

# Standardization or Customization of the Marketing-Mix Strategy? Evidence Drawn from FMCG MNCs in UAE

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**Abstract:** *To standardize or to customize? This question has always been the dilemma of numerous companies that decide to operate beyond the national boundary. This sensitive and ambiguous issue has caught the attention of several marketers and scholars resulting in emergence of different school of thoughts. The standardization school of thought attributed the world as a homogeneous place, hence advocating standardization of the elements of the marketing-mix strategy to yield numerous advantages to both the consumer and the marketer. Contradicting the standardization school of thought, the believers of adaptation approach argued that the world is a heterogeneous place and MNCs need to adapt the differences in the market environment in order to appeal to its target market in the host country, hence customization of marketing-mix strategy is imperative. Further, what has amplified the dilemma is the degree of adaptation or standardization required. Is it necessary to customize or standardize all the elements of marketing-mix (product, price, place and promotion)? The purpose of this study is to draw an insight into the level of standardization or customization of various elements of marketing mix of Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) MNCs in the UAE. The results of the study indicated that the FMCG MNCs operating in UAE have adapted a mixed approach to the marketing-mix strategy wherein they standardize critical elements of the marketing-mix and customize the rest in order to respond to the host country differences.*

**Keywords:** *Standardization, Adaptation, Marketing-mix, Globalization, International Marketing, Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)*

## I. INTRODUCTION

International marketing has always depicted a dichotomized approach. One approach (standardization) argues that owing to the technology, modern communication, travel and transport world is becoming more homogeneous which demands company to market the same product in the same fashion across the globe (Levitt, 1983). The other approach focuses on customizing the product and the related strategies to meet heterogeneous market requirement (customization). Standardization (globalization) verses customization (adaptation) of business practices has always been in question and is the most sensitive, debatable and ambiguous issue for many MNCs. International marketers have a more challenging and complex strategic decision-making related to the marketing – mix than their domestic counterparts (Wall & Rees, 2004).

Moreover, what is further questionable is the degree of standardization or customization of the various elements of marketing-mix (product, price, place and promotion). According to Deirdre (1999) standardization refers to offering the same product lines, at the same prices, using the same promotional and distribution strategies to the consumers based in the different geographical locations. This school of thought views world as a homogeneous market place and bolsters the practice of the standardized approach in order to achieve greater efficiencies and economies of scale (Kogut, 1985 and Levitt, 1983). Besides achieving the economies of scale, what incentivizes the marketer to embrace standardization is the ability to control the company's R&D and the marketing program (Czinkota, Ronkainen and Michael, 2003). Ball and McCulloch (1999) also reinforced that the standardization of the marketing-mix benefits the management from the lower costs, easier control and coordination from the head quarter and reduction of the time consumed in preparing the marketing plan. Supporting the standardization approach, Levitt (1983) argued, "World's needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized and that this makes the multinational corporation obsolete and the global corporation absolute."

While the standardization of business strategies gained favor of many scholars, the believers of the adaptation approach looked at the concept differently. The adaptation school of thought argued that there prevail differences in the business environment of the home country and the host country. The micro and macro environment vary across boundaries and that calls for the customization of the business strategies to make the offering more compelling and impactful in the host country (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987; Boddewyn et al, 1986). This approach of customizing the strategies contradicts the company's need for standardization. Ball and McCulloch (2004) argued that notwithstanding the advantages of standardization, many firms depending upon the product type, the environmental forces, and the degree of market penetration find it necessary to either modify the present mix or develop a new one while going international. Czinkota, Ronkainen and Moffet (2003) were also of the opinion that differences in consumer behavior, political and legal influences, socio-cultural environment, use conditions, adherence to the marketing concept; together encourage the MNC to embrace the adaptation approach.

The empirical findings, of the study conducted by Samiee and Roth (1992) on influence of global marketing standardization on performance, did not provide enough evidence of achieve a superior performance through global standardization.

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They further stated that though multinational companies like Colgate- Palmolive and Coca – Cola cater their products to more than 160 countries, it does not imply that these MNCs invariably practice a high degree of standardization across all their products globally.

Besides the issue to standardize or adapt, the degree to which international strategies should be standardized or customized is also the concern of the marketers (Samiee & Roth, 1992). Hodgetts and Luthans (2003) strongly suggested that MNCs should respond to the national differences while going global. Czinkota, Ronkainen and Michael (2003) advocated that ideally the international marketers should neither pursue an extreme standardization nor extreme customization instead they should think globally and act locally. Global thinking facilitates flexibility of leveraging quality ideas and products from across the world irrespective of their origin.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to satisfy the customers, marketers have to devise integrated marketing program that promises and delivers value to the customers (Kotler & Keller, 2006). McCarthy (1996) classified the various tools required to meet the marketing objectives into the four Ps i.e. product, price, place and promotion (marketing-mix) that are considered to be critical tool of every domestic and international marketer. While going international numerous factors like the market position, market condition, market environment, product characteristics and organizational factors collectively tend to influence the standardization or customization (adaptation) of marketing-mix strategy Hou (2001). The implication of each of the elements of marketing-mix in international marketing is discussed below with special focus on the degree to which it should be adapted or standardized.

