

# Firms Going Global, Communication Going Sensitive. Cultural Sensitivity: A Challenge for Global Companies in Saudi Arabia

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**Abstract:** *This research examines the intricacies of cultural sensitivity throughout global advertising efforts, specifically with regard to Saudi Arabia. Employing interpretation as the philosophical framework and a mixed-methods technique, this study investigates the perceptions and attitudes of Saudi residents towards culturally sensitive advertising. The findings indicate a notable inclination among Saudi individuals towards commercials that are in line with their cultural values, emphasizing the significance of language, traditions, and religious observance. Expert interviews highlight the difficulties and advantages linked to worldwide advertising standardization, highlighting the importance of being culturally sensitive. Secondary data analysis confirms the importance of respecting local cultural norms, as evidenced by society responses and manifestations. In addition, the study examines the concept of glocalization in advertising, emphasizing the significance of adapting global marketing strategies to suit specific local contexts. This study offers practical knowledge for global companies seeking to handle cultural sensitivity in the Saudi market. It highlights the significance of aligning advertising strategies with local cultural norms to improve customer engagement and brand perception.*

**Keywords:** Glocalization, culture, religion, marketing communication, and advertising.

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## INTRODUCTION

Organizational structures in today's world have made it easier for people to travel across national borders, and for technologies, goods, and services to be seamlessly transferred.

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The rise of digital marketing generated a surge in demand, providing people, businesses, and nation-states with unique opportunities to reach a global audience more quickly, deeply, and affordably than ever before.

However, in the midst of the limitless opportunities that digital marketing presents, difficulties eventually surface. While operating internationally allows organizations to improve their production processes over time, it also presents significant challenges. If these obstacles are not effectively managed, they may hinder the marketing process and jeopardize the integrity of the product's promotional mix in particular societies.

Examining how culture affects marketing reveals an important paradox: the interaction between the local and the global. A careful balance is needed to manage marketing tactics in a world where local and global factors collide. Renowned Scottish urban planner Patrick Geddes was among the first to advocate for balancing these two tiers, explaining this complex link with his well-known maxim, "Think globally, act locally." Although there is no single agreed-upon definition of culture, it remains exclusive to humans. Hence, culture is associated with society—a group of people sharing common history, territory and values. It dictates the way a society acts and reacts to stimuli. It influences their needs and expectations and affects their perceptions and attitudes towards any phenomenon, be it natural or man-made. Therefore, to understand consumers behavior, one must first be familiar with their culture.

This article focuses on the practical obstacles encountered by global corporations when attempting to navigate the complexity of worldwide markets. As we move further into the world of international marketing, it becomes abundantly clear that the theoretical understanding of the cultural impact on digital communication must be translated into tactics that can be implemented by businesses aiming to achieve success on a global scale.

### **Problem Statement**

Understanding the different cultures and intercultural communication is crucial for international marketing. Culture is generally perceived as the main factor affecting the degree to which a globally operating company can standardize its marketing communication strategy. Marketers are studying the cultural factors that influence the buying behavior of their markets before setting an IMC<sup>3</sup>.

Yet, culture is specific for a society. There is no one culture for all people living on earth. Even globalization has failed in diluting the cultural differences between nations. Therefore, the main research question is:

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<sup>3</sup> Integrated Marketing Communication

“To what extent are global companies able to accommodate cultural sensitivity in their digital advertising strategies?”

To find answers for this question, we considered Saudi Arabia, a country at the nexus of modernity and tradition. Despite its integration in global markets and its adoption of high-tech and ICT<sup>4</sup> in its societal system, Saudi Arabia demonstrates cultural constraints and limits that challenge marketers in global companies targeting the Saudi Arabian market.

Actually, Saudi Arabia has a combination of modernity and tradition, which creates a setting that is both captivating and demanding for multinational marketing endeavors. An unusual combination of rapid economic growth, traditional societal values, and a cautious approach to adopting certain aspects of globalization is making Saudi Arabia a country with selective permeability to globalization. Hence, the specific research questions can be formulated as follows:

- What is the effect of Vision 2030 on Saudi Arabia's cultural norms and economic diversification?
- Why is there a perceived offensiveness in global ads that do not consider Saudi Arabian consumers' cultural and religious context?
- How can global firms effectively manage cultural sensitivities, especially those pertaining to religion, in their advertising strategies?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In an attempt to get insights about these inquiries, a literature review was conducted focusing on the theoretical connections between globalization and culture.

### **Globalization: A trigger for normalization of cultures**

In the broadest sense, globalization is defined as “the crystallization of the entire world as a single place” (Mooij, 1998, p. 6). A more detailed definition by UNESCO is as follows: “Globalization is an economic and cultural phenomenon characterized by the increased interconnectedness of nations and their peoples via commerce, information technology, travel, cultural exchanges, mass media, and mass entertainment”.

### **Globalization *versus* businesses**

The commercial landscape has been significantly influenced by globalization, notably in its impact on consumer behavior. With the growing interconnection of marketplaces, customers now have enhanced accessibility to a wide array of items and brands from all parts of the globe. The increased availability is a consequence of various factors

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<sup>4</sup> Information and Communication Technology

related to globalization, such as the widespread use of global supply chains, the worldwide standardization of products, and the growth of multinational corporations (Meyer, 2020).

