

Dissertation Prospectus

Seeking Efficacy in Transcultural Learning

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Educators of international students may be challenged to address the ranging diversity of cultures in a classroom setting. The question at hand is this: Are there certain themes and images that resonate across nationalities and cultures, which can be used to more efficaciously construct an instructional framework for international education? This grounded theory study will examine international university students' reactions to various themes and images projected through video presentations, within international marketing and advertising courses. Data will be collected through a variety of methods including observation, interviews, and document review, with sufficient safeguards to ensure study reliability and validity. Following the data collection, the study will seek to identify and categorize any transcultural images and themes that may resonate across diverse national and cultural backgrounds, within a theoretical framework that may be applicable to enhanced learning in international classrooms.

Background to the Study

Education is often hailed as a means for addressing and redressing many of the world's woes. As global economic developments may allow for advancements in educational inclusion, there exists an opportunity for higher education institutions around the world to meet the demand of and competition for international students. This is an issue of particular importance to colleges and universities in the United States. Foreign students contributed \$12 billion to the U.S. economy in the 2002-2003 academic year (Rooney, 2003), and many U.S.-based online education institutions are expanding their reach into the global education arena (Pohl, 2003). To be successful in this outreach,

institutions and instructors must be prepared to effectively deal with the demands of an international setting, where “the educational benefits of including international perspectives and traditions” are imperative (Rooney, 2003, p. 1).

Nature of the Problem

One of the common criticisms against U.S.-based international education is that American instructors are often ignorant and unaccommodating of the diverse and ranging cultural variations found among international students. Though instructors cannot be expected to become experts on the diversity of world cultures, they can become better skilled at finding methods to adapt to the challenge in a way that—while acknowledging cultural variations—seeks to transcend them. The problem that this study will address is how to develop more effective transcultural communication methods in international classroom settings. Perhaps the process of cross-cultural communications could be enhanced by analyzing efficacious models where cultural differences are not only bridged, but also transcended.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

This study will be a grounded theory consideration of means to analyze transculturally (culturally transcendent) resonant images and themes, which may then be used to prepare an instructional framework for more effective learning in international classroom settings. The themes and images examined over the study will be gleaned from international marketing video clips played in PowerPoint presentations within global marketing and advertising courses for international students, with student reactions measured through observation, informal interviews, and student assignments.

Assumptions

The study is based on an emergent conviction that certain themes and images do indeed resonate across the wide diversity of cultural dimensions found among international students, subsequent to my experience teaching international courses in marketing and advertising, as well as my experiences as an overseas journalist and international public education project manager. Furthermore, it is assumed that by identifying themes and images which may resonate across nationalities and cultures, instructors may be better able to prepare course materials that will enhance the learning experience as well as the personal and career development of international students.

Research Question

What sorts of themes and images might create transcultural resonance and dissonance within an international classroom comprised of diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds?

Social Significance

This study may serve to identify possible methods to enhance the educational experience of international students as they interact with other nationalities in the classroom. Beyond the academic and programmatic benefits gained from enhanced interactions among international students and instructors, strained global relations call for more effective communications within other international settings. The international students participating in well-designed educational programs may then progress to provide future cross-culturally skilled leadership in a conflicted global environment.

Study Delimitation

The images and themes referenced in this study necessarily derive from the creative mindsets and incentives of international marketing and advertising. The industry produces audience appeals covering in large part the panorama of human desires, needs, and emotions. Yet the presented images and themes are hardly representative of the great diversity of human experience in the potential realms of transcultural communications, especially in the loftier dimensions of psychology and intellect, heart and spirit.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the study's purpose in the examination of potentially transcultural themes and images resonating among diverse international university students in marketing and advertising courses. Chapter 2 reviews the literature delineating the extent and intractability of cultural variations; as well as the literature suggesting means to transcend cultural differences. Chapter 3 details the research methodology used in the study, including observations and interviews of students to measure any instances of transcultural resonance to presented themes and images.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Cultural differences run deep and wide, and are well entrenched in our social mindsets. Though there is an abundance of literature and research identifying cultural variations, there is limited research available on effective transcultural communication skills, and most of that targets international business rather than educational applications. This dissertation will review available studies directly and indirectly relating to cross- and transcultural communication skills, and literature describing cultural differences that may require attention in an international setting, including on-ground and online classrooms.

Hofstede (1997) refers to culture as “software of the mind,” a computer-era appropriate axiom that designates the diverse selection of loaded programming each of us runs upon our not-too-dissimilar biological hardware: “Every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime. Much of it has been acquired in early childhood, because at that time a person is most susceptible to learning and assimilating” (pp. 4-5).

Theorists perhaps need to rethink the computer-age cultural metaphor as our understanding of computer function becomes more sophisticated. We may come to see social, political, and economic systems as an assortment of societal software, which can be readily upgraded, purged, and over-written. Culture instead may be considered the *operating system*, the very operational foundation upon which the software is run. We might have the best software program, but if it is not compatible with the native operating system, it just will not work.

