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Standardisation Versus Adaptation – Marketing Communication Strategies of Multinational Companies on the European Textile Market

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the issue of marketing communication strategy standardisation/adjustment by multinational textile companies on the European market. The own research is based on information presented on the websites of multinational companies operating in the European Union and on the results of a survey carried out among 246 young consumers from France and Poland in the first quarter of 2015. In the paper, firstly the results of studies concerning 50 multinational textile companies and their comparison with those of 100 multinationals from other sectors are presented, and the relations between the levels of marketing communication activity adjustment are discussed. Afterwards an analysis of the survey results is conducted taking into account the evaluation of standardisation/adaptation of promotional strategies on the textile market by young consumers. Analysis of the findings indicated that multinational textile companies partially or fully standardise marketing communications activities on the European market, and the level of standardisation of the communication strategies is higher on the textile European market than on the other European B2C markets. Results also support the assumption that textile products are more likely than other products to benefit from the standardisation of marketing communication activities. The results also emphasise a positive evaluation of the global communication campaigns of multinational textile companies by young consumers from France and Poland. Their attitudes as well as purchase intentions toward global textile brands promoted with standardised tools are stronger than in the case of global textile brands promoted with a locally adapted promotion strategy.

Key words: marketing communication strategy, textile industry, globalisation, standardisation, adaptation.

Introduction

The European market is a major world market with a natural competitive advantage. We can observe increasing competition, evolution of consumer needs and the development of innovation, which push companies to take action to improve and enrich their offers. We also observe the tendency of unification of customer behaviours on this market, especially with the creation of a European Union market. This also allows the expansion of multinational companies on the different European domestic markets.

However, diversity of languages and cultural backgrounds is a common reality in the European Union. Multinational companies {Multinational companies (MNCs) are firms that are headquartered in one country but have operations in one or more other countries. These companies come – in the majority – from one of three geographic locations: the United States, the EU or Japan [17]} operating on foreign markets must inevitably decide to what extent they should adapt their strategy to local circumstances and to what extent they should standardise their activities. According to UN data

[1, 4], some 35000 companies have direct investment in foreign countries, and the largest 500 of them control about 80 percent of world trade. The European Union market is one of the world's largest markets and, in consequence, many multinational companies are now developing activities on this market or are targeting the area in their expansion plans. However, these multinational companies have to understand different consumer behaviours in segmented regional markets and to respond to different needs and attitudes imposed by national or local cultures.

The authors have examined the relation between globalisation and standardisation, as well as the adaptation of communication strategies of multinational companies. This research predominantly investigates:

- the level of standardisation/adjustment of marketing communication strategies of multinational textile companies in the European Union in comparison with other B2C sectors,
- the evaluation of standardized and adapted promotional activities of multinational textile brands by young European consumers.

A literature review was made on the basis of the systematic literature review method, taking into account the following criteria: paper objective, key words, data accuracy, data reliability and data accessibility. Own research was based on analysis of information – concerning communication strategies – presented on websites of multinational companies operating in the European Union and on the results of a survey carried out among 246 young consumers in the first quarter of 2015.

■ Conceptual background

Marketing communication is an important element of an international marketing strategy. There are several tools of communication with consumers. One can distinguish media communication with the press, television, cinema, and Internet advertising, as well as non-media communication i.e. sponsoring, participation in fairs, contacts with the press or direct marketing. Companies can also communicate through sales promotion activities and several online marketing tools, each of which is aimed to win people's interest and favour, build the brand image, and thus bring about an increase in turnover.

Nowadays marketing communication campaigns, besides underlining the material characteristics of products, supply information about the brand's intangible values. Consequently, in promotional campaigns, brand values associated not only with the product itself but with lifestyle, security, promoting freedom, joy and fun are presented. These values more and more often have a global character and join people over the world.

Fashion 'brands' appear to be becoming more and more important as they act as symbolic signifiers of values [6]. On the textile market the objective of marketing communication is especially to enhance the company's image on the market, develop brand loyalty, promote new collections, as well as to inform about sales promotion activities. There are special campaigns dedicated to promoting a brand, its personality, values and image.

Marketing communications in the clothing industry represent a network of relationships that forms between the manufacturer, retailer and customer. The essential target of communicating in the field of clothing and fashion is to influence the consumer and direct his/

her purchasing pattern. By integrating the consumer into an organisation, we encounter a change in the nature of communication from one-way to two-way communication, from monologue to dialogue. The structure of the marketing communication mix of clothing companies does not deviate from the general theory. Advertising is one of the most important instruments of the marketing communication mix in the clothing industry, with additional activities in the area of personal selling, sales promotion and public relations [19].

