Influence of culture and national image on marketing

- A study of IKEA's promotion in Sweden and France

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how cultural differences between Sweden and France are manifested in IKEA’s promotion material and the extent to which Sweden is emphasised as the country of origin. The study analyses the photos and the language in the IKEA catalogues in Sweden and France, the content of five different TV commercials and data from previous empirical studies. The thesis follows a deductive strategy as conclusions are drawn based on existing theories on marketing and national cultures. It can be concluded that both cultural adaptations and a focus on Sweden are present in IKEA’s marketing material, however, in both cases to a limited extent. The cultural adaptations are mainly found in the TV commercials and the references to Sweden in the catalogues. Thereby, neither cultural adaptation nor the use of Swedish references solely characterises the studied promotion material.
1. Introduction

The recent economical development has been characterized by a clear trend towards increasing globalization. Local companies have become more exposed to the global market and contact with foreign actors is perceived as more or less inevitable. With this new world order comes great opportunities for companies wishing to expand their activities, but the current economical situation also brings great challenges. (Hill, 2009:4-5.) Levitt (1983) claims that as the world is getting globalized, products will become standardized and produced to a low cost on a large scale. As a result, the importance of national borders, and thereby national cultures, will be reduced (Tufvesson, 1996:15). Other publications (Roostal, 1963; Buzzel, 1968) also claim that the cultural distances between countries are declining. The European Union’s common policy regarding international trade and customs has improved both the possibility for trade between countries within Europe and the integration of European markets that could result in a standardization of marketing activities in Europe. (Tufvesson, 1996.)

However, Mooij (2000:105) claims that “although there is evidence of convergence of economic systems, there is no evidence of convergence of people’s value systems”. Instead she concludes that, with converging incomes, people’s consumption habits will diverge as the convergence of incomes lead to demonstrations of value differences. (Mooij, 2000:105.) Thus, even though most physical obstacles for trade have been eliminated within the European Union, cultural differences still act as barriers for trade.

Within the field of marketing yet others (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001) imply that a cultural adaptation of marketing activities is unnecessary for global businesses. Instead, unconventional approaches based on the country of origin are chosen in order to attain different images and positions in the minds of the consumers. As this phenomenon deviates from the idea of cultural adaptation it constitutes an interesting field for further research.

1.1 Background

Ever since Sweden’s entrance into the European Union, the interaction between the Swedish industry and the industries of other European nations has been inevitable. The Swedish export to the French market increased by 4 percent between 2006 and 2007, making France
Sweden’s seventh largest export market and, thus, an important trade partner (The Swedish Trade Council, 2008). However, despite the reduced economical barriers between the two countries, cultural differences remain (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

Extensive research has covered how countries differ culturally and, as a result, Hofstede & Hofstede (2005) have proposed five dimensions of national culture; Power distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty avoidance and Long-term orientation. Differing scores in the dimensions indicate cultural differences between societies. Sweden has significantly lower scores in the power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance indices in comparison with France. There is no data available for France for the long-term orientation index and in the individualism index, Sweden and France have the same score. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005.)

Being a company with employees in 39 countries, IKEA (Ingvar Kamprad Elmtaryd Agunnaryd) is a company that is greatly affected by cultural differences. However, it is known for its Swedish roots and its standardized product offering. IKEA was founded by Ingvar Kamprad in 1943 but it was not until 1948 that IKEA began specializing in furniture. Kamprad’s vision has always been to “create a better everyday life for the majority of people” (Saltzer, 1994:60) by selling affordable furniture. In 1963 the first store outside of Sweden was opened in Oslo and ever since, the company has expanded all over the world. (IKEA, 2008.)

The first store in Paris, France, was opened in 1981. Today there are 26 stores in France, 17 in Sweden and 253 around the world. France is IKEA’s third largest sales market and Sweden its fifth. Today IKEA employs around 127 800 people in 39 countries. (IKEA – Facts & Figures, 2008.) With a few exceptions, IKEA sells the same home furnishing articles across the globe, all designed in Älmhult, Sweden. (Salzer, 1994:111.)

1.2 Problem discussion

IKEA is a company with strong connections to Sweden, something that is visible in the organization of every IKEA store. This Swedish style has been used for management as well as for marketing throughout the company’s global expansion. IKEA is traditionally known for their humorous TV commercials with references to the Swedish culture but it has moved
towards classical promotions where the image of “crazy Swedes” has been removed. (Salzer, 1994.) IKEA has a standardized concept all over the world regarding for instance personnel dress codes, product names and store design (Bartlett & Nanda, 1990) but their advertising is subject to less centralised control (Salzer, 1994:124). Research suggests that it is possible to promote a product with the country of origin as a motivating factor (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001). However, other researchers emphasise the importance of cultural adaptation (Mooij, 2005). The following research questions are thus of interest and constitutes the point of departure for this study:

- How do the cultural differences between Sweden and France affect IKEA’s promotion?
- How is Sweden used as a country of origin in IKEA’s Swedish and French promotion?

### 1.3 Purpose

Hofstede & Hofstede’s (2005) cultural scores constitute the foundation of the study but only the dimensions within which Sweden and France differ are discussed. By relating their scores to Mooij’s (2005) research on advertising and national cultures, the purpose is to clarify how cultural differences between Sweden and France are manifested in IKEA’s promotion. Further, Sweden’s role in IKEA’s promotion is examined to determine the extent to which Sweden is used as a country of origin at the expense of cultural adaptation.

