Cultural Influence in Advertising

A Comparative Analysis of IKEA’s Video Advertising in Sweden and Japan
ABSTRACT

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Title: Cultural Influence in Advertising
Subtitle: A Comparative Analysis of IKEA’s Video Advertising in Sweden and Japan
Language: English
Pages: 47

International marketing activities have a great impact on the prosperity and competitiveness of multinational companies (Akgün, Keskin, & Ayar, 2014). That is why the design of marketing activities is especially important. Researchers claim for cultural sensitivity. According to their work, culture has a significant influence on marketing content which needs to be culturally adapted (Kaur & Chawla, 2016).

Based on these assumptions the present study aims to discuss the concepts of culture in relation to standardization and adaptation of IKEA’s advertising content published in Sweden and Japan. The study is focused on IKEA since the company is known to implement a standardized marketing approach with only minor cultural adaptations (Burt, Johansson, & Thelander, 2011).

To accomplish that goal a multimodal critical discourse analysis is applied. The analysis seeks to identify the similarities and differences in IKEA’s video advertisements published in Sweden and Japan to determine how the company promotes its products. The analysis is limited to visual semiotic choices.

The interpretation of the results is linked to the findings of Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long- and Short-Term Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint.

The study revealed that signs for both concepts standardization and adaptation were visible in IKEA’s advertisements. Especially the analysis of the Japanese sample has shown that IKEA follows a standardized marketing approach when it comes to communicating the company’s core values such as gender equality. This value was frequently depicted in the Japanese advertisements where gender division usually prevails. However, less significant aspects such as those concerning the outer appearance of the actors were culturally adapted. These findings underline a dialectical relationship between culture and advertising content. Leading theoretical frameworks lag to take into account this continuous discourse that emphasizes the importance to implement the perspective of a changing environment in further theoretical contributions.

Keywords: Culture, Cross-cultural Research, Advertising, Marketing, Standardization, Adaptation, Hofstede
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1 Introduction

People from different cultural backgrounds are getting in touch more frequently, working
groups in companies are becoming increasingly internationalized and business practices of
companies are crossing borders. All these observations are consequences of the globalization
process which is described as “an objective, empirical process of increasing economic and
political connectivity, a subjective process unfolding in consciousness as the collective
awareness of growing global interconnectedness, and a host of specific globalizing projects
that seek to shape global conditions” (Nederveen, 2009, pp. 16-17). According to Nederveen’s
definition globalization initiates processes which affect economic, political, social,
environmental and - of special interest for the given thesis - cultural changes (Gwynne & Kay,
2014). He points to an interrelation between globalization and culture which is described as
global mélange or hybridization in common literature (Nederveen, 2009). These effects lead
to several challenges for international marketing and communication since different cultural
backgrounds may imply diverging expectations and needs regarding the distributed content.
This fact introduces further questions of marketing standardization and adaptation.
Questions also arise as to whether clear and targeted communication is even possible in such
a hybridized environment and whether companies are aware of that circumstance.

Based on these assumptions the present paper seeks to discuss the connection between the
concepts of culture on one hand and standardization and adaptation of marketing content on
the other. To this end, video advertisements of IKEA published in the two culturally different
countries Sweden and Japan are analyzed. The overall aim is to evaluate current business
practices against the background of leading theoretical concepts to review their validity and
applicability.

To begin, an overview of the global retailer IKEA is given. Special attention is paid to the
already applied marketing strategies and their success and failure regarding questions of
standardization and cultural adaptation. Following this, the research aim including a more
specified research questions are presented to provide the basic guideline of the paper. The
subsequent literature review attempts to introduce the reader to the research field of cross-
cultural communication. In particular, those studies that deal with the thematic overlap
between cultural studies on the one hand and their influence on marketing content on the
other are considered before the research gap is defined. Thereafter Hofstede’s theory of
cultural dimensions is introduced since the model forms the theoretical base for the analysis
of the selected material. In the analysis that follows, ten advertisements total from two
different campaigns published by IKEA in Sweden and Japan respectively are analyzed. The
results are gathered and interpreted by using the qualitative method of the multimodal
critical discourse analysis. The analysis is thereby limited to the visual content provided by
the advertisements. Finally, conclusions regarding IKEA’s ways of marketing its products in its home market Sweden and its sales market Japan are discussed.

2 Background

IKEA as a Global Company

IKEA is the world’s largest retailer within the furniture sector and is currently operating successfully in more than 40 countries all over the world (IKEA, 2018a). The Swedish company has been working in foreign markets since 1973 when it opened for business in Switzerland. In the following years the company expanded to other “neighbouring countries and markets with similar language and cultural traditions” (Burt, Johansson, & Thelander, 2011, p. 183). Nowadays IKEA acts on a global level with 375 stores located in North America, Central America, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and Asia (IKEA, 2018a).

IKEA’s Marketing Strategy

IKEA has the vision to “create a better everyday life for the many people” (IKEA, 2018a). This indicates that furniture designed by IKEA should be accessible and affordable to as many people as possible. To accomplish this goal, the company is implementing a standardized marketing approach according to which the company should act in the same manner in every market. In this way regional adjustments for marketing materials can be minimized, which leads to lower costs. Only a few selected IKEA markets have the opportunity to adapt their marketing material to regional values. For this reason, IKEA is often described as a global retailer (Burt et al., 2011). On top of this IKEA is known to be a company that maintains its Swedish values (Usunier & Lee, 2005). Therefore, it should be highlighted that, in contrast to other companies, IKEA is not only concerned about home furnishing but also about the social impact their business practice has on the people the company works with: “At IKEA, we believe in people. We do our best to stand for equal opportunities and support human rights. Every co-worker can expect fair treatment and equal opportunities whatever their ethnicity, religion, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation or age” (IKEA, 2018d). According to the above statement it is expected that IKEA does not only follow a standardized marketing approach when it comes to the design of marketing materials but also with regard to its way of working in different, often culturally diverse, countries.

IKEA’s Advertising Blunders

Although IKEA is generally associated with a standardized marketing approach defined by its “promotion of human rights, tolerance and political correctness” (Sputnik, 2017), it must be outlined that there exist differences in practice. In a few cases the Swedish company has adapted some of its marketing material to regional or national aspects that have not always
been successful and that have already led to severe criticism in the last few years. In 2012 IKEA removed women from its catalogue which was published in Saudi Arabia. This incident led to a questioning of IKEA’s conviction of gender equality in public (Ringstrom, 2012). A similar case occurred in 2017, when the members of ultra-Orthodox Haredi communities received an IKEA catalogue without any representation of women (Roden, 2017). In 2013 the Swedish company erased a lesbian couple from its Russian catalogue in order to respect the local restrictions on being gay. That provoked protests of gay and lesbian couples who visited the IKEA store in the Moscow suburb of Khimki where they kissed each other in front of IKEA’s customers (Sputnik, 2017). In 2017 IKEA had to withdraw a Chinese advertisement because of its depiction of a single woman who “was being scolded by her mother for not ‘bringing home a boyfriend ’” (Corry, 2017). All these examples show how difficult it is to balance a marketing strategy with the core values of a company on one hand and the local values of a national culture on the other. This challenge implies the need for further research on how IKEA designs its marketing strategies in specific cases in order to gather information on how to design marketing material in the most favorable way.

3 Aim and Research Questions

The overall aim of this study is to discuss the concept of culture in relation to standardization and adaptation of advertising content in different countries. Of special interest is identifying the impact of cultural values of societies on the production and design of the marketing concepts in question. Furthermore, this study seeks to determine the role of marketing within the cross-cultural research field and its implications for already established theoretical frameworks such as the theory of cultural dimensions provided by Geert Hofstede. To accomplish this objective, selected advertisements of one single company have been analyzed through the qualitative method of multimodal critical discourse analysis. The study has hence been restricted to a comparison between IKEA’s video advertisements published in two different markets, namely Sweden and Japan.

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. How does IKEA advertise its products in Sweden and in Japan?
   a): What are the similarities and differences between the advertisements for the Swedish and Japanese markets respectively?
   b): How does IKEA work with standardization and adaptation in its advertisements for above mentioned markets?
2. What can the comparison between IKEA’s advertising campaigns for Sweden and Japan teach us about how the company understands “Swedish culture” when communicating with customers?
In addition to these research questions, other possible influencing factors regarding the production and design of marketing content will be taken into consideration to evaluate the applicability of this study’s underlying theoretical frameworks to the research problem under investigation. The starting point for this consideration is the assumption that the globalization process has already led to intercultural overlaps that might be reflected in the advertising sector. The fact that numerous researchers have criticized many cultural theories due to a lag in the depicted influencing factors makes this claim particularly important.

4 Literature Review of Previous Research

Research Procedure

The research for the literature review was conducted through several data bases. Jönköping University’s library webpage PRIMO, the SCOPUS data base which provides mainly abstracts of peer-reviewed journals and Google Scholar were used initially to obtain an overview on the broad research topic. At the beginning wide key terms in different variations were used. These include “culture”, “cultural influence”, “cultural impact” or “cultural differences”. The terms were combined with the terms “marketing”, “marketing strategy”, “advertising”, “advertisement”, “advertising strategy”, “standardization” and “adaptation”. Thereby the search process was limited to peer-reviewed journals and from the years 2000 to 2018.