### *A Standardization or Adaptation of Product Strategy*

Product strategy element of the marketing mix strategy encapsulates the strategies associated with designing, developing and branding the core product or service that caters to the customer needs. It has been observed that MNCs follow dichotomous approach while dealing with the product strategy, i.e. they standardize a few elements while adapting the rest of them.

Richer (1999) ,in his study, empirically found that the German companies tend to standardize their product element of the marketing mix to the highest degree. According to Peerally (2008), it is advantageous for MNCs to standardize the brand name of the product as it allows the firms to reduce the production, packaging, design and advertising costs. Despite the success of the product in the home country, certain environmental differences in the host country such as level of literacy, income, technical skills of potential customers, climatic conditions, power level, availability and quality of maintenance support , and many such factors can often force the company to make unexpected or costly changes (Jeannet & Hennessey, 2004). Marketers also tend to customize the packaging of the product to incorporate the host country environmental differences.

Keegan (2002) advocated that the compliance of product labeling and instruction with the national laws and regulation, and the language of that country. Delaney (2001) stated that in United States a slick black package with imprinted gold and silver is considered to be elegant but the

same package in Africa suggest death. Huo (2001) found that in due to legal and political factors in China, it is imperative for the foreign products to translate the instructions in Chinese; hence Shiseido products had to translate the instructions into Chinese to market them in China. Peerally (2008) also stated that the legal rules and regulations of the host countries influence the labeling and health requirement, and the cultural forces impact the language used on the labels or ingredients and consciousness of consumers.

### *B Standardization or Adaptation of Pricing Strategy*

Standardization of the pricing strategy has the lowest potential as compared to the rest of the elements of the marketing-mix strategy (Shoham, 1995). Birnik and Bowman (2007), while referring to the various studies conducted by Sorenson and Wiechmann (1975); Grosse and Zinn (1990); Ozsomer et al. (1991); Boddewyn and Grosse (1995); Chhabra (1996); Zou et al.(1997); Mitchell et al.(1998); and Vrontis and Papasolomou (2005), bolstered the fact that pricing strategy happens to be the least or one of the least standardized elements of the marketing mix owing to the host country differences . Shaw and Ritcher (1999) empirically found that German companies tend to adapt the pricing strategies in the foreign company but the British companies, on the contrary, tend to standardize their pricing strategy the most in the international market. Huo (2001) found that Shiseido had to adapt the price of the products in China and U.K. due to the difference in the tax and tariff system.

### *C. Standardization or Adaptation of Distribution (Place) Strategy*

Distribution (place) strategy includes all the strategies related to designing a mechanism of making the product available to the end users ,i.e. the consumers. The Rodrigues (2001) stated that distribution methods generally require variations from country to country as well as within each country as the methods are shaped by the size of the market, the scope and quality of the competition, by the available distribution channels, and by the firm's resources. Distribution strategy of the MNCs usually embraces the adaptation approach in the host country.

Birnik and Bowman (2007) in their study collected enough evidence, from the prior researches conducted by several scholars (Sorenson and,1991; Boddewyn and Grosse,1995; Chhabra,1996; Yip, 1997; Zou et al. ,1997; Michell et al. ,1998; Vrontis and Papsolomou, 2005), that sales and distribution strategy of the MNCs depicted fairly low level of standardization but typically not as low as pricing. Huo (2001) also found a moderate adaptation rate of distribution strategy of Shiseido product in both China and U.K.

### *D. Standardization or Adaptation of Promotion Strategy*

Promotion strategy of the marketing-mix encompasses all the activities undertaken to spread the awareness of product/ service and persuade the consumer to buy the product. It also includes the strategies associated with positioning and branding the offering of the company. There is an ongoing debate on whether the MNCs should standardize or adapt their promotion / advertising strategy.