### 1.4 Limitations

Concerning IKEA’s promotion, the field of interest is Advertising and Direct marketing, thereby excluding the other areas discussed by Kotler (2001:626); Public Relations, Personal Selling and Sales Promotion. Therefore, there is no focus on the standardization of store design, location and personnel dress codes. The only used promotion material is the IKEA catalogues in Sweden and France and TV commercials in both countries. Furthermore, within Hofstede & Hofstede’s (2005) description of culture, it is the Symbols of IKEA’s promotion and the Values of the customers that are of interest. The other signs of cultural difference, Heroes and Rituals, are excluded. As there is no data available on the long-term orientation index and as Sweden and France have the same score on the individualism index, these two dimensions will not be studied. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005.)
2. Theoretical framework

Culture can be defined in many ways and the literature gives many examples of definitions. Hofstede & Hofstede (2005:4) define culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others”. According to Hofstede & Hofstede (2005:6), cultural differences appear in several ways, namely: symbols, heroes, rituals and values. Their work regarding differences in national culture is widely cited in cultural studies. Even though cultures vary across nations, it is favourable to gather cultural data on national level as citizens often are unified through language, educational and political systems etcetera (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:18).

2.1 Dimensions of national culture

In 1967 Hofstede initiated a large study of employee values in the IBM company across more than 70 countries. By 2001, the replications of the IBM study had produced scores for 74 countries (Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions, 2008). The Hofstede model has received both celebration and critique. McSweeney (2002) mentions some points where Hofstede’s conclusions can be questioned. First, the statistical significance is questioned as the answering frequency is very low in some countries. However, both Sweden and France display significant results. Secondly, Hofstede’s data was gathered from one company only and mainly from people in marketing and sales positions. It is questioned whether employee values from one company can represent a whole country. However, this critique could be questioned as the study of one company isolates national culture as the single variable when other aspects are shared between all employees, for instance through the organizational culture. Other researchers have tried to classify national culture, for instance Trompenaars (1993), but no publication has received the same recognition as the original Hofstede classification, especially regarding implications for marketing across cultures. Leung et al. (2005:374) claim that Hofstede has inspired many researchers and kick-started the field of research.

At present, Hofstede has presented five different dimensions along which national cultures vary (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In three of the dimensions, Sweden and France differ significantly. These dimensions are presented individually below. The other two dimensions, long-term orientation and individualism are excluded in the study as there are no data
available on long-term orientation for France and the individualism score is identical for Sweden and France. Long-term oriented cultures are those that foster “the virtues orientated towards future rewards” whereas the opposite, short-term oriented cultures foster the “past and present” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:210). The individualism dimension “pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:76).

2.1.1 Power distance

Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:46). Inequalities exist in all societies, but to a greater extent in some than in other ones. The higher the society’s score on the power distance index dimension, the greater are the inequalities between its most and least powerful members. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:40-46.)

2.1.2 Masculinity

Women’s values differ less between countries compared to men’s values. Therefore, the masculinity index separates countries based on men’s values, from typical masculine values like “assertive, tough and focused” to typical feminine values like “modest, tender and concerned” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:120). The greater the gap between gender values and the greater the gender differences, the higher the score on masculinity.

2.1.3 Uncertainty avoidance

Hofstede & Hofstede (2005:167) define uncertainty avoidance as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations”. These cultures have a need for predictability and use laws and rules, and various safety and security measures, to prevent such situations. In contrast, uncertainty accepting societies are comfortable with unexpected events and a dynamic environment. The higher the culture’s score on this dimension, the more uncertainty avoiding it is. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:166-172.)
2.2 The marketing mix

In order to analyse the effect of differing cultures on marketing activities, a deeper understanding of the variables included in a firm’s marketing process is needed. The marketing process involves a firm’s effort to analyse the market and the adaptation of activities to targeted market segments. The correct mix of marketing activities should be applied in order for a firm to successfully interact with its current and potential customers. Kotler (2001:827) defines the marketing mix as “the set of controllable tactical marketing tools – Product, Price, Place and Promotion - that the firm blends to produce the response it wants in the target market”. As the promotion is the central activity for the purpose it will be detailed in the next section.

2.2.1 Promotion

The central issue within promotion is the communication between the company and the customer as well as that with other actors on the market. In order to successfully communicate their message, firms must apply a correct mix of promotion efforts. Five tools of promotion can be identified: advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations and direct marketing (Kotler 2001:626). However, the thesis only focuses on advertising and direct marketing. Advertising is “any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor” (Kotler 2001:626). Direct marketing is defined as the “direct connections with carefully targeted individual consumers to both obtain an immediate response and cultivate lasting customer relationships” (Kotler 2001:626).

2.3 Culture and marketing

The national cultural dimensions appear in several ways in a society. Duesenberry (1949) noticed that people’s consumption behaviour is strongly influenced by other people’s consumption behaviour and that the consumption patterns follow the characteristics of the culture. This has direct implications for marketing in nations with differing cultural scores. Mooij (2005:60) asserts that, although Hofstede’s model is mainly used for studying work-related values, it can also be used for studying consumption-related values. Her studies provide a link between Hofstede’s data, consumption, attitudes and behaviour and she claims that her data correlates with culture (Mooij, 2005).
Mooij (2005:163) emphasises three aspects of advertising that are influenced by culture: the central message, the basic advertising form and the execution. The central message relates to culture as it includes values and motives that appeal to the consumers. Appeals “reflect the core values of a culture” (Mooij, 2005:163) and they are used to illustrate “how the Hofstede dimensions can explain what makes advertising culture-bound” (Mooij, 2005:163). It is important to distinguish what is desired and desirable in a culture as these two often contradict each other. The desirable represents a common view on what should be desired whereas the desired represents what people actually desire. Desire “is what the majority in a country actually do” (Mooij, 2005:164). The section below describes typical appeals and use of language that are important in different national cultures.

### 2.3.1 Power distance in advertising and direct marketing

In countries with large power distance, status symbols are very important whereas they are less important in small power distance countries. Status and hierarchy are visualized in the way people communicate between social levels in the society and in the respect for elders. In TV commercials, the elder can often be seen advising the younger whereas it is the opposite in small power distance countries. The lack of respect for authorities in small power distance countries is reflected in humoristic advertisements where managers and authorities are parodied. (Mooij, 2005:168-170.)

