Preface

International Marketing Research is fundamental for firms expanding globally (Douglas & Craig, 2006). Specifically, within this area, consumer behaviour in international markets is still not well understood, in spite of the importance of consumers and of having knowledge about them. This view is supported by Meglena Kuneva, EU Consumer Commissioner who pointed out: “There are now more than 490 million consumers in Europe and their expenditure represents over half of the EU’s gross domestic product (GDP). Consumers are essential to economic growth and job creation. Yet there is an EU-wide lack of consumer confidence when it comes to cross-border shopping. I believe that consumers should be confident about making purchases in other countries as they are at home.”

Culture has become an important strategic issue in markets, and one that has to be faced and properly managed. Moreover, as the concept of culture is becoming more diffuse, and “global culture is shared not so much between countries as between particular individuals within countries” (Steenkamp, 2001, p. 37), there is a need for a profound understanding of the cultural manifestation observable in consumer behaviour (Craig & Douglas, 2006).

1. CONSUMPTION CULTURE

Globalization is most notably reflected in the expansion of international business. As a consequence, there is an increased need for businesses to understand consumers from a cross-national perspective. Cleveland and Laroche specifically mention the two following trends, “Globalization has reduced the homogeneity of consumer behaviours within countries, while increasing commonalities among consumers across countries” (2007, p. 250).

Companies currently have to decide whether to standardize their marketing strategies or to develop differentiated strategies. This addresses the question whether and to what extent in our globalized world consumer attitudes, perception and behaviour differ between countries and, hence, require differentiated marketing strategies. According to Banerjee (2008), even after tremendous exposure to globalization, consumers from different cultures have different attitudes, perceptions, tastes, preferences, and values. Put another way, “Globalization is everything and its opposite” (Friedman, 1999, p. 331).
On the other hand, against the backdrop of a longstanding tradition of unification of the European market as reflected in the European Union and agreements in political, financial, and economic aspects, the assumption that Europe can be treated as a single market seems to have become established (Steenkamp & Ter Hofstede, 2002). While some studies confirm the assumption of a single pan-European market (Yip, 1995; Özsomer & Simonin, 2004), another stream of research emphasizes that European countries continue to possess predominantly distinct market identities and those studies favour multi-regional strategies (Lemmens, De Haan, Van Galen & Meulenbroek, 2007; Kaufmann, Zagorac & Sanchez Bengoa, 2008; Bracic-Stjepcevic, Guszak & Sopka, 2011). Profit and non-profit marketing professionals wishing to profile consumers and define new targets often ask for research information on cultural determinants. The trend leading toward the socio-economic integration between Eastern and Western Europe, for example, continues in spite of the economic crisis, increasing the need for references on the cross-cultural dimension. At the same time, economic differences among Northern and Southern European countries seem to increase, showing the need for a careful consideration on the relative effects in terms of consumption culture.

Culture and its factors have been traditionally studied through literature, not only in marketing but also in other fields (Albaum, Yu, Wiese, Herche & Evangelista, 2010). Nevertheless, even if there are several approaches to defining culture in anthropology, sociology, cross-cultural psychology, and marketing, there is no single, agreed definition (Merz, He & Alden, 2008). “Culture, by definition, is very abstract and complex, and consequently, few have agreed on a common definition for the concept” (Cleveland & LaBarge, 2007, p. 250). The diverse interpretations of culture are reflected in the number of different conceptualizations. As early as 1954, Kroeber and Kluckhohn cited 164 different definitions of culture (1954, p. 4355). The most widely accepted definition of culture is: “the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group from another” (Hofstede, 1984, p. 201).

One purpose of the preface of this book is to establish that many approaches and frameworks exist to aid researchers in their efforts to conceptualize culture and to capture the meaning of cultural differences between markets. Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham (2007) apply a cultural assessment typology to distinguish between approaches that have been used in existing marketing studies to measure culture. This distinguishes between four approaches: (1) ethnological descriptions, (2) use of proxies, (3) direct values inferences, and (4) indirect values inferences. This typology serves to classify approaches to the study of culture in marketing.

The direct values inference, and Hofstede’s cultural dimensions in particular, is arguably the most commonly used approach in cross-cultural marketing. However, although Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and distance scores have been widely ap-
plied in international marketing studies, both his methodology and understanding of culture have been widely criticized (e.g. McSweeney, 2002; Baskerville, 2003; Blodgett, Bakir, & Rose, 2008) and other frameworks like those of Hall (1976), Schwartz (1994), Trompenaars (1994), Kim, Pan, & Park (1998), House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta (2004), Cleveland & Laroche (2007), and Chen & West (2008) have identified alternative configurations of cultural dimensions.

Many researchers in international marketing have claimed that culture is a prime determinant of various human behaviours, including consumption. Culture is a part of our daily lives that is present in the products we use, the television programs we watch, etc. (Van Raaij, 1997). Consuming is central to who and what we are and involves much more than a weekly excursion to the supermarket. Whatever the differences between people visible in preconceived national characteristics, it is at least arguable that they are outweighed by a shared identity as consumers (Bauman, 1995).