Dichotomous approaches have been found from the past studies that indicate that British companies tend to adapt their promotional activities (Shaw & Ritcher ,1999) whereas Huo (2001) found that Shiseido Company while marketing its product to China and UK tend to keep the promotion strategy standardize in both the countries. The question arises- which approach is more effective and should be embraced by the marketer, and what are the factors that lead to the adaptation and standardization of the promotion strategy? In general problems related to international promotion strategy include the legal aspects of the country, tax considerations, language complexities, cultural diversity, media limitations, credibility of advertising, and degree of illiteracy (Rodrigues,2001). The standardized advertising is recommended when the marketing environment of the host country is found to be at par with the home country; if these environmental factors depict heterogeneity instead of homogeneity then an adapted advertising strategy should be embraced. Bolstering the adaptation strategy, Luqmani et al. (1987) suggested that advertisement in Saudi Arabia should be designed in such a fashion that it is compatible with the religious norms, socio-economic environment and the government priorities. Chandra, Griffith and Ryan (2002) argued that in order to keep pace with the needs of the international target market it becomes essential for the marketer to adapt the advertisement theme, slogan, idiomatic expressions, symbols and colors.

Gaurav (2008) like Melewar and Vermmervik (2004) advocated that the contingency approach towards advertising is the most acceptable approach, rather than pure standardization or adaptation, as it not only identifies the local preferences but also facilitates some degree of standardization.

### III. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES.

The primary objective of the study is to gauge the degree to which the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) MNCs standardize or adapt the elements of the marketing –mix strategy (product, price, place and promotion) while going global, in order to respond to the varying consumer demands and the overall differences in the business environment. Fast Moving Consumer Goods refer to the goods that are bought on recurring basis, have low consumer involvement and are priced relatively low, hence such goods are sold very quickly. Example of FMCG includes food items, dairies, confectionaries, toiletries, cosmetics and many more.

For the purpose of this study, a blend of both the qualitative and the quantitative approach has been used. To carry out this study literature was reviewed, objectives were set, and questionnaire was designed to gather data to meet the objective of the study. The questionnaire was sent out to hundred different Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) MNCs in the UAE. However, only fifty-three companies responded and participated in the survey. Hence, the response rate was merely fifty three per cent.

The data gathered through the questionnaire was systematically analyzed and interpreted to achieve the desired objectives of the research. Descriptive analysis was carried out using the mean, frequency, standard deviation(S.D.), variance and the coefficient of variation. The findings were presented in the form of table. SPSS

16.00 was used for a smooth and accurate analysis. Inferences were drawn by overall analysis of the various responses and the results of the analysis were then methodically juxtaposed to draw an effective conclusion about the objectives of the research study.

### IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

To meet the objective of the study, the respondents (FMCG MNCs) were asked to rate the key elements of the marketing-mix strategy (product, price, place and promotion) pursued in UAE on the basis of the level of standardization practiced in the region as compared to the marketing practices in their respective home country. This was done to gauge the level of standardization or adaptation of the elements of the marketing-mix practiced by the FMCG MNCs while marketing their products in the UAE. The findings are presented in the form of the table provided below (refer table 1).

It can be inferred from the table (refer to annexure) that of all the elements of the marketing mix, the brand name ( $M=4.7$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ) is standardized the most followed by the standardization of the product quality ( $M=4.11$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ) and the advertising message ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ). This can be associated with the fact that in order to keep pace with the globalization, the MNCs tend to establish a consistency of these strategies to build a uniform brand image in the minds of the consumers across the globe. However, due to the socio- economic, cultural and legal difference, also and owing to the varying customer's taste and preferences the foreign firms have to customize the other element. The analysis revealed that the foreign company standardizes few elements while the others are customized to align to the differences that prevail between two regions. Amongst the ones that are highly customized include the price of the product ( $M=2.02$ ,  $SD=0.69$ ), personal selling techniques ( $M=1.96$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ) and the discount structure ( $M=1.94$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ).

The findings indicate that of all the elements of the marketing mix, the FMCG MNCs customize their pricing strategy the most (average of mean being 2.36 and average of sum being 125.33). The customization of the pricing strategy is consistent with the studies of Grosse and Zinn (1990), Shoham (1995), Boddewyn and Grosse (1995), Chhabra (1996), Zou at al. (1997), Mitchell at al.(1998),Ozsomer et al. (1991), Shaw and Ritcher (1999), Sorenson and Wiechmann (1975) Huo (2001), Czinkota et al. (2003), and Vrontis and Papapsolomou (2005)

At the second place, FMCG MNCs customize the promotion strategy (average of mean being 2.69 and average of sum being 139.57). The MNCs need to adapt to the differing business environment of the region and have to address the legal, social, economic, demographic and cultural differences that prevail in the region while formulating the advertising and promotional strategies. This supports the studies conducted by Chandra, Griffith and Ryan (2002), Shaw & Ritcher (1999),Luqmani and Yavas (1987) that insisted on the adaptation of the promotional strategies by the MNCs.

