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## CULTURE AND MEDIA: THE STUDY OF NATIONAL EDITIONS OF A FASHION MAGAZINE

This article shows the results of an Amsterdam Fashion institute students' research, conducted under the author's supervision, into whether cultural factors influence a fashion magazine's editorial and advertisement content, as well as its placement within different countries. Students participating in the Intercultural Communication and Globalization courses were asked to research the link between media and culture, by studying one brand (*Vogue* magazine) across three different countries. Students were encouraged to use interdisciplinary methodology in examining English, French and Russian editions of *Vogue*, analysing text and image, political and social elements within these editions. Representation of national or international (often American or West European) celebrities and models, the (exotic) Other, sex, gender and authority all appeared to be influenced by the local context in which *Vogue* appeared. Together with students, I was able to identify a number of elements through which local differences in representation can be measured.

The main subject areas that I shall analyse in the three versions of *Vogue* are related to representations of the local and the global, to issues surrounding factors like sex, gender editions and authority. This chosen template of three different international *Vogues* from April 2005 can be utilised for any country and any brand magazine. Twelve issues of *Vogue* from the previous year are also examined in order to provide more context and material for comparison. The magazines will be used as tools for exposing cultural differences and similarities, by using the same 'brand' of a magazine across different cultural markets.

*Keywords:* culture and media, fashion theory, globalization.

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## 1. Magazines in Anthropological and Marketing Contexts

Women's magazines are both cultural products and commodities, argues Moeran (2006: 225) in his article on Japanese edition of *Vogue*. As such, women's and fashion magazines are an interesting subject of study for both anthropologists (interested in cultural products) and market researchers (interested in commodities). In examining the national differences between editions of *Vogue* in New York, Paris and London, Edwards (2006) uses interdisciplinary methodology including mapping and issues of place to provide insights into the differences between national versions of *Vogue*. The study of national editions of fashion magazines may provide potentially interesting insights into both globalization and localization theories and practical information about the consumer of such a commodity. In practice, however, the study of magazines is often delegated to fields of media and communications.

Anthropologists are known to work in contexts wider than academic settings, actively engaging with people from other disciplines and professions. The lecturers in the Fashion institute where I presently work are challenged to integrate the practical knowledge and skills originating from the fashion industry into lessons, lectures and projects that prepare the students for their future careers. Our own task as anthropologist lecturers in Intercultural Communication and Culture and Globalization courses is to engrain broader knowledge in students to compliment the practical competencies required in professional settings. An example of the practical assignments asked of our students is integrating their knowledge of minority groups or other cultures in developing certain fashion brands that would appeal to different ethnic groups or social classes within own society or be marketable abroad. The deeper knowledge of segmentation, niche markets and specific target groups helps students to orient themselves in professional situations within the fashion industry. This requires an act of translation as well as transformation in order to translate the general (such as cultural theories) into the concrete (such as examples from the fashion industry) and to transform concrete examples and cases into broader theories. This article reflects on such acts of translation and transformation that serve as the basis for some of the courses I offer to our fashion students.

The researchers of marketing, consumer behaviour, brand developments and trends tend to approach culture as an 'obvious given', treating it with certain offhandedness. They see social scientists as 'remote' and caught in their own paradigm. Culture may also be seen as something that stands in the way of globalization, a kind of nuisance to be dealt with. While sharing the general consensus that culture should be 'respected' and 'treated seriously', the major thrust of marketing and consumer studies is often, implicitly, how to overcome and 'manage' culture (Roothart & Van der Pol 2003).

Social anthropologists tend to shun the 'non-academics' who deal with realities of the market, consumer behaviour and trend developments implying that their commercial orientation prohibits development of scientific theory. Anthropologists tend to shield their ivory tower from the supposedly polluting influences of their 'more commercially oriented' colleagues by branding their insights superficial and unworthy of serious attention.

