

Cross-cultural impact on advertising strategies: a critical analysis of intercultural communication present in the automotive industry

Abstract

This project will examine the differences in advertising strategies present in the automotive industry, specifically focusing on the global brands Toyota and Volkswagen. Additionally, analysing the success of intercultural communication across the two brands using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Hall's high and low-context environments and the marketing techniques of localisation and glocalisation.

Introduction

Globalisation is known as the process of interaction and integration among people, companies, and governments across national borders and cultures.¹ With increased globalisation and the emergence of the 'global company', it is more cost-effective to develop all advertising in the home country of businesses for use in other countries either in the English language or translated into many different languages; this is known as the 'one-to-many procedure'. "No longer will there be a different advertising campaign for each country and each language of the world".² This procedure is an internalisation strategy used as part of the standardisation communicative approach. International marketers are now faced more than ever with the complexity of developing advertising strategies in cross-cultural environments where their products must appeal to clients or target markets with a wide range of beliefs, religions, attitudes, norms and values. The role of intercultural communication is vital for a culturally integrated marketing campaign and global marketers must recognise cultural differences to effectively promote products. The automotive industry operates globally, therefore, relying heavily on intercultural communication

¹ Jason Fernando, "Globalization", Investopedia, 2022

<[² Marieke De Mooij, 'Translating Advertising: Painting the Tip of an Iceberg', *The Translator*, 2.10 \(2004\), 179-198 \(p. 180\).](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/globalization.asp#:~:text=Globalization%20is%20the%20spread%20of,globe%20fostered%20through%20free%20trade.> [Accessed 27 April 2022].</p></div><div data-bbox=)

and cross-cultural communication. Advertising is an important element of marketing strategy which is highly influenced by culture.³ This project will firstly, aim to compare advertising techniques present in the companies, Toyota and Volkswagen specifically both their attempts to advertise to the US; secondly, analyse the success of these marketing strategies from an intercultural perspective focusing on frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and, finally, discuss the efforts of localisation and glocalisation across campaigns from Toyota and Volkswagen in the USA and determine which is more successful when overcoming cultural challenges.

International marketing and culture

According to Hofstede, culture is defined as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group of people from others”.⁴ Culture includes shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles and values found among speakers of a particular language who live during the same historical period in a specific geographic region. Triandis notes, “Language, time and place all help define culture.”⁵ When translating an advertisement, companies often must adapt or localise their message based on culturally relevant motives and visuals, wordplay and symbolism. Multimodal texts play a key role in the success of their strategies. Multimodal texts are “texts which combine and integrate the meaning-making resources of more than one semiotic modality - for example, language, gesture, movement, visual images, sound, in order to produce a text specific meaning.”⁶

Intercultural communication refers to “the communication between people from two different cultures”⁷ and plays an important role in global marketing. American businessman Anthony Robins states, “To effectively

³ Marieke De Mooij, 'International and Cross-Cultural Consumer Behavior', in *The Handbook of International Advertising Research*, ed. by Hong Cheng (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 125-148 (p. 128).

⁴ Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, (California: SAGE, 1980), p.48.

⁵ Marieke De Mooij, 'Translating Advertising: Painting the Tip of an Iceberg', *The Translator*, 2.10 (2004), 179-198 (p. 181).

⁶ Paul. J. Thibault, 'The Multimodal Transcription of a Television Advertisement: Theory and Practice', in *Multimodality And Multimediality In The Distance Learning Age: Papers In English Linguistics*, 1st ed. (Campobasso: Palladino, 2000), pp. 311-85.