The social hierarchy in societies is also reflected in the language. According to Usunier & Lee (2005:386) “the language context contributes to a constant reframing of culture-bound assumptions about hierarchy in society”. Hierarchical and status oriented cultures tend to display a higher level of formality in the language. Thereby, the languages in cultures with high power distance are more formal than in cultures with low power distance. This is displayed in, for instance, the use of pronouns in conversations and advertising. (Usunier & Lee, 2005:386.)

The paradox of what is desired and desirable becomes visible when discussing independence as it is desirable in small power distance countries but it reflects what is desired in the opposite. The customers’ independence is important in small power distance countries where citizens must be allowed to make decisions based on their private knowledge and the companies should take a “role as a facilitator instead of imposing ideas or creating
dependency relationship with the consumer” (Mooij, 2005:170). The attitude to the role of children in advertisements differs with the power distance scale. Children are less independent and more protected in large power distance countries. (Mooij, 2005:170.)

2.3.2 Masculinity in advertising and direct marketing

There are some typical characteristics of masculine cultures that often are reflected in advertisements and TV commercials. In such cultures, winning and being the best is important, especially if the culture is also very individualistic. The promotion often displays competitiveness and the fulfillment of a dream. The opposite is true for feminine cultures where dreams are considered self-delusional. As for large power distance countries, status is important in masculine cultures. This is reflected in expressions like “car of the year” and the desire for big products, for instance big cars. The use of celebrities in advertisements is common in masculine cultures whereas it is less common in feminine cultures. Instead, in such cultures celebrities in advertisements and TV commercials could rather be parodied than endorsed. (Mooij, 2005:174-179.)

The typical characteristics of feminine cultures are “caring, softness and the small” (Mooij, 2005:175). In contrast to masculine cultures it is common to use understatements in advertisements. Feminine cultures often reflect the opposite to large power distance countries; one should not talk about power in public and things should not be communicated directly. Important technical details are communicated to the consumers to give them a chance to get their own view on the product. This “reflects modesty and harmony” (Mooij, 2005:176).

The role differentiation between men and women are displayed in different ways in masculine and feminine cultures. In masculine cultures, men working at home are often depicted as stupid while the woman is the expert and can be shown to be tough. In feminine cultures, however, men are often depicted as tender. The success orientation in masculine cultures is reflected in the advertisements displaying effectiveness. Women often take part in advertisements but have no role in the message. Feminine cultures are more relationship oriented resulting in advertisements and TV commercials displaying family happiness. (Mooij, 2005:174-179.)
As for high power distance cultures, the equality in a society is reflected in the language. The level of masculinity, thereby, correlates with the language to some extent. The language in cultures with high score on masculinity is often more formal. The opposite is true for feminine cultures. (Usunier & Lee, 2005:386.)

**2.3.3 Uncertainty avoidance in advertising and direct marketing**

Advertisements and TV commercials in uncertainty avoiding cultures are often based on detailed and structured information from competent people. The culture desires “need for explanations, structure, testing, test reports” (Mooij, 2005:179) but design is also most important in such cultures. It is very important to demonstrate the competence of the manufacturer whereas for low uncertainty avoidance cultures the result is more important. The design and the importance of competent authorities in uncertainty avoiding cultures are displayed in advertisements in the way people are dressed and the use of accessories matching with the product. People’s competence is demonstrated by showing titles and displaying researchers in white coats whereas these characters often are parodied in less uncertainty avoiding countries. Emotions are often highlighted when promoting in uncertainty avoiding countries. The same is valid for relaxation from tension and anxiety which counts as important appeals in such cultures. They prefer stability over change and this is often exploited when promoting. (Mooij, 2005:179-182.)

**2.4 Country of Origin**

As different countries display different scores on national culture, they are also perceived differently by other countries. This fact can be used in marketing by emphasizing the product’s country of origin. The perceptions of countries are often projected on to the products made in, designed in or connected with the country in mind. As an example, German products are generally perceived as being of high quality. The evaluation of products based on the general perception of a country is called the national image effect. (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001.)

There are two constructs, commonly used individually to explain the national image effects; the Halo and Summary construct. Johansson (1989) uses the halo construct as he claims that the country of origin effect is more important when the buyer is not familiar with the product. “The halo construct assumes that even when a person has neither prior knowledge of, nor
experience with products made in a certain country, s/he will have a certain image of the country as a source of products” (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001:42). The contrary, summary construct “assumes that country images are based on experience with a country’s products and the resulted perceived attributes of products made in it” (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001:42). According to Han (1989), the constructs importance varies depending on countries and products. However, both constructs affect the brand image of a company but in different ways.

Lagergren (2001) claims that Sweden and people’s perception of Sweden could be used for promoting Swedish companies abroad. By discussing the concepts of identity, profile and image, Lagergren concludes that the Swedish identity can be transferred into an image of Swedish products and services. A European study of the identity of the Swedish people displayed the image of Sweden that has been communicated to citizens of other countries. The image consists of some attributes that people relate to Sweden and its products. Swedes are perceived to be obsessed with quality and security, resulting in safe products of high quality. The environment is considered important and Swedes live in harmony with the nature. Swedes are honest and ethically aware. The citizens are also consequence minded and think before they act. All these ideas about the Swedes have an impact on the perception of Swedish products and could be used in marketing by emphasizing the desired attributes. (Lagergren, 2001.)

**2.5 Theory summary**

Hofstede’s data gives a good indication of how countries differ culturally. Furthermore, Kotler’s division of marketing activities into product, price, place and promotion provides a theoretical platform for further studies of promotion. In order to apply these theories on promotion in different cultures, further operationalisation of the cultural dimensions is required. Mooij has identified several characteristics for the indices of power distance, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance within the field of marketing. Cultures with large power distance emphasise status symbols in advertising while in cultures with low power distance, advertising respects the consumers desire to make an independent decision. Masculine cultures value success and tend to display women in advertising as authoritarian. Feminine cultures are described as softer and tend to use understatements in advertising. Uncertainty avoiding countries prefer stability over change and often use competent people
with formal clothing in advertising. In less uncertainty avoiding countries such experts are often parodied. The language in advertising can also be related to the cultural dimensions as masculine cultures with a large power distance tend to be more formal and focus on hierarchies compared to other cultures. Finally, the assumptions about a culture can in itself be used in promotional activities for products. The country of origin may affect the perception of an unknown product but the perception of the country of origin may however in turn be influenced by experiences from a product. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks allow one to further approach the complex subject of promotion across differing cultures.