Kumar & Patel (2022) indicate that globalization has increased the level of consumer exposure to global brands and standardized products. This, in turn, has had an impact on customer expectations and preferences. Global supply chain integration enables consumers to acquire items of consistent quality and design, irrespective of their geographical location (Gereffi & Lee, 2016). In addition, the process of standardizing product characteristics and advertising strategies across several countries has resulted in the formation of global customer segments that have similar interests and preferences (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2021).

The term "global" now incorporates a broader scope beyond international or multinational concerns. It signifies a change towards a more integrated and strategic approach to marketing that utilizes global trends to improve competitiveness (Kumar & Patel, 2022). This shift emphasizes the importance for organizations to comprehend and adjust to the changing consumer habits influenced by the dynamics of globalization.

The presence of intense competition in a globalized environment has resulted as well in a significant change in how consumers behave. Due to enhanced information accessibility and a broader range of options, consumers currently expect superior quality and greater innovation in products. Companies that consistently innovate and adjust to evolving customer demands are progressively gaining market supremacy (Christensen et al., 2015).

With the ongoing process of globalization and the rapid progress in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), organizations are progressively moving towards international markets. This phenomenon poses a substantial obstacle for marketers, who need to modify their market segmentation and marketing mix methods. Although product, price, and place may frequently be standardized across several markets, communication presents a distinct problem. Recipients must understand the material or messages based on their own cultural references, so it is crucial for marketers to take into account local cultural nuances (De Mooij, 2021).

According to De Mooij (2021, p. 7), the author contends that local markets represent individuals, whereas worldwide markets represent commodities. The decision between global and local approaches has emerged as a significant topic in the business world, resulting in the adoption of an intermediate strategy referred to as glocalization. Marketers face a dilemma in deciding whether to standardize their products for economic advantages or adapt to local consumer preferences and behaviors for improved efficiency. The complexity of the contradiction between local and global is heightened with the emergence of digital marketing. Marketers are confronted with the quandary of deciding whether to standardize their worldwide marketing approach or tailor it to each individual market. The true difficulty lies in the marketing

communication strategy: can a "passe-partout"<sup>5</sup> material be created that is universally accepted, irrespective of cultural disparities?

Studies indicate that globalization promotes the uniformity of specific aspects of the marketing mix, especially products. However, to achieve successful communication, a more subtle and refined approach is necessary. Customized marketing messages that take into account local cultural references are more likely to connect with customers, leading to increased engagement and brand loyalty (Nguyen, De Cremer, & Simkin, 2019). This emphasizes how crucial it is for marketers to maintain a harmonious equilibrium between global uniformity and local customization, especially in their communication methods (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010).

### **Globalization *versus* cultures**

An important concept to take into account is the idea that "There may be global products, but there are no global people" (De Mooij, 2021, p. 8). Although globalization has resulted in extensive product uniformity, it is essential to acknowledge that cultural and individual distinctions continue to be vital. Recent research emphasizes that even while global markets are becoming more similar, successful marketing strategies need to consider the specific differences in customer behavior and preferences in different regions (Kumar & Patel, 2022).

The process of global economic homogeneity has facilitated the more efficient promotion of standardized products and services by international corporations, leading to cost reductions and higher profit margins (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2021). Standardization also enables the establishment of a uniform worldwide company identity, which aids in the formation of robust global brands (Meyer, 2020).

In addition, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has highlighted the significance of standardization as an approach for ensuring quality. ISO standards guarantee that products and services adhere to uniform quality standards in many markets, hence promoting the development of a dependable global brand reputation. Additionally, ISO standards address the necessity for quality control and consumer confidence (ISO, 2023).

However, Mooij (1998) argues that social relationships and values in local cultures are bound to resist the corrosive impact of globalization. Globalization carries two notable sides: on one hand, it is assumed to abolish local cultures, while on the other, it is the reason behind the revival of local cultural identities worldwide. Despite a global convergence of technology, media, and financial systems, the behaviors of consumers are not unifying. De Mooij (2021) emphasizes that culture has an equal impact on thinking and acting. Cultural frameworks establish the way people think and perceive. They observe and analyze the world through the lens of their own cultural framework.

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<sup>5</sup> master key

De Mooij (2021) introduces the global-local paradox as follows: As individuals increase their knowledge of foreign nations and cultures, their consciousness regarding their own cultural or national identity also grows. In other words, the more cultures you are introduced to, the more you reflect on your own. Therefore, although the increase in companies doing worldwide business, consumers' wants and needs are not yet unified nor standardized, but rather differ from one country to another.

Today, several companies realize that consumer needs are universal to a large extent, but their attitudes, motivations, and expressions of these needs differ. They recognize the variations between global markets and modify their processes and offerings to meet the needs and wants of their customers.

“Think globally and act locally” is an approach introduced in business studies by Wind (1986) that suggests following a worldwide perspective in terms of design while considering every country’s characteristics and cultural differences. Champy (1997) highlights the significance of appreciating cultural and ethnic characteristics for organizations striving to thrive in global marketplaces. Thorough comprehension of consumers' desires and requirements in many markets is crucial for achieving success in global marketing. To fully understand this, one must possess extensive expertise in cultural contexts and consumer behavior (Kumar & Patel, 2022).

