

# Unpacking the design of cross-border communication through digital channels: standardization vs. adaptation approaches

Yanina Rashkova<sup>1</sup>, Ludovica Moi<sup>2</sup>, Elona Marku<sup>3</sup>, Francesca Cabiddu<sup>4</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether and how multinational companies adapt or standardize the design and content of online communication across different channels when operating in different countries. We perform a content analysis of multinational companies' websites and Instagram pages to analyze their online communication deployed in two markets: Russia and Italy. This study reveals three main approaches that multinational firms adopt when considering the design and content of websites and social media simultaneously: standardized convergence, adaptive convergence, and cross-media divergence. Furthermore, we confirm that country and industry are important variables to consider when developing cross-border communication in the online context. In closing, we provide some managerial implications and recommendations for further research on this topic.

**Keywords:** Online communication; multinational firms; standardization; adaptation; content analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Company websites and social media embody crucial means by which firms can improve their businesses internationally (Chang, 2011; Hudson et al., 2016). In the international marketing literature, research about how multinational firms adapt or standardize their online communication strategies is long-established (e.g., Hatzithomas et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2016). Some researchers provide empirical support for adapting communication via digital channels when serving foreign markets (Al-Bali, 2005; Chang, 2011; Constantinescu-Dobra, 2011) to better size cultural differences (Fernandez-Cavia et al., 2017). Other scholars have recognized the benefits of standardization strategies, according to which organizations keep similar advertising messages and contents across markets (Agrawal, 1995).

Despite the industry's important role in shaping the decision-making process of multinational companies (Melewar et al., 2007), very few studies have examined its importance in the online context (Okazaki & Skapa, 2008; Sinkovics et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2005). Furthermore, even though both websites and social media are considered essential tools for cross-border online communication (Chang, 2011; Hudson et al., 2016), previous research overlooked their conjoint and simultaneous investigation to understand the level of similarity or difference (convergence or divergence) (Dennis et al., 2008) in terms of adopted standardization vs. adaptation.

This study explains how the website and social media design and content jointly fit a firm's decision to adapt or standardize its online communication in different countries. We conducted a content analysis of websites and social media (Instagram page) deployed by

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1 Yanina Rashkova, Ph.D. Student, Department of Economics and Business, University of Cagliari (Italy), Viale Sant'Ignazio 74, 09123, +39 070 675 3382, [yanina.rashkova@gmail.com](mailto:yanina.rashkova@gmail.com).

2 Ludovica Moi, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of Economics and Business, University of Cagliari (Italy), Viale Sant'Ignazio 74, 09123, +39 070 675 3382, [ludovica.moi@unica.it](mailto:ludovica.moi@unica.it).

3 Elona Marku, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics and Business, University of Cagliari (Italy), Viale Sant'Ignazio 74, 09123, +39 070 6753550, [elona.marku@unica.it](mailto:elona.marku@unica.it).

4 Francesca Cabiddu, Full Professor, Department of Economics and Business, University of Cagliari (Italy), Viale Sant'Ignazio 74, 09123, +39 070 675 3382, [fcabiddu@unica.it](mailto:fcabiddu@unica.it).

outstanding multinational firms in two markets: Italy and Russia. We contribute to extend the model introduced by Harris & Attour (2003) and Whitelock & Chung (1989) and develop a new framework that better captures the understanding of cross-border online communication. Furthermore, we investigate the convergence or divergence between websites and social media regarding standardization and adaptation approaches. Finally, we found support that differences in standardization vs. adaptation of online communication are explained by country and industry.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to the standardization approach in the design and content of online communication, as long as technology evolves, cultural distance can be narrowed, converging cultures toward one more homogenous and global (Hatzithomas et al., 2016). Standardizing website and/or social media strengthen firms' identity and products' global image and create a "transferable experience," such as using the same marketing tactics across different countries (Vrontis, 2005). However, it may be difficult due to the high level of customer engagement and interaction and the attention given to the specific features of the local markets that such communication channels require (Berthon et al., 2012).