3. Method

Based on relevant theories about national culture, marketing and national image, this thesis draws conclusions about the promotion strategies of IKEA in Sweden and France. Sweden was chosen as IKEA is a Swedish company. Despite the short geographical distance and the close trade relation between Sweden and France, previous studies indicate that there exist large differences in national culture. France was therefore considered an interesting country to study. Furthermore, IKEA is well-established on the French market. IKEA was considered an interesting object for studies as it has a strong connection to Sweden and as it appears to have a standardised concept around the world. The work to investigate the problem follows a deductive strategy, meaning that conclusions are drawn based on existing theories (Patel & Davidson, 2003). The empirical data is exclusively based on secondary information gathered from previous academic and public studies, publications in the daily press and promotion material from IKEA. A large part of IKEA’s marketing budget is used for their yearly catalogue (Bartlett & Nanda, 1990). As it is IKEA’s main channel for communication around the world, the French and Swedish version were studied to find differences that could be related to the diverging national culture or if the catalogues are similar and thereby standardised. To get a broader view of IKEA’s advertising, five TV commercials, two from Sweden and three from France, were compared with the same purpose. All TV commercials that were found on the websites of IKEA Sweden and IKEA France were studied to get as much information as possible. As the TV commercials were found on the official websites of the individual countries one can assume that they represent successful campaigns that IKEA wants to keep communicate to the consumers. According to Soares et al. (2006:278) “goods embody visible evidence of cultural meaning”, and studying artefacts in IKEA’s advertising and direct marketing may therefore be an appropriate way of examining its promotion. Other
sources were studied to get an external view on the marketing activities of IKEA and the implications, for companies, of having a Swedish heritage. As the main promotion channels of IKEA were covered, cultural variations between Sweden and France and symbols of Sweden, should be identified. Thus, the validity of the thesis should be ensured.

The theory section mentions some typical attributes that are displayed in countries with diverging scores on national culture. In addition, the concept of national image is discussed. The research questions are operationalised by studying the extent to which these variables, the artefacts of national cultures and references to Sweden, are displayed in IKEA’s promotion material. The catalogues were carefully compared, side by side, to find deviations and similarities that could be related to cultural artefacts. If no differences are found, one can conclude that the catalogue is completely standardized and no cultural adaptation is present.

To study the use of Sweden as the country of origin, references to Sweden in the catalogues were analysed. The TV commercials were studied by careful examination of the photos, general messages, characters, surroundings and the language. By studying these details, data regarding cultural traits and references to Sweden was gathered. The data was analysed by relating the findings to typical traits of the different cultural dimensions and the theories of national image. All sources were studied methodologically and carefully to ensure the reliability of the thesis.

3.1 Sources of error

The study thus focuses on an analysis of the photos and language used in IKEA’s promotion material and since this involves interpretations, several sources of error arise. Initially, the fact that neither of the authors are native French speakers poses threats to the credibility of the language analysis. An incorrect interpretation of the French promotion material would seriously affect the validity of the conclusions. However, the risk of misinterpretations is minimized by years of studies of the French language combined with extensive practical experience. The risk of misinterpretations of the Swedish promotion material may also be considered minimal since both authors are native Swedish speakers. The knowledge of the French culture is extensive, assuring correct observations of cultural traits in the French promotion material. The knowledge of the Swedish culture is also considerable since both authors have Swedish nationality. It is worth mentioning that the analysis of the symbols is
based on personal interpretations by the authors and, as people may interpret the information differently, there is as risk of misinterpretation and subjectivity.

Errors could also occur when interpreting and reviewing the articles that were used. The risk of this is, however, minimized by reading the articles carefully and questioning the information that is published. Some of the data have been gathered from the Internet, and the reliability of such information should always be questioned. The data was mainly gathered from the Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions website, the homepage of The Swedish Trade Council, the Swedish Institute and the IKEA home page, which are all considered reliable sources.

### 3.2 Ethical issues

As this thesis is based on secondary data, the ethical issues are of less importance in comparison with a thesis based on primary data, including personal interaction. There are, however, a few points that are worth discussing. The data is collected by studying academic publications about IKEA and by observing and analysing some of their promotion material. The fact that the used sources are published by IKEA and interpreted by the authors, without discussing the findings with IKEA, could be an ethical problem. One might draw conclusions and publish results about IKEA that coincide with used models even if they are not thought-out by IKEA. Contact has been established with IKEA once but they did not want to participate in the study and have thus not been able to comment on the findings. The lack of access to someone within the company does not prevent studying IKEA. Instead it provides an opportunity to focus on their promotion which can be seen as the product of the collective ideas within the marketing department. This will however create an ethical problem if one does not attempt to further research if there is a harmony between the official promotion and the internal views. By studying the work of other researchers the authors hope to create a deeper understanding of the IKEA mentality and avoid drawing incorrect conclusions.
4. IKEA’s advertising

The main communication channel between IKEA and its customers is the yearly IKEA catalogue. The catalogue is distributed in 36 countries, in 27 languages and in 52 different versions (Dagens Industri, 2008, IKEA – Facts & Figures, 2008). In addition, IKEA is also frequently visible in TV commercials. In the subchapters below, the Swedish and French IKEA catalogue (2008) and French and Swedish IKEA TV commercials are described.