The relevance of cultural intelligence (CQ) has significantly increased in today's globalized society. Cultural intelligence (CQ) is the capacity to understand and effectively interact with people from other cultures. Marketers with a high level of cultural intelligence are able to customize their approaches and messages to different cultural environments, which improves their efficacy and engagement with consumers (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015). By utilizing cultural intelligence, organizations may better cater to local client tastes and requirements, which is crucial for attaining global marketing success (Meyer, 2020).

### **Culture: A Key Determinant of Consumer Behavior**

In an attempt to define culture, Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002) stated that people share, pass on, and learn new things about how to live their lives through culture; which is what gives people the meaning they need to make sense of their experiences and decide what to do next. They recognize different sources of culture, such as language, education, ethnicity, nationality, religion, family, gender, social class, and organization (Rice & Al-Mossawi, 2002, Al-Hyari *et. al*, 2012,).

Therefore, culture is a key factor in consumer behavior. Yet, some global companies are assuming the existence of an international consumer behavior today, a standard one

brought by globalization. To state this assumption, let's examine first the consumer behavior, which is a human behavior *stricto sensu*<sup>6</sup>.

### **Culture is resilient**

Culture has a crucial role in molding consumer behavior, influencing not just how people behave but also contributing to society stability by pushing certain habits and imprinting values in individuals (Kotler & Keller, 2022). Cultural institutions, such as religion, school, family, and government, have vital functions in upholding and preserving cultural norms and values (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2019). Religion frequently acts as a conservative influence by maintaining established cultural practices and opposing change, therefore safeguarding enduring cultural traditions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012).

A society's beliefs, customs, and behavioral patterns are reflexive of its culture. Many authors evoked the stability of culture over time (Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002), Al-Hyari et al. (2012), Sheth (1986), De Mooij (1998 & 2021)).

Culture plays a remarkable role in society by promoting specific behaviors and infusing values in people. It establishes certain power structures in each society and helps maintain them (Samli, 1995). While providing the dominant power structure offers continuity to a society, it could also lead to some massive faults, such as continuous discrimination or widespread poverty (Samli, 1995).

Culture is a main concern for marketing researchers. Understanding why culture is a variable of market segmentation, a reference of consumer behavior and a source of human diversity is the object of a series of classical marketing studies (Hollensen, S. 2020). Recent researches focus on how to influence culture through stimulating new consumers' needs and behaviors (Kabadayi, S., & Lerman, D. 2020).

Mass media, in its various forms, is a way of doing this as it tends to advocate, communicate, and instill values, attitudes, and behaviors (Samli, 1995). Although media represents an essential means for the transmission and reinforcement of cultural aspects, it is a powerful tool of promoting certain attitudes, values, and behaviors within a community.

Because it maintains cultural norms and values, the mass media has a particularly large impact on how consumers behave (Samli, 1995).

Yet, the effect of mass media is defeated by the cultural reinforcers. Education, family, religion, and government are among the cultural reinforcing processes that Samli (1995) highlighted. If active, these reinforcers confer a resilience to a culture. The preservation of the established power structure and cultural stability is greatly aided by these

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<sup>6</sup> "In the strict sense."(1) Literally and without exaggeration or approximation.

institutions. As an example, religion, being inherently conservative, has a tendency to oppose change and Westernization, which helps to maintain long-standing cultural traditions (Samli, 1995).

### **Culture is permeable**

Cultural permeability is the measure of a culture's ability to assimilate and incorporate features from other cultures. Cultures interact and evolve through three main processes:

- "Acculturation", i.e. how people or communities incorporate aspects of another culture into their own identity while still being uniquely themselves. As a result of the mutual influence of their cultures, immigrant groups frequently exhibit this trait.
- "Transculturation", which comprises a deeper interchange in which two or more cultures combine to create a hybrid culture.
- "Enculturation" refers to the way in which people acquire and embrace their own culture's values and conventions from a young age, hence preserving and strengthening cultural identity.

How well these processes work together determines how permeable a culture is. In particular, cultures with a high degree of permeability are more receptive to acculturation and transculturation, allowing for the easy incorporation of foreign cultural practices. Less permeable cultures, on the other hand, place an emphasis on enculturation, the preservation of traditional values and practices, and the resistance to outside influences.

Lower permeability is typically observed in religiously-based civilizations. Where religious ideas and practices are strongly ingrained in daily life and passed down through generations, there is a strong enculturation process that occurs in these cultures. According to Al-Hyari et al. (2012), religious beliefs have a significant impact on consumer behavior and societal norms, indicating that these cultures are very stable and resistant to change. Islamic principles' influence on Middle Eastern advertising was also covered by Rice and Al-Mossawi (2002), suggesting a strong enculturation process that helps maintain cultural traditions.

The importance of media and communication in promoting acculturation and transculturation is vital. The quick transmission of cultural aspects across boundaries is made possible by modern communication technology and global media platforms, increasing the permeability of cultures. Global markets and media have encouraged cultural interaction, which has resulted in a more interconnected world (Levitt, 1983). De Mooij (1998, 2021) focuses on the effectiveness of global advertising and media in bridging cultural divides, however, the degree of success would be dependent on the degree of culture permeability.