Yet, culture and fashion are very closely interlinked, and the research done by anthropologists and consumer behaviour or marketing researchers can well compliment each other and add to joint knowledge (Bruzzi & Gibson 2000; Davis 2004). Both anthropologists and fashion industry practitioners are grappling with very similar issues, such as globalization vs. localization, culture vs. economic and industrial development, market forces vs. tradition, etc. Both tend to approach culture as a complex and dynamic whole rather than simplified or reified entity by specifying concrete examples from fieldwork or practice to illustrate cultural complexity. Methodologies, involving both qualitative and quantitative methods, also often overlap, offering a wealth of information at both macro and micro levels of analysis. These range from concrete examples of trends within the fashion industry and consumer behaviour within specific contexts, to greater insights into social processes underlying such trends and behaviour.

As part of my course and the subject of this article, my main question is *whether cultural and/or national factors play a role in fashion magazine's placement within different countries*. If so, I wish to identify some of such cultural or national variables.

This question is also related to the issue of global or international (as our chosen journal can be seen) vs. culturally or nationally specific (*cou-*

*leur locale*, adaptability and sensitivity to local context). As in the case of both nationally and internationally distributed journals, their content is sensitive to its readers' general expectations of what a fashion journal should be about (independent of the country where it is issued) as well as sensitive to national context (for example, journals may include culturally acceptable standards of style, featuring local celebrities and avoiding sensitive or uncomfortable topics). Yet another question pertains to 'global' product advertisements, such as those for Channel #5: are these 'using the same formula' in all magazines or do they use local signifiers (by featuring local language, models, or themes, etc.) Are their differences in the content of featured 'serious' stories (on political, social, economic, and cultural topics, if any?) Can I speak of *Vogue* as exhibiting 'brand personality' (dependent on its country of origin)?

## 2. Behind *Vogue*

*Vogue* is part of a huge network of magazines and publications owned by Condé Nast. It is associated with the luxury-end of fashion and its readers are generally considered to be from the middle- to upper-classes. In this case study I look at three different national versions: French (approximate circulation: 170,000, subscriptions: 21,000), Russian (approximate circulation and subscription numbers vary according to source), and UK (approximate circulation: 187,300, subscriptions: 37,600). While French and UK editions exist for almost a century, being launched in 1921 and 1916 respectively, Russian edition is a newcomer, having been launched in 1998.

In the special issue of *Fashion Theory* (March/June 2006), entirely devoted to *Vogue*, authors reflect on the issue of national differences both in terms of placement (market, target audience) and content (editorial and advertisement). In examining the readers' letters in the French edition of *Vogue*, Rocamora (2006: 153–172) concludes that the readers' voice represents an 'ideal audience' which turns the discourse on consumption into that of enlightened debate. French *Vogue*, she argues, represents itself as a platform for critical discussion raising fashion to the status of high art. Similarly, Russian edition of *Vogue* tries to elevate what the Russian intel-

lectuals would term 'just another glossy magazine' (Bartlett 2006: 177) to the level of literally and educational magazine. Not unlike the French *Vogue*, Russian edition tries to target not just the wealthy elite (which, in the Russian case, is often equated with corruption of the newly rich) but also the refined and politically active (although in the Russian context, less wealthy) intellectuals. By featuring stories of the well-known cultural celebrities such as actors and ballerinas and extracts from classical literary works of the likes of Turgeniev, Russian *Vogue* strives to give its wealthy readers the idea of seriousness and respectability (which participants of Russian murky businesses seek), simultaneously enticing the cultural elite which was 'historically wary of conspicuous consumption and any display of material wealth' (ibid.: 177). In this respect, Moscow can be compared to Paris, where money and sophistication were 'necessary prerequisites' of belonging to the elite (ibid.: 178). The difference between the Russian and French editions, though, is that Russian *Vogue* attempts to educate the masses in what fashion, sophistication and *Vogue* itself is, while the French audience is assumed to be already sophisticated. The same sophistication is strongly apparent in the British editions of *Vogue*, expressed through 'glossy words' and special 'language of fashion' (Konig 2006: 205). Historically, however, British *Vogue* exhibited quintessentially British artistic and literally features in the tradition of Bloomsbury's 'inkylectuals' and incorporating 'amusing style' and 'queer' attitudes (Reed 2006: 39). In examining *Vogue*'s target audiences in different countries, Moeran concludes that 'any fashion magazine's globalizing strategy is subject to a number of cultural and economic constraints which themselves ultimately affect that magazine's contents' Moeran (2006: 232).