4.1 The IKEA catalogue

The Swedish and French catalogues are very similar as all products are given the same Scandinavian names in both catalogues. The main differences are the product offerings that are highlighted on separate pages and the pricing. Most photos exemplify furniture in different settings. It should, however, be mentioned that the photos tend to display people from different cultures, happy families, both men and women working in the kitchen and also children working alone in the kitchen. There is only one photo of a furniture studio with an obvious difference between the catalogues. It displays a glass cabinet with transparent windows in the Swedish catalogue but in the French catalogue the windows are shaded and the interior is not visible. It is an obvious manipulation of the photo for the French catalogue.

The main differences concern the language as the catalogues are written in French and Swedish. In general, the language is very informal and youthful, both in the Swedish and French versions but to a higher degree in the Swedish catalogue. When the Swedish catalogue describes a furniture series with three verbs or a catchy phrase the French catalogue uses a noun describing its function or a technical concept. Some examples of different use of language are shown below.

"Beddinge – sitta, sova, förvara" (Beddinge – sit, sleep, store) (IKEA Katalogen, 2009:61.)

"Beddinge – multifonctionell" (Beddinge – multifunctional) (IKEA Catalogue, 2009:61.)

"Uppåt väggarna" (Up the walls) (IKEA Katalogen, 2009:152.)

"Verticalité" (Verticality) (IKEA Catalogue, 2009:152.)
The language and tone in both the Swedish and French catalogue are very aggressive, describing IKEA as crazy with their low prices. Strong words like “överlyckliga” (more than happy), “galenskap” (madness) or “C’est dingue!” (It is crazy!) are frequently used. The introduction to new sections sometimes tells a story of what could happen in the room in mind.


”Qui fait quoi ? Pendant que vous préparez le repas, les enfants lisent ou dessinent.” (Who does what? While you prepare the meal, the kids read or draw.) (IKEA Catalogue, 2009:107.)

In the Swedish catalogue, some phrases are written in English whereas French is exclusively used in the French catalogue. The Swedish catalogue gives a more relaxed impression with phrases like “ladda alla batterier” (charge all batteries) (IKEA Katalogen, 2009:32). The introduction to the catalogue, written by the CEO of the individual countries, differs between the catalogues. The message is the same but the tone diverges between a more formal attitude in the French catalogue to a more welcoming tone in the Swedish version, as exemplified below.

“Men först katalogen. Hoppa upp i soffan och börja bläddra. [...] Välkommen till IKEA 2009!” (But first the catalogue. Get up in the sofa and start flip through the pages. [...] Welcome to IKEA 2009!) (IKEA Katalogen, 2009:3.)

“Mais pour l’heure, nous vous invitons à tourner les pages et à découvrir ce catalogue IKEA 2009 !” (But for now we invite you to turn the page and discover the IKEA catalogue 2009!) (IKEA Catalogue, 2009:3.)

The group CEO, Anders Dahlvig, is given a page in both catalogues to describe IKEA’s vision. However, in the French catalogue he is given a place in the middle of the catalogue whereas in the Swedish version he is found in an obscured place in the catalogue’s last pages. The French catalogue has a section about food with strong links to Sweden. “La Suède
s’installe chez vous […] de produits scandinaves à l’Epicerie suédoise.” (Sweden comes to you […] Scandinavian products at the Swedish grocery store.) (IKEA Catalogue, 2009:371.)

4.2 IKEA TV commercials

IKEA is frequently visible in advertisements on television, cinemas and posters in public places. Five TV commercials, two from Sweden and three from France, were studied. The TV commercials were found in IKEA’s advertising archive on the IKEA websites of the individual countries.

4.2.1 Swedish TV commercials

The first TV commercial is called “Drömkök åt alla” (Dream kitchen for everyone) (IKEA – Drömkök åt alla, 2008) and shows different kitchen settings while playing some youthful music. It shows two hands playing with a scrap book with one page for each kitchen studio and the possibility to alter the kitchen styles into many combinations. The different combinations are shown by changing colours of cabinet doors and dishwashers. The pages contain people in different settings: A young man being fed with a piece of bread, baked in another kitchen and placed in his open mouth. A young man vacuuming a kitchen floor. Six youngsters, both men and women, having a party and dancing. The TV commercial ends with a summoning and a tagline in two pages. (IKEA – Drömkök åt alla, 2008.)

"Välj bland tusentals olika kökskombinationer – till fantastiska priser.” (Choose between thousands of different kitchen combinations – at great prices.) (IKEA – Drömkök åt alla, 2008)


The second TV commercial is called "Alla sover olika” (Everybody sleeps differently) (IKEA – Alla sover olika, 2008). It is a short TV commercial showing different people, and a dog, sleeping in different positions. The film is in black and white and is shot from a top-down perspective depicting a white bed. It displays different scenes that switch in time to the music. The actors are of different ages, genders, colours and sizes. The TV commercial ends with a claim and a tagline. (IKEA – Alla sover olika, 2008.)
“Alla sover olika” (Everybody sleeps differently) (IKEA – Alla sover olika, 2008)

“Alla sover olika” (Everybody sleeps differently) (IKEA – Alla sover olika, 2008)

“IKEA – Länge leve mångfalden.” (IKEA – long live diversity) (IKEA – Alla sover olika, 2008)

4.2.2 French TV commercials

The French TV commercials have a clear humoristic tone and depict mid life, middle class, Caucasian, with one minor exception, women and men of seemingly ordinary nature. The tag line “IKEA, bien plus qu’un marchand de meubles” (IKEA, much more than a furniture retailer) is displayed at the end of each film. The films are described individually in further detail below.

The first TV commercial is called “Chut” (Fall) (IKEA – Chut, 2008). The film takes place in a modern office environment. One man rises and puts on his jacket while silently announcing his plans to go to IKEA to one of his colleagues. The secret is, however, poorly kept and before he manages to get to the elevator, a big part of the staff has ordered something from him. When finally in the elevator, the protagonist meets a serious elderly man that appears to come from a floor above, who lets him know that the elder man’s wife loves IKEA. The tone in the interactions between the protagonist and the rest of the staff is informal and involves the second person singular pronoun (Tu) while the interaction with the old man is more formal and involves the second person plural pronoun (Vous). The main character’s nervous approach and the formal language indicate that the elderly man is likely to be an executive. (IKEA – Chut, 2008.)

