011) is crucial as people attach more importance to their personal life than to their work, which is more satisfactory for employees. They will be less success and competition-oriented and will prioritize equality, relationships, and consensus. Also, the "role overlap," which is a society's acceptance for women to do tasks traditionally done by men, and the contrary (Smith, Roberts and Balmer, 2000), is much more common than in masculine societies.

Thailand's strong hierarchy culture reflects on employees' positions within an organization. They are usually determined by age and experience, whereas in western societies like France, a position is held through competencies and experience (Harada, 2017). A CEO holds the status of leader and "father" of the organization, managing in a paternalistic way, which is hugely respected by Thais. It shows that Thailand

companies, mainly the family-owned and ruled, generally use power culture (Boundless, 2015). Also, due to the collectivist nature of their Culture, Thais will tend to work with people belonging to their group, or long-time relationships they can blindly trust. The clan culture, which consists of managing an organization like a family, emphasizing on mentoring, caring, and being together (The Tipster, 2013), is a standard model in the Thai corporate world.

We have also seen that France was an adhocracy society, where anticipating the future and thrifts in modernity are encouraged, and where innovative spirit and entrepreneurial mindset and being the pioneer to achieve something are appreciated (The Tipster, 2013). Values like patience and perseverance are common, sometimes to the detriment of the leisure time, which is not considered as being that important. It is rather informal, flexible, and opposed to the rigidity of a bureaucratic system (Bennis, 1968), that is common in Thailand. France once again appears as an exception since it has one of the lowest working time of the EU states, with a score of 39.1 worked hours weekly, the EU average being 40.2 hours (Eurostat, 2017).

International Business Strategies

"It is the process of investigation, analysis, and decision making that provides the company with the criteria for attaining a competitive advantage. It includes defining the competitive advantages of the business, identifying the weaknesses that are impacting the company's ability to grow, crafting the corporate mission, specifying achievable objectives, and setting policy guidelines" (Wheelen, Hunger, Hoffman, Bamford, 2018).

The relationship between planning and firm performance has been studied many times, and a clearly defined strategic plan and strategy are considered as being the key leading to success for a firm (Hummelbrunner & Jones, 2013). It may sound challenging to elaborate a strategy for an unknown market, but according to Deresky (2008), the global strategic formulation process is not much different from the process followed domestically. The only differences are due to the authorities governing the international business, such as governments, political and legal systems, economic alliances, exchange rate, local competition, and cultural diversity.

Finding and Conclusion

Through the conducted research, culture appeared as a multidimensional term,
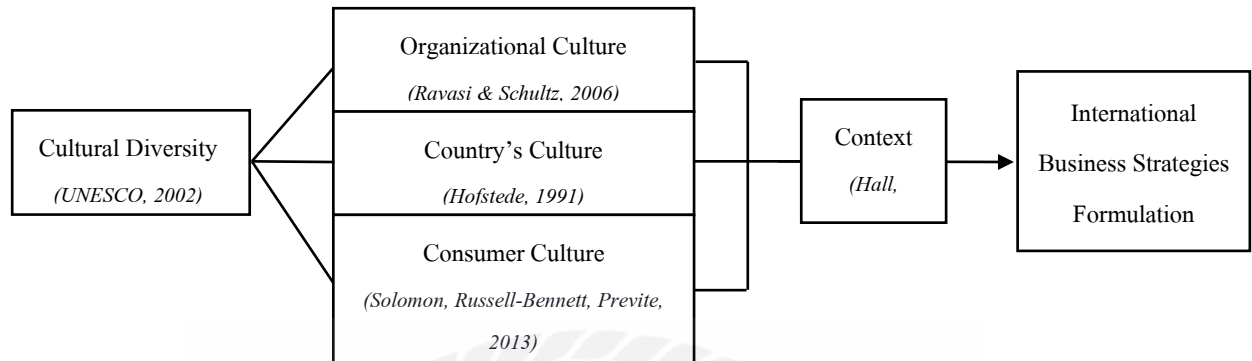
studied by researchers such as Hall (1976) or Hofstede (1991), among many others. As cultural diversity is described as an opportunity to widen the range of options to everyone and as one of the main sources of development (UNESCO, 2002), companies are increasingly dealing beyond their national boundaries to widen their range development opportunities (Cullen & Parboteeah, 2010). The research review shown that the key to success for a company is the upstream strategic planning (Hummelbrunner & Jones, 2013), which, if well conducted and implemented, will benefit the business (Grant, 2003). However, as to properly formulate an appropriate strategy, a firm needs to know the market it is aiming at, hence, studying its Culture, since each group has its cultural differences that shape and influence their purchasing behavior (Cleveland, Naghavi & Shafia, 2017).

This research identified and mapped out the five cultural variables that a company should pay attention, and the path it should follow while formulating its cross-border strategies to not overlook one of these factors.

To conclude, we can affirm that cultural diversity influences the way multinationals' strategies are formulated and implemented, with nuances in corporate, national, and consumer cultures. It impacts a strategy's length and orientation, the type of employees to hire to carry on a project, the kind of management to implement, the way of communicating with both internal and external customers, the sales channels, and so on. Every already implemented cross-border strategy did pay attention to cultural diversity to maximize its probability of success. If so, the company has likely been rewarded for this upstream effort (Grant, 2003).

Recommendation

The limitation of this paper might be its perishability. Indeed, the world is continuously evolving, and today's truth might be wrong in a few years. It seems unlikely, but as cultures do not have boundaries, we could reckon the fact that, in a few decades, maybe centuries, due to deep and long globalization, cultures will be much more standardized than today. Maybe cultural diversity has lived long enough, and has come to an end? Doubts can arise about that, but cultural diversities could become slighter in the future, until a point where we could be able to interact and do business without paying attention to the way the culture works and how to communicate with locals. Maybe, only a few distinct cultures will remain, perhaps stronger than never, because they would have embraced their neighbors'. It could be, for instance, a dominant Chinese culture for Asia, a standardized European culture, and the American Culture being the standardized global business and consuming culture.

On the other hand, when cultures are growing too much and starting to be a source of fear for some others, it can lead to a withdrawal into yourself, to protect what is precious. The future of culture could either be the conservatism and the protectionism, or the standardization. None of these options seems particularly appealing.

Although, we can also contemplate a less extreme scenario in which globalization would lead cultures to blend and take some aspects of others while keeping their fundamental values unaltered. This could strengthen them by creating "hybrids," relying on a strong traditional cultural heritage, dusted with contemporary foreign aspects. It could perhaps lead to more standardization, but pragmatic cultures would probably last longer than unchanged conservative cultures. And seen that way, there is still a ray of hope.

It would be exciting for a researcher to analyze what comes first and influences the other, in order to find whether a standardized culture influences businesses and consumption habits, or if a global corporate and customer habits shape a global standardized culture.

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