The search revealed that a significant amount of studies referred to two main theories presented by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980). Since these studies were published at an earlier time, it was expected that pioneering studies were already conducted before 2000. This assumption was supported by the article published by Dahl (2004) who summarized the most cited studies within the research field of cross-cultural communication. Since an increase of publications in 1996 was visible in the provided table, the time frame for the search was expanded. The further search covered the period from 1995 till 2018. Moreover, a more specified research could be conducted. By indicating precise key terms, such as “cross-cultural marketing”, “cross-cultural advertising”, “cross-cultural communication”, “cross-cultural research” and “cultural dimensions” as reference to Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions, other data bases such as the Communication Source which forms part of the EBSCO Information Service or the DiVA student theses data base, which require a more specified research, could be used. Articles which seemed especially useful for the research purpose formed the basis for further research. The articles cited in these works were reviewed additionally. After the decision was made that the Swedish company IKEA should be the research object of the given paper another literature search process focusing on IKEA’s marketing strategies was implemented. This time similar key terms as before were used in
combination with the new key terms “IKEA”, “IKEA marketing strategy” or “IKEA advertising strategy”.

The literature review includes nine articles which are most significant for the given research. Dahl’s (2004) publication provides a summarizing overview on the cross-cultural research field. The articles published by Zhang & Neelankavil (1997) and Albers-Miller & Gelb (1996) give insight in quantitative research approaches in the field of cross-cultural communication while Yalcin & Cimendag (2012) provide information which is more qualitatively based. Other studies focus on selected cultural dimensions (Milner & Collins, 2000) or a specific communication medium where marketing content is published (Hermeking, 2005; Baack & Singh, 2007). Also, articles dealing specifically with IKEA’s marketing strategy are reviewed (Burt et al., 2011; Maqedonci & Svedenman, 2018).

**Reviewed Articles**

Global companies face several difficulties when designing their marketing strategy since every country is distinguished by different cultural backgrounds. Researchers assume that culture has a significant influence on consumer behavior and preferences and therefore on marketing products (Kaur & Chawla, 2016). This topic is researched within the cross-cultural communication field which belongs to intercultural communication studies. Cross-cultural communication seeks for the identification of differences and similarities between nations in advertisements (Dahl, 2004).

This approach implies further questions of the standardization and adaptation of marketing content. Burt et al. (2011) examined the degree of standardization and adaptation of the four retail marketing mix activities merchandise, location and store format, the selling and service environment, and market communication within IKEA’s sales markets in Sweden, the UK and China. They obtained the data by conducting “personal interviews, in-country consumer research, company documentation and third party commentaries” (Burt et al., 2011, p. 183). The study revealed that although IKEA claims to follow a standardized concept, cultural adaptations of elements concerning the customer and back office processes can be observed. Nevertheless, IKEA is considered to implement much less adaptation in its sales market than other global retailers such as Tesco, Wal-Mart or Carrefour.

Following these findings IKEA seems to play an exceptional role within the global retail market. In contrast to leading literature which rather claims for cultural adaptation IKEA seeks increasingly for standardization. Zhang & Neelankavil (1997) for example investigated the effects of different advertising appeals in the United States and China by focusing on Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions of Individualism versus Collectivism. Hofstede’s theory focuses on the consumer perception of marketing activities. In total he identified six
cultural dimensions to classify different national value systems: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long- and Short-Term Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). To accomplish that goal they carried out an experiment by employing a quota sample of 160 subjects (80 subjects per country) from undergraduate and graduate business classes in a large university in China and in the USA. The researchers found out that the same marketing appeals in fact have different effects in the two countries: Marketing appeals which emphasize collectivist benefits had a greater impact on the Chinese audience. Individualist benefits on the other hand were rather influential in the American market. Therefore, it is expected that culture has a significant influence on the perception of marketing content which questions IKEA’s prior mentioned standardized marketing strategy. Furthermore, it is important to mention that according to Zhang & Neelankavil (1997) most of the cultural models fall short in their depiction of cultures since they exclude other variables such as those concerning the core values of a company, politics or other sectors in society.

Yalcin & Cimendag (2012) obtained similar results as the prior introduced studies and advocate for cultural sensitivity in designing marketing strategies. They emphasize the importance for companies to be flexible in a globalized environment with its cultural challenges. The researchers examined how cultural differences in global marketing can be handled by global companies in the Middle East. To achieve a better understanding about Middle Eastern culture the researchers referred to Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions and Hall’s high-context and low-context cultures. Following Hall’s explanations people use a preprogrammed context and information which differ among countries to create meaning (Hall, 1976; Kittler, Rygl, & Mackinnon, 2011). Low-context cultures “depend on spoken and written language for meaning” (Yalcin & Cimendag, 2012, p. 16) which consists of the encoding and decoding of messages. High-context cultures on the other hand “use and interpret more of the elements surrounding the message to develop their understanding of the message” (Yalcin & Cimendag, 2012, p. 16). These elements include the social importance of the person, its knowledge as well as the social setting. They influence on how the message is perceived (Hollensen, 2011). Yalcin & Cimendag (2012) gathered their information through semi-structured interviews with representatives from companies and agencies located in the Middle East as well as previous case studies. Yalcin & Cimendag (2012) concluded that global companies should adapt a “think global, act local” marketing approach which respects market differences such as local culture, religion and advertising regulations and guidelines. They also recommend cooperating with local advertising agencies in order to benefit from their knowledge and address cultural differences properly. However, since the study had a
qualitative approach and only covered few representatives, these findings need to be treated with caution.

Also, Albers-Miller & Gelb (1996) had a related research purpose and came to similar though less clear conclusions. They analyzed if systematic differences in local advertising stand in line with the culture the content is published in. Contrary to the prior presented researches the given analysis includes business publications from eleven countries by correlating the proportional use of Pollay's advertising appeals (1983) to Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions Individualism versus Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, and Masculinity versus Femininity. For ten out of thirty expected relationships a cultural reflection of the advertising content could be proofed. After removing outliers another eight hypotheses could be provisionally confirmed. Since the given study is characterized by a quantitative research approach with strong requirements regarding the significance of findings it seems logical that the results are not as trend-setting as some of the results presented before which are strongly based on subjective interpretations.

Therefore, another quantitative study testing the applicability of cultural frameworks among different countries is introduced in the following. Baack & Singh (2007) conducted two studies to analyze cultural reflections. The underlying frameworks which were used to portray the national cultures of the depicted countries were Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions (1980) and Schwartz’s (1994) theory of cultural value orientation. The theory of Schwartz is assigned to the newer cultural theories and has a different theoretical assumption than the prior introduced theories. According to Schwartz it is important to not only pay attention to ethnic characteristics but also to emic characteristics (Reimer, 2005). He focuses on three basic issues which can occur in society: “(1) relations between individual and group; (2) assuring responsible social behavior; and (3) the role of humankind in the natural and societal world” (Steenkamp, 2001, p. 32). Similar to other researchers Schwartz formulated dimensions to describe differences in cultures. These are conservatism, intellectual and affective autonomy, hierarchy, mastery, egalitarian commitment and harmony (Reimer, 2005). In their first study the researchers undertook a content analysis. Instead of analyzing business publications they based their content analysis on web content from fifteen countries. The obtained results support prior findings which point to difficulties when applying theoretical frameworks in practice. Nevertheless, Baack & Singh (2007) emphasize that the identified factors emerge from the cultural dimensions since they are explainable by the theoretical approaches. To minimize the limitations the researchers claim to combine Hofstede’s and Schwartz’s theory in further studies. The second study investigated the cultural adaptation of a Taiwanese company website. The researchers conducted usability tests among students from three Taiwanese universities in order to identify their usage preferences. The study showed that culturally adapted websites are generally preferred. They
also found out that the selected theoretical frameworks provide a useful foundation for the design of those websites. These findings underline the fact that not only printed marketing content needs to be culturally adapted but also web communications should respect local culture and values. This observation is supported by Hermeking (2005) who examined concepts of culture by referring to their limitations and utility for web content from a marketing perspective. Hermeking (2005) conducted a literature review by relating his findings mainly to the cultural models from Hofstede (1991) and Hall (1977). He found out that the internet is broadly influenced by culture although the internet diffusion is described as increasing process. Nevertheless, cultural differences are clearly visible between countries which explains Hermeking’s claim for cultural adapted web content.

The literature reviewed so far revealed that most researchers agree on the fact that culture has a significant impact on marketing content. The majority of the studies tried to test already existing theoretical frameworks of culture regarding their applicability. Only the publication of Albers-Miller & Gelb (1996) was limited to the single cultural dimension Individualism versus Collectivism. In that case it has to be highlighted that also another dimension received a lot of attention within the body of literature: the dimension of Masculinity versus Femininity. Maqedonci & Svedenman (2018) for example examined different gender roles and family structures in IKEA’s commercial campaign “Där livet händer” (translation: Where life happens). Furthermore, they evaluated if the analyzed advertising content either strengthens or weakens the societal norms in Swedish society. The researchers conducted a qualitative content analysis on four commercials by linking the content to Goffman’s gender analysis (1979) which provides insight on different notions of gender in advertising and Hirdman’s theory of gender contract (1988) which focuses on the historical development of gender relations. Maqedonci & Svedenman (2018) concluded that IKEA depicts gender roles in an extraordinary way. Different from usual portrayals of women the female actors in IKEA’s commercials were presented as independent and equal individuals. Men on the other hand are more associated with soft attributes which stand in conflict with their ordinarily very masculine depiction in advertisements.