In spite of national differences, all *Vogues* strive to develop or maintain the audience first sought by the very first (American) edition of *Vogue*. This audience has a lifestyle defined by 'style, affluence and activity' (Moeran 2006: 229). The Editor-in-Chief of the Japanese *Vogue* reflected that besides two traditional audiences of the fashion magazines, advertizers and readers, there is also a 'third target audience', that of the so-called international 'fashion village' (Interview sited in Moeran 2006: 246). Returning to the initial question of this article, we may ask how global or international is being negotiated by national or cultural.

## 2. National Cultures and International Fashion Magazines

Magazines can be seen as the voice of the fashion industry. Beyond the surface level of brand advertisements and industry information they are cultural objects that reflect the cultural zeitgeist both visually and textually. As cultural media objects they narrate dominant cultural patterns. Magazines can be analyzed using a number of comparative features, such as fashion content (editorials or articles) vs. advertisements, informative vs. puffing ads, sexual vs. non-sexual advertisements, or types of products used in the advertisements. One can also discuss layout, text/image proportion, content of featured stories, national/international celebrities, political content, etc.

Cassidy (1992) attempted an analysis of the 'Cosmo Girl' from *Cosmopolitan*, as well as pointed out national and cultural differences as to how the magazine was received. American Cosmo girl is modern, classy, liberated (does not want to have children before her late thirties, values sex- but not on the first date!) and yet somewhat traditional (expects to get married – but not just yet!), owns many shoes and at least one long conservative skirt, etc. Apparently, Cosmo Girl was well received in modern Hong Kong and yet treated with suspicion in Latin America and Indonesia, both rather conservative countries in terms of traditional gender roles.

In *Vogue Futures* Hutton (1994) analyses different contents of *Vogue*, such as visibles (skin, hair, nails, teeth, shape, make-up, style), physicals (brain, senses, breasts, heart, muscles and joints, etc.), practicals (al-aligning, moving, taking time out, eating, etc.), hormonals (sexuality, contraception, fertility, etc.), and psychologicals (attitudes, insights, expectations), etc.

The meaning of fashion symbols is often said to be 'undercoded', in a sense that fashion leaves lots of room for interpretation and contextual analysis (Davies 1985). The meaning of European fashion in non-European societies, may be debated. McDowell speaks of fashion as the 'imposition of a prevailing mode or shape' (2000). Further, particularly high fashion, is an indulgent distinction from the majority, reflecting on power and status, as a 'weapon wielded against the poor' (1984: 10). Taking this to the international level, Craik (2000) reflects that the fashion as an exercise of power continues to exist as European fashion is

imposed upon non-Europeans (starting from colonial times) Yet, Craik argues, Western fashion is not unique in its exercise of power and distinction (2000: xi).

### 3. Analysing *Vogue*

In our own study of the *Vogues*, I shall concentrate on features of editorial and feature content, advertisements and featured personalities, such as models and celebrities.

The editorial and feature content may be interpreted as the most explicit reference to the issues of (national) ownership and (local) audience. Editorial comments are also revealing of the tone, style and 'personality' of a particular national edition. Feature stories may provide critical commentary and reflection on issues considered important or interesting for local audiences.

Examining twelve issues of *Vogue* magazines from previous year, I have discovered that the total pages in each magazine varies, ratio of editorial to advertising pages is significantly larger in the Russian followed by the British editions and smaller in French ones. The ratio of international branded goods to local goods in advertising pages was larger in British, followed by French editions.

Analysing advertisement matter is one way of getting at the underlying cultural assumptions. Advertisements are said to be both ubiquitous and inevitable part of our lives, reflecting and even shaping our culture (Williamson 2002). However, individuals are not blinded or totally influenced by ads as these are seen as part of complex and often tacit manifestations of culture. The sheer range of advertisement matter may fail to address some or most of individuals' choices, prompting Wood and Allan (2003) to postulate that 'ads don't work'. Critique of consumerism suggests that ads for certain products may only 'click' with the certain audience if there are real values or needs that these may satisfy (Roberts 1999). I shall thus look at certain ads in *Vogue* neither searching for deep content nor assuming that the products themselves will create a global or local consumer identity. Rather, I will focus on the ads' graphic features to reveal the differences or similarities in national or international style and presentation.

