Think Globally Act Locally. This is the core mantra of the marketing departments of international corporations and it helps towards define what the portmanteau word glocalization means. Richard Tiplady defines glocalization as “the way in which ideas and structures that circulate globally are adapted and changed by local realities’ (Tiplady, 2003) The term glocalization originated from within Japanese business practices which began to gain popularity within management circles in the late 80’s in the western world and particularly so in America; due in part to the growing domination of Japanese cars in the US. The term is derived from the Japanese word dochauka which means global localization and originally referred to adapting farming techniques to local conditions, in the business world this idea was applied to the marketing of products and effects all parts of the marketing mix, including most crucially the communication of products and brands. The first Japanese business practices to be hybridized with western management philosophy, for example Kaizen, focussed on improving production, simply because it was seen by the business executives at the time that the biggest threat from the Japanese imports were that they were of high quality and of relatively low cost. The introduction of the term glocalization to the English lexicon is attributed mainly to the British sociologist Roland Robertson in the early 1990’s, and this was later reinforced by Canadian sociologists Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman along with Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in the late 1990’s at a time when globalization moved one step closer from being an aspiration of businesses to a reality. Prior to the idea of glocalization, and when globalization was in its infancy, leading Harvard business professor Theodore Levitt in 1983 published an essay entitled “The Globalization of Markets”. Naomi Klein in her book “No Logo” states that “he argued that any corporation that was willing to bow to some local habit or taste was an unmitigated failure. “The world’s needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized”’ (Levitt in Klein 2005. p.116) What this quote demonstrates is the ‘traditional’ perhaps even American view of how globalized businesses should undergo its activities, since the introduction and mass adaption of the idea of glocalization this idea of ignoring local cultures has almost entirely being eradicated from contemporary marketing philosophy, however, as will be demonstrated, this is not to say that despite widespread acceptance of glocalization that homogenization is not taking place.

Crucially, before going on further, the term globalization should be defined. Globalization thus far in this report has relied upon the commonly sold economic understanding of globalization, the idea that globalization is “worldwide economic interaction resulting in a dynamic global market.” To many this definition is inadequate as it firstly; as mentioned, only considers the economic impact of globalization, and secondly it does not distinguish itself from past
forms of international trade. Perhaps a more accurate definition of globalization can be seen in the one provided by British born sociologist Anthony Giddens whereby he states that “Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990, p. 64) While this definition is much more rounded it could still be some be considered trouble-some. A useful way to understand globalization is demonstrated In the book “Globalization: A Very Short Introduction” by Steger (2003) whereby defining the phenomenon is related to the ancient Buddhist parable of the blind scholars and their encounter with an elephant. In the parable the blind scholars all feel the elephant to try and understand it. The first scholar felt the trunk of the elephant and surmised that it was like a lively snake, another man felt the creature’s leg and suggested that it was like a rough column of massive propositions, a third man felt the tusk and stated it was like a sharp spear. They were all correct in their descriptions of the different parts of the elephant, but what none of the scholars could fully understand was the bigger picture, they each hung on to their own understanding of what an elephant was and ended up arguing over the true nature of the elephant as a result. Steger argues that states that “The ongoing academic quarrel over which dimension contains the essence of globalization represents a postmodern version of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Even those few remaining scholars who still think of globalization as a singular process clash with each other over which aspect of social life constitutes its primary domain” Globalization then is a complex beast it is not just related to economics as we are most commonly sold but it effects political, cultural and technological spheres to name but a few.

Glocalization is primarily rooted within the economic understanding of globalization, but as demonstrated within the elephant parable it will go on to effect many different social spheres as they are all one of the same. Glocalization from a marketing point of view is said to be about adapting your product to meet the needs and wants of consumers in foreign market. There are numerous examples of products and brands being glocalized, I will briefly demonstrate two such examples.

Various global television networks adapt their programming to better suit their markets, for example the comedy show The Office in the UK is in many ways vastly different from The Office in the US however they both maintain the underlining theme of depicting the everyday lives of office employees displayed in the style of single-camera documentary. Another such example in terms of TV can been seen with the game show format Deal or No Deal. The format; which is often described as being a postmodern drama, originated in the Netherlands and has now been exported to over 70 countries each of which put their own spin on the formula.
Another example of Glocalization in action; having first misunderstood local culture, and a commonly cited example within the business world, can