⁷ Guo-Ming Chen & William J. Starosta, *Foundations of intercultural communication* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon. 1998), p.24.

communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.”⁸ Every marketer should be culturally sensitive, understanding and respectful to be able to communicate a message effectively. Automotive companies have had to overcome cultural barriers to increase trade globally and one of the main methods has been through using cross-cultural advertising using techniques such as ‘localisation’. Localisation “refers to the process of making a product or service more specific or appropriate ‘locally’ in a specific market”.⁹ The aim of localisation is to give a product the look and feel of having been created specifically for a target market, no matter their language, culture, or location. International marketers use ‘glocalisation’ which refers to “the interface between a global and a local marketing strategy by combining dynamics of cultural homogenization and heterogenization”.¹⁰ It is a hybrid strategy that combines localisation and globalisation. One example of glocalisation could be the adaption of cars suited to meet local criteria such as emission standards or steering wheel locations.

Intercultural communication approaches

To critically analyse and judge the success rate of Toyota and Volkswagen, it is important to measure intercultural communication using models such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high and low-context cultures.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

One of the most influential frameworks to measure intercultural communication is Hofstede's model of national cultural dimensions. This model distinguishes cultures according to six different dimensions, “Power Distance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation and

⁸ Marcel Schwantes, 'Here's Tony Robbins' Advice on How to Dramatically Improve Your Communication Skills', *Inc.*, 13th October 2015, p.1.

⁹ *CEO today* (2019) <<https://www.ceotodaymagazine.com/2019/07/why-localisation-can-make-or-break-a-brand/>> [accessed 26 February 2022].

¹⁰ Sven Hollensen, ‘Glocalization: companies search for the right balance between globalization and localization’ in *Handbook on Cross-cultural Marketing* ed. by Glen H. Brodowsky and Camille P. Schuster (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), pp 20-36 (p.21)

Indulgence”.¹¹ The model provides scales from 0 to 100 for 76 countries for each dimension, and each country has a position on each scale relative to other countries. This framework is especially useful when assessing the differences in cultural values across businesses and the success of their advertising strategies as it helps remove cultural prejudices and provides information on cultural differences and how to manage them in business. Understanding cultures is increasingly important for global advertising and Hofstede’s model of national cultures is applicable to global advertising and marketing. The model explains “various concepts of self, identity, personality which further helps in devising branding strategies”.¹² Hofstede’s model is a method of describing various cultures which can be used to increase intercultural communication and become more culturally competent, more importantly for international marketing.

However, there are some limitations that must be considered when using this framework; Piller states that culture cannot be reduced to six cultural dimensions and these value orientations should not be measures and quantified into a precise numeric score as dimensions may change according to external factors and are not pre-fixed.¹³ More specifically, Hofstede reduces the meaning of culture to six dimensions and measures these with numeric scores which may not be applicable to each culture. Therefore, Hall’s concept of high and low-context environments will also be used to critically assess the success of intercultural communication present in both Toyota and Volkswagen.

Hall’s High and Low-Context Environments

Another framework which is important to consider is Hall’s high and low-context environments whereby he categorises cultures as being either high or low-context depending on interpersonal relationships. In high-context cultures such as the Japanese culture (Toyota’s country of origin), “people are very homogenous with regard to

¹¹ Marieke De Mooij, 'Translating Advertising: Painting the Tip of an Iceberg', *The Translator*, 2.10 (2004), 179-198 (p. 183).

¹² Marieke De Mooij, *Global Marketing and Advertising: Understanding Cultural Paradoxes*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), pp. 78-79.

¹³ Piller, I. (2017). *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

experiences and information networks where consistent messages have produced consistent responses to the environment”.¹⁴ In high-context cultures, messages are shown through gestures, use of space and even silence and advertising may sell a certain lifestyle. In comparison to low-context cultures such as the German culture (Volkswagen’s country of origin), “people are less homogenous, and the verbal message contains most of the information and very little is embedded in the context”.¹⁵ Advertising in low-context environments is usually very clear and what is sold is “shown”.

However, there may be limitations with using this framework; according to today’s standards, the research carried out by Hall to reach his conclusions on different country’s classifications could be outdated and flawed. Furthermore, certain cultural values or characteristics may change over time making Hall’s conclusions inapplicable to the modern day.