I shall also look at models and celebrities (either national or international) featured in the *Vogues*. Chan (1994) sees models as reflective of the post-modern condition as having a schizophrenic quality (her discontinuous presence), envied glamour, lack of subjectivity – in short, an ultimate object. Yet, models are also manifestations of ideals presently existing in societies, be they local ideals derived from the ideas of ‘traditional’, or authentic, or reflecting the supposedly universal or ‘Western’ ‘models’ (in this sense, being used as a ‘superhuman’ generic shape or even concept).

#### 4. Locally Grown

In Russian *Vogue* the local is represented by nostalgic references to Soviet and pre-Revolution Russia and underpinned by interviews with successful Russian fashion designers and musicians – all of whom are men. It appears that the face of contemporary Russian society is one steeped in former glory days or at least one clinging to traditional male gender stereotypes of machismo. The one woman who is given significant visual space is Natalia Vodianova an internationally famous Russian model. She is perhaps considered the country’s prime female export or ambassador.

Representations of women in this edition are not overtly sexy or sexual. Women’s bodies are in general clothed and ‘safe’. There is also a distinct lack of powerful or creative Russian women in the pages.

An interview of particular interest is one featuring a Russian actor – Evgeny Mironov – who wears not only the international labels Dolce & Gabbana and Dior Homme by Hedi Slimane but also sports in one shot a track suit replete with the 1980 Russian Olympic games insignia. He is captured in decidedly macho poses, displaying international savvy and local references by his clothing and is considered one of Russia’s charismatic male celebrities of the moment.

In the Culture section, there is a new opera for the Bolshoi – Rosen-tal’s Children – “a pseudo documentary story from our Soviet past, with members of the Party and their favourite composers Chaikovsky, Musso-rgsky, Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner.” (ibid.: 417). Here the past masters are carrying the cultural torch for contemporary Russian society.

Interestingly there is a serious feature about xenophobia in Russian society without any accompanying images. In the Contributors list at the

front, there is a picture of the journalist posing as the serious family man with his two children.

Advertising for local products, events etc was strictly minimal. There was one ad for Russian chocolate, the remaining ads were for international brands with a sprinkling of Russian boutiques selling international labels. The majority of the advertisements were for international luxury products using the standard international images. This perhaps indicates that the local (luxury) market is still underdeveloped and that the readership is focused on the promises of the main brands from the West.

In general French *Vogue* (April edition) is focused on the exterior world rather than domestic France. Notions of luxury long associated with France are referred to in a feature 'Le Lustre du Luxe' on Le Crillon hotel in Paris and highlighting the international celebrities like Madonna who stay at the hotel when visiting the capital.

There is an interview with the French author, Frédéric Beigbeder the author of *L'égoïste romantique* which has been referred to as the male version of the English novel *Bridget Jones diary* (an international bestseller and film). The other celebrity featured is Loulou de la Falaise – famed for her connection with YSL and party days at Studio 54 with Andy Warhol et al. There is also a feature article on the French film director Régis Wargnier about his new film, *Man to Man*, which tells the story of two pygmies captured in Africa and bought to Scotland at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The notion of local in most of the examples above are mostly tempered by notions of the local as revered by the outside world, a kind of "us looking at them looking at us."

Advertisements in the French *Vogue* concerned with representations of the local were very much focused on clichéd icons of Paris. *Histoires de L'Eau d'Issey* has the perfume bottle substituting the heel of a stiletto shoe and posing as the tower in a model of the Tour Eiffel. This ad is also in British *Vogue* along with numerous other French luxury brands. Many of the local luxury brands are represented by models or actresses from elsewhere, for example, Kate Moss as the face of the perfume *Coco Mademoiselle* (Chanel) and the actress Liv Tyler for *Very Irresistible* by Givenchy.

In the April issue of British *Vogue*, the representation of local is much more infused with exotic others than the other editions, however, there is

also a sense of clichéd Britishness. The return to fashion of floral decoration (long associated with a romanticised ideal of countryside England) brings back the “English Roses” and “petal power.” The *Vogue Living* section features London-based French stylist Florence Nicaise “telling Chloe Fox about hosting dinner parties with Parisian panache.”