This depiction of men and women in Swedish advertisements stands in line with the study conducted by Milner & Collins (2000). They examined television advertisements published in Japan, Russia, Sweden and the United States by using Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions. More than twelve hours of programming from big broadcasting companies were analyzed in four countries. The study concluded that the theoretical assumptions stated by Hofstede agree with the findings of the study. According to Hofstede Russia and Sweden are rather described as feminine countries while the United States and Japan are considered to be masculine countries. Feminine countries are characterized by an overlap of gender roles. Masculine societies on the other hand distinguish themselves through a strict gender
separation following the traditional family model. The study revealed that in fact more significant differences in sex roles were observable in the masculine societies represented by the United States and Japan. The advertisements published in the feminine societies Sweden and Russia on the contrary featured a variety of relationship depictions for female and male characters. Also, gender overlaps as observed in the study conducted by Maqedonci & Svedenman (2018) could be identified in this sample.

In the following, a final study conducted by Dahl (2004) is introduced. The study aims to summarize the research carried out in the field of cross-cultural advertising published during the time period from 1985 to 2004. The study states the knowledge about the influence of culture on advertising as well as further areas for research by performing a broad literature review. One of the main aspects Dahl (2004) figured out during his research is the proofed relationship between culture and marketing appeals. According to him a strict homogenization or standardization of marketing content is not possible. Marketing content is rather culturally adapted. Furthermore, Dahl (2004) highlights several limitations in the studies conducted within the field of cross-cultural advertising. He points out that only a few studies deal with the attractiveness of advertising content in respect to the customer. Also, most of the studies lag to link cultural similarities and differences of societies in a systematic way to cultural dimensions such as those provided by Hofstede (1991) or Schwartz (1994). Therefore, he claims to conduct further studies by using a broader framework which includes all cultural dimensions of a theory instead of limiting the research to a selected amount of aspects.

Research Gap
The literature review revealed that researchers agree on the fact that culture has a significant influence on international marketing activities. According to them cultural adaptations of marketing content are needed in order to respect local requirements such as values, religion or advertising regulations. This aspect receives special attention considering IKEA’s marketing strategy. As pointed out by Burt et al. (2011) IKEA implements a rather standardized marketing approach although leading literature claims for cultural adaptation. Therefore, the study focuses on analyzing how IKEA advertises its products in foreign markets by identifying similarities and differences in advertisements considering the concepts of standardization and adaptation highlighted by Burt et al. (2011). Hereby it must be emphasized, that the given research concentrates on the advertising of IKEA products to enable the researcher to draw general theoretical based conclusions for the cross-cultural research field. Since Dahl (2004) claims for a systematic comparison of cultural similarities and differences based on a broad theoretical framework Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions is used as theoretical background for the analysis. Although his work was often
criticized by several researchers the theory is still considered to be one of the most comprehensive theories within the field of intercultural management since other approaches of this size are missing so far (Reimer, 2005). The literature review also revealed that previous research is rather characterized by breadth than depth (Dahl, 2004). Therefore, the given study follows a qualitative research approach by focusing on the differences and similarities of marketing strategies in only two countries. This way another perspective within the cross-cultural research field can be provided. In that case it is recommendable to act as prior researchers have by choosing those countries which are culturally dissimilar (Burt et al., 2011). Since the United States was the object of several studies (Dahl, 2004) it also seems appropriate to choose other countries as a point of comparison to provide the research field with new insights of less frequently covered countries. The actual selection of the two cultural dissimilar countries is described and explained in the sampling chapter 6.1. Moreover, it is noted that most research deals with the cultural analysis of print or television advertising (Baack & Singh, 2007). Therefore, it should be considered to provide other perspectives in future research by covering especially the internet as a publication medium of advertisements since web communications are not freed from cultural influences (Baack & Singh, 2007; Hermeking, 2005).

5 Theoretical Frame and Concepts

In the following chapter the theory of cultural dimensions by Geert Hofstede is introduced. Since the two concepts of culture and values provide the theoretical basis for Hofstede’s theory they are shortly explained before an overview on the six cultural dimensions is given. Subsequently the two concepts of standardization and adaptation are described. Both Hofstede’s theory as well as the concepts of standardization and adaptation will be used for the connecting analysis to identify linkages between the sample and the theoretical framework although they differ in their perspective. Hofstede focuses on cultural values in workplaces (Hofstede Insights, 2018a) while the two concepts of standardization and adaptation originate from a marketing perspective (Kotler, 2016). Nevertheless, both approaches are combined in the present study to be able to answer the prior introduced research questions.

5.1 The Theory of Cultural Dimensions by Geert Hofstede

Geert Hofstede is a Dutch researcher and professor. With his theory of cultural dimensions Hofstede conducted “one of the most comprehensive studies of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture” (Hofstede Insights, 2018a). His publication “Culture’s Consequences” in 1980 turned him into the founder of the comparative intercultural research where he is still recognized as a leading representative. The most popular book published by
Hofstede is “Cultures and Organization: Software of the Mind” in 1991 which was translated into 20 languages and which was recited more than thousand times (Reimer, 2008; Hofstede Insights, 2018a). Exactly that book forms the theoretical foundation of the present thesis which was enriched by recent articles published by Hofstede in social science and management journals (Hofstede Insights, 2018a).

The theory of cultural dimensions by Hofstede can be understood as basic theoretical framework for cross-cultural communication. Its overall aim is to identify cultural dimensions to analyze similarities and differences between nations (Kutschker & Schmid, 2002). Comparing this objective to the research approach presented before the theory seems suitable for the given study since it concentrates on the cultural attributes each national identity consists of. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that Hofstede’s theory was repeatedly criticized. Critics point to a lack of a theoretical concept and the weaknesses of the chosen research object and method within his theory. However, most researchers agree on the fact that Hofstede’s theory is the most comprehensive research within the field of intercultural management since other approaches of this size are missing so far (Reimer, 2005).

The focus of Hofstede’s theory is presented by two key terms: culture and values. Culture is generally understood as “a complex, multifaceted construct” (Zhang & Neelankavi, 1997, p. 135) which is a fundamental aspect to society and has a significant influence on people’s behaviors (Punnett, 2009). These behaviors are based on a set of learned orientations which “provide solutions to problems that all societies must solve if they are to remain viable” (Terpstra & David, 1985, p. 5). According to Hofstede these behaviors differ because of the “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from those of another” (Hofstede, 1999, p. 35). This way culture is an influencing factor when it comes to the environment an organization is working in. He assumes that especially the management processes are affected through the “collective mental programming” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5) of its members. Hofstede describes that phenomenon as “cultural relativity” (Hofstede, 1994, p. 4). The core elements of the cultural concept which forms part of the prior mentioned collective programming are values. Values are described as “broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others” (Hofstede, 1999, p. 35). This fact leads to the assumption that values have a significant effect on the relationships between people of a society. These people generally share a collective mindset which differs from other societies regarding ethnicities, religion and linguistics that are linked to specific historical backgrounds (Hofstede, 1994). These explanations show the importance to understand the concepts of culture and values since they are highly relevant for the behaviors a target group might present and at the same time gives implications for
ways on how to achieve desirable behaviors regarding a brand, its products and services (Punnett, 2009).

To classify the different national value systems Hofstede et al. (2010) identified six different independent dimensions:

- **Power Distance**: The first dimension describes the degree of inequality which is perceived by the population of a country. This dimension can differ between equal for small power distances and unequal for the case of high power distances (Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 2001a; Hofstede et al., 2010). The power distance affects hierarchy and relationships in families and organizations (Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2007).

- **Uncertainty Avoidance**: The second dimension focuses on the degree to which people like to structure situations. High uncertainty avoidance can lead to clear rules to structure events which have their origin in either tradition or written law. These societies can be characterized as rigid since they tend to see different things critically. A low uncertainty avoidance on the contrary points to a more flexible society which is open to new ideas (Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 2001a; Hofstede et al., 2010).

- **Individualism versus Collectivism**: The third dimension ranges between individualism and collectivism. People of a country who prefer to act individually than as a member of a group are characterized by a high score within that dimension. The members of these societies focus more on themselves than on the group itself. Collectivist communities on the other hand differentiate between in-group members and out-group members. People who belong to a certain group respect their members and build up a loyal relationship to them. These relations are life-long and characterized by mutual protection (Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 2001a; Hofstede et al., 2010).

- **Masculinity versus Femininity**: The fourth dimension varies between masculine and feminine societies. It describes the degree to which masculine values like “assertiveness, performance, success and competition ... prevail over values like the quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, care for the weak, and solidarity” (Hofstede, 1994, p. 6) which are more linked to the role of women. Masculine societies are therefore characterized as tough societies which focus on performance. Feminine societies on the contrary are distinguished by their tenderness. Typical societies scoring high in this dimension are welfare states (Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 2001a; Hofstede et al., 2010).

- **Long- and Short-Term Orientation**: The fifth dimension Long- and Short-Term Orientation was added later based on the results from the Chinese scholars mainly represented by professor Michael Bond in the 1980s. This cultural dimension refers to values which either point to the future such as persistence and thrift or to values which are oriented towards the past and present like the respect for tradition or the
commitment to fulfill social obligations (Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 2001a; Hofstede et al., 2010).