The process of internationalisation implies a number of questions connected with marketing communication strategy. In the literature, there are two contrasting opinions on the subject. According to one, the adoption of a uniform strategy all over the world enables a company to profit from the effect of synergy arising from multinational operations, which in consequence leads to obtaining a competitive advantage on a global scale. The other theory stipulates that only the adaptation of strategies to local circumstances guarantees a company's success. The middle way between these views is a strategy based on the principle "think globally, act locally", which allows for taking advantage of international attributes and adjusting the communication strategy to the expectations, habits and attitudes of local consumers at the same time [11].

The forces of social change are changing the world and leading to the decreasing importance of national dimensions in defining companies' communication strategies. Differences between individual market segments within a country are becoming far greater than those between consumers within the same market segment in different countries. Consequently it is therefore reasonable to view different market segments in the regional, even global context. The doubtless homogeneity of certain market segments within the European Union creates prerequisites for using "European marketing" as a regional, standardised marketing concept. In this context, it should also be noted that the European framework is fairly heterogeneous, which in turn begs the question whether European marketing is the optimal solution, or whether one should take into account the fact that there is a clear distinction between country clusters within the EU, which will serve as a better basis for implementing the stand-

ardised international marketing concept [8]. However, cultural awareness shapes how business firms behave in cross-culturally reflected international markets. It is broadly recognised that cultural factors are like invisible barriers in international marketing communications. Tian and Borges [18] stress that understanding cultural differences is one of the most significant skills for firms to develop in order to have a competitive advantage in international business.

The problems of standardisation/adaptation of communication marketing strategy have been discussed in literature, most often in context of:

- costs savings, by de Mooij [7], Jain [13], Harris [12], Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos [16], Pae *et al.* [15] and Backhaus *et al.* [3],
- message confusion, e.g. by Jain [13] and Harris [12],
- brand image, by de Mooij [7], Jain [13], Harris [12], Pae *et al.* [15] and Backhaus *et al.* [3],
- promotion efficiency, e.g. by de Mooij [7] and Backhaus *et al.* [3],
- competitive position, by Cavusgil and Zou [5] and de Mooij [7],
- media availability and usage, by de Mooij [7] and Agrawal [2],
- local laws, by de Mooij [7] and Agrawal [2],
- cultural issues, by Argawal [2], Kanso & Nelson [14] and Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos [16].

■ Research concept

Inspired by several studies, the authors decided to analyse the level of standardisation/adjustment of the marketing communication strategy of multinational textile companies in the European Union in comparison with other B2C sectors to develop the discussion concerning adaptation/standardisation of marketing communication strategies on the textile market in Europe while taking into account activities conducted by the companies analysed as well as the opinions of young consumers (age 19-24) from Poland and France.

The objectives of this study are to investigate the level of adjustment of the marketing communication strategy of the multinational textile companies on the European market studied. The analysis of differences between the level of adaptation/standardisation of communication strategies by multinational tex-

Table 1. Standardisation, partial standardisation and adaptation of marketing communication activities of multinational textile companies in the European Union in comparison to companies from other sectors. *Note:* * language of information was not considered as an adaptation. Own elaboration.

Marketing communication activity	% of textile companies (n = 50)			% of other companies (n = 100)		
	Full standardization	Partial standardization	Adaptation	Full standardization	Partial standardization	Adaptation
Advertising	32	50	18	15	55	30
Sponsoring	40	36	24	20	45	35
Event communication	28	40	32	20	45	35
Sales promotion	40	28	32	25	50	25
Online marketing	60	22	18	35	35	30

tile companies and other multinational companies operating in the European Union and offering products for the B2C market (individuals and households) is also important, as well as the evaluation of global communication campaigns of multinational textile companies by young consumers. Thus the following hypotheses are set forth:

- H1: Multinational textile companies partially or fully standardise their communications strategies on the European market.
- H2: The level of standardisation of the communication strategies is higher on the European textile market than on the other European B2C markets.
- H3: Young consumers' attitudes toward global textile brands promoted with standardized tools are more favourable than in the case of global textile brands promoted with locally adapted promotional activities.
- H4: The purchase intentions of young Polish and French consumers are stronger in the case of global textile brands promoted with standardised tools than in the case of global textile brands promoted with locally adapted actions.
- H5: Textile products are more likely than other products to benefit from the standardisation of marketing communication activities.