Methodology

The research method for this project is a qualitative data analysis of examples of advertising across brands Toyota and Volkswagen to the USA, specifically focusing on the promotion of products and cross-cultural marketing strategies such as localisation. The motives for focusing on car advertisements are that there are clear distinctive cultural preferences in regard to the automobile industry and it is the second biggest advertisement sector that is influenced by culture.¹⁶ The data analysed in this project will feature advertisements, specifically campaigns gathered from online secondary sources which illustrate cross-cultural marketing strategies and promotion of

¹⁴ Samovar, L.A., Porter, R., and Stefani, L.A. (2011). ‘Hofstede’s value dimensions and Hall’s high context/low context,’ in Hua, Z. (ed.) *The Language and Intercultural Communication Reader*. 1st ed. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 49-58.

¹⁵ Samovar, L.A., Porter, R., and Stefani, L.A. (2011). ‘Hofstede’s value dimensions and Hall’s high context/low context,’ in Hua, Z. (ed.) *The Language and Intercultural Communication Reader*. 1st ed. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 49-58.

¹⁶ Jose Albors-Garrigos and others, "Impact of National Cultures on Automotive After Sales Services Perception.", *Journal of Sustainable Business and Management Solutions in Emerging Economies*, 22.2 (2017), p.13.

products across the automotive industry. These examples include up-to-date information from company websites, television advertisements, and finally, visual product promotion to provide an accurate in-depth critical analysis.

The results obtained from this research will then help to critically assess whether Toyota or Volkswagen have more successfully managed to achieve intercultural communication using marketing strategies such as localisation. This will be done with reference to intercultural communication frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high and low-context environments to reach a conclusion. It must be noted that these frameworks have some limitations; therefore, the results collected must be analysed with caution.

Findings of Toyota Campaign

In 2021 Toyota released its '*Upstream*' campaign in the USA which featured in the Super Bowl LV. The commercial received recognition for being one of the most effective advertisements shown in the Super Bowl LV, generating the highest level of emotional engagement at 63%. The campaign tells the story of Team Toyota athlete Jessica Long's inspiring journey, which began when she was adopted by an American couple from a Russian orphanage. The advert generated feelings of warmth, happiness and amazement and the intense emotional response from the US audience managed to drive purchase intent and brand recognition. *Upstream* ends with an uplifting line "We believe there is hope and strength in all of us", not only does this line reflect Paralympian Jessica Long's journey but also reflects Toyota's cultural value of Respect for People (Appendix 1).

In relation to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the USA has an individualism score of 91 which is the highest figure out of all the dimensions (Appendix 2). In relation to advertising strategies this means that USA has a relatively individualist society compared to a collectivist society and "in individualist societies people are only supposed to look after themselves and their direct family".¹⁷ The campaign features Jessica's adoptive parents and the care that they have given her despite her disability which supports individualism, specifically the idea of caring for

¹⁷ Geert Hofstede, "Country Comparison - Hofstede Insights", *Hofstede Insights*, 2022 <<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/the-uk,the-usa/>> [Accessed 16 April 2022].

family. Furthermore, most of the advertisement solely features Jessica's achievements which is a very individualistic approach, compared to a collectivist Japanese society where collective accomplishments are praised more than individual accomplishments. Additionally, the advertisement focuses on a woman whereas Japan has a higher masculinity score than the USA which suggests that it believes that men should be more dominant. Toyota features more women in its advertisements in the USA, especially featuring women like Jessica involved in sports which are not common in a Japanese society. Therefore, Hofstede's theory supports the adaptations Toyota made in advertising to the USA, which suggests that Toyota was successful at advertising across its home culture.

However, there may be some limitations with using Hofstede's cultural dimensions here; it is designed using a top-down approach whereby cultural dimensions are fixed and pre-defined and this can be an issue when looking at subcultures or people with bicultural identities. Furthermore, Hofstede makes the assumption that culture is based on geographical location rather than cultural diversity or migration which can have a large impact on cultural values and behaviours. Finally, Hofstede's cultural framework is very subjective and is largely based on Hofstede's personal opinions which may not be universally agreed-upon.