### **Implications of Globalization – Culture discrepancy for global marketing**

Understanding that "cultures don't change easily" is a fundamental tenet for marketers negotiating the complexities of international marketplaces. This knowledge emphasizes how important it is to be sensitive to cultural differences and adaptable when developing global marketing communication strategies.

Globalization has a substantial impact on cultural dynamics, resulting in different consequences based on the level of cultural reinforcement in a community. In countries with limited cultural reinforcement, globalization promotes the processes of acculturation and adaptation, leading to a significant permeability of cultural barriers. The permeability of cultures enables their adaptability and evolution by incorporating new influences and practices (Hollensen, 2020).

On the other hand, in countries that have strong cultural influences, globalization results in the process of adopting and internalizing cultural values, and a decrease in the extent to which outside influences are accepted. These civilizations demonstrate cultural resilience by preserving their traditional beliefs and traditions in the face of foreign pressures (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). The selective permeability of cultural identity helps maintain its integrity in the face of globalization's introduction of new elements.

Both scenarios are a consequence of globalization, illustrating how a society's response to global influences is inherently connected to the effectiveness of its cultural mechanisms. Hence, it is imperative to meticulously design global marketing strategies, particularly those related to communication, in order to accommodate these cultural variables. Marketers must have an understanding of the extent to which a culture is receptive or resistant to external influences in order to appropriately customize their marketing mix strategies (Kumar & Patel, 2022; Meyer, 2020).

### **SAUDI ARABIA: A low permeable culture in a highly attractive market**

Saudi Arabia is of great religious significance as it is the birthplace of Islam, with Mecca and Medina being the two most sacred cities in the religion. Islam exerts a profound effect on its legal and social structures (Hegghammer, 2021). The nation is a prominent international oil producer, which has enhanced its economic and geopolitical sway (Al-Moneef, 2020).

Saudi Arabia holds a prominent position in the Arab Muslim world as a result of its strong economic influence, religious importance, and political guidance. The kingdom's sphere of influence expands through its regional policies and alliances, particularly as a result of the recent changes spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Elshennawy, 2022).

Saudi Arabia has a unique potential for examining the influence of culture on global marketing, given its distinct combination of cultural, economic, and geopolitical elements. Being the place where Islam originated, its Islamic principles have a profound impact on consumer behavior and society conventions (Hegghammer, 2021). The kingdom's position as a prominent oil producer amplifies its economic and geopolitical significance, rendering it a noteworthy market for global brands (Al-Moneef, 2020). Furthermore, the continuing reforms under Vision 2030 offer prospects for investigating the interplay between cultural adaptation and modernization. Saudi Arabia's unique characteristics make it an important case study for exploring how global marketing methods can be customized to suit varied cultural contexts.

### **Cultural Determinants in Saudi Arabia**

This section explores – based on a review of previous studies - the various cultural factors in Saudi Arabia, a country targeted by a broad range of global businesses due the high spending capacity of its inhabitants.

#### ***Religion: A Key Determinant***

According to Al-Hyari et al. (2012), religion clarifies and defines life's principles, which are then mirrored in societal norms and individual attitudes. These attitudes and values determine the behavior of institutions as well as the members of a certain culture. In other words, religion can be perceived as the catalyst for consumer purchasing habits.

It is important to note that Arabic/Islamic cultures are extremely collective in nature (Al-Hyari et. al, 2012). In such cultures, relationships between members of the society and the interconnectedness between them play a central role in shaping a person's identity. Therefore, family values and socialization are at the core of any Arabic/Islamic culture (Al-Hyari et. al, 2012). Consequently, collectivism directly influences purchasing decisions and behaviors.

The study of Al-Hyari et al. (2012) stresses also that the mixture of religion and conspicuous consumption directly affects consumers' purchasing decisions. It concluded that a consumer's buying decision is highly affected by a product's country of origin. Companies are directly influenced by cultural conflicts. The study presents the example of the boycott of Danish products in the Muslim world. Since the Danish Government has refused to condemn the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published by the Danish Newspaper Jyllands-Posten in September 2005. This boycott reveals the power of religious considerations in Muslim societies.

Add to it, a study done in 2020 by Bajaber on the impact of cultural values in advertising on Saudi consumers' loyalty showed that advertiser-supported ideas could have a beneficial or detrimental impact on viewers. It concluded that there was a notable detrimental effect on consumer loyalty to advertisers who published ads' content that is incompatible with their cultural identity (Bajaber 2020).

In order to comprehend the cultural environment in Saudi Arabia, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of certain fundamental Islamic beliefs. Sharia is an Islamic legal framework derived from the Quran and Hadith, which governs all elements of a Muslim's life, encompassing legal, moral, and social issues (El-Awa, 2008). Halal refers to actions and practices that are allowed according to Islamic law. This term encompasses not just food, but also money transactions and behavior (Ibn Jauzi, 2021). Islamic values are based on the principles of justice, compassion, and integrity, which have an impact on both personal and commercial behavior (Esposito, 2015). In Islamic culture, there are taboos that pertain to activities that are considered wicked, such as the avoidance of consuming pork and alcohol. Additionally, there are regulations regarding modesty and relationships between genders (Rizvi, 2020). Understanding these notions is essential for comprehending the cultural framework and customer expectations in Saudi Arabia.