In his original study, Hofstede (1980) classified dimensions of work-related value differences in 40 subject countries. The classifications may well be applied to cultural dimensions of the educational setting, including: *Power Distance* (or the extent to which individuals at lower levels accept their lack of autonomy and authority); *Individualism* (or the relative importance of self and immediate family versus the collective social grouping); *Masculinity* (or the extent to which traditionally “male” goals of wealth and recognition are acknowledged); and *Uncertainty Avoidance* (or the extent to which risk and ambiguity are acceptable). Hofstede later added a fifth dimension: *Long-term Orientation* (fostering virtues oriented towards future rewards), which interjected a growing understanding of Asian culture, specifically Confucian influence.

Hofstede’s original theories have held up well in ensuing studies, such as those conducted by Fernandez, Carlson, Setpina, and Nicholson (1997). Adler (2001), while incorporating Hofstede’s findings and categories, has modified the *masculinity* dimension with a new continuum measuring cultural orientations toward *career success* and *quality of life* (p. 61).

Cultural variations can range from different “ways of knowing” (Berrell, Gloet, & Wright, 2002), to diametric and seemingly irreconcilable opposition in fundamental ethical values (Singhapadki, Rawwas, Marta, & Ahmed, 1999). These cultural conflicts have impeded globalization, international business partnerships, transfer of economic ideologies, and other critical areas of interrelations, even when all parties have a common aim of effective development in cross-cultural relations.

Luga and Gupta (2001) refer to a framework for discerning cross-cultural behavior incorporating the works of other theorists and researchers (e.g., Hofstede, Belk,

Pinker, Solomon, Geertz, McCracken, Rook), to examine cultural manifestations of values, heroes, rituals, and symbols. What the specific manifestations might be varies according to cultural differences; what does transcend the cultural differences is the proposal that all cultures share the act itself of defining and envisioning values, heroes, rituals, and symbols. How those definitions and visions might intersect among cultural groupings is a consideration of transcultural communications.

Other cultural researchers to be considered in the literature review include de Mooij (1998), Hall (1981), Mueller (1995), Anholt (2000), Huntington (1995), Harrison (2000), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), and so on. Also considered will be methodologies of effective qualitative study, especially those specific to grounded theory and case study approaches (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rubin & Rubin, 1995), as well as observational, archival, and interview data collection methods (e.g., Hatch, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 1990).

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This study will examine international university students' responses to commercial clips from around the world projected through PowerPoint presentations in international marketing and advertising courses. This will be done in an attempt to determine what images and themes—if any—may resonate across diverse nationalities and cultures. The research methodology will incorporate a grounded theory approach seeking ways to identify and analyze transculturally resonant messages and themes, which may then be used to augment an instructional framework for more effective learning in international classroom settings.

A grounded theory research method places considerable onus on the researcher to present and interpret the study from a more subjective perspective, which Cresswell (1998) observes benefits from a “procedure that is thoroughly discussed and systematic,” as well as the necessity that the “language and feel of the article are scientific and objective while, at the same time, addressing a sensitive topic effusively” (p. 34). Using this approach, the study will include extensive narrative describing the cultural concepts and categories of cross-cultural communication (relying on data from researchers such as Hofstede, Hall, de Mooij, et al.), a general background on the students (including data on nationality, gender, and age), as well as comprehensive treatment of the marketing messages, themes, images, and so forth considered in the study. The research conclusions will “construct interpretive narratives from their data and try to capture the complexity of the phenomenon under study,” as is requisite of effective qualitative researchers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 103).

Reliability and Validity

The study will incorporate a triangulated method of observation, interview, and review of written student assignments, fortified with the analytical skills of cultural competency (see Appendix 1), examining student responses to a series of marketing messages that may or may not contain transculturally resonant themes and images. A group of participants for the study will include international university students enrolled in global marketing and advertising courses with the UCSB International Program through the academic year 2003-2004. The student participants will be observed as they respond to various international marketing messages and video clips containing a wide array of themes and images. The recorded observations and interviews will track the participants' reactions according to a detailed schematic of criteria, with the gathered data collaborated and compared between the researcher and a qualified second observer. Abiding by the policies of the Internal Review Board, the study research methods will be approved by the administration of the UCSB International Program, and participating students will have provided their consent.

Data Collection

The sample in this study will include international students participating in advertising, marketing, public relations, and management courses, representing diverse nations of Asia, Africa, Europe, Eastern Europe, South America, and so forth. The observation and interview research will involve currently enrolled international students. Direct quotes may be used from the students gleaned through normal classroom discussions and written materials such as emails and class assignments.

Observation. The classroom dynamics will be observed during the presentation of video clips within international courses in marketing and advertising. During classroom sessions, international students tend to sit in small groups of nationality (from 1 to 5 students per seating group, depending upon the size of the class and the national mix): Turks with the Turks, Koreans with their own, Japanese with their own, Brazilians with other Brazilians, and so on. It is common for the students to interact within their groups during the playing of video clips, communicating among their own cultural group when a clip in particular interests them along linguistic or cultural lines.