Arnould & Thompson (2005, p. 869) define consumer culture suggesting that it “frames consumers’ horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behaviour and sense-making interpretations more likely than others.” Pointing to the emergence of consumer culture, Arnould & Thompson (2005, p. 873) state: “In contrast to traditional anthropological views of people as culture bearers, consumers are seen as culture producers.” A culture of consumption should not therefore be visualized as some pre-existing determining antecedent; for a culture frames how consumers behave, their behaviour in turn modifies the cultural system. In other words, there is an ongoing reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between consumers and consumer culture.

In his groundbreaking article on culture and consumption, Grant McCracken (1986) offers further insight into the possible workings of a culture of consumption. For McCracken, a culture fulfils two broad remits. First, it furnishes people with a lens through which they can make sense of their world as consumers and does so by categorizing, by making distinctions between people, places, times and space. Through marketplace enculturation, consumers learn to apply these categories and thereby make sense of their surroundings, to read the landscape as a consumerscape. The second element of a culture acts as a template or blueprint for people’s activity. Here, McCracken includes the repertory of appropriate behaviours, customs and rituals, and the coordinates of customary consumer behaviour – queuing, bidding, paying, using, drinking, disposing, lending, and wearing.

Researchers have argued that international marketing studies need measures that permit comparative analysis of consumer culture. Consumption should be the point of departure; it is not the end result or outcome of any series of extra-consumption variables, influences or determinants. Embracing a culture-of-consumption perspective absolves consumer researchers from having to set out with some predetermined a priori dimensions or indices of what ‘culture’ is. The consumer culture environment should be decoded on its own terms.
2. CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND CULTURE

Culture, as a sum of perceptual, evaluative, communicative, conative, and value-related standards characterizing individuals sharing the same language in a given historical period and geographic area, is fundamental to comprehending human behaviour. Consumption represents an important—if not the main—experiential area of human behaviour, and every society has its own experiential area (Siri, 2004). Today, a new experiential centrality is assigned by the phenomenon of consumption, meant as the expression of a particular way of using objects, meanings, related languages, and of establishing human relationships. Even the most socializing contexts, the ones where people meet together, are related to consumption (e.g. a shopping mall).

Today, world trends such as globalization, fragmentation, and tribalization make it more complex to understand culture. In European postmodern societies, the diffusion of information and communication technologies, the intensifying migration flows, the radicalization of individualist and collectivist stances are affecting the process of re-creation of social identity. All these elements have thus modified the cultural maps used to date. The comprehension of consumer behaviour is being compromised by the social changes engendered by these global trends. For this reason, researchers are forced to perform updated analysis on cultural characteristics (Featherstone, 1991), and their relationships with consumer choices, as consequences of current social changes and, at the same time, fundamental inputs of marketing strategies (Tsoukatos, 2011; Horska, Nagyova, Loebl & Rovny, 2011; Ganguly & Dash, 2011).

There are further reasons, both operative and theoretical, that validate the renewed attention paid to the relationship between culture and consumption.

The main theoretical frameworks conceive of culture as a static phenomenon instead of a dynamic one, proposing schemes that disregard the relative context and neglecting the possibility that individuals react differently to events according to different contingencies (Nakata, 2003). They also imply a constant internal homogeneity within the culture, overlooking the heterogeneity of subcultures and legitimizing a direct correspondence between countries and culture instead of considering transnational shared characteristics. As a result, the main theoretical frameworks give rise to a need for a new wave of studies on the relationship between culture and consumption that acknowledges their complexity and dynamism and aims to broaden the view to the interplay between consumption and culture.

Understanding that the individualism and the enhancement of the self are two of the most relevant phenomena concerning the contemporary culture of consumption leads us to seek a cultural micro-analysis. The micro-analysis takes individual culture or subculture as its unit of analysis (Steenkamp, 2001), focusing on the responsibility of individuals (viewed as social, independent players). Individuals can accept, select, or refuse cultural influences. As such, they are not passive receivers but akin to “architects” of cultural change. Understanding their motivating values seems to be a prerequisite for comprehending the process of change.
This type of analysis is still at an early stage, but it does demand the attention of experts on cross-cultural marketing. This book builds on this call, representing a first attempt at providing a pluralistic view of the relationship between consumption and culture. We focus our attention on drinking-related consumption behaviour in 30 European countries.

With so many challenging questions and issues to address, the principles and objectives of the COBEREN research protocols have been defined in a way that mandates the selection and implementation of a typical methodology that can be specifically described as such:

- A mixed methodological approach combining the advantages of qualitative and quantitative techniques and the use of a large range of numerical, verbal, and pictorial measurements.
- A broad scope to cover different aspects/dimensions of consumer culture but an obligation to retain an acceptable format from the point of view of the study’s participants.
- Coordination and centralization of the process while recognizing a need for local flexibility to reach the defined targets.
- Combination of some predefined instructions and guidelines with the ability to make some later adaptations owing to the use of quick and flexible tools.

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