An interesting difference to Russian and French *Vogues* (April) is the emphasis on women achievers and women with high-powered jobs. From women with dangerous jobs – Western women in foreign lands usually – in the article ‘Fear Factor’ to challenging jobs in the retail fashion sector like directors at exclusive stores like Liberty women are portrayed as positive, strong and financially independent. Also, levels of female nudity and general skin exposure are kept to a minimum in the British edition, similar to the Russian *Vogue*.

Most advertisements in British *Vogue* were foreign with the majority of luxury products being French. The mass market brand – *Rimmel London* – is an exception with the effervescent *London It Girl* – Kate Moss as its face. Another British brand – *Smeg* – uses a variety of coloured fridges with one decorated entirely by the Union Jack – the epitome of British design. Another local ad is *Black Prince* by Belstaff a specialist company in waterproof technology clothing for motorcyclists etc. The current campaign features a mud-splattered couple embracing on a motorbike with a Union Jack sticker on the body of the bike. The Union Jack often returns as the symbol of Britain – this is not the case in French or Russian *Vogues*.

In summary, while Russian *Vogue* had predominantly foreign luxury products, the features and interviews came from the domestic sphere whereas notions of local in the French and English editions were much more based on stereotypes of ‘Frenchness’ or ‘Englishness’ and connections with other ‘global’ locations suggesting lifestyle rather than nationhood as the differentiating factor in what constitutes the ‘local’.

## 5. Representing the Other

Another focus of our work is how these luxury-end magazines represent the Other, the exotic. The spring/summer 2005 collections are full of ethnic looks from safari (colonialisation and the wild) and sub-Sahara

Africa, to Northern Africa and folkloric Europe which explains the fashion emphasis on the exotic Other.

In British *Vogue*, one fashion shoot titled 'World Vision: the grown up approach to global style' is loosely based on ethnic influences in the fashion of the season. From gypsy, to African adventure and 'haute safari' via Navajo. The fashion editor has certainly not had to hard sell the concept of global to the readers, it seems a prior knowledge of 'Other' styles is expected – the reader fills in the gaps. There is also a shopping feature on different global cities and their best trendsetting stores. "Fashion may well be a worldwide phenomenon but when it comes to the must-haves of the season, global tastes vary." (ibid.: 266) The notion of exoticism is very tied into a globalization that is accessible to the British shopper – a world where different cultures are easily drawn back into the culture centre associated with London and Britain as being a world power.

There is also a feature about how Irish singer Bono and his wife Ali have joined with designer Rogan Gregory to create a fashion line that will be made from organic fabrics from Peru and Turkey with a sustainable agenda. The Irish countryside where the interview takes place and specifically Bono and Ali's property is represented in as having mysterious Otherness "that ethereal feel, with the mist and the moss and rocks. It's definitely otherwordly..."

Otherworldliness is also captured in the advertising for example Hermès the French luxury brand features a campaign for a silk scarf 'Le monde est un fleuve' complete with a map of the world. While the Italian fashion house Valentino has a model with a baby zebra for their African inspired collection. The spirit of different places is very much part of the British imagination as is of course the accessibility to exotic products.

In Russian *Vogue*, the whole theme of the month's articles are based on travels to exotic locations especially those associated with the fashionable looks of the season: India, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Wild West, Hawaii, Africa, the Greek Islands, Asia and folkloric Europe. The editor's Letter translated at the back of the edition sums up the attitude to the exotic: "*Countries of blazing heat where skin colour graduates from dark olive to bitter chocolate, where white Europeans get special reception...*" Long ostracised as an outsider in Europe, it is now Russia's opportunity to be part of the West, part of the centre.

There is a story from a certain Sheikh Majed discussing life in the hot, exotic Eastern countries of India and China. He questions the nature of 'exoticism' and writes that for some (like those living in the exotic East) Russia is an exotic land – the cold, the Kremlin, etc while Russians don't see themselves as exotic. The exotic East is also the perfect destination for the wealthy Russians reading *Vogue*. The feature has an almost educational tone to it; politely informing readers of what's on offer elsewhere.

