

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN A GLOBAL CRISIS

Understanding how identities
and values shape behaviour

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THE COVID-19 CURVE BALL

While the jury is still out on how much and how deeply the world will change following coronavirus, there is no doubt that the global pandemic has disrupted life, livelihoods and health across countries and cultures.

Consumption cycles have not stopped, but various aspects are reshaped through different contexts and needs:

- **New use cases for consumption:** People are grappling with quarantine, lockdowns and staying at home, forces that impose new contexts for all. This has especially affected activities like cooking and eating, health and wellness, hygiene and household chores, entertainment, and shopping.¹

- **New emotional needs:** Consumers are now prioritizing needs such as safety and reassurance, convenience, vigilance and proactivity, damage control, empathy and support. This means new coping strategies, skills and resources are now in demand.
- **Brand engagement has intensified:** People are giving brands more deliberate consideration. Brands will be judged on their response, behaviour and leadership in times of unprecedented crisis, including the role they play to provide support and genuine empathy. This means that brand perceptions and values may take on new meanings, and be reviewed according to new priorities.



SAME CRISIS, DIFFERENT RESPONSES

As we see some of the universal aspects of the current pandemic playing out, we also see very different approaches, strategies and responses across the globe. Underpinning these differences is the role that culture plays in shaping our behaviour when under threat. Culture is defined as the shared values that shape individual behaviour. And these subsume the approaches, as well as the tone of communication and interpersonal exchanges.

In times of crisis such as the present, culture kicks in even stronger, shaping how different sets of people now prioritize needs and benefits in not just an auto-intuitive way but even more in a considered way². The need for overarching safety and reassurance means that cultures will revert to the uptake of established norms and practices that have in the past helped social groups to overcome such times. **Terror Management Theory**³ tells us that culture provides individuals with reassurance in their world views by attaching them to a deeper meaning. This allows them to cope with the

threat to their self-esteem and even their mortality. We see evidence of this in Ipsos' *Covid Watch*, a digital ethnography project looking at consumer responses to COVID-19. It reveals that behavioural changes adopted tend to happen within the realms of already available options rather than completely new and unfamiliar options. Familiarity is the balm that eases some of the anxiety around uncertainty, and culture is one of the strongest markers of familiarity.

GOVERNMENT MESSAGING

The craving for comfort is also reflected in how governments are engaging with their citizens. Co-opting their participation in lockdown is critical when responding to a public health emergency that requires a range of new social and personal behaviours, including self-quarantining. We can see some contrasting approaches to COVID-19 from governments and individuals that are shaped by their diverse cultures.

Figure 1 The war analogy in COVID-19 communications



Source: French President Macron's national address, 16th March 2020

In cultures where freedom is considered an inalienable right, such as France, the US, and the UK, governments use the war metaphor to shape their COVID-19 messaging, which serves as a rallying factor for their measures. Even the British royalty refers to World War II as a comparable crisis. In cultures where an interventionist approach is not the norm, it is perhaps war that can make government curtailments on personal freedoms permissible – be that in restriction of movements, tracking and tracing for infection, or limiting availability of products and services to essentials only.

In some North Asian cultures, notably China and South Korea, freedom has a more nuanced meaning, where the concept of a comparatively more diminished 'reasonable' personal freedom is acceptable provided that the state ensures freedom from external threats such as to livelihoods and health. In these cultures, we see the government taking on emergency powers and mandating sweeping rules, which are then implemented with strong precision and the promise of a collective greater good. The success of this approach has been shown in terms of managing the problem as well as compliance shown by citizens.