In relation to Hall's high and low-context cultures, Japanese advertising "tends to use symbolism and emotional appeals to a greater extent than western firms".¹⁸ US consumers are culturally more content-driven since English is a low-context, high-content language. The *Upstream* campaign managed to evoke an intense emotional response from the audience and "A general good mood in a commercial is more likely to appeal to the vast audience, is less likely to "offend the sensibilities of the viewer and helps to defuse audience objections".¹⁹ This explains why Toyota has tried to sell a mood as an emotional appeal as this is more resonant with a context-driven

¹⁸ Johnny K. Johansson, "The Sense Of "Nonsense": Japanese TV Advertising", *Journal of Advertising*, 23.1 (1994), 17-26 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1994.10673428>>.

¹⁹ Johnny K. Johansson, "The Sense Of "Nonsense": Japanese TV Advertising", *Journal of Advertising*, 23.1 (1994), 17-26 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1994.10673428>>.

audience than product specifications. Some of the main themes of this campaign are the idea of diversity and family which appeal greatly to an American audience.

Nevertheless, there may be some limitations to Hall's high and low-context theory such as the lack of research and the narrow conclusions made by assuming that culture can only be divided into two categories, high-context and low-context. Culture is a complex term and Hall's conclusions do not take into account subcultures or people with multicultural backgrounds which could not be applied to this framework.

Glocalisation of Toyota

Reducing CO₂ emissions is an example of glocalisation where Toyota has adapted its design to suit a global market. For example, in the US 52% of Toyota models have electrified versions and in North America electric car sales are more than 4 million.²⁰ Furthermore, Toyota has adapted its steering wheel locations to suit countries with left-hand specifications such as America and New Zealand.

Findings of Volkswagen Campaign

In 2017 Volkswagen launched its '*America*' campaign to help promote Volkswagen first family sized SUV built in America, 'Atlas' (Appendix 3). The advertisement features a three-generation family and their cross-country journey across the USA. The campaign features the song '*America*' by Paul Simon and the tag line "Life's as big as you make it". This is an example of the use of the pronoun "you" in adverts to help bring across a friendly and more personal approach which is often used in Western advertisements. Furthermore, the use of a metaphor is expressing to viewers to make the most of their life whilst also using the adjective "big" to illustrate the size of the car and its capacity.

²⁰ "Carbon-Education", Toyota.Com, 2022 <<https://www.toyota.com/usa/environmentreport/carbon-education>> [Accessed 4 May 2022].

In relation to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the USA has a long-term orientation score of 26, which is one of the lowest scores out of the cultural dimensions (Appendix 4). This reflects the country's strong sense of nationalism and social standards as in short term countries such as the USA, people tend to place more emphasis on consistency, truth, and principles. Therefore, the campaign was successful due to the continuous references to American culture throughout which highlighted values of national pride, tradition, magnanimity, and generosity. The emphasis on national pride can be supported by the low long-term orientation score. Therefore, Volkswagen's advertising changes are successful according to Hofstede's theory.

In comparison, Germany has a long-term orientation score of 83 meaning that people are more modest, pragmatic, and curious. In relation to the campaign, Germany tends to promote their products' long-term value and robustness whereas Hofstede's theory suggests that in the USA short-term benefits must be emphasised. One example of where German culture interweaves itself into the advert is the emphasis on the car's practicality and affordability which is a common theme of cultures with long-term orientation such as Germany. In this case, Volkswagen have used adaption to create a version of a car that is geared towards an American market whilst also keeping some of the brand's cultural values.

In relation to Hall's high and low-context cultures, Germany is classified as a low-context culture whilst America is a medium-low context culture. In relation to advertising, low-context cultures' messages are direct and give a clear product description, in comparison to high-context cultures where the situation and context of the message is an important aspect of the advertisement. Volkswagen has adapted to an American audience by reducing the amount of detail and product information as this may come across as excessive or extreme in America. Furthermore, phrases such as the tagline used in this campaign represent a German influence as there is very little humour used in Germany and advertisements tend to be more serious and informative rather than having a more light-hearted tone. Furthermore, the use of the pronoun "you" instead of "we" is commonly seen in low-context cultures as more emphasis is placed on individualistic personal values rather than collectivist ones. In the example of the tagline, this represents Volkswagen's German influence in the campaign.