Based on the above, global companies need to fully examine a country's cultural background and localize their products in order to meet the country's standards. For the Muslim World, and Saudi Arabia in particular, they need to consider religion as a key determinant of consumer behaviors, and get insights about Shariah principles, the *Halal* concept, Islamic values and taboos so as to set appropriate marketing communication strategies.

### ***Societal Institutions: Vectors and Reinforcers***

Societal institutions in Saudi Arabia have a significant impact in shaping cultural factors and strengthening social norms. The family is a vital institution that plays a crucial role in socializing individuals and transmitting culture. The emphasis is placed on traditional values such as reverence for older generations, hierarchical connections, and shared accountability, all of which are essential for upholding social stability and continuity (Esposito, 2015).

Education plays an essential part in shaping cultural standards, as the curriculum frequently incorporates Islamic ideals and societal expectations. Educational institutions serve the purpose of not only providing academic knowledge, but also instilling cultural and ethical values in individuals, equipping them to make meaningful contributions to a society that strongly upholds its traditions (Rizvi, 2020).

The economic institutions of Saudi Arabia are organized based on cultural norms, which have a significant impact on business practices and consumer behavior. Financial transactions are required to adhere to halal principles, which have an impact on the way firms function and engage with consumers (Ibn Jauzi, 2021). Government policies promote cultural norms by enacting legislation that align with social ideals, such as upholding public order and promoting cultural heritage. These institutions jointly influence the cultural landscape, shaping the necessary adaptations of global marketing strategies to align with local expectations and conventions.

## **Vision 2030**

On April 25, 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman unveiled "Vision 2030", a strategy aimed at achieving three interconnected objectives: raising Saudi Arabia's profile internationally, modernizing society in line with cultural traditions, and diversifying the Saudi economy away from oil. Eight years ago, when he began this journey, he declared: "Our vision is a strong, thriving and stable Saudi Arabia ... with Islam as its constitution and moderation as its method."

Briefly, through Vision 2030 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia aims at becoming a major player in international investment and the hub linking Europe, Asia, and Africa (Vision 2030, G. 2016).

However, there's a chance that this significant social opening will spark anxiety at home or possibly a reaction. Saud Kateb (Saud Kateb, 2020) asked Saudis about what "national attractions" in the country the leadership should highlight as part of its soft power strategy. The majority of respondents concurred that the kingdom's significance to Islam and its place in the Muslim world need to take precedence. The least significant factors, according to the participants, are "artistic creativity, powerful media, tourism potentials, and entertainment attractions." (Saud Kateb, 2020).

Additionally, respondents stated that entertainment shouldn't conflict with Saudi Arabian social and cultural norms. Thus, Saudi residents are deeply attached to their religious values and not totally involved in globalization.

In this context, it is interesting to investigate how Saudi Arabia's ambitious "Vision 2030," affects the marketing strategies of MNCs doing business in the Kingdom.

The necessity of matching marketing messaging with the cultural and religious fabric of Saudi society is a challenge for global companies that seek to standardize their marketing communication strategies worldwide.

In parallel, some recent studies highlighted the changing attitudes, lifestyle and consumption behaviors of Saudi citizens as Vision 2030 takes shape (Alharthi, 2021; Al-Khalifa, 2022). This reflects that KSA is witnessing a period of change at all levels that makes it more permeable to globalization influences. Although the change is mostly affecting Saudi Arabia's economy, the other societal dimensions are influenced due to their systemic interrelationships, but also to an update of legislation in a way to cope with the new image of the kingdom that Vision 2030 aims to convey (Ghanem, 2023). This complex period that some essayists qualify as a transition period (El-Sayed, 2020), others as modernization (Al-Bassam, 2022), suggests that global businesses should be cautious in devising their marketing communication strategies. Global messages or communication content don't seem to fit in a conservative society where everything is interpreted through the prism of religion.

Effectively aligning advertising efforts with cultural norms is not only a crucial requirement but also a critical factor in determining success inside the Saudi market.

## **Research Hypotheses**

Based on the review of literature and relevant studies related to Saudi Arabia and its vision 2030, and in an attempt to answer the questions of this research, we assume that:

- Hypothesis 1: Vision 2030 is a trigger for societal change at KSA.

Vision 2030 is in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and represents a comprehensive effort to broaden the economy, improve social infrastructure, and modernize numerous sectors. The objective is to reduce the country's reliance on petroleum, encourage the expansion of the economy into various sectors, and enhance the standard of living for the people of Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 is implementing substantial changes in sectors such as education, healthcare, and entertainment, resulting in a dramatic transformation of Saudi society. This transformation involves increasing openness to new ideas and global influences, as well as transforming the cultural and economic aspects of the country.

- Hypothesis 2: Marketing communication tactics that are in line with cultural and religious values have a greater chance of connecting with Saudi Arabian consumers.

During this era of transformation, it appears that global communication tactics are ineffective due to the continued strength and influence of religious filters. The cultural factors of Saudi Arabia, including deeply rooted Islamic values, family structures, and traditional social standards, have a substantial impact on consumer behavior. These aspects generate a robust opposition to messages that do not conform to or show regard for local norms and values, emphasizing the necessity for marketers to adapt their techniques to line with the cultural and religious framework of the country.