The fashion pages in this edition are based on exoticism from different eras including British photographer Norman Parkinson's iconographic 1975 shot of Jerry Hall in a modest bathing suit on a Soviet-style sculptured platform. There is a feature on the Afro-American tennis player Serena Williams – sport is a constant theme appearing throughout. In Russian *Vogue*, there are no bared breasts and the amount of flesh bared is minimal.

Advertisements in Russian *Vogue* are almost entirely from 'The West' and all the cultural baggage that that implies for the former Soviet nation. Everything that is branded and luxurious comes from elsewhere. The advertisement for Burberry Brit perfume has the Burberry print on the umbrella and scarf of what looks like a British girl in front of a Rolls Royce with an English bobby (policeman) looking in the car. Another Burberry ad in the magazine features British It girl Kate Moss in an English park setting. The Chanel advertisement in this Russian *Vogue* features a model with the famous quilted bag (somewhat dated in the West) and a photo of Place Vendome as a reference to luxury Paris. All ads feature strong icons of 'chic' from abroad.

In the French edition the exotic other is focused on two cultures – Americana and Asiatic. American culture as one global centre of relaxed cool with equally cool and relaxed personalities with a feature on a tailor "Thom Browne (qui) garde son cool très américain et pousse le classique jusqu'à l'excentricité" and other; LA's Cameron Silver 'culte' vintage dresser to the Hollywood stars. There is also a page devoted to Halston the American designer who dressed the jet-set and was associated with Studio 54.

Asia is another theme in French *Vogue* which gives a taste of the Other. The Japanese beauty routine – skin cleansing – is the focus of the beauty section. In the fashion pages, there is also an Asian influence: *L'Emprise*

*des sens.* Within this shoot, there is a Western model together with an Asian model, they engage in a series of pseudo-lesbian poses – a flirtation between East and West – but the Western women keeps her top on and appears to be in control while the Asian model is bare breasted and apparently submissive.

Generally the visual content of French *Vogue* is highly sexualised with lots of nipples and even pubic hair in the fashion shoots. For example, comparing advertising contents of the German sport shoe brand Puma, perhaps exposes fundamental differences. In French *Vogue* the ad for Puma shows a young girl in ‘sporting’ clothes lying on what looks to be a hotel bed, while in the English *Vogue*, the people wearing Puma is a group of New-Age travellers playing with sporting equipment. Both ads appear in the same month but create different meanings for the brand. One of sex, the other of eccentricity.

## 6. Tone and Authority

British *Vogue* stands out for its authoritarian tone in comparison to the other two. In the *Vogue* Shops section collage-style theme pages with directives such as: “The Look ...”, “What to Wear ...”, “How to do ...” tell readers how to do certain fashion looks. It seems to be the instructions for how to be part of a certain group and in this case the exclusive society of the upper-middle classes. Britain has had a strong class structure and the element of being told what to do/wear reflects this.

However perhaps the real essence of authority in the sense of Hofstede’s interpretation of Power Distance is evidenced in the absent or present Editor-in-Chief. Does the Editor show their power by having a page of their own at the front of the magazine or do they sit in the background and silently shape the contents? There is no editor’s note in the British *Vogue* edition which unlike the other two present Editors, leads us at this point, to acknowledge Hofstede’s findings that Britain had the lowest power distance in comparison to France and much lower than Russia.

In the French *Vogue*, the tone is much more suggestive with the pages much more evocative rather than commanding like the British edition. Four pages of “Happy Hippie” with images from the hippy era and the contemporary incarnation. “La Hippie attitude est un kaléidoscope de

matières et de couleurs juxtaposées.” Readers are given inspiration rather than instructions.

In Russian *Vogue* the equivalent ‘Style’ pages are also much more suggestive than directive. Once again a general theme is offered like India, Gipsies (sic) and Africa. Headings are given in English with Russian text suggesting a readership that has an international focus.

In a classroom situation, comparing tone of text and shows of authority help with illustrating dominant cultural patterns as suggested by the main Intercultural Communication theorists like Hofstede.

