

# Understanding the science of culture

CULTURE

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To understand what makes one group of people similar or different to another, marketers first need to familiarize themselves with the elements – or dimensions – of culture that influence identity.

Culture is a complex beast. It is informed by a society's customs and traditions. It is revealed through a society's artistic and intellectual achievements. And it is maintained by a series of behavioral codes passed down from generation to generation.

As marketers, it's vital that we understand these behavioural codes, because they determine what consumers think, feel and do. But breaking behaviour down into data is no easy task. It's not an exact science.

At least, it didn't use to be. Fortunately, there are now a number of tools that can help us quantify culture and understand why a marketing or media strategy that works in one market won't work in the nation next door.

The foundations of these tools can be found in the work of Dutch social psychologist, Professor Geert Hofstede.

## A background to Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede set the template for comparative cultural studies in the 1970s, when he conducted a comprehensive analysis of the attitudes and behaviours of IBM employees around the world.

His work subsequently identified a number of key factors – or dimensions – that managers, HR teams and change consultants have long used to explain the workplace challenges that sometimes emerge when different cultures are asked to work together.

These dimensions help explain why, for instance, a Brit does not behave like an American (despite the shared language), or why a Belgian does not share the same opinions as his neighbour in The Netherlands.

## Hofstede's dimensions

Over time, Hofstede's study has grown and become more detailed. It now measures behaviors in 70 countries around the world, each scored on a 0-100 point scale for the following measures:

**Power Distance Index:** The degree to which people respect leaders and hierarchy.

**Individualism:** The extent to which people think about themselves as 'Me or We'.

**Masculinity:** Whether people focus on 'achievement' verses 'quality of life' (or whether they

are 'tough' or 'tender').

**Uncertainty Avoidance:** How likely people are to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity.

**Long Term Orientation:** How likely people are to focus on short-term results versus long-term results.

**Indulgence:** The extent to which people indulge themselves (without caring what others think) or restrain themselves.

### Applying Hofstede's dimensions to marketing

When applied to marketing, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions provide insights into the way people in different countries behave. But there are some limitations.

Firstly, the original Hofstede study was conducted in an institutionalised environment. People often behave differently outside of work and are influenced by different things.

Secondly, consumer cultures change over time, impacted by information availability, changing borders and greater immigration.

Thirdly, brands need greater granularity in order to really understand consumer segments. In every country, cultural behaviours change from generation to generation, between ethnicities, and within political ideologies.

What's more, advances in technology have had a massive impact on the spread of cultures. Whereas immigrants once had to assimilate to their adopted homeland, nowadays they can stay in touch with home much easier. This has made countries more heterogeneous. Many have become melting pots of cultures – and this is changing the consumer landscape.

**Cultural Connections: a new framework for modern marketers**

Working with Iitim International's Hofstede Centre, MediaCom has now added new insights to Geert Hofstede's original study, updating the original dimensions framework to reveal the cultural forces that influence the motivations and behaviors of consumers.

As part of this study – called Cultural Connections – we have interviewed more than 60,000 consumers in 63 markets around the world to understand why they think, feel, and behave differently.

We have quantified these responses using nine consumer-specific (or consumer-modified) dimensions, as shown below.

### Consumer-centric cultural dimensions

Five cultural dimensions reveal insights into the national psyche that underpins consumer attitudes:

**Identity (Fixed or Flexible)** measures the strength of a nation's self-image. Monumentalist or 'Fixed' societies have very clear identities rooted in tradition; they see no reason to change or evolve. Examples include Venezuela and Colombia. 'Flexible' countries, however, are always looking to adapt and improve. They might have traditional values, but they are interested in moving with the times. Examples include Japan and Taiwan.

**Individualism (Me or We)** measures the extent to which people think about themselves as 'Me or We'. Australia and Canada, for example, are 'Me' cultures, where people think of themselves and their immediate family first and let the state take care of the welfare of everybody else. Nigeria and Kenya are more collective. People here put the welfare of their community or group first, rather than the specific wants or needs of individuals within it.

**Emotional state (Anchored or Anxious)** determines whether a culture is emotionally stable or more anxious. Countries that score highly (Anxious) tend to show their emotions easily. One example is Italy. Emotionally stable (Anchored) markets include Indonesia. They tend

to be more relaxed and calm.

**Ambition (Content or Competitive)** measures the degree to which people want to climb the social ladder. People in highly ambitious societies, such as China and South Korea, tend to put pressure on themselves and judge others by their social and professional successes. The converse is true in countries like Chile and Egypt, where success is more about achieving quality of life on one's own terms.

**Curiosity (Closed or Curious)** assesses the degree to which people follow a prescribed way of life or actively pursue new experiences and ideas. Indonesia and Thailand, for instance, are typically more closed cultures, while Portugal is more curious.

## Marketing dimensions

Four marketing-specific dimensions consider how consumers are likely to respond to certain types of brand messages and content:

**Vanity (Secure or Insecure)** measures how much consumers are likely to buy certain products to feel good about themselves. A high score suggests insecurity. In these countries, people use products to reinforce a positive self-image. A low score suggests security. In these countries, people already have a positive self-image, so this is not a motivator for buying a product. Russia and Hong Kong score high on vanity, while New Zealand and Peru score low.

**Impact (Concerned or Unconcerned)** assesses how conscious consumers are of the impact their purchases have on themselves or others. Do they buy products just to serve their immediate needs or do they make more considered choices? While Indonesia and the Philippines tend to focus on immediate needs, societies like Belgium and France consider a range of factors (like health benefits).

**Information need (Informed or Impulsive)** measures the extent to which consumers research products. Impulsive cultures, like the Philippines and Vietnam, prefer to share opinions and act on anecdotal recommendations. Informed cultures, like Norway and

Sweden, prefer more qualified opinions. They like detail and want to know everything about a product before buying.

**Badge appeal (Functional or Fashionable)** measures the extent to which consumers are susceptible to the glamour or allure of – often high-end – products. Do they use designer labels as status symbols? Turkey and Indonesia are big fans of luxury goods and score highly for ‘Badge appeal’. Consumers in Israel and Ukraine care more about functional benefits.

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We will continue to grow and evolve Cultural Connections to keep pace with changing cultures. This level of cultural detail is essential information for marketers looking to succeed in different countries and regions around the world.

For the first time, they can use data to qualify which markets are culturally consistent (and therefore likely to react to brand messages in the same way). This kind of knowledge can make or break multi-market campaigns.

Conversely, marketers can use this more scientific approach to spot where countries differ, and where their campaigns will have to be modified – or media rules re-thought – to successfully transfer between markets.

As an example, brands looking to reach [Muslims in Indonesia](#), for instance, can use Cultural Connections to understand why they should adopt a different strategy to the one they used to target Muslims in Turkey.

Brands looking to launch in Israel, where it's notoriously difficult to achieve sustained success, can finally work out what sets this market apart.

And brands keen to crack the burgeoning LATAM markets can use these cultural insights to connect with consumers across the whole region.

In fact, Cultural Connections can help brands understand consumer cultures all over the world. And that's the ultimate formula for success.

*Head to [www.mediacom.com/culturalconnections](http://www.mediacom.com/culturalconnections) to learn more about MediaCom's Cultural Connections study and how it can help your business.*

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