Transcultural resonance or dissonance in response to a displayed video clip or image may be evidenced when discussions among students go beyond their group seating. A transcultural resonance to a presented image and/or theme may be demonstrated when the cross-group discussion is energetic, positive, upbeat, laughing; a cross-culture dissonance may be evidenced when the discussions turn confrontational and argumentative between seating groups. Other indicators of themes and images that may transcend cultural differences might include:

- a) Entire class focus on screen in an intense and unified manner.
- b) Unified and attentive silence.
- c) Unified laughter.
- d) Unified chatter.
- e) Cross-cultural comments and questions within and outside of class to particular themes and images.

Student reactions along these lines will be recorded in field notes and on audio tape for later coding and classification, with observations collaborated and compared with a qualified second observer (e.g., an ESL assessor with the International Program).

Interview. The study interviews will consist of informal Q&A during the class sessions, rather than more formal and in-depth interview sessions and surveys. Students may be asked open-ended questions to identify components of a message they might find especially appealing or repulsive, with a particular emphasis assessing themes and images. More intensive and intrusive interview methods could prove problematic, where the necessarily voluntary participation might well become more of a cultural measurement of a participant's proclivity to volunteer, yielding culturally skewed results. While the students would be asked to voluntarily participate in class discussions for informal observation, the imposition would be minimal and less likely to raise objections or cultural variations in consent (e.g., reluctant acquiescence from the more power-distance oriented cultures where the instructor is not to be questioned). The students would be asked for their consent by an International Program administrator rather than the instructor/researcher, so they felt no pressure to participate. Any student(s) who declined participation would not be quoted or otherwise referenced in the case study research.

Demonstration

The presentation of research will include hypertext links to multimedia clips demonstrating examples of images and themes international students found resonant and dissonant. The dissertation will be submitted on CD-ROM, as well as hardcopy, for ease in accessing the clips.

Study Limitations

Groups of international students participating in the current year's courses will be in smaller classes than the prior 3 years, following the 9/11 disaster where student visas to study in the United States have been more difficult to obtain, and some students have been more reluctant to study with US-based international programs. The average class size has dropped from more than 20 to often under 10 students, and some nationalities (such as Turkish and South Korean) have especially curtailed attendance. However, the duration of the study could be expanded over several quarters if necessary to ensure a valid sample.

Furthermore, students attending the USCB International Program typically represent some of the higher-income and more privileged classes of their home countries, for example, children of diplomats and coffee plantation owners. Yet Hofstede (1997) indicates that the examined core cultural dimensions tend to be independent of localized social variation and stratification in such sub-groupings as religion, generation, gender, and social class (pp. 15-17). The higher social positions of the students also helps ensure they may well become key decision-makers in their home countries, fortifying the necessity for an effective and culturally enriching experience in their international studies.

As mentioned above, there is also concern regarding more in-depth interview and survey processes which may result in culturally skewed results, based on a student's cultural proclivity to volunteer (or not) for such activity. To avoid this, the interview process will consist of informal Q&A during regular class sessions, with the researcher relying on less intrusive observations of classroom dynamics, comments, facial expressions, body language, room ambiance, and so on, observed and inscribed within field notes.

Finally, the theoretically transcultural images and themes visited in the study's global marketing and advertising courses are necessarily limited to those selected by message producers within the constraints and demands of the marketing industry. Other potentially transcultural themes and images may exist well beyond those that might be observed in the current study.

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Appendix 1

Cultural Competency of Researcher

In order to fortify the research validity within a classroom setting observing cultural variations in reactions to themes and images, I offer the following background and experience to support a claim of cultural competency:

- a) Master's degree with emphasis in cross-cultural management and communications.
- b) Four years based in Ukraine managing a USAID program developing cross-cultural messages on economic reforms through nationwide print and broadcast media.
- c) Two years as executive producer for a Washington, DC and Moscow-based television news bureau, managing Russian and American staff.
- d) Three years teaching for UCSB International Program (courses in international advertising and cross-cultural marketing).
- e) Two years as assessor for IREX international grant applications (Eastern Europe).
- f) Three years as instructor for international MBA program through Cardean University (courses in Global Management and Business Communications).
- g) Guest lecturer for university students, government and business leaders in Russia and Ukraine.
- h) Self-designed Walden University doctoral program emphasizing cross-cultural and transcultural development.
- i) Ongoing research into cultural theories of Nancy Adler, Geert Hofstede, Marieke de Mooij, Fons Trompenaars, Edward Hall, Barbara Mueller, Simon Anholt, Samuel Huntington, Lawrence Harrison, and so on.
- j) Objective observation, interview, and reporting skills honed through more than 15 years experience as domestic/international print and broadcast journalist.