- Indulgence versus Restraint: Also, the last dimension was added later to Hofstede’s model due to the World Values Survey data analysis from Minkov in 2007. The results led to a sixth dimension called Indulgence versus Restraint. Indulgence refers to “a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 281). Restraint on the other hand stands more for the “conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 281).

In the following these cultural dimensions will be used as parameters to compare the values displayed in the analyzed advertisements with the cultural descriptions and their implications according to Hofstede. The overall aim is to determine the degree the national culture of a country influences the design and content of marketing strategies.

5.2 Standardization & Adaptation

International marketing activities have a great impact on the prosperity and the competitiveness of multinational companies. Therefore, the concept of international marketing receives a lot of attention among common literature. The concept refers to the adaptation and standardization of business practices (Akgün, Keskin, & Ayar, 2014). Since multinational companies operate in a globalized market where countries differ in their cultural values a cultural impact on the marketing design is inevitable. Accordingly, each company must determine to what extent they adapt or standardize their marketing material to the local context (Kotler, 2016; Wang & Yang, 2011).

Standardized global marketing is characterized by using “the same or similar advertising messages across different countries or areas” (Wang & Yang, 2011, p. 25). Advocates of the standardization strategy argue that the world is becoming more homogenous in respect to preferences, tastes and cultures. The reasons for that development are the technological advances which facilitate communication across borders (Brei, D'Avila, Camargo, & Engels, 2011; Levitt, 1983). On top of that the establishment of a standardized marketing approach provides several advantages. It enables the company to “focus on common segments, bringing economy of scale and more consistent promotions” (Brei et al., 2011, p. 270).

Adapted global marketing on the contrary refers to a marketing strategy and its marketing mix which is adapted to the targeted market by using different advertising messages (Kotler, 2016; Wang & Yang, 2011). These messages are adapted to “the differences in the environment, consumer behavior, standards of use, and competitiveness” (Brei et al., 2011, p.
Proponents of the adaptation approach claim therefore for a customization of marketing strategies which take into account the environmental factors (Brei et al., 2011). These two concepts are especially important for the present study. The research seeks to determine in which cases IKEA adapts to the cultural values in Swedish and Japanese markets and when it standardizes its marketing content. This research question is particularly interesting since IKEA claims to apply a standardized marketing approach. According to the company only in exceptional cases are cultural adaptations realized. This procedure seems unusual according to the prior introduced literature which advocates for cultural sensitivity (Dahl, 2004).

6 Method and Material

The subsequent chapter deals with the material and method of the given paper. Firstly, the reader is introduced to the sampling method. In this paragraph it is described how and why the sample was selected. Secondly, the qualitative method of the multimodal critical discourse analysis is presented. Thereby the aim as well as the instruments which will be applied during the analysis are pointed out. Thirdly, the material is presented. Each video advertisement is shortly described and represented by a screenshot. Also, a hyperlink to the videos is provided.

Here the limitations of the study need to be emphasized. Since the study follows a qualitative research approach by conducting a multimodal critical discourse analysis it must be highlighted that the results rely on subjective interpretations (Döring & Bortz, 2016). Also, the sample must be treated with caution. Only five IKEA advertisements per country were analyzed. To increase the reliability of the findings the sample needs to be expanded. In this case it must also be mentioned that the study focuses on video advertisements published in two countries by a single company. That indicates that the findings cannot be generalized. They are limited to the specific case depicted in the study. Nevertheless, implications for the applied theoretical frameworks might be derived.

6.1 Method: Sampling of Material

In total ten IKEA advertisements are selected as examination units since these videos seem highly promising to address the research purpose (Kromrey, 2009). All of them are pieces of a campaign and were published in the years 2017 and 2018. The five examples used for the analysis in Japan belong to the campaign “今すぐはじめよう、新生活” (translation: Start your new life immediately) and last around 13 seconds each. The five examples for Sweden form part of the campaign “Där livet händer” (translation: Where life happens) and last around 20 seconds to one minute each. Since the research focuses on the visual analysis of
the cultural attributes depicted in the advertisements only those advertisements without dialogues were selected.

Following Kromrey’s (2009) selection procedure of examination units the method of the concentrated selection is chosen as the sampling method for the present study. This method forms part of the nonrandom selections which are characterized by conscious choices and mainly focus on those cases which are particularly significant for the research approach. This means that already a small amount of the population is expected to have a great impact on the analyzed features (Kromrey, 2009).

According to that explanation the Swedish company IKEA is chosen as research object. IKEA is the world’s largest retailer within the furniture sector and is currently operating successfully in more than 40 countries all over the world (IKEA, 2018a). That leads to the assumption that IKEA disposes of comprising knowledge when it comes to the adaptation and standardization of their marketing content in different countries. Also, other researchers claim to examine IKEA’s marketing strategy in further studies. They point out that already conducted analyses focusing on IKEA’s marketing strategy are too old or only deal partly with marketing activities where specific countries are considered (Salmon & Tordjman, 1989; Burt et al., 2011). Furthermore, this company is interesting to research since it claims to mostly implement a standardized marketing approach (Burt et al., 2011) although the majority of researchers emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity (Dahl, 2004).

As stated before the IKEA advertisements of two different countries will be analyzed. The selection of these countries is mainly based on their diverse cultural setting provided by Hofstede. Following Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions especially Sweden and Japan are identified as fundamentally different when comparing the three dimensions of Masculinity versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance and Indulgence versus Restraint. While Japan is characterized as one of the most masculine societies in the world which strives for excellence and perfection, Sweden is rather described as a feminine society which focuses on the values of quality, solidarity and work-life balance (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). In comparison to Sweden, Japan is also one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries with a high degree of predictability for every day actions. Sweden is more relaxed instead and tolerates deviances. Also, the dimension Indulgence versus Restraint does apply more to Sweden than to Japan. While Japan is characterized by a restraint culture with tendencies to cynicism and pessimism, Swedish society shows the willingness to realize their impulses and desires with the overall aim to enjoy life (Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 2001a; Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b).

Besides these theoretical reasons also other aspects support the selection of Sweden and Japan as comparative countries. IKEA is a Swedish company whose values are rooted by their
national identity which is basically characterized by people who are “hard-working, down-to-earth, help each other and live in a close contact with nature around” (IKEA, 2018c). These core values do not only address economic issues but also contribute to society which has already led to some changes at IKEA working sites in some foreign countries. One of these countries is Japan where several measures were successfully implemented to achieve gender equality in respect to payment and females in management positions. These efforts seem interesting especially given the fact that growing revenue in the furniture and homeware sector in Japan is expected during the upcoming years (Statista, 2017).

6.2 Method: Analysis of Material

The literature review has shown that a lack of qualitative research approaches exists in cross-cultural communication. Qualitative research seeks to investigate on social and cultural phenomena as well as the people in their social and cultural environment (Myers, 1997). Qualitative approaches are usually applied when either not sufficient information about the research object is available or when subjective viewpoints such as those provided by IKEA should be identified (Wassermann, 2015). Since the study is based on an explorative research approach which is typical for qualitative research a critical discourse analysis is chosen as research method (Döring & Bortz, 2016). In the following the research method is explained in detail.

The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) seeks for the denaturalization of media content to understand how visual communication “shapes and is shaped by society” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 10). It “is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). To accomplish that goal written as well as visual semiotic choices can be analyzed. If the analysis includes visual semiotics as the prior introduced sample, the method is described as Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The basic idea of this method is the assumption that most media content consists of ideologies which are not directly visible. The concept of ideology is understood as reference to those instruments social groups use to wield power over subordinate groups to influence the belief system of individuals or collectives (Marx, 1933; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Therefore, researchers assume that there exists a dialectical relationship between the discourse on the one hand and its social structure on the other which is (re)produced during the social interaction among the members of the same social group who share a similar system of signs and values (van Dijk, 2001). In addition to ideology, linkages to the concepts of power and language are typical for a CDA. The concept of power provides individuals with a privileged access to social resources such as authority, status and influence. This power is “transmitted and practiced through discourse” (Machin &

In the following the criteria which are used throughout the analysis of the advertisements are displayed. Since the sample consists of video advertisements where no dialogue is included only those criteria concerning visual attributes are applicable for the analysis. By using these criteria consistently, it is assured that the obtained results are comparable. The main purpose of the CDA is to identify those attributes which either stand in line or in conflict with the cultural background of the country the advertisement is spread in. Furthermore, it is intended to answer the questions regarding how the advertisements are designed, why they are designed in a certain way and how they could have been designed differently (Fairclough, 1995). Thereby it should be emphasized that the analysis is conducted on two different levels of knowledge: (1) The denotative level focuses on the creation of the ideological content. (2) The connotative level on the contrary concentrates on the reasons for that content by considering the overall context (Hall, 1997). Subsequent those criteria are introduced which are consistently applied during the following multimodal critical discourse analysis:

- **Iconography:** Iconography is connected to the semiotic theory by Ronald Barthes (1973, 1977) which focuses on the connotation and denotation of images. The denotation of images deals with the question of whom and what is depicted in an image while the connotation of images focuses rather on the presentation of the ideas and values (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Semiology is understood as the science of signs which determines how people behave and communicate (Barthes, 1983).

- **Attributes:** The analysis of attributes concentrates on the discourses the depicted objects imply. It is analyzed which ideas and values are presented by these attributes and in what way these are introduced (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

- **Settings:** Settings are used to “communicate general ideas, to connote discourses and their values, identities and actions” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 52). The setting relates to the environment the persons are portrayed in.