Nonetheless, there may be some drawbacks with Hall's model; for example, the terms 'high' and 'low' are relatively general terms to describe a culture and every society may use both modes. More specifically, individuals can use both high and low-context communication skills and cultures can vary with time according to variable social and economic factors such as technology and media. These terms would be better used to describe specific situations and not for generalisations as culture is everchanging and communication is not static.

Localisation of Volkswagen

The *America* campaign is an example of a localisation strategy where Volkswagen have incorporated specific American elements to their advertisement in order to appeal to an American audience such as the music and scenery used. The campaign creates a strong emotional and empathetic response. The protagonist of the advert, Marie Gallagher, is a widowed Irish grandmother who emigrated to the USA in 1958 (Appendix 5). The process of glocalisation and internationalism is featured by Volkswagen's inclusion of Irish culture and its suggestion of how this is united with the USA.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Volkswagen and Toyota have been successful with promoting their products in USA for American consumers using a mixture of marketing approaches such as localisation and glocalisation. The level of advertising success is dependent on the achievement of intercultural communication according to frameworks such as Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Hall's High and Low-Context Environments. However, it is important to note that whilst these frameworks are useful to a certain degree although, there are limitations present. Consequently, caution must be taken to avoid generalisations and misunderstandings. Intercultural communication is not static and is constantly changing with society, therefore these frameworks may be outdated and misrepresent cultural communication we experience today. Research has shown that adaptability is crucial, and a mixture of advertising strategies can be useful when dealing with complex cultures. However, further

research is required on the success of global marketing in Toyota and Volkswagen, not only directed at an American audience but also across other cultures such as a British audience.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: 2021 Toyota 'Upstream' Campaign for Super Bowl LV in USA

Toyota USA. (2021) Available at: < <https://pressroom.toyota.com/toyota-shares-messages-of-hope-strength-and-social-responsibility-in-big-game/>>

[Accessed: 20th March 2022].

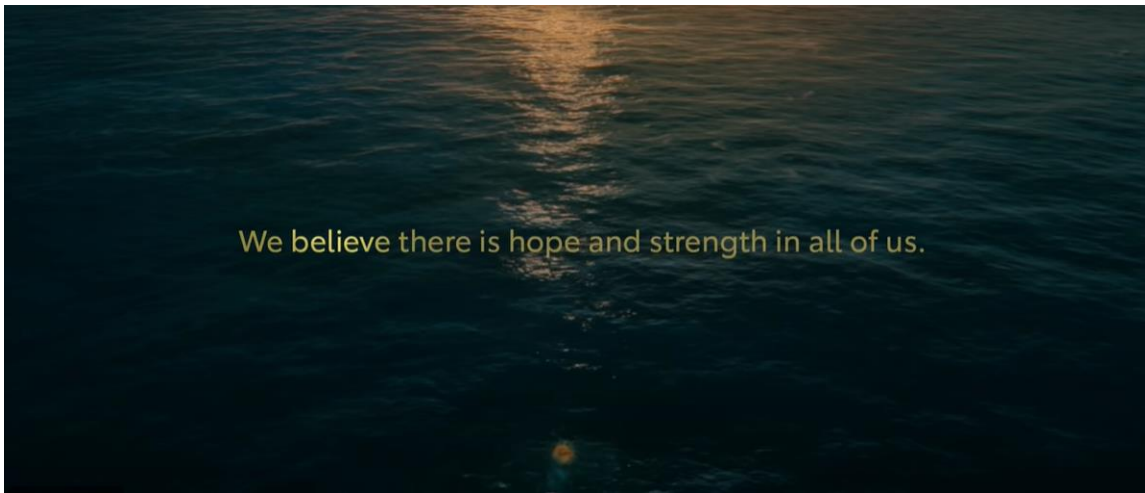


Figure 1: 'Upstream' Super Bowl LV advertisement showing the message 'We believe there is hope and strength in all of us' (at 00:54 seconds).