The second TV commercial is called “Démarre” (Start) (IKEA – Démarre, 2008). In this film, a woman is seen receiving her receipt from the cashier in an IKEA store and heading towards the exit with her shopping bags. She suddenly stops and examines the receipt, smiles nervously and starts jogging out from the store. Once outside she locates the car of a man reading a newspaper, presumably her husband, and shouts at him to start the car. The man, in shock, starts the car and, with the woman inside, speeds away from the store. When the woman finally gives away a roar of victory and happiness, the man looks slightly worried. (IKEA – Démarre, 2008.)
The third TV commercial is called “Le Crayon” (The Pencil) (IKEA – Le Crayon, 2008). The film starts by showing a woman doing the laundry. She finds a pencil in a pair of trousers and with the pencil in her hand, she walks into a living room where she confronts a man reading a newspaper in a sofa. The man is most likely her husband and the woman, considerably upset, asks him what she holds in her hand. The man responds that it is an old IKEA pencil. The woman, now aggressive, brings up another pencil, an old IKEA pencil, to show him what one looks like. She then compares it with the pencil found in the trousers and concludes that it is clearly a new one. She asks the man if he went to IKEA without her and, unwillingly and nervously, he confesses that he went there, but just to get some ideas for the kitchen. The woman, now almost in tears, states that he has done something serious. (IKEA – Le Crayon, 2008.)

4.3 Publications on IKEA and Sweden

Despite that the IKEA stores have a clear common strategy and layout throughout the world, each individual country controls their IKEA promotion. This decision is motivated by the idea that the individual country has the greatest knowledge of its demography and their preferences. (Affärsvärlden, 2001.) Historically, the promotion of IKEA in France has been characterized by funny and crazy TV commercials. The old slogan “Ils sont fous ces Suédois” (They are crazy these Swedes), a comment referring partly to the low prices, has helped in creating a distinct image of the company and represented the “Swedish model” (Salzer, 1994:121). IKEA is known for their spectacular openings of new stores where the Swedish heritage is displayed to its maximum. ”There is a live band, a Billy bookcase-building contest, a Swedish log-cutting ceremony, and the singing of the U.S. and Swedish national anthems” (George, 2006). IKEA do not adapt themselves to all people, instead they use a standardized concept of being Swedish. The products are all given Scandinavian names and “all around the store, there is evidence of the company's unrelenting "Swedephilia" (George, 2006).

According to the Swedish Institute (2008), a powerful and attractive national trademark is beneficial for companies using Sweden in their communication with customers. The Swedish Institute continuously work to improve the perception of Sweden abroad. (Swedish Institute, 2008a.) A yearly study performed by The Swedish Institute and Anholt Nation Brands shows knowledge and attitudes to Sweden abroad. Sweden has a good
reputation, especially regarding the social system and people are positive about living and studying in Sweden. The main negative part concerns our cultural knowledge and heritage. Sweden is perceived as a country with high living standards, a country that takes responsibility for questions concerning peace, security, environment and poverty in the world. However, outside of the western world, there is a lack of knowledge about Sweden. Swedish products have a good reputation abroad. Sweden was ranked fourth regarding from which country consumers prefer to buy products/services from. However, it was not ranked as high in the class “best export” which indicates that people do not relate Sweden’s successful export companies to Sweden. (Sverigebilden, 2008.) In general, Sweden as a total trademark was ranked 10th in the world in 2008. Among all participating countries, France and Germany have the best perception of Sweden. (Swedish Institute, 2008b.) Anders Dahlvig, CEO of the IKEA Group, states:

“There is some kind of quality aspect connected to "Swedishness." Other qualities are that it is perceived as a fairly solid brand internationally. Being a Swede is usually seen as something good, healthy, and solid.” (Kling & Goteman, 2003:35)

Since a decision to broaden the IKEA product line, the advertising agencies have chosen more serious and softer ways of communicating. The new vision of the corporate “self” is mainly enforced by the managers and according to employees, the new image makes IKEA less unique. (Salzer, 1994:124.) The change was motivated by the perception that IKEA’s primary customer segment, “younger families or young couples” (Kling & Goteman, 2003:35), would shrink and that it was necessary to attract more traditional buyers in order to ensure the company’s future. This new direction is, however, a clear threat to the IKEA image and combined with the rapid expansions, employees fear that the company’s cultural values might be lost. The value of and need for common concepts and Scandinavian preferences have however also met criticism and some employees have questioned the lack of national adaptations. (Bartlet & Nanda, 1990:94-95.) The change in tone in the TV commercials and the will to appear as a more serious furniture dealer has manifested itself in softer and quieter advertisements. According to one manager, the company is striving to differentiate the image of IKEA and attract the broader segments (Salzer, 1994:120-121).
5. Analysis and discussion

Based on the concepts found in the theory chapter, the gathered data is analysed in the following subchapters. The catalogues and the TV commercials are analysed separately together with the data from the literature. The chapter ends with a short reflection about the findings.