- **Salience:** Salience is assigned to an object or person to highlight its importance within an image. Salience can be expressed in different ways: Some elements carry cultural symbolism to attract people’s attention. The size of objects indicates the ranking of their importance. The color and tone influence the perception of an object by their saturation and contrasts. But also, the position of an object within the picture can be salient (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

- **Gaze:** The gaze of the depicted persons can tell the viewer something about how he should evaluate the participant. The gaze of looking directly at the viewer, upwards or downwards can lead to different conclusions (Machin & Mayr, 2012).
• Poses: Following Barthes (1973) remarks, are the postures of persons connected to the connotative level of images and can indicate broader values, ideas and identities. Therefore, poses can be used to have a significant influence on the audiences’ perception of the persons. For example, by depicting them with an open posture they seem approachable for the audience (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

6.3 Presentation of the Campaign Videos under Analysis

Swedish Advertisements

1.1 Vardag (translation: Weekday or working day)

A single mother comes home after a late evenings work, carrying the groceries. She seems stressed. At home she is confronted with an untidy apartment. Clothes and shoes lie around. The dishes are not done. Her children are focused on their technological devices and do not even notice her arrival. Upset about the situation the mother leaves the apartment by slamming the door. The children realize their mistake and start cleaning the apartment together. When the woman comes back and sees her children cleaning, she starts smiling. In the end of the advertisement IKEA’s tableware which was recently cleaned is highlighted simultaneously as its price appears.

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¹ The given thesis is 35 pages long excluding the provided illustrations.
1.2 Da capo (translation: From the beginning)

A young man dresses up to visit his mother for her birthday at the old people’s home. She has Alzheimer’s and seems to be absent-minded. The man hands her over a frame with a picture of the two of them years ago and puts an old record on. When he asks her to dance, she seems to remember him and starts smiling. In the end of the advertisement the price of the IKEA frame is mentioned.

1.3 Close call

A young teenage boy is organizing a house party when his parents are gone. At first the boy appears to be enjoying himself. However, the situation rapidly gets out of hand as uninvited guests arrive. In desperation he calls his parents and asks them to come home. When they
arrive, they turn on the light in the living room and put an end to the party, whereby the price
of the lamp is communicated.

1.4 Smita ut (translation: sneak out)

A young teenage girl is preparing herself. She puts on makeup, nice clothes and shoes. After
making sure no one is present outside her door she silently climbs up her commode and
sneaks out the window. In the end of the advertisement the price of the commode is
displayed.

1.5 Komma hem (translation: Coming home)
A Western-looking woman arrives at an adoption service in an Asian country. After being welcomed she is asked to fill in some documents and to take a seat in a waiting room. There she meets her adopted child whom she brings back home with her to Western Europe. When the son first notices his play corner in the living room he cannot wait to play with his toys. Simultaneously the prices of the IKEA’s kids’ collection appear.

**Japanese Advertisements**

2.1 今すぐはじめよう、新生活 彼女がやってきた編 (translation: Getting started now, a new life with your girlfriend)

A young couple in a kitchen is depicted. The man eats wok noodles with chopsticks. A packed IKEA cupboard is visible. Its price is displayed. A woman enters the kitchen with a red blanket, covers her husband’s food and transforms it into cutlery, plates and wine glasses. After that the man takes the red blanket and covers the cupboard in the kitchen which is transformed into a tidier one by using several IKEA containers.
2.2 今すぐはじめよう、新生活 パパといっしょ編 (translation: Getting started now, a new life with dad)

A man is sitting in front of a desk while typing on his computer. The price of the desk is displayed. The office is dark. Only a small light is turned on. A few seconds later the viewer is introduced to the same setting with daylight. The man is still sitting in front of his desk but this time his son joins him. Imitating his father the little boy is also sitting in front of the desk doing some “work”. Both are depicted with their backs to the viewer.

2.3 今すぐはじめよう、新生活 家飲み編 (translation: Getting started now, a new life where drinking can be at home)
A couple is drinking tea in their dining room when three unexpected visitors ring at the door. The man extends the adaptable table for his friends to offer them a seat. Meanwhile, the price of the table is communicated. The tea cups are replaced by different dishes of food. Also, the flower on the table is exchanged for a bigger one.

2.4 今すぐはじめよう、新生活 おかたづけ編 (translation: Getting started now, a new life with a new lifestyle)

The children are playing in the living room. A girl is sitting on the ground. A boy is standing in the room surrounded by a mess of toys swiping a rod. The price of the sofa is displayed. The boy pretends being a magician. Each time he swipes his “magic wand” some of the toys lying around “magically” disappear and reappear in the sofa storage. His sister is cheering for him. As soon as the boy is done with cleaning the living room the mother appears. She is sitting on the sofa and smiles.
2.5 今すぐはじめよう、新生活 パジャマパーティー編 (translation: Getting started now, your new life where you can have a pajama party)

One girl is sitting on her bed. The price of the bed is displayed. When her three friends arrive for the pajama party they help each other to expand the bed so everybody has a place to sit on. In the end food and drinks are placed on the table and balloons are coming down from the ceiling. Then a group picture is taken.

7 Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The multimodal critical discourse analysis of the IKEA advertisements published in Sweden and Japan aims to determine to what degree IKEA makes use of standardization and adaptation approaches to promote its products. As basis for the analysis the theoretical framework of cultural dimensions by Hofstede is used. Overlaps with the theory are interpreted as an attempt for cultural adaptation to the specific background of each country. Contradictive information to Hofstede’s theory implies either missing aspects in Hofstede’s theory or signs for IKEA’s standardization by implementing Swedish values. In this case it should be emphasized that missing or vague cultural depictions in Hofstede’s theory might depend on the date of publication. The study was originally published in 1980. The analytical criteria used within the following multimodal critical discourse analysis are mainly limited to the visual semiotic choices of iconography, attributes, settings and salience. But also, the gaze and poses of the actors depicted in the advertisements were observed during the analysis.
7.1 IKEA’s Advertising Strategy in Sweden

In the following five advertisements published by IKEA in the Swedish market are analyzed. The analysis makes use of Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions of Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long- and Short-Term Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint in order to identify cultural depictions which either match or contradict with Hofstede’s findings. The main purpose is to identify those cultural depictions which seem to be typically Swedish. These cultural attributes can be used during the connecting analysis of the Japanese advertisements to be able to identify signs of IKEA’s standardization approach in its marketing strategy.

Masculinity versus Femininity

According to Hofstede Sweden is a feminine society which is characterized by people who value an appropriate work-life balance, quality and solidarity. Another typical aspect for such a society is the overlap of gender roles where masculine as well as feminine attributes apply to both men and women (Hofstede et al., 2010). This characteristic is particularly visible in the semiotic choices in advertisement 1.1 where a single mother is depicted. During the day the woman seems to be working which is signaled by her notebook bag hanging around her shoulders. Considering the traditional family model this task would be originally assigned to men. Nevertheless, she also did the groceries after work since she is carrying two grocery bags which would be a female task in respect to the traditional family model. In this case Hofstede’s findings still seem to be valid since the overlap of gender roles is clearly observable in the given example. A similar case comes in advertisement 1.5 where a single, modern woman decides to adopt an Asian child. Since the woman is presumably unmarried and does not have a man she is required to combine both parenting roles in one person. This depiction of the modern single woman seems to be typical Swedish and should be considered during the upcoming interpretation process.

Nevertheless, it has to be outlined that also aspects which do not agree with Hofstede’s findings within the dimension of Masculinity versus Femininity can be found. Hofstede says that people in Swedish society follow the Scandinavian fictional law where people do not try to lift themselves above others (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Exactly that behavior is observable in advertisement 1.3 when uninvited guests arrive to the private party the teenage boy organized. The party guests do neither respect the boy nor the accessories in the house. They act as if it was their home and do not care about their “friend” who seems quite upset. They use him to have a nice party without actually knowing him. This behavior can be interpreted as an attempt to lift oneself above another person, the teenage boy in the given case.
Individualism versus Collectivism

Although Hofstede describes Sweden as an individualist society with a loosely-knit social framework, it should be highlighted that this behavior changes in problematic situations or situations in which it is important that the family sticks together (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Especially advertisement 1.1 is a suitable example for that case. When the mother arrives at home after working the whole day and doing the groceries, she is confronted with an untidy apartment. Her children do not even notice her arrival and stick to their technological devices such as their PlayStation/Xbox, notebooks, or headphones which characterize the individualist acting of Swedish people Hofstede refers to (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). The whole situation exacerbates the stressed mood of the mother who throws the grocery bags on the floor and leaves the apartment by slamming the door. After realizing their mistake, the children change their behavior and work together to clean up the apartment. This storyline stands in line with Hofstede’s assumption according to which individuals primary take care of themselves but also about their immediate family if needed (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). This observation is also visible in advertisement 1.2 where a middle-aged man visits his mother for her birthday at an old people’s home. His mother seems to suffer from Alzheimer’s disease and does not even recognize him, as the camera close-ups emphasize. Nevertheless, the son suits up, brings flowers, a gift, and even an old record from their shared past to trigger memories. In the end of the advertisement, this plan seems to finally work out when he picks her up to dance as they used to since she starts smiling at him. Aspects which contradict Hofstede’s model within the dimension Individualism versus Collectivism were not identified within the sample.