- Hypothesis 3: In the Saudi Arabian market, cultural sensitivity is a strategic referent of success for global companies' communication efforts.

It is highly probable that multinational companies achieve long-term success in the Saudi market by showcasing cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and congruence with local values in their advertising tactics.

### **Methodological plan**

To understand the complex connection between religious-based culture and marketing communication approaches, the optimal research strategy to follow is the case study. The choice of Saudi Arabia is supported by the specific religious context of a country considered historically as the holy land of Islam, but seeking presently to enhance its economic and political position at the international scene.

The justification for choosing Saudi Arabia is based on its strategic significance as a vibrant market experiencing considerable economic, social, and cultural changes, notably reflected in the ambitious Vision 2030 initiative. This strategy enables, as well, a comprehensive examination of how global companies navigate the complex cultural environment of Saudi Arabia in their advertising tactics, providing significant insights and contributing to a deeper comprehension of worldwide marketing dynamics.

In line with the deductive approach of this research, we referred to the simple mixed method to collect primary data.

The rationale for the choice of mixed methods lies in its synergistic nature, which combines the comprehensive scope of quantitative analysis with the profound insights provided by qualitative investigation.

The study used a cross-sectional temporal frame to capture current dynamics and trends of cultural alignment in marketing. The study's framework covered a duration of one year, starting from March 2023.

To address the quantitative part of this study, data on the perceptions and attitudes of Saudi Arabian people towards advertising content, design, and appeal was collected by a survey done via an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of questions that encompass demographic information, advertising exposure, cultural sensitivity in advertising, and general attitudes regarding global ads.

Simultaneously, the qualitative part encompassed a sequence of semi-structured interviews with 10 marketing specialists in Saudi Arabia. The purpose of these interviews was to reveal their opinions about the advertising content and effectiveness of global firms' commercials in the Saudi market. The main topics discussed included participants' perspectives on culturally appropriate advertising, their encounters with international advertisements, the connection between contemporary marketing in KSA and Vision 2030, and the difficulties encountered in attaining cultural resonance.

Hence, 2 populations are targeted: the Saudi residents and the Saudi marketing experts.

For the first population, we identified a facebook page named Residents of Saudi Arabia which gathers Saudi citizens from all the Saudi territory and from different age ranges.

This facebook community raises discussions about contemporary societal issues in the kingdom. We posted our survey on this page and boosted the participation of this page' members several times. After one year, we collected 3200 duly completed questionnaires.

For interviews, a purposive non-random sampling was followed after identifying 10 marketing experts in KSA and then calling them for an e-interview via Zoom.

In addition, secondary data were gathered from other online and social media sites. The secondary data consisted of feedback and comments provided by inhabitants of KSA regarding selected critical advertisements from various global firms throughout the research period. Examining these instantaneous answers offered more understanding into the initial reactions and perceptions of the intended audience towards advertising initiatives.

This methodological process seeks to provide detailed insights into the intricate correlation between cultural subtleties and successful advertising strategies in the Saudi Arabian market.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This section examines the results obtained from the survey, expert interviews, and analysis of secondary data to investigate the complex connection between cultural sensitivity and global companies' marketing communication strategies in Saudi Arabia.

### **Primary data findings**

#### **Survey insights**

In this study, the deliberate choice was made to mostly concentrate on descriptive statistics, namely frequency analysis, in line with the research goals and the overall objectives of the survey. Although we have knowledge of both descriptive and inferential statistical approaches, the specific parameters of this study required a more direct analysis that accurately represents the attitudes and views of the participants. The use of descriptive statistics enabled us to effectively emphasize the most significant patterns, preferences, and culturally sensitive aspects disclosed by participants. This facilitated a clear comprehension of the survey's purpose without probing into complex inferential methods that were outside the scope of this exploratory study.

#### **Participants' profile**

There are 42.4% female respondents and 57.6% male respondents.

A significant percentage of participants (51.1%) are under the age of 35, with (40.4%) belonging to the age range (25–35) and (11.1%) to the age range (19-24).

This noticeable representation of young demographics in the survey is explained by the online nature of the questionnaire distribution on a social media platform.

47.5% of the respondents are single, while 44.4% are married.

The majority of respondents are educated people, with 7.1% holding a PhD, 48.5% a Master degree, and 28.3% a Bachelor degree. Consequently, their income level is expected to be high. Indeed, more than half of our sample earn more than 15,000 SAR per month.

The individuals involved in the survey are primarily mature adults and engaged individuals in society, demonstrating a high educational background and financial stability.

### **Participants' perceptions of standardized global advertising**

The majority of respondents (87.9%) claim that social media is the most influential advertising channel for global companies. (62.6%) express that they feel offended by commercials that do not consider their culture. Of those offended, the content that makes them uncomfortable relates to the disrespect for religious values (34.7%), the use of sexual overtones (29.2%), the disregard for traditions and customs (20.8%), and the discrimination and racism (15.3%).

The majority of respondents (62.6%) emphasize the importance of cultural alignment in marketing communication content and state that they strongly believe that commercials should represent and respect the cultural values of the target audience.