5.1 The catalogue

There are very few signs of cultural adaptation when studying the Swedish and French IKEA catalogue. The diverging product offerings are not important for our study as they seem to be randomly chosen. The main differences are within the use of language. The photos are similar in both catalogues but they tend to display artefacts identified by Mooij (2005) as typical for advertisements in cultures with low power distance index and low masculinity index. The observation that men and women are doing the same chores in the household and that children are working independently in the kitchen was, thereby, not expected in the French catalogue. However, based on typical artefacts in low power distance and low masculinity cultures, it was certainly expected in the Swedish catalogue. The same is true for the display of happy families. Thus, the photos in the IKEA catalogue are independent of differences in national culture. Based on the photos in the IKEA catalogue, the promotion strategy seems to be completely standardized. The attributes in the photos are typical for cultures similar to that of Sweden and it is an interesting observation that these attributes are not adapted to the French culture. It could be due to lack of attention from IKEA, the difficulties with adapting the catalogue to all differing cultures or a conscious strategy to share Swedish values across Europe. These attributes might subconsciously relate the photos to Sweden based on the French people’s view of Sweden. The attributes could therefore remind the readers of Sweden as the country of origin and the benefits associated with Sweden as mentioned by Lagergren (2001). If this is a conscious strategy, IKEA takes advantage of their country of origin. This correlates with the ideas of Jaffe & Nebenzahl (2001) who claim that a company can benefit from consumers’ perception of the company’s country of origin. The food and restaurant section in the catalogue is very much connected to Sweden and this might be sufficient to maintain the customers’ awareness of IKEA’s origin. One should also mention the naming of the products. By using Scandinavian names customers might relate to Sweden and their perceptions about Swedish products. Words like safety, quality, ethics and environmental
relate to Lagergrens (2001) description of the Swedish identity and should subconsciously increase customers desire to purchase IKEA’s products. Even the CEO of IKEA, Anders Dahlvig, claims that there are some benefits of having Sweden as a country of origin, mainly regarding the quality aspect. This view of Sweden as the country of origin is explained by the halo construct as the image of Sweden can affect the customers’ believes about the IKEA products. French consumers tend to favour Swedish products more than others. One would therefore have expected more focus on Sweden, as the country of origin, in the catalogue. The fact that people appreciate Swedish products without connecting famous Swedish companies with Sweden proves that the Halo construct is suitable for describing the country of origin effect.

The language is informal and youthful, both in the Swedish and French catalogue. However, this is valid to a lesser extent in the French version. As an example, the catalogues’ introductions differ between a formal tone in the French catalogue to a less formal and more relaxed tone in the Swedish catalogue. The level of formality in a language can be related to the score on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. The higher score on, mainly, power distance but also masculinity for France is reflected in a more formal language in the catalogue in comparison with the Swedish catalogue. This correlates with the ideas of Usunier & Lee (2005) concerning language formality. The difference is, however, not as big as expected. Both catalogues have a quite informal tone and the language is quite similar.

The language difference between the catalogues regarding the description of new furniture series could be related to cultural differences between the countries. The French catalogue is more structured and informative, as it uses nouns to describe functions or technical concepts, in comparison with the Swedish catalogue. This could be due to the higher score on uncertainty avoidance in France where, according to Mooij (2005), it is important to give structured information and give a professional impression. It is not the technical details that are communicated, as is important in feminine cultures, but the impression of knowledge and professionalism. As a weak uncertainty avoiding country, this is not as important in Sweden and instead, verbs and catchy phrases are used in order to interact with the customers’ emotions.

The strong words and the youthful tone is probably a remnant from IKEA’s image as crazy Swedes. It is obvious that IKEA wants to maintain an image of being mad or crazy, both in
Sweden and France. This seems to contradict the fact that IKEA have chosen a more serious way of communicating. Such a strategy could be questioned in France with its formal language and high power distance score but it seems as if the aggressive tone is successful also in France. The story that is told in the beginning of a new section about the present actions in a room is similar in the French and Swedish catalogue. This soft and cosy tone seems very feminine according to Mooij’s (2005) theories and would be expected in the Swedish catalogue but not in the French version. The use of similar language in the catalogues could be due to a centralized production of the catalogue, resulting in a somewhat standardized catalogue.

An interesting observation is the occasional use of English in the Swedish catalogue whereas French is exclusively used in the French catalogue. This can perhaps not be related to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions but the French people are known to be reluctant to other languages than French. It is, thereby, a typical adaptation to the French market.

The placement of Anders Dahlvig’s letter to the consumers is worth mentioning. The hierarchical structure and respect for authorities in high power distance countries, such as France, and the opposite in Sweden, could be the reason why he is placed in a more visible place in the French catalogue. A Swede would probably not take note of his appearance whereas his words are considered very important in France.

**5.2 TV commercials**

The Swedish and French TV commercials differ substantially in their core messages. The low price is emphasised in one of the French TV commercials and the desirability of going to IKEA in the two others. The clear humoristic tone does not directly relate to Sweden but could be interpreted as a reminder of the Swedish foolishness of low pricing. Thus, the idea of the French advertising activities trying to give a more serious image of IKEA is not in harmony with these observations. It is neither directly related to Sweden and Swedish values as was the case in previous strategies. Thus, none of the typical Swedish attributes mentioned by Lagergren (2001) is communicated in the commercials.

The description of the man silently trying to leave his office puts emphasise on the desirability of the IKEA product line. Another point of interest is the fact that the interaction between him
and his colleagues and that between him and the man in the elevator differs substantially. To begin with, the more formal and nervous approach that the protagonist adopts in the elevator tells us that the old man is more worthy of respect than the colleagues. The elderly man being in the elevator when the protagonist, on his way down, arrives also tells us that the elder man might be coming from a higher managerial floor. This correlates with the traits of a high power distance culture. This observation can therefore be interpreted as a reflection of the French culture and thus constitutes a cultural adaptation not present in the Swedish TV commercials. The fact that the elder man uses the more formal pronoun “Vous” when addressing the protagonist tells us that their relationship is more formal than that of the protagonist and his colleagues. While this does not necessarily indicate that the elder man is an executive, according to Usunier & Lee (2005) it indicates that the interaction is taking place in a high power distance culture and a French adaptation is therefore present.

The French TV commercial depicting a couple arguing over a secret trip to IKEA also emphasises the desirability of going to the furniture retailer. Of greater interest in this TV commercial are the clear gender differences between the man and the woman. As suggested by Mooij (2005), women in masculine cultures can be shown to be more dominant. This correlates well with the behaviour of the upset woman in the TV commercial. The fact that the woman, prior to their interaction, is doing the laundry while the man is reading a newspaper in the sofa also indicates that the TV commercial is adapted to a masculine culture where, according to Mooij (2005), traditional gender roles are more common.