Long- and Short-Term Orientation

Cultural depictions regarding the dimension Long- and Short-Term Orientation could not be found during the analysis of the Swedish advertisements in the selected sample.

Power Distance

In Hofstede’s model of cultural dimensions, Sweden is described as a society with low power distance. That means that people tend to act individually with equal rights since power is decentralized (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). As already pointed out before, the actors presented in the analyzed IKEA advertisements published in Sweden are characterized by a high degree of independence. As a result of decentralized power relations with flat hierarchies within the family structure, the children dispose of the power to organize their lives on their own. Since control is disliked in Sweden (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b), parents cannot check if their children behave in the right manner. They have
to trust them. This aspect is particularly highlighted in the advertisements 1.3 and 1.4. While the teenage boy in the first advertisement organizes a house party when his parents are gone the teenager girl sneaks out of her parents’ home in advertisement 1.4. Striking in advertisement 1.3 is the fact that although the boy does a mistake in organizing the party and even has to call his parents to put an end to the party they do not seem to be mad at him. On the contrary they still treat him as a grownup that admitted his mistake what seems more important to them.

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

The cultural dimension Uncertainty Avoidance focuses on the degree to which people like to structure situations. Sweden scores low in that dimension according to Hofstede. He describes Swedish society as relaxed, where the people focus rather on practice than principles. That means that the Swedish society tolerates deviances (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). This aspect is observable in advertisement 1.3 as stated above. Although their son did something wrong in organizing an unauthorized party his parents do not seem to be angry. He learned in practice that what he did was wrong and takes responsibility for his actions.

Although Hofstede might be right in this aspect his findings do not seem to be applicable regarding the perception of innovation. Following his explanation countries like Sweden who are characterized by low uncertainty avoidance perceive innovations as something positive (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Transferring this statement to advertisement 1.1 where a variety of technological innovations are depicted (e.g. PlayStation/Xbox, notebook, phone, headphones) it should be outlined that these devices are not perceived as something positive. On the contrary the depiction is rather negatively since the children lose their grip on reality. They do not notice their mother arriving home and do not have spoken conversations between each other.

**Indulgence versus Restraint**

In Hofstede’s model Sweden is considered as an indulgent society where people realize their personal impulses and desires with a tendency to optimism (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). This aspect is especially noticeable in advertisement 1.5 where the single woman decides to adopt an Asian child since it is her personal wish to become a mother with or without a man. The striving for the realization of impulses and desires is also observable in the advertisements 1.3 and 1.4 where two teenagers are depicted. While the boy seems to organize the house party to finally become part of a group where he is admired and accepted, the girl sneaks out to satisfy her need of meeting a specific person the viewer does not get to know within the advertisement. These actions are guided by the willingness of the individuals
and can be interpreted as supportive findings when evaluating Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions. Since the value of realizing one’s impulses is frequently present in the analyzed advertisements it can be assumed that this cultural depiction is typical Swedish and should be taken into account for further analysis.

7.2 IKEA’s Advertising Strategy in Japan

In accordance with the analysis of the Swedish sample five Japanese IKEA advertisements are also analyzed in the following by using Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions. The main purpose of the analysis is to identify especially those aspects which disagree with Hofstede’s findings and compare them to the Swedish values depicted in the Swedish advertisements. This way it is expected to determine in which aspects IKEA tends to standardize its marketing material. Nevertheless, also aspects agreeing with Hofstede’s findings should be pointed out since they might be interpreted as an indicator for cultural adaptation in IKEA’s marketing strategy in Japan.

Masculinity versus Femininity

Within the Japanese advertisements it must be highlighted that the cultural dimension Masculinity versus Femininity is frequently depicted. According to Hofstede Japan is one of the most masculine societies in the world. A masculine society is characterized by a notorious workaholism where hard and long working hours are not unusual (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). That hard-working approach is especially observable in advertisement 2.2. A man is sitting in front of a desk working with his computer. It seems to be 10pm in the evening as the clock shows since the room is quite dark and only a little light is turned on. The man is depicted from his back. This way no contradiction is possible. He can completely focus on his work. This observation approves Hofstede’s findings and emphasizes the Japanese main concern of performance (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). The same situation is applicable to the little son of the man. After a few seconds he is displayed within the same advertisement. He is also sitting in front of the desk, acting like his father by concentrating on doing his homework from kindergarten or school. Meanwhile it is 10 in the morning since the child is awake and the daylight shines through the window. This aspect leads to the assumption that Japanese society is concerned about their children’s future early and already introduces them to the cultural hard-working approach when they are young.

Considering IKEA’s standardized marketing approach, it has to be outlined that IKEA rather adapts to the cultural background of Japanese society in the analyzed sequence. On the other hand, that depiction can also be interpreted as contradiction to Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions. In the given case it seems as if the man of the family stays home with his child
instead of the mother. He is not leaving for work. He works from home instead. According to the behavior of the child that situation is no exception because the boy is already copying his father’s behavior by scratching his head at the same time. In fact, this situation is more of a reality in Sweden where flexible working hours are perceived as favored (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Although equality is a basic value in Japanese society it would have been expected that the woman stays home with her child instead of the man since Hofstede points out that it is difficult for women to climb up the corporate latter (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Also, the fact that Japanese society is still characterized by the Confucianism where women are described as good wives and good mothers supports that assumption (Bestor Victoria, Bestor, & Yamagata, 2011). Therefore, the observation can be interpreted as a sign for a standardized marketing approach where IKEA attempts to transfer the Swedish value of gender equality to the Japanese market where gender division usually prevails.

Nevertheless, it must be highlighted that this attempt does not seem to be stringent. In other advertisements analyzed within the sample a clear gender separation which is typical for masculine societies is notable (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Within advertisement 2.4 a mother and her two children are depicted in a living room. She seems not to be working and stays at home with her children instead. This aspect is characteristic for a masculine society where the woman of a family takes care of aspects concerning the quality of life (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). That includes assuring that her children are doing well although that might limit her self-realization. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that the depiction of the woman can also be interpreted as an effort to achieve gender equality since also an advertisement of a man taking care of his child was published within the campaign (see advertisement 2.2).

The aspect of gender equality also seems to be the purpose of advertisement 2.1 where a young Asian couple is displayed in a small kitchen with a cupboard crowded with food. While the man is eating Asian wok noodles with chopsticks, the woman indicates a change with a red blanket. By covering the food of her man, the Asian noodle box and chopsticks transform to cutlery, plates and wine glasses. In a second step also, the man indicates a change by covering the cupboard with the red blanket. This time the cupboard transforms into a tidy and much more uncluttered one. The striking aspect in that advertisement is the fact that both actors act equally. Japanese society is described as society with a high degree of gender differentiation. In such a society women are concerned about the quality of life which would include concerns regarding kitchen utensils. Men on the other hand are supposed to act tough and assertive focusing on material success (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). In the given case the man acts as the woman though which is considered a feminine
attribute. This observation might be another indicator for the fact that IKEA tries to transfer Swedish values such as gender equality to other cultures.

Besides these findings it can be stated that the selected sample of Japanese advertisements also emphasizes how the Japanese strive for excellence and perfection in their material production which is also assigned to the masculine dimension (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). IKEA aims to satisfy that need by offering the Japanese market cheap and functional products which look nice and adapt to unexpected situations. That might include the unexpected visit of friends where the table in the dining room needs to be expanded spontaneously (advertisement 2.3) or the need to store a variety of toys in the sofa of the living room within a short time (advertisement 2.4). The products presented within the advertisements seem especially suitable for small apartments with the possibility to offer a lot of storage room in a small place. In this case no signs for the standardization of IKEA’s marketing strategy in the Japanese market are visible.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Outside of Masculinity and Femininity the dimension Individualism versus Collectivism was also often present in the Japanese advertisements. Hofstede describes Japanese society as rather collectivistic where the harmony within a group is rated more important than the individual opinion (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). After analyzing the Japanese IKEA advertisements, it can be stated that especially this cultural dimension is strongly represented. In advertisement 2.3 a young couple is having tea in their dining room when unexpected guests ring at their door. After their arrival the setting of the dining room changes. The table is expanded so everybody is able to take a seat. The IKEA product is represented as functional furniture which can be adapted to specific situations and prevents the hosts from losing their face. The shame for losing face in front of others is one aspect Hofstede refers to within the Individualism versus Collectivism dimension of Japanese culture (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Besides the changing size of the table also the attributes on the table change. Instead of the prior tea cups different food dishes are placed on the table. Even the small flower is replaced by a much bigger one. This change might be interpreted as a positive development which indicates that Japanese people are in favor of collectivism rather than individualism since the couple is enjoying its friends company. Also, the fact that hosts as well as visitors collaborate and help each other to rearrange the table proves a collectivist approach which assures the harmony within the group. The same applies to the advertisement 2.5 where all four girls are supporting each other to prepare the beds for the pajama party. Also, in this case the IKEA product of a bed is represented as product which adjusts in a changing environment.
Both analyzed aspects seem to stand in line with Hofstede’s findings and can therefore be interpreted as an adaptation to the cultural dimensions of Japanese culture. Attributes contradicting Hofstede’s theory within the Individualism versus Collectivism dimension were not found within the sample. Therefore, no signs of standardization could be identified in the given case.