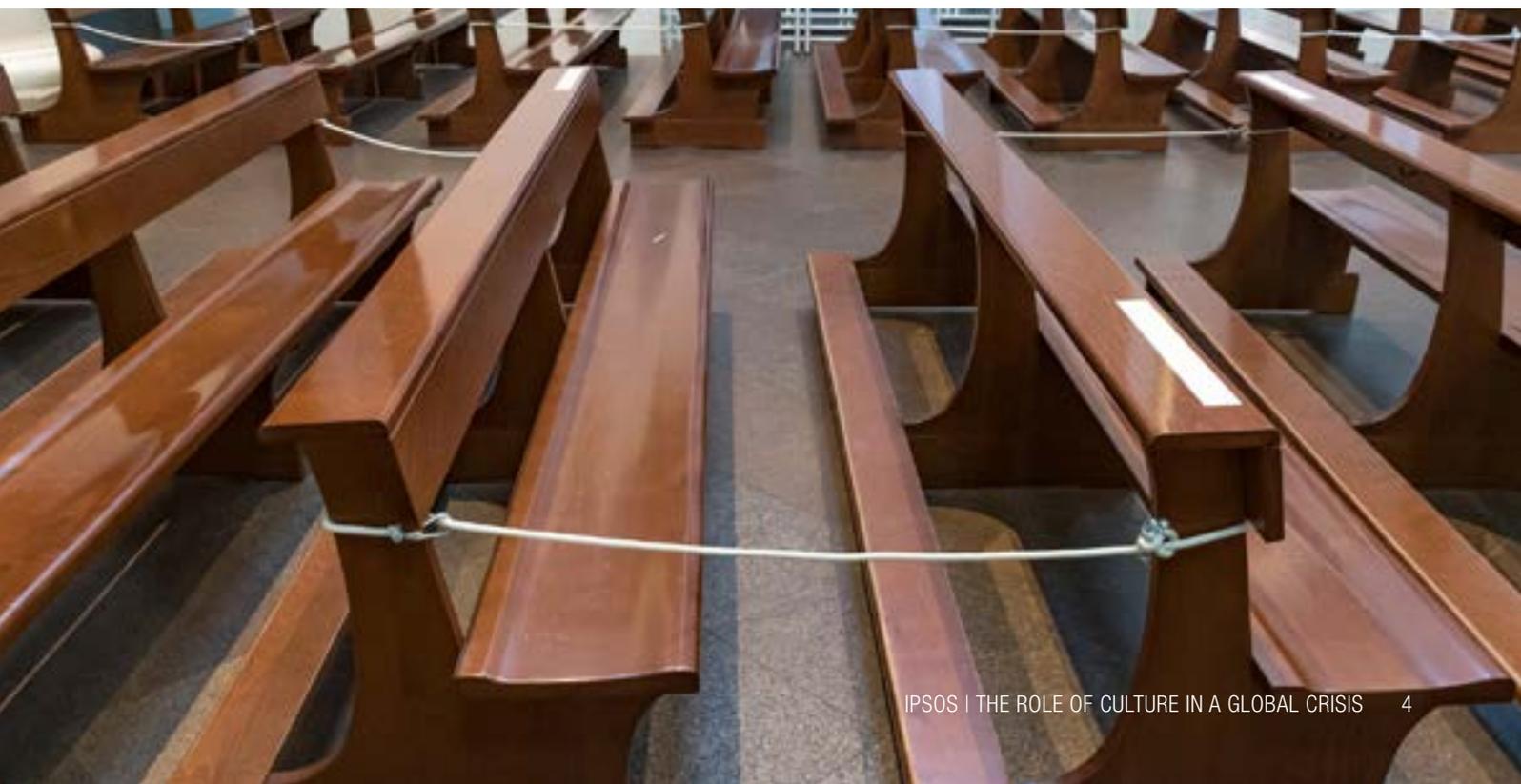
Perhaps the most interesting example comes from a complex and ancient culture like India, a somewhat chaotic democracy with a tradition of subverting rules and high degree of comfort in leaving things to fate. The country's huge and diverse population includes rural folks, migrant labour and a large illiterate populace⁴. To communicate

the important message of staying at home and maintaining social distancing, the Indian Prime Minister evoked a simple metaphor from a famous mythology epic. He spoke about the 'line of containment' (referred to as *Lakshman Rekha* in the local culture), asking people to stay within this 'line'. The metaphor achieved what very sophisticated arguments could not by conveying the gravity of the problem through implicit reference to the consequences of breaching the line in a well-known story. It is a metaphor that is understood by the length and breadth of India, irrespective of any religious moorings or ethnic differences. The Prime Minister here embraces his role as a benevolent patriarch, invoking the need for discipline and sacrifice from citizens who are asked to marshal their inner strength. This is a sharp contrast in approach to the war analogy of an external enemy.