The most important components of culturally sensitive advertising, according to respondents, are respecting sociocultural values (38.5%), not being offensive to minors (21.9%), language (14%), being compatible with religious norms (13.1%), and adhering to traditions and customs (12.5%).

### **Participant's reaction to culturally insensitive communication content**

A significant proportion of participants (89.9%) indicate that they would be inclined to endorse firms that exhibit cultural sensitivity in their advertising, suggesting a robust association between cultural sensitivity and brand loyalty.

Significantly, 62.6% of participants indicated that they would be unwilling to buy products promoted in a way that is disrespectful of their cultural values, underscoring the possible harm that cultural insensitivity could do to a brand's reputation and the trust of its customers.

### **Participant's ranking of culturally sensitive advertising elements**

Respondents rank respect for cultural values (69.7%), religious norms (45.5%), social beliefs (48.5%), the nation's regulatory framework (42.4%), and children's innocence (61.6%) as the most important requirement for advertisers. This highlights the variety of expectations that advertisers have to uphold moral and cultural standards.



This frequency-based analysis of the questionnaire reveals how crucial it is to match advertising content to the expectations and cultural values of the intended audience. Advertisers may cultivate positive brand views, improve consumer engagement, and establish enduring relationships with their audience by exhibiting cultural awareness and respect.

### **Knowledge Gained from Expert Interviews**

Expert interviews offered useful perspectives on global advertising standardization, cultural sensitivity, and the influence of Vision 2030 on advertising strategy in Saudi Arabia.

### **Perspectives on the Standardization of Global Advertising**

Experts presented varying perspectives on the notion of global advertising standardization, with some arguing for a uniform strategy to achieve cost-effectiveness and brand coherence, while others underlined the significance of local customization to ensure cultural relevance and efficacy.

Different viewpoints were influenced by factors such as target audience, industry, and advertising goals, emphasizing the intricate nature of the standardization versus localization-in global advertising campaigns.

### **Significance of Cultural Sensitivity and Local Adaptation**

All interviewees emphasized the crucial significance of cultural sensitivity and local adaptation of advertising content, especially in markets such as Saudi Arabia with unique cultural norms and values. They underscored the importance of brands adhering to local customs, religious views, and language preferences. They also emphasized that effective advertising techniques should align with the cultural context of the target audience in order to cultivate favorable brand perception and engagement.

### **Consumer Responses to Cultural Insensitivity**

Interviewees provided valuable perspectives on the potential consequences of cultural insensitivity in global advertising content, emphasizing the substantial adverse effects on customer perception, brand reputation, and market sustainability.

They evoked some of the negative responses from Saudi customers, i.e. boycotts, criticism on social media, and interventions by regulatory authorities.

### **The impact of Vision 2030 on advertising strategies**

The majority of interviewees realize the significant impact of Vision 2030 on economic diversification, yet, only two believe that this vision will induce a cultural shift.

Most of our interviewees argue that global companies considered The Vision 2030 initiative as a driving force for sociocultural change at KSA. Therefore, they gave up

devising specific marketing communication content for this market, and opted for global ads specially that social media has made any content accessible by anyone anywhere. Yet, this doesn't seem to be an effective strategy in low permeability cultures that refer to religious codes to consolidate its values.

## **DISCUSSION OF PRIMARY DATA FINDINGS**

This section examines the primary data findings concerning the need for cultural customization in advertising, its impact on consumer purchase decisions, and the need for ethical principles in marketing communications. The purpose is to get a deeper understanding of how culturally sensitive advertising can improve brand perception and consumer involvement.

### ***The impact of advertising content on cultural values***

Respondents hold a strong conviction regarding the powerful potency of advertising content in altering cultural values throughout society, emphasizing the widespread effect of advertising messages in molding cultural norms and beliefs. This emphasizes the obligation of advertisers to carefully consider the wider societal consequences of their marketing communication content and to guarantee that it aligns with cultural values and sensitivities.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (89.9%) support the customization of advertising campaigns to align with the culture of each country. They highlight the significance of tailoring messages to resonate with varied cultural audiences aligning with the experts interviewed as well, who underscored that good advertising content should match the target audience's culture to boost brand perception and engagement.

To that, Respondents emphasize the importance for global companies to align their communication content with local customs, traditions, and language preferences, acknowledging the varied cultural environments in different markets.

### ***The influence of cultural compatibility on purchasing decisions***

The majority of participants expressed a high probability of endorsing firms that exhibit cultural reverence in their advertising, indicating that cultural compatibility significantly influences customer buying choices which mirrors the professionals emphasizing in their discourse the significance of integrating advertising strategies with local cultural values, confirming hypothesis 1 and 2. This emphasizes the capacity for culturally aware advertising to have a beneficial impact on how consumers perceive a brand and behave as consumers.

### ***Ethical Advertising Practices***

Respondents strongly emphasize the importance of respect in advertising practices, particularly in regards to cultural values, religious norms, social beliefs, the country's regulatory framework, and the innocence of children.

Therefore, marketers are strongly advised to give utmost importance to cultural sensitivity in their messaging, refraining from using content that could potentially be interpreted as insulting or disrespectful towards the cultural, religious, or social sensitivities of the intended audience.