Appendix 2: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Graph showing USA and Japan

Available at: < <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/japan,the-usa/>>

[Accessed 20th March 2022].

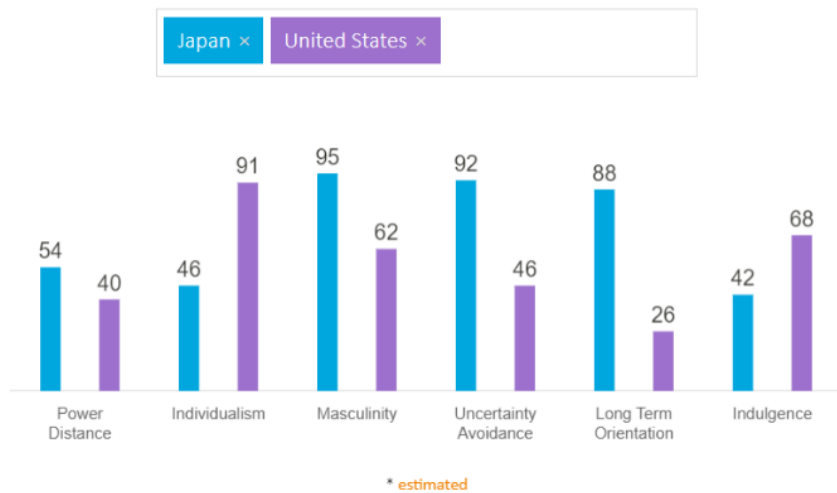


Figure 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions graph showing the differences between USA and Japan

Appendix 3: 2017 Volkswagen 'America' Campaign

Volkswagen USA. (2017) Available at: < <https://media.vw.com/en-us/releases/874> >

[Accessed 24th March 2022].



Figure 1: 90 second Volkswagen 'America' Campaign with the tagline 'Life is as big as you make it' at (01:20 seconds).

Appendix 4: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Graph showing USA and Germany

Available at: <<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/germany,the-usa/>>

[Accessed 27th March 2022].

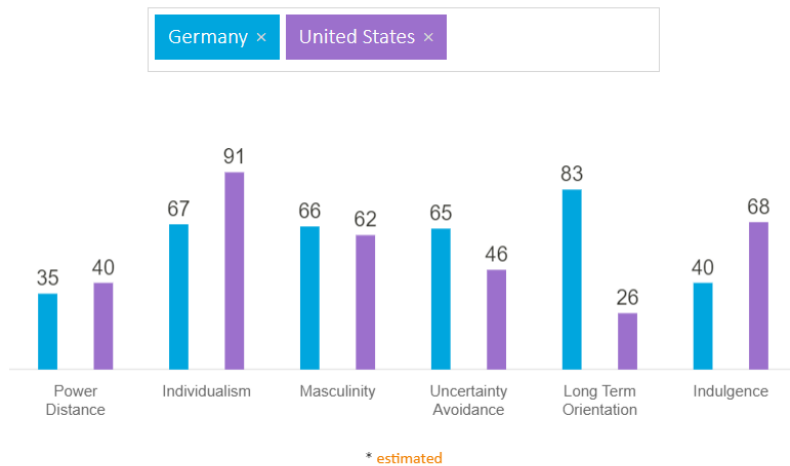


Figure 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions graph showing the differences between USA and Germany

Appendix 5: Protagonist in Volkswagen's 'America' Campaign

Available at: <https://dailycommercials.com/volkswagen-atlas-america-full-version/>

[Accessed 1st May 2022].



Figure 1: Irish widow, Marie Gallagher featured in Volkswagen's 'America' Campaign at (00:15 seconds).