PERSONAL RESPONSES

A universal effect of coronavirus is the sense of anxiety and uncertainty that people everywhere are feeling about the future. But, our *Covid Watch* tells us that uncertainty is a culturally relative concept.

As we look at the varying approaches and responses, we find that it is culture that is shaping them. Various empirical cultural frameworks talk about the role of culture and security, including the Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Theory which profiles national cultures on six different dimensions⁵ to help us understand them better.



The Hofstede Institute explains:

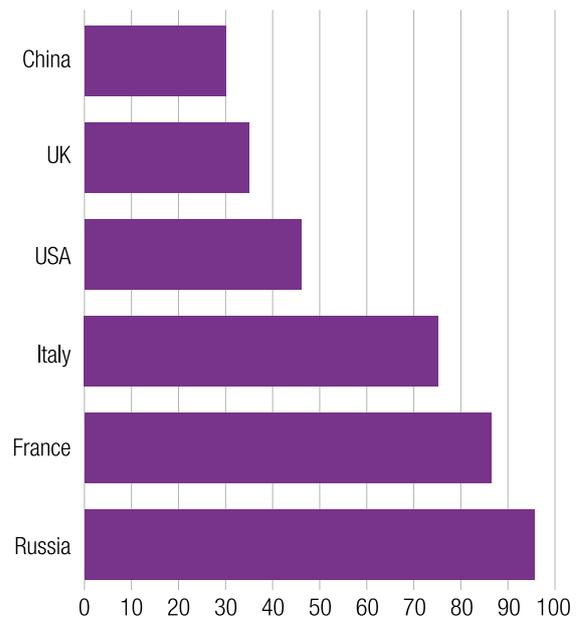
“Uncertainty Avoidance has to do with the way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? This ambiguity brings with it anxiety, and different cultures have learnt to deal with this anxiety in different ways. The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these”.

Lower scoring countries (China, the UK and the US) feel comfortable not knowing what will happen, while higher scoring countries (Russia, France and Italy) have a greater need for certainty around what is going to happen in the future, so tend to seek greater reassurance from governments and brands to help them overcome increasing levels of anxiety.

Reactions to containment and isolation are also different. While many countries associate these changes with negative implications for physical and mental health, this is experienced differently in a country like Russia because of its history of deprivation and preparation. Self-sufficiency is ingrained in the cultural narrative, meaning people are more likely to take the crisis their stride. Long, harsh winters mean

many keep a well-stocked larder and cellar, and so the crisis has simply meant upping their stocks. Indeed, anecdotal evidence from our Russian participant in *Covid Watch*, suggests a paradoxical sense of relaxation during the crisis.⁶

Figure 2 Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance scale



Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison>



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BUSINESSES?

Marketers have been just caught as unprepared as consumers in this crisis. But adopting a superficial response without understanding the role of culture and local nuances can only mean a lot of generic communication that will get lost in the “Covid clutter”. The video in figure 3 on advertising during COVID-19 is a telling montage of how so many alike messages can be indistinguishable from one another, and seen all together can become quite tedious.

Most brands are more vulnerable today, as during the pandemic they are mandated with not just functional delivery but also social responsibility. Consumers will judge brands and organisations differently, specifically looking at their role as critical players shaping the success or failure of how people cope with the crisis.

Leader brands will be evaluated more critically on how they use their leadership towards the interest of the nation or consumers. Communication, behaviour and engagement is

paramount. This is not just through brand communication, but also public relations, consumer reports and staff behaviour. PR is one of the most delicate aspects of brand engagement and we have seen several examples of things being mishandled or landing in way that is not culturally appropriate. Recent pandemic-specific ads with opportunistic offers and insincere empathy have raised objections from many consumers. The challenge for brands is how they can offer help and support, not just products. Add to this the nuances of local national interests, local language, symbolism and cues – and many complexities are at play at once. Without deeper cultural understanding, brands may struggle to identify some of the potential barriers to building meaningful, authentic and intuitive engagement.