The same clear gender differentiation is present in the TV commercial taking place at an IKEA store. A woman is shown shopping by herself while her male accomplice is waiting in the car with a newspaper. The woman appears fanatic and shows authority by giving the order to start the car, a behaviour in line with that of a masculine culture where, according to Mooij (2005), women can be shown to be tough. The TV commercial relates to the traditional IKEA characteristic of affordability and gives the impression that the low prices are somewhat crazy. The traditional image of the crazy furniture retailer is thus not entirely abandoned despite some intentions to move towards a more serious style of communication.

The Swedish TV commercials are more informative and focus on describing the actual product line. In one TV commercial, the variety of kitchen configurations is described with a youthful tone. It emphasises the diversity of the product line and while depicting people from
varying groups the TV commercial gives the impression that there is something for everybody. In one of the scenes, a man is shown vacuuming. As stated by Hofstede & Hofstede (2005), gender differences are smaller in a feminine cultures and this observation can be perceived as a typical phenomenon in a feminine culture where men can indeed be helpful at home. The general message in the other Swedish TV commercial is also related to diversity. As a number of different people in differing sleeping positions are presented the TV commercial underlines the need for a personalized bed. With the tagline “long live diversity” at the end of both Swedish TV commercials, the message is unmistakable and represents a traditional approach considering Kamprad’s ambition to supply affordable furniture for everybody.

5.3 Analysis reflections

As IKEA is a well known institution in the Swedish society the advertising in Sweden compared to other countries should be affected. It was found that the Swedish TV commercials were not as crazy or spectacular as the French TV commercials but instead more informative. This observation can perhaps not be related to Swedish culture as much as IKEA’s position on the Swedish market. Due to its well established position, the need for a humoristic approach is less important. It is, instead, of greater value to communicate special offers and being informative. However, in France IKEA might still be perceived as something different and new, despite its extensive presence. A more humoristic advertising approach might be necessary in order to come to terms with unawareness and confusion regarding IKEA’s business concept.

As the focus of this paper has been on one company, its contributions to marketing theories are limited. However, it can be considered a small contribution to the field of research. Even though the findings on IKEA do not allow concluding a deviation from the cultural adaptation of promotion proposed by Mooij (2005), some standardization is still present. Standardization between cultures with considerably differing characteristics is an interesting and relevant phenomenon that deserves further exploration and IKEA is an excellent starting point for such studies. While the country of origin might play a role in this case, this study can not propose that it is the only explanation for the standardization. As the study does not involve interviews with those responsible for the advertising and catalogues researched, conclusions are drawn from the symbols in the promotion material. While this, to some extent, limits the accuracy of
the explanations it allows one to approach the IKEA philosophy with greater independence. Since one is allowed to apply theoretical frameworks on actual observations, the information will not suffer the same risk of being manipulated and distorted, as would be the case with interviews. A more extensive study of IKEA’s promotion and that of other companies is however advisable in order to be able to draw more accurate conclusions and further research within the area is thus required.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to clarify how cultural differences between Sweden and France are manifested in IKEA’s promotion and to examine Sweden’s role in IKEA’s promotion. This was done in order to determine the extent to which Sweden is used as a country of origin at the expense of cultural adaptation. By studying and comparing Swedish and French IKEA TV commercials, the IKEA catalogue and previous publications on the subject, several noteworthy differences were found together with references to IKEA’s Swedish heritage.

The TV commercials have been found to differ substantially in their core message. The French versions tend to emphasise humour, price consciousness and desirability for the product line whereas the Swedish versions focus on being informative and cool. There are some cultural traits in the TV commercials that can be related to the differences in national culture, especially when observing the French versions. The language used in the French TV commercials is the main indicator of a high power distance setting. The empirical findings coincide with Usunier & Lee’s (2005) theory about the use of language in high power distance cultures. The women’s role in the French TV commercials is noteworthy as the substantial difference between them and their male counterparts represents the traits of a masculine culture as discussed by Mooij (2005). The absence of these artefacts in the Swedish TV commercials indicates an adaptation based on the cultural differences. In addition, there was no explicit reference to Sweden in neither the French nor the Swedish TV commercials.

The Swedish and French catalogues are similar in their graphical layout and the products are exactly alike but there are some interesting differences. Once again the language differs between formal French and less formal Swedish. However, it is worth mentioning that the formality in the use of the French language was expected to be higher and the relatively youthful language indicates some Swedish influence. The high uncertainty avoidance in
France manifests itself in a wider use of technical terms in the French catalogue compared to softer and more informal descriptions in the Swedish version. Sweden as the country of origin is present in both catalogues as all products are given Scandinavian names. Some of the photos in both catalogues seem more adapted to a feminine culture, based on Mooij’s (2005), findings but they are still present in the French catalogue. The French catalogue further emphasises the Swedish origin as traditional Swedish dishes are presented in the food section. It is, through these observations, clear that IKEA strives to communicate its Swedish heritage and benefit from the values associated with it.

In general, the differences, and thereby the cultural adaptations, are smaller than expected. This is especially true for the catalogue as the general content and presentation is similar. There are however some observed deviations from the standardization that indicate a cultural adaptation in IKEA’s promotion activities. It is an interesting observation that, despite the increased globalisation and the concept of standardisation, a large corporation like IKEA still chooses to adapt its promotion efforts to individual countries. One could have expected more references to Sweden in the promotion material, especially the French TV commercials, as IKEA is a well known brand of Sweden. However, if one were to perform a similar study with other countries where IKEA is not as well established one might find more references to IKEA’s Swedish heritage. An interesting subject for further studies would be to examine how IKEA’s TV commercials have changed in France since its entrance on the French furniture market. By only studying the latest catalogues and TV commercials one might have missed possible trends of cultural adaptation and previous referencing to Sweden, something that would imply that a standardisation process is present.
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