■ Data collection

The first research was based on the analysis of information concerning communication strategies presented on the websites of multinational companies operating in the European Union. The choice of this research method was justified by the specificity of the subject matter of the paper. The websites of 50 multinational textile companies and 100 multinational companies offering other products for the B2C market (individuals and house-

holds) were analysed. Data was collected during the period August-September 2014 (for textile companies) and March-April 2014 (for other sectors). The websites were selected based on the global brand research conducted by Interbrand. However, the sample is not representative. Using a standardised coding form, these websites were examined page by page for the existence, type and features of communication marketing activities. The companies from the textile sector studied are characterized by a varied structure of employment, their size, as well as by the customer segments in which they operate. Among the companies studied from sectors other than the textile one, several companies represent the following: cosmetics, food, automotive as well as retail chains and the banking sector. Some of the companies studied also belong to the telecommunication and insurance sectors. The diversity of types of activity, the size of the companies, as well as the sector segments in which they operate enable one to carry out an in-depth analysis of the level of standardisation/adjustment of a marketing communication strategy.

The second research was a study based on the method of indirect collection of information, in which the research tool was an on-line survey questionnaire. Data were collected from a relatively large convenience sample in the first quarter of 2015. The population of young French and Polish consumers (age 19-24) was analysed. The responses from 246 young consumers were received, 57% of which represented Poland and 43% France. The respondents all have secondary or higher education, 46% of which were female and 54% male. The choice of an on-line survey questionnaire was justified by the specificity of the subject matter of the paper and the necessity to include a larger number of consumers in the study.

■ Results and discussion

During the analysis, firstly the number of companies implementing a fully-standardised, partially-standardised or adapted marketing communication strategy was determined taking into account five promotion activities (advertising, sponsoring, event communication, sales promotion and online marketing) for a minimum five European countries (*Table 1*).

The analysis of website content shows that the multinational textile companies are more likely to partially or fully standardise their promotion activities, especially in the case of advertising (82%), online marketing activities (82%) and sponsoring (76%). Partial or full standardization is the most popular on the textile market in the case of advertising and online activities. The qualitative analysis of text content and quantitative correspondence analysis were used to study the narrative and visual information on 250 national websites of 50 different textile companies in 5 European countries. The structure of the website in majority of cases analysed is exactly the same (60%) or similar (22%). The websites of multinational textile companies have the same framework and the collections presented are analogous. Also the graphic form, colours and tab titles are – in the majority of cases – exactly the same. The companies often underline on the websites global activities in the area of sustainable development. However, some important differences are noted for 9 of the companies analysed in which the website content is adapted especially by introducing local information concerning sales promotions, events or local company engagement.

Advertising campaigns are fully standardised by 32% of the textile companies analysed, and consequently the advertising content presented on the websites is exactly the same for all European countries analysed. Partial-standardisation is implemented by 50% of the companies studied. Sometimes ad information differs only in the price, which is the effect of the economic situation. These differences are noteworthy between eastern and western branches. Additionally the model of clothes presented on the main page are also not similar in the same moment and in these cases, and we can conclude that partial adjustment is employed, which can be connected espe-

cially with weather conditions, different in the countries analysed.

76% of the textile companies studied fully or partially standardise sponsoring activities. These actions often have a global character and are associated with the support of international fashion events, charity organisations, ecological initiatives and sport or music events. This global engagement helps to reinforce the global brand image and especially attract well-educated, cosmopolitan consumers. The sponsoring of local actions was observed in the case of 24% of companies. In the majority, they support local charity actions and local fashion or music events.

The partial standardisation and adaptation of marketing communication activities of multinational textile companies in the European Union may be caused by different factors, the most often by the impact of the economic, cultural or natural environment. Adaptation is chosen by the textile multinational companies analysed more often (32%) in the case of event communication and sales promotion tools. However, for both types of promotional actions, 68% of the textile companies studied still choose full or partial standardisation. 40% of companies organise local editions at global events included in the international marketing communication strategy (partially standardised promotion) and 32% organise local events dedicated only for consumers from one country and connected in the majority with regional holidays or participation in events organised by shopping centres. These events are often opportunities to organise local sales promotion actions (32%). However, 40% of companies studied standardise their sales promotion activities and inform on their websites about similar sales promotion actions undertaken in different European countries in the same period.