Following promotion strategy, the distribution strategy ( $M=2.79$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ) is pursued in the region is adapted the next. It can be inferred that owing to the fact that the market size, prevailing competition, infrastructure and the available distribution channel across countries varies, this results in the adaptation of the distribution strategy in the foreign land. The finding of the study is consistent with the previous findings of Birnik and Bowman (2007), Rodrigues (2001), Boddewyn and Grosse, 1995; Chabbra, 1996; Michell et al., 1998; Ozsomer et al. 1991; Sorenson and Wiechmann 1975; Vrontis and papsolomou, 2005; Yip, 1997; Zinn and Grosse, 1990; and Zou et al. 1997, and Huo (2001).

The element of marketing-mix that is attributed to the lesser degree of adaptation as compared to price, promotion and distribution strategy is the product strategy (average of mean is 3.50 and the average of the sum is 185.5). While some elements of the product strategy like the brand name and the quality are kept standardized, the other elements like packaging and labeling calls for customization. Hence, the MNCs are required to follow a blend of both standardization and customization while formulating the pricing strategy. Cherunilam, (2007), Jeannet & Hennessey (2004), Czinkota, Ronkainen & Moffett (2003), Hou (2001), and Shaw and Ritcher (1999) were of the opinion that the product strategies could be slightly customized due to the changes in the market conditions. As it is evident from the table 1 (refer appendix) that the FMCG MNCs neither follow pure standardization nor pure adaptation as a single approach to market their product in the UAE. Instead, they have embraced a mixed strategy that integrates both standardization and customization of the marketing mix to bridge the gap in the region.

V. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the FMCG MNCs in UAE adopted a combination strategy that incorporated both the attributes of standardization as well as adaptation. Some strategies were

VI. APPENDIX

Table 1: Standardization of the Various Elements of the Marketing Mix Strategy

Marketing Mix	Elements of Marketing Mix	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Coefficient of Variation	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Ranking
Product Strategy	Brand name	4.7	0.54	0.29	11.49	2	3	5	249	1
	Product Design & Features	3.47	0.82	0.68	23.72	3	2	5	184	4
	Product Quality	4.11	0.58	0.33	14.04	3	2	5	218	2
	Product Ingredients	3.3	0.99	0.98	30.06	3	2	5	175	5
	Packaging	3.09	0.6	0.36	19.32	3	2	5	164	8
	Language on the label	2.32	0.61	0.38	26.42	2	2	4	123	11
Pricing Strategy	Pricing Approach & Strategy	3.13	0.74	0.54	23.48	3	2	5	166	7
	Price of the Product	2.02	0.69	0.48	34.31	2	1	3	107	15
	Discount Structure	1.94	0.63	0.4	32.63	2	1	3	103	17
Distribution Strategy	Distribution Channel Followed	2.79	0.66	0.44	23.69	3	2	5	148	10
Promotion Strategy	Advertising Message	3.77	0.51	0.26	13.4	3	2	5	200	3
	Advertisement Appeal	2.94	0.57	0.324	19.35	3	2	5	156	9
	Media Used	3.28	0.6	0.36	18.32	3	2	5	174	6
	Sales Promotion Techniques	2.19	0.65	0.42	29.77	3	1	4	116	12
	Direct Marketing	2.13	0.81	0.66	38.03	3	1	4	113	14
	Public Relation Strategy	2.15	0.72	0.52	33.4	3	1	4	114	13
	Personal Selling	1.96	0.65	0.422	33.11	3	1	4	104	16

standardized while others were customized. The pricing strategy is customized the most followed by the adaptation of the promotion and the distribution strategy. The product strategy showcased the least degree of adaptation. Among all the elements of the product strategy the brand name is standardized the most to ensure easy acceptance of the product in UAE and to ensure a consistency of brand image. The language on the label is customized the most due to UAE rule of practicing bilingualism; both Arabic and English language is used on the label. Of all the elements of the pricing discount structure is customized the most strategy due to the differences in the competition and the market structure.

The research has focused on two important approaches: degree of standardization and customization of marketing strategies. The study was conducted only on the FMCG MNCs in the UAE. The marketing strategies of the MNCs that belong to the FMCG sector might vary from the other sectors. The study can be conducted on the MNCs of other industries to assess the commonly used international business strategies. The study focused on comparing the marketing strategies of the FMCG MNCs practiced in the UAE with that of the home country, it does not highlight how the strategies of the FMCG MNCs practiced in UAE are different from the other countries. The study doesn't shed light on the effect of the micro and macro environment on the standardization and customization of the marketing-mix strategy. In order to make the study more viable, further research is recommended.



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