The risk is not just of pursuing engagement strategies with consumers that are inefficient or ineffective. Taking a wrong step can also mean lost connections, damaged relationships and a loss of respect for the brand.

Figure 3 Every COVID-19 commercial is exactly the same



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&utm_campaign=5dc45a74a9580a0001aee08c&utm_content=5ea73afa75dfa90001706b60&utm_medium=smarpshare&utm_source=linkedin&v=vM3J9jDoaTA&app=desktop

THE NEED FOR CULTURAL ANALYSIS TODAY

Ipsos believes that now is one of the best times to invest in profiling markets for their cultural orientation and deep-diving to understand the similarities and differences between them. Cultural analysis can offer several benefits:

1. Culture is deeply embedded and a function of generations of collective social consciousness. It does not change easily but how it manifests is shaped by ongoing influences. Ipsos Global Trends⁷ tracks change over time and shows that while attitudes and behaviour react to change, drivers, culture and values tend to stay steady. Dipping into cultural analysis and combining it with local market understanding of expressions and evolution will be relevant and valuable for brands.
2. A time of crisis is even more relevant for us to develop this cultural profiling and understanding. Nothing reveals cultural priorities and values as our response to a crisis which threatens our very existence. This time also offers a unique opportunity to reveal which aspects of the values are weakened and may transform with the current influences.
3. The profiling and understanding brands invest now will serve as baseline and strong reference framework to help identify cultural clusters, identify boundaries and flex, and apply it to a post-COVID-19 world, not just to the current crisis.
4. Applying a cultural lens also allows brands to learn from countries like China⁸ for response profiles, the role of brands and what this could mean for communication and brand engagement across borders.

THINGS WE LEARNED FROM CHINA'S EXPERIENCE

- People travel through stages of emotional responses as they deal with uncertainty. The stages move from disbelief to adjustment to looking to a time beyond current crisis.
- High growth categories shift to smart consumption and the acceleration of digital transformation.
- Different response strategies are driven by attitudes to change and the influence of culture.
- Response strategies to the change brought about by COVID-19 are driven by socio-cultural values (personal empowerment vs social interdependence) and desired outcomes (change for better vs return to stability).
- There are nuanced roles for brands in the new world (see figure 4).

Figure 4 Roles for brands

Be present

Enhance engagement, not cut it

Be big

Show solidarity, commitment, stability, not panic

Be responsive

Show adaptability and flexibility to new demands

Be Positive

Show a path ahead

Source: Ipsos brand research during coronavirus

SUMMING UP

Times of uncertainty heighten the need for safety and security, and culture steps in to anchor consumers to the familiar, providing meaning and helping cope with any anxiety that arises.

Ipsos recognizes the importance of culture. To this end, we have reviewed various cultural works from social scientists such as Geert Hofstede (Cultural Dimensions),

Shalom Schwartz (Basic Theory of values), Milton Rokeach (Rokeach Value Survey), Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner ('Riding the Waves of Culture') in combination with market traits and functional databases on communication and innovation norms to develop our Cultural Transferability approach (see figure 5 on cultural profiling).

Figure 5 Mapping dimensions of culture



Source: Ipsos' cultural profiling approach

We would urge all marketers to explore the influence of culture in times of crisis so they can build an authentic and empathetic engagement for their brands. This can help to:

- Know the drivers and dimensions that define cultural identity for your consumers – across countries, segments and regions
- Understand the role that your brand can play in helping consumers cope with their uncertainty in culturally nuanced way
- Build authenticity and simplicity in your engagement with consumers through these uncertain, evolving times.

“Without deeper cultural understanding, brands may struggle to identify some of the potential barriers to building meaningful, authentic and intuitive engagement.”

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