H1 predicted that multinational textile companies partially or fully standardise their communication strategies on the European market. The analysis of website content proves that the majority of companies indeed partially or fully globalise promotional activities. For each of the five promotion tools analysed, more than 68% of global textile companies partly or fully standardise communication marketing strategies on the European market. In consequence, hypothesis 1 is supported. Standardisation optics on the textile market is very strong.

The textile companies analysed fully standardise online marketing activities (60%) the most often, and the least – event communication activities (20%). This tendency is visible also in the case of companies representing other sectors – most often fully standardising online marketing activities (35%) and least frequently – event communication activities (10%). However, full-standardisation optics is much stronger in the case of textile companies for all types of marketing communication activities, especially for online communication activities (60% – textile companies and 35% – other) and sponsoring (40% – textile companies and 20% – other), see *Table 1*. For these two factors, the differences between companies from the textile sector and other sectors oscillate at the level of 25% and 20%, which can be evaluated as important; full-standardisation on the textile market is also more frequent for other tools of promotion. Partial standardisation is more often used by companies from other sectors, popular in the case of advertising (55%), sales promotion (50%), sponsoring (45%), and event communication (45%), and the least for online marketing activities (35%). Differences between the textile and other B2C sectors are also visible during the adaptation of marketing communication activities. Adaptation is chosen by the multinational textile companies analysed especially in the case of event communication (32%) and sales promotion tools (32%). The companies from other sectors more frequently adapt promotion activities for all tools (except sales promotion, which is, however, partially standardized by 50% of companies). This comparison confirms hypothesis 2, where the level of standardization of the communications strategies is higher on the textile European market than on the other European B2C markets.

The partial or full standardisation of the European marketing communication strategy in the textile industry is connected with the globalisation of fashion trends, easy access to the Internet and also to social media, the development of global brands and their reinforcement by international star images, as well as with the development of a global distribution network and European citizen mobility.

The second research was conducted among young consumers from France and Poland and allowed the evaluation of their attitudes as well as the level of

purchase intentions toward global textile brands promoted with standardised or adapted marketing communication tools. The one-dimensional five-item scale, usually integrated in studies on brand attitudes and purchase intention measurements, was selected. Its reliability and validity was at a satisfactory level (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.90$ and $\alpha = 0.83$ and Jöreskog $\rho = 0.91$ and $\rho = 0.89$). An ANOVA test was run for hypotheses 3, 4 and 5.

ANOVA results confirm that the attitudes of young French and Polish consumers toward global textile brands promoted with standardised promotion tools are more favourable than for global textile brands promoted with locally adapted promotion tools, irrespective of respondents' origin. More favourable attitudes toward global textile brands promoted by standardised tools were observed for men than for women.

Young consumers are strongly affected by the trend of globalisation. Due to the development of new technologies, they regularly track information from different parts of the world and very often compare messages sent by producers to consumers from different countries. They expect access to the same offers as consumers from other countries, and they are more cosmopolitan, open to the globalisation process and more English-speaking, which facilitates the standardisation of marketing communication tools. These young people also want to be more trendy, follow new styles and be open to new fashion trends, which can explain their positive attitude toward the standardised marketing communication of global textile brands.

Thus hypothesis 3, postulating that young consumer attitudes toward global textile brands promoted with standardised tools are more favourable than in the case of global textile brands promoted with locally adapted promotional activities, is confirmed. ANOVA results also confirm a stronger intentions to purchase global textile brands promoted with standardized tools than global textile brands promoted with locally adapted promotional actions. Stronger purchase intentions toward global textile brands promoted by standardised tools were observed for young Polish consumers, which can be explained by the desire to get closer to consumers from more developed countries. Stronger purchase intentions toward global textile brands promoted by

standardised tools were also noted for women, which can be connected with women's aspiration to follow the latest international trends in fashion and their interest and knowledge of the fashion market. The new forms of purchase provided due to the development of e-commerce also facilitate globalisation of marketing communication activities, especially in the area of on-line marketing. Young consumers expect access to the same products and brands, which, in consequence, can be promoted by standardised means.

Thus hypothesis 4, where the purchase intentions of young Polish and French consumers are stronger in the case of global textile brands promoted with standardised tools than in that of global textile brands promoted with locally adapted actions, is confirmed.