**Long- and Short-Term Orientation**

The cultural dimension Long- and Short-Term Orientation is not as visible in the Japanese IKEA advertisements as the cultural dimensions mentioned before. Nevertheless, it can be stated that at least in one occasion a link to Hofstede’s findings is identifiable. According to Hofstede Japan is one of the most long-term orientated societies in the world where life should be guided by virtues (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). In introducing the little boy in advertisement 2.2 at an early age to the Japanese hard-working approach the father prepares him for his distant future working life where he is supposed to achieve the best. Since this observation stands in line with Hofstede’s theory it can be interpreted as a sign for cultural adaptation. Other attributes considering the cultural dimension Long- and Short-Term Orientation could not be found within the sample.

**Power Distance**

Power distance describes one of Hofstede’s cultural dimension which stands for the degree of inequality perceived by the population of a country. This aspect is especially interesting considering Japanese culture. In Japanese society equality is a cultural value which is given to every member by birth (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Nevertheless, the power distance varies between men and women in the Japanese society and in the Japanese IKEA advertisements. This aspect is especially visible in advertisement 2.4 and the depiction of the two children. While the girl is sitting on the ground, the boy is standing straight in the room and swipes his “wand” to clean up the toys lying on the ground. This situation might be interpreted as masculine dominance expressed by the visually higher position of the boy who is standing compared to the sitting girl on one hand and his power to clean up the room which the girl does not have on the other. This observation can be linked to the concept of power mentioned within the critical discourse analysis since the boy has a “privileged access to social resources such as authority, status and influence” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). Comparing this finding to Hofstede’s assumption it must be highlighted that the observation of Japan being a meritocratic society is not stringently visible in the analyzed sample since the two roles of the boy and the girl are not depicted equally. Nevertheless, this finding stands in line with the strict gender division in Japanese society and underlines a cultural adaptation in the given case.
Uncertainty Avoidance

Hofstede describes Japan as one of the most uncertainty avoiding societies on earth. According to him Japanese society prefers to be always prepared for uncertain situations (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). IKEA seems to take advantage of this cultural need. To satisfy that need IKEA promotes a variety of functions their products provide to prepare Japanese people not only for their daily life but also for unexpected situations. The IKEA products adapt to changing circumstances and can easily be transformed and enlarged as the dining table in advertisement 2.3 or the bed in advertisement 2.5. In this case Hofstede’s findings can be currently verified since IKEA takes cultural attributes of Japanese society regarding the dimension Uncertainty Avoidance into account when communicating its products. A cultural adaptation is therefore existent.

Nevertheless, also an opposite observation can be made. In advertisement 2.1 the woman indicates a change with a red blanket where the Asian wok noodle box and the chopsticks are converted into plates, cutlery and wine glasses. This change is perceived as positive by both actors the man and the woman. This aspect seems to stand in conflict with Hofstede’s findings who says that one result of a high degree of uncertainty avoidance is the fact that things are difficult to change (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). In the given example the opposite is more likely to be the case. Similar to Swedish society the people in the Japanese sample perceive the new Western innovation as something positive. This behavior might be seen as a sign for IKEA’s standardization following the Swedish model of welcoming new innovative products.

Indulgence versus Restraint

Indulgence versus Restraint is the cultural dimension which refers to “a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 281). According to Hofstede Japan is characterized by a low score within that dimension and is rather described as a culture of restraint than indulgence with a tendency to cynicism and pessimism (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). After analyzing the sample with Japanese IKEA advertisements, it must be highlighted that Hofstede’s findings in the case of the cultural dimension Indulgence versus Restraint do not seem to be applicable anymore. On the contrary only contradictive aspects could be identified during the analysis. In the end of advertisement 2.1 the woman takes a bottle of wine out of the cupboard and offers it to her husband although wine drinking during the day does not seem to match with the hard-working approach Hofstede refers to where leisure time is perceived as something wrong (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). This observation can be generalized for all the other analyzed advertisements within the sample. Hofstede’s description of Japanese society as being a culture of restraint which
refuses indulgence is not visible in the advertisements. The Japanese people are depicted as society that enjoys life and spends time with family and friends. Since Hofstede would rather describe Swedish society in the mentioned way it might be assumed that IKEA tried to transfer the Swedish value of indulgence to the Japanese market. This action might be seen as reflection of IKEA’s standardized marketing approach.

7.3 Similarities and Differences in IKEA’s Advertising Strategy in Sweden and Japan

In the following the differences as well as the similarities between the Swedish and Japanese advertisements are summarized. The information was gathered from the prior introduced multimodal critical discourse analysis. Since the analyzed content was already described in detail before the connecting subchapter focuses rather on bringing the already made findings together.

Differences in IKEA’s Advertising Strategies in Sweden and Japan

Although IKEA is considered to implement a standardized marketing approach (Burt et al., 2011) it must be emphasized that more differences than similarities between the advertisements published in Sweden and Japan can be found.

In the Japanese advertisements the focus is on the IKEA products. They are depicted as elements which improve the situations of the actors as soon as they are implemented in the everyday life: They help the protagonists in organizing their kitchen or office, offer space for family and friends if needed and provide storage possibilities in minimum space. Therefore, the advertisements concentrate on the functions of IKEA products which consist mainly of their practicability and flexibility. In the Swedish advertisements on the other hand the IKEA products play a subordinate role. The main focus lies on the actors themselves and the way they are realizing their desires. The IKEA products are only named in the end of the advertisements and have more function to help people to satisfy a need in a specific situation: They help in cleaning the kitchen, remembering good times, put an end to a party that is out of control, help owners sneak out of the basement or make someone feel at home.

Another striking difference between the advertisements published in Sweden and Japan are the depicted topics. Although in both cases everyday situations of individuals and families are portrayed they differ regarding their atmosphere. In the Japanese advertisements exclusively, happy people are portrayed in favorable situations such as a girl's sleepover in advertisement 2.5 or having guests around as in advertisement 2.3. The actors never seem angry or stressed and the children behave as they are expected to. In the Swedish advertisements one can observe the opposite. There especially problematic situations are discussed. That includes difficulties in being a single mother as in advertisement 1.1 and 1.5
or the rebellious attitude of teenagers when they try to grow up as in advertisement 1.3 and 1.4. In these examples not only pleased facial expressions of the protagonists are observable but also desperate ones. These differences show that the Japanese advertisements seem more constructed than the Swedish ones. Life has its ups and downs. Therefore, the Swedish everyday spots appear to be an excerpt from life.

Also differences regarding the outer appearance of the actors are noticeable. The actors in the Japanese advertisements are Asian-looking while the actors in the Swedish advertisements seem to be more westernized. This observation is supported by other cultural depictions such as eating habits and accessories.

**Similarities in IKEA’s Advertising Strategies in Sweden and Japan**

Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that an influence of Western values in the Japanese advertisements is observable in their behavior. In some cases, Western values seem to mix up with the traditional values assigned by Hofstede to Japanese society. This concerns especially the Swedish core value of equality. Hofstede describes Japan as a masculine society which stands for a high degree of gender separation (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Nevertheless, it must be stated that in the given sample Japan is rather depicted as a feminine society with low power distance which follows Swedish standards. In advertisement 2.2 for example the man takes over the traditional responsibility of the woman to take care of his child. He works from home. Also, in advertisement 2.1 the man undertakes responsibility for “feminine” tasks which mainly concern the quality of life. Despite equality also the realization of personal desires is present in the Japanese advertisements. Hofstede et al. (2010) & Hofstede Insights (2018b) describe Japan as hard-working society where leisure time is refused. In the given sample the opposite is the case. Similar to the Swedish advertisements the actors in the Japanese advertisements enjoy their free time by spending the afternoon with friends and/or wine. These two crucial observations might be interpreted as signs of IKEA’s standardized marketing approach where IKEA attempts to transfer its Swedish core values to other markets such as Japan to improve their social order.

This is also noticeable when it comes to similarities regarding the IKEA products. In advertisement 2.1 the chopsticks of the man are exchanged with Western cutlery. Instead of adapting the IKEA products to cultural eating habits in Asia, IKEA prefers its standardized approach by offering the Japanese market Western cutlery consisting out of a fork, a knife and a spoon. Besides it has to be outlined that in both campaigns the IKEA products stand for a positive change within the narrated storyline. The products facilitate the everyday life of the people by helping them realize their personal desires and impulses. The settings of the everyday situations differ in their variety but do not seem to be particularly special. On the
contrary the depicted settings offer space for interpretation. This way the viewer can imagine himself in these settings.

7.4 Standardization & Adaptation in Japanese Advertisements

In this chapter those aspects which provide signs of standardization and adaptation in IKEA’s marketing content are summarized. Since IKEA is a Swedish company which is characterized by Swedish values it is relevant to analyze where these Swedish values are visible in the Japanese advertisements. The analysis does not seek to determine whether the company’s core values stand in line with the cultural Swedish depictions in the Swedish advertisements.

Standardization of IKEA’s Marketing Content in Japanese Advertisements

The analysis has shown that IKEA indeed tries to standardize its marketing content when it comes to crucial topics the company considers to be important. As already mentioned before IKEA is concerned about “fair treatment and equal opportunities whatever their ethnicity, religion, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation or age” (IKEA, 2018b). This statement also implies the core value of gender equality. All these values are considered typically Swedish. Striking is the fact that gender equality is also a frequently depicted value in the Japanese sample although Japanese society is described as one of the most masculine societies in the world where gender separation is an important aspect (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Also, the fact that the Confucianism according to which women have the only task to be good wives and good mothers is still present in Japanese society underlines the importance of that observation (Bestor Victoria et al., 2011). The value of gender equality is especially visible in advertisements 2.1 and 2.2. The first advertisement depicts a young Japanese couple who performs the same actions although they concern the quality of life which is a feminine task that is originally assigned to women (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Also, advertisement 2.2 visualizes the value of gender equality. The man of the family is working from home and at the same time takes care of his child which contradicts with the Confucianism according to which the woman rather than the man takes over the “feminine” task of the childhood education (Bestor Victoria et al., 2011).