The analysis of overall attitudes towards marketing communication content emphasizes the ***significance of tailored messages, the effect of cultural compatibility on purchasing choices, and the importance of culturally intelligent content***. Through the strategic alignment of advertising design with cultural norms and sensitivities, marketers have the ability to cultivate favorable brand views, amplify consumer involvement, and establish enduring relationships with their target audience.

It's important to mention that the majority of interviewees emphasized the significance of integrating advertising strategies with cultural changes and Vision 2030 objectives. Their practical guidance underscores the importance of conducting cultural examination, engaging stakeholders, and adhering to regulatory requirements. The findings support the first hypothesis indicating that the successful implementation of Vision 2030 can indeed have a favorable impact on Saudi Arabia's endeavors to reconcile cultural traditions with economic development. Moreover, the prioritization of localization, digital platforms, and integration of Vision 2030 principles confirms the validity of the third hypothesis. This suggests that international corporations can achieve sustained success in the Saudi market by demonstrating cultural sensitivity and adaptation in their advertising strategies.

### **Secondary Data Analysis**

This section explores two global ads displayed on X social media platform (previously known as Twitter) that provide insights into public perceptions and responses in Saudi Arabia. The choice of X as a key data source is rationalized by its extensive adoption and impact among Saudis, rendering it an indispensable asset for comprehending public opinion and perception regarding advertising campaigns. Through the analysis of publications and social media replies, the objective is to get a thorough comprehension of the interplay between advertising dynamics and societal reactions within the Saudi context.

- Burger King launched the #WhoppHER campaign in July 2018: Burger King launched a promotional campaign centered around the distribution of complimentary Whopper burgers in honor of women's driving in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the corporation overlooked the fact that "whop" in Arabic

denotes the action of striking forcefully. After launching the campaign, the corporation encountered inquiries regarding their stance on women.

The comments from X on Burger King's #WhoppHER campaign demonstrate a misinterpretation of its intended message. There were concerns expressed with the term "whop," as it carries negative connotations associated with violence. Users criticized Burger King's choice of wording, arguing that it went against the campaign's purpose of promoting women's driving in Saudi Arabia. The remarks emphasize the significance of linguistic sensitivity in advertising content, especially in culturally delicate circumstances.

- Coca-Cola launched an ad featuring a Saudi Woman Driving Nov 2017 under the title "Change has a taste":

In one of the many written news documents about this topic, on Newsweek.com, the spotlight was shed on a contentious Coca-Cola advertising that was unveiled in November 2017, immediately after Saudi Arabia's announcement regarding women's driving rights. The advertisement showcases a Saudi father presenting his daughter with the vehicle keys, and following her consumption of Coke, she proceeds to drive with assurance. The tagline is "Change Has a Taste." The advertisement received criticism for belittling the challenges faced by women in the traditional Muslim nation. Critics accused Coca-Cola of capitalizing on a delicate matter for financial gain.

The findings from secondary data analysis have significant implications for global firms operating in the Saudi market. Understanding and respecting Saudi cultural values, customs, and religious beliefs is essential when developing marketing communication strategies, particularly advertising. Advertisers must ensure that their messages are locally adapted, culturally appropriate, thoughtful, and successfully resonate with the target audience.

The above-mentioned examples offer concrete evidence that supports our second hypothesis which stipulates that marketing tactics that are in line with cultural and religious values have a greater chance of connecting with Saudi Arabian consumers and lessening the perception of offensiveness. These incidents illustrate that marketing strategies that are in line with cultural and religious values are more likely to connect with Saudi Arabian consumers, but actions that go against cultural sensibilities can result in substantial backlash and harm to a brand's reputation.

Furthermore, these occurrences highlight the significance of the third hypothesis, which suggests that international corporations seeking sustained success in the Saudi Arabian market should give utmost priority to cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and alignment with local values in their advertising strategies. Neglecting to do this, can lead to harmful repercussions for how the brand is perceived and its success in the market.

## CONCLUSION

The research yielded significant insights into the significance of cultural respect and adaptability in global marketing communication strategies, the impact of Vision 2030 on global firms' advertising content, and the consequences of cultural insensitivity for brands.

The findings enhanced our comprehension of the intricate relationship between cultural values, advertising strategies, and consumer choices in Saudi Arabia. They emphasized the crucial significance for global firms operating in the Saudi Arabia market to employ glocalization approaches.

Performing comprehensive cultural research and implementing a tailored approach to advertising efforts are a must. To effectively connect with the Saudi audience and prevent negative reactions, global firms' marketers should give utmost importance to cultural sensitivity and adapt their strategies accordingly. Moreover, by connecting their marketing communication content with the objectives of Vision 2030, global firms have the chance to showcase their dedication to societal advancement and economic growth, thereby establishing deeper connections with consumers.

The research identified certain culturally sensitive aspects that advertising must adhere to. These factors encompass the uphold of cultural values, religious standards, social views, the country's regulatory system, and the safeguarding of children's innocence. The significance attributed to these aspects emphasizes the imperative for advertisers to synchronize their content with the cultural norms and anticipations of their target audience. Advertisers can cultivate favorable brand views, increase consumer involvement, and establish lasting connections with their target audience by exhibiting cultural sensitivity and respect for these delicate aspects.

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