## 7. Reflecting on the Findings

In this article I have explored the links between the supposedly standardized and globalized content of a fashion magazine with local cultural contexts. The research done to explore the influence of culture on media can be aided both by anthropological and market or consumer behaviour studies. Interdisciplinary approach, as I have argued, is crucially important in approaching very complex topics such as global media and localization. Through the analysis of editorial and advertisement content, students were able to discern global and local elements encoded in text and image. Content analysis helped to gain insights into aspects of sex and gender representation and authority and showed that cultural and national factors play a significant role in *Vogue*’s placement within different countries.

During the course, I have encouraged students to embed specific insights gained from *Vogue* research into the larger context of placing global products in local context and observing how this may influence the product’s identity. Also identity of the consumer of this product may be different in different countries – a point that calls for more cross-national research.

Identity in a globalizing world is said to form a shifting, ever-changing, complex paradigm (Bauman 2001). Within fashion, many types of identities may be distinguished, namely ‘personal’, ‘cultural’, ‘social’, ‘fashion’, ‘brand’, ‘national’, ‘international’, etc. Personal identity is said to be one of the problems of modernity, implying that it is equally true that the ‘fashion industries are deeply implicated in the manufacture of ‘personality’. Fashion provides a short-cut by which I enter another identity and

join a subculture that insulates us from contamination from other styles' (Finkelstein 1997). Social identity can be used to elicit, channel, and assimilate fashion's code modifications (Davis 2004: 16). Similar to social identity, brand identity is not always clear-cut, it is rather dependent on its country of origin (Meyers 2003).

Hofstede (1980) discusses a number of cultural dimensions by which culture differences can be measured, such as power distance and authority, femininity/masculinity, risk avoidance, and collective/individual values. Examining Hofstede's theories on authority in cultures, we find two cultures – France and UK with similar authority levels (France has a greater power distance) while Russia scored extremely high in the distance between 'boss and worker' or to stretch it between social groups. What I find in the tone throughout the three *Vogues* is different to the what would be expected. The Brits seem to be content with being told what to do – as long as it is someone from the same class? While the French and Russians were much more aware of the importance of individuality and individual choice. Suggestion rather than coercion is more important for these cultures.

The problem with such – and potentially with our own – 'analysis' is the fact that it is not necessarily based on public opinion polls – or rather readership poles. The readership of international fashion journals represents a certain target group which is normally not the same as the 'average citizen' – in most cases, the readers are culturally Western-oriented, economically relatively well-to-do, socially – quite 'liberated' (by comparison with the so-called 'traditional' societies). Another problem is that when one talks about countries or cultures (the national and the cultural are often equated) one tends to focus on 'cultural stereotypes' or superficial knowledge, which may lead to simplistic conclusions, like 'Because Indonesia has a large Muslim population and the naked female body image is a taboo, certain fashion magazine has little chance of being widely accepted unless it adheres to local standards. This problem seems, alas, persistent in many cultural studies related to marketing and international communication.

Marketers with fashion industry and international consumer researchers tend to reify and essentialise the notion of culture as something stable, unchanging and 'fixed' (Alvessen 2002; Bauman 2001).

It is indeed attractive for the industry professionals to present culture as possibly explainable and, above all, measurable. Measurability could make cross-cultural encounters somewhat more predictable, and thus assure success of a foreign venture. Hofstede's (1980) famous cultural dimensions are much loved by organizational and marketing social scientists. And yet, the elusive, 'soft' aspects of culture – now you see it, now you don't phenomenon, complexity and diversity of sub-groups within a 'culture' make us weary of the fact that I should be cautious not to generalize about all cultural and national values.

This article only proves that such pitfalls are almost inherent in the project of intercultural comparison of global products. But the fact remains that there is still something that other researchers and ourselves consistently find when we observe a global or international product in a local context – a cultural variation which can be hardly accounted for by chance alone.

Some questions still need to be addressed. Having analysed some of the *Vogue* features, we may ask ourselves what type of identity do *Vogue* readers across the globe share? Do they share an identity? Does the meaning of this identity vary from country to country? Is, for example, the Indonesian woman buying *Vogue* in Jakarta dressed and more importantly, feeling similarly to the English buyer in London? As an exercise for the next semester, we have asked our students to think of a design for a cross-cultural consumer research that may aid us in finding some answers.

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