IKEA’s standardization approach is also noticeable in the Japanese sample when it comes to the value of indulgence. The analysis of the Swedish advertisements has shown that indulgence is a fundamental value in Swedish society since it is illustrated in three out of five advertisements (1.3, 1.4 and 1.5). According to Hofstede Sweden is considered as an indulgent society where people realize their personal impulses and desires with a tendency to optimism. Japan on the other hand is described as a culture of restraint with a tendency to cynicism and pessimism (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Considering the analysis, it must be emphasized that not only Sweden but also Japan is presented as an indulgent society.
throughout every single advertisement where the focus lies on enjoying life with family and friends: In advertisement 2.3 for example a young couple is unexpectedly visited by friends they spend the whole afternoon with or in advertisement 2.5 a group of girls is meeting up for a pajama party with candy and soda. This contradiction to the theoretical framework can be interpreted as clear indicator for IKEA’s standardization approach. Not only gender equality but also the depiction of the cultural dimension Indulgence versus Restraint seems a main concern of the furniture company.

Adaptation of IKEA’s Marketing Content in Japanese Advertisements

However, IKEA is known to implement a standardized marketing approach in their marketing strategy (Burt et al., 2011), the conducted analysis has shown that the storyline as well as other aspects which are detailly explained in the following were culturally adapted to Japanese society:

Hofstede et al. (2010) and Hofstede Insights (2018b) describe Japan as a hard-working society. This aspect is observable in advertisement 2.2 where the man is working during the evening. Also, the fact that his son is depicted the same way the following day underlines how important that value is for Japanese people. Even at an early stage children are introduced to the Japanese hard-working approach which can as well be linked to the Long- and Short-Term Orientation that Hofstede assigns to Japanese society (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). Although the prior chapter stated the depiction of gender equality in Japanese advertisements it needs to be highlighted that it is not consistently applicable. In advertisement 2.4 a masculine dominance is noticeable. While the boy is standing in the room, his mother and little sister are depicted sitting. Also, the fact that the woman is at home taking care of her children stands in line with the traditional Japanese family model following the Confucianism approach (Bestor Victoria et al., 2011). Besides this, the Japanese strive for excellence and perfection in material production as well as their high degree of uncertainty avoidance is thematized in the Japanese sample (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). IKEA presents its products by focusing on their functionality, practicability and flexibility which offers a complete solution for daily and unexpected situations such as friends visiting at short notice where the dining table needs to be expanded spontaneously (advertisement 2.3). Moreover, the collectivist behavior of Japanese people is observable. Hofstede et al. (2010) and Hofstede Insights (2018b) describe Japan as collectivistic society where the harmony within a group is rated as more important than the individual opinion. This aspect for example can be seen in advertisement 2.5 where the girls help each other to prepare their pajama party.
All these examples contradict with IKEA’s standardized marketing approach. This observation underlines the fact that a company cannot ignore the cultural values within the markets they are working with. To stay competitive cultural adaptations as those analyzed before are needed. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that a company can influence the value system in foreign markets by following a standardized marketing approach. Values which are considered especially important by the company such as gender equality in the case of IKEA might be depicted in advertisements although they contradict with local conditions. Highlighting gender equality in Japanese advertisements can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to have a positive impact on the social order of women in Japanese society where gender division usually prevails.

8 Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of the paper, IKEA is associated with a standardized marketing approach (Burt et al., 2011). The analysis has shown that this approach is not always strictly applied since clear differences between the advertisements for the Swedish and Japanese markets were observable. Within the Japanese advertisements the focus rests on the IKEA products and the functions they provide. The products in the Swedish advertisements play a subordinate role in turn. The advertisements concentrate on the different actors rather than the way the IKEA products help them in satisfying their needs in specific everyday situations. Also, the topics depicted in the advertisements differ from each other. Although all the advertisements take place in everyday situations they vary in their mood and the facial expressions. In the Japanese advertisements exclusively, favorable situations are depicted where the protagonists always smile. In the Swedish advertisements more problematic topics are depicted. Also, the outer appearance of the actors seems culturally adapted. While the Japanese actors look Asian, the Swedish actors seem more westernized.

Nevertheless, similarities among the advertisements which support IKEA’s standardized marketing approach could also be found. Both societies were portrayed as feminine societies where gender roles overlap, and equality is highly valued. This finding is crucial since Japan is normally characterized as masculine society (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b) where signs of the Confucianism are still present (Bestor Victoria et al., 2011). In the given sample the Japanese actors are depicted in a different way and do not follow the traditional family model. Also, the fact that all the advertisements deal with the realization of personal desires and wishes is interesting given the fact that Japanese society is considered to refuse leisure time (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, 2018b). The analysis showed the opposite though. Not only Swedish advertisements are characterized by individuals who are pushed by their impulses. Also, the actors in the Japanese advertisements seek for the realization of their individual wishes.
According to these findings it can be generally stated that IKEA implements a mixed marketing approach between standardization and adaptation. When it comes to important topics such as gender equality which also concern the company's core values IKEA follows a standardized approach. Although Confucianism is still present in Japanese society and resistance in Japanese society can be expected because of the “modern” depiction of the woman in the advertisements, IKEA communicates its products in a “Swedish” way. Nevertheless, minor aspects are culturally adapted. These include mainly the outer appearance and other aspects which do not contradict with IKEA’s philosophy.

This observation shows that global companies can have an impact on the cultural setting of the countries they are operating in. In the present study it is observable how IKEA’s commercials change the Japanese culture to a certain extent. As pointed out during the analysis the Japanese commercials depict Westernized aspects although they contradict with local culture. Nonetheless, those advertisements are accepted in the Japanese market. This observation might be interpreted as an indicator for Hofstede’s theoretical limitations. Hofstede’s model seems too rigid and narrow since it ignores the dialectical relationship between a specific culture such as Japan and the advertising content. In the present discourse IKEA’s commercials shape Japanese society by communicating Western values which are interpreted as signs for IKEA’s standardization. But at the same time those commercials are shaped by the Japanese society when implementing cultural adaptations in the advertisements. Therefore, it should be emphasized that theoretical models such as Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions indeed provide a broad overview on what nationalities consist of but lag to take into account a continuously changing environment. That emphasizes the importance of implementing a dialectical relationship between culture and marketing in further theories.

Furthermore, Hofstede’s model falls short considering the aspects he refers to within in his theory. Nowadays global companies cannot only focus on monetary rewards. They also have to deal with questions of social and environmental sustainability and responsibility which are connected to aspects dealing with politics, economy or geography. All those aspects can influence the standardization and adaptation of a company’s marketing content. Also, for the conducted analysis and interpretation it would have been helpful to gather more information about local conditions in the depicted countries instead of focusing exclusively on Hofstede’s findings. This critique especially gains importance considering other aspects which could not be linked to Hofstede’s model throughout the analysis. These concern the outer appearance of the actors (Asian versus Westernized depiction), eating habits (chopsticks versus Western cutlery), stereotypes (e.g. Asians taking pictures) or living conditions (e.g. limited living space in Asian cities). Focusing exclusively on Hofstede’s model was already criticized by prior researchers such as Baack and Singh (2007) who claimed to combine different cultural
models with each other to minimize limitations. For example, they applied Hofstede’s theory (1980) together with the theory of Schwartz (1994) within their study.

Considering these reflections, it can be stated that IKEA seems to act as a role model in the global retail industry since the company already recognized its social and environmental responsibility. One aim of the company is to achieve gender equality, equal payment and environmental sustainability in several working sites abroad (IKEA, 2018b). Considering IKEA’s marketing strategy, it could be interesting to further investigate how standardized approaches as implemented by IKEA are perceived by the audience in foreign, non-Westernized markets such as Asia or the Middle East. Are Western values in these markets rejected by the audience because they contradict with national cultural values or are they welcomed since they might improve social conditions? In this case especially the theories and concepts dealing with hybridization and cultural mélange within countries should be considered. In addition, it could be interesting to examine the company’s perspective in terms of their perceived responsibility: Are global companies eager to transfer their core values to foreign markets although they might contradict with local societal values or is IKEA rather an exception? This research approach also raises questions regarding its success: Are culturally adapted marketing approaches even more successful than standardized approaches since they respect national culture or is there a gap between theoretically based suggestions and the actual work environment?

In conclusion it can be stated that the Swedish furniture company IKEA is an outstanding exception within the global retail. IKEA follows a standardized marketing approach with few local adaptations, which is different than most of its competitors. In this way Swedish values such as gender equality are also transferred to those markets which may be associated with opposite attributes such as female subservience. This example makes it clear that global companies can have a significant impact on the social order of countries they are working with. Therefore, global companies situated in Western countries are asked to follow IKEA’s example and to assume responsibility not only for environmental but also social issues to guarantee everybody’s equality (IKEA, 2018b).
References