During realisation of the research, analysis concerning the unification of marketing communication activities for textile products and products from other sectors was also conducted. In order to verify hypothesis 5, an ANOVA test was applied to measure the variance for unrelated means. The respondents could indicate more than one product category, and in consequence indicate one category did not exclude preference for other products. The standard deviations demonstrate that there is no important dispersion around the mean. The mean difference is significant at 0.05. The results prove that textile and cosmetic products have the highest preference, followed by automobile products, telecommunications, insurance and banking services, and finally retail chains and food products. This can be the effect of internationalisation of the textile market, influenced by global trends, tendencies and promoted by global celebrities. Thus hypothesis 5, postulating that textile products are more likely than others to benefit from the standardisation of marketing communication activities, is confirmed.

■ Limitations and extensions

It is important to define the contributions of this research properly. The conclusions in this study are set fourth, of course, with a caveat as to the limitations of the sample, as in the first research, the choice of companies studied was a deliberate one, the sample not representative, and the analysis concerns only the selected examples of multinational

textile companies, while in the second research, the study was based on a sample of young consumers from only two European countries, and consequently it may not have captured the full extent of consumers' attitudes toward standardized marketing communication activities. To provide a more comprehensive analysis, similar studies could examine textile companies and their opinions concerning the level of standardization of marketing communication strategies. A future study could also examine consumers from other countries and other age ranges and their opinions concerning the evaluation of standardised and adapted communication activities.

■ Conclusions

Today the European Union market offers many opportunities for textile company development. Expansion in this region is often a condition of maintaining their competitive advantage. According Grandys and Grandys [10], clothing companies will certainly continue to use internationalisation as a vehicle for expanding their business, and this process will contribute to the better efficiency of management. The formal determinant of firms' expansion into global markets is international agreements, mainly WTO membership and the country's integration with the European Union [9].

The diversity of European citizens poses many questions related to marketing communication strategy. The question is whether multinational textile companies can adapt or standardise their promotional activities taking into account the era of globalisation and, at the same time, the specificities of national markets.

Analysis of the results presented shows that more than 50% of multinational textile companies partially or fully standardize their marketing communication strategies (by unification of advertising campaigns, participation in international fashion events, development of online tools, sponsoring of global events, and organisation of common sales promotional actions i.e. seasonal sales). This standardisation of marketing communication actions in the European Union is caused by the unification of cultural, economic, legal, technological and natural factors. Results also support that textile products are more likely than others to benefit from the standardization of marketing communication activities.

Analysis of the attitudes and purchase intentions of young consumers from two European countries toward global textile brands promoted with standardised or locally adapted tools proves that young people are cosmopolitan and represent positive attitudes toward a single textile market with promotional actions that are unified for all European countries.

The main reason for the standardisation of marketing communication activities on the whole European clothing market is cost advantages. The other is the introduction of global textile brands that have a positive influence on the company's image. By promoting one brand throughout the international clothing market, one can enhance the company's position in the consumers' awareness in many countries.

The following trends on the textile market are of crucial importance to standardise promotion activities: the universal presence of the Internet, influencing societies in terms of general values, the development of unified fashion trends, and the cosmopolitisation of culture under the influence of the new media. Factors influencing the choice of standardised strategy on the clothing market also include the market position of multinationals, the position and activities of competitors, consumer preferences, and the nature of products which can be transferred and sold at the same time in different regions of European Union. Consequently the nature of the sector and products are significant factors to unify marketing communication activities.

The advance of technology, the Internet in particular, have changed the behaviours of consumers on the clothing market, especially the young. The internet is changing how these companies compete and how they approach the global market place. Young people are looking for international trends, observing the style of celebrities and searching for new forms of purchase provided due to the development of e-commerce. This also facilitates the globalisation of marketing communication activities on the clothing market as well as the development of the same products and brands, promoted by standardised means.

The effect that this intensified globalisation has had on marketing strategies has been spectacular. Globalisation means that companies try to take advantage of the associated benefits of a standardized

approach to marketing strategy. The European Union is the world's most complex region, with "European citizenship" still in development and substantial differences in the economic, cultural, and infrastructural environments existing in Europe. Despite these divergences, the unification of lifestyles and growing uniformity in consumer tastes and purchasing behaviours progressively minimise the importance of traditional geographical, political, and cultural boundaries within Europe. Consequently European diversity impact on marketing communication strategy is quite low and standardisation of communication activities can bring success in conducting international business on the textile and clothing market.



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The **Laboratory** is active in testing fibres, yarns, textiles and medical products. The usability and physico-mechanical properties of textiles and medical products are tested in accordance with European EN, International ISO and Polish PN standards.

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