In contrast, according to the adaptation approach, the micro and macro differences across countries (e.g., languages, national attitudes and behaviors, cultures, product usage conditions, industry characteristics, economic development) push international marketers toward more adaptive and tailored approaches in cross-cultural communication via website and/or social media (Constantinescu-Dobra, 2011; Leonidou et al., 2010; Moura, et al., 2016; Vrontis, 2005). In this way, firms achieve higher responsiveness to local or country-specific needs, increasing competitiveness (Agrawal, 1995; Hatzithomas et al., 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

We adopted a content analysis approach to investigate whether and how multinational firms synchronize adaptation and standardization approaches for the design and content of their website and social media channels when dealing with different countries (Krippendorff, 2018). By elaborating upon the model of Harris & Attour (2003) and Whitelock & Chung (1989), we have developed the comprehensive frameworks for the website and social media to capture the understanding of cross-border online communication better. We analyzed the website and social media standardization according to four macro-categories: *landing page design, content, product portrayal, and other website elements*. The variables were developed from a literature review of advertising, intercultural web communication and digital design. We distributed the scores among the macro categories until reaching a maximum score of 100 (Harris & Attour, 2003), which points out total adaptation. The weights assigned to each element were based on some elements' relevance in the overall communication. For social media analysis, we choose to analyze the Instagram profiles of the selected multinationals, as being the primary social media channel for most brands (Evans et al., 2017).

We focused our research on Italy and Russia because of their in-depth cultural differences (Hofstede, 1984). Specifically, we examined the Russian, Italian and English-speaking websites, and Instagram accounts of multinational firms across five different industries (apparel, automobile, food-and-drink, cosmetics, and ICT). We used English as the benchmark because it is the favored language for science, business, and trade. We obtained our sample by analyzing top brand valuation reports issued by Brand Finance (<https://brandfinance.com/>). Companies that have both Italian, Russian, and English websites and Instagram accounts were selected. If a company had an Italian Instagram account but did

not provide a Russian version, it was excluded from our sample as these companies were out of our research target. A final pool of 75 multinational brands was obtained.

In performing content analysis, we proceeded as follows. For instance, if the color of a corporate website's interface was different, we assigned a value of 5. Thus, if the color of the interface slightly varied, we assigned a value of 2.5. However, if the color of the interface did not change, we assigned a value of 0. Following the best practice of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), inter and intra coder reliability was achieved.

## FINDINGS

### Country-level and industry-level analysis

The ANOVA test investigated the differences at the country and industry level of standardization versus adaptation of online communication design and content. Results reveal that differences between Italy and Russia and across industries (apparel, automobile, food-and-drink, cosmetics, and ICT) are statistically significant at the 95-99,99 percent confidence level. As such, country and industry represent critical variables that explain online communication differences in terms of standardization versus adaptation. We found that online communication design and content tend to be more adapted in Russia than in Italy for website and social media. For Russian websites, marketers are more inclined to adapt their landing pages and content-writing techniques. Unlike Italy, Russia employs personalized and high contextualized messages and adapts value propositions through, for instance, different image placements, calls to action, celebrity endorsements, and storytelling. Additionally, we found an overall low degree of standardization across all brands when communicating through a website, especially in industries like ICT, apparel, food, and cosmetics. On the contrary, communication through social media reveals a higher degree of adaptation across all brands, which position in a balanced degree of standardization versus adaptation.

### Cross-media communication – convergence approaches

Our convergence analysis revealed that most sampled companies converge their online communication through the website and social media when dealing with different markets, i.e., use the same approach in different digital channels in terms of standardization vs. adaptation. There are three approaches that multinational firms implement when they simultaneously integrate the design of both communications channels:

1. *Standardized convergence approach*: standardization approach for website and social media (presented mainly by apparel and automobile industries).
2. *Adaptive convergence approach*: adaptation approach for website and social media (presented mainly by automobile industry).
3. *Cross-media divergence approach*: standardization approach for websites and adaptation approach for social media (presented mainly by cosmetics and ICT industry).

Firms that implement ***standardized convergence approach*** unify content and design strategy across countries. A standard web page design ensures a consistent experience for Internet users regardless of the country of navigation and enhances the global image of multinational companies. In some cases, the same images and color design are used in both media, creating seamless navigation that can result from switching between social media and the website and nurturing a sense of “familiarity” and consistent brand recognition among web users. In terms of content, such firms take a translation<sup>5</sup> approach for the Italian market and a localization approach for Russian, always keeping the same meaning in both media.

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<sup>5</sup> Here, by translation, we mean literal duplication of meaning from one language to another, while localization means transferring meaning to meet both linguistic and cultural expectations (Batova & Clark, 2015)

However, when it comes to hashtags in social media, those are almost always written in English (for example, #ImpossibleIsNothing for Adidas). This choice may bring together customers from different countries by creating a sense of community and sharing. The portrayal of products is highly standardized for both countries and media. The description, slogan, and representation of products in websites follow the same line and are perceived in the same manner by users of analyzed countries. Product portrayal in social media, despite a pronounced standardization approach, has some traits of adaptation approach.

Firms pursuing an ***adaptive convergence approach*** adjust their content and design strategy based on country differences. The design implemented greatly varies for both communication channels companies accommodate cultural differences. Cultural design adaptations translate into different visual backgrounds, interface colors, and celebrity endorsements. They try to create a sense of closeness with their customers. Content differs from one country to another, aligning with local events, traditions, and habits. Product descriptions and their appearance in both communication channels highlight different benefits and use different slogans to grab customers' attention.

The ***cross-media divergence approach*** mixes website standardization and social media adaptation. We noticed that for some firms, the web page design is strictly standardized, and adapted for social media since social networks usually represent more informal communication channels. Thus, companies create more customer engagement. Regarding contents, on websites, they tend to be translated keeping the same meaning, while on social media, they vary greatly from one country to another, based on cultural differences to increase user engagement. We found the same result for product portrayal and other elements categories.

## DISCUSSION

This work investigated whether multinational firms apply standardization or adaptation approaches for the design and content of their websites and social media in different markets and industries and whether and how they converge their communication strategy across different degrees of standardization vs. adaptation. Previous studies have investigated communication strategies in other communication channels (e.g., print media) (Harris & Attour, 2003; Whitelock & Chung, 1989). We extend previous works by introducing a novel framework aligned with online communication to capture communication design and content on websites and Instagram pages. Furthermore, we extend the international marketing literature by confirming that country and industry are important variables to consider when developing cross-border communication in the online context (Bock et al., 2012; Li et al., 2018; Rao-Nicholson & Khan, 2017; Roper, 2005). Additionally, by jointly analyzing the website and social media in Italy and Russia, we provide empirical evidence of media convergence (implementation of the same approach in different digital channels in terms of standardization vs. adaptation). We describe three convergence approaches that multinational companies adopt when communicating via website and social media across different countries. We suggest that the industry sector may explain firms' choice of convergence approach.

### Limitation and future research

Future research should extend the data collection period and observe how trends in the design and content of communication might have changed longitudinally. Furthermore, future research may extend the literature by including other social media channels like Facebook or TikTok and analyzing other countries. Additionally, future research can clarify why these

differences arise and what factors may influence the adoption of a particular convergence approach.

### **Managerial implications**

With this work, we enhance the attention practitioners should devote to the design and content of their digital strategies and tactics, to become more responsive and flexible to changes in international markets.

Our study findings may assist practitioners seeking to redefine their online communication strategies by learning more about how to synchronize communication strategies according to different degrees of adaptation vs. standardization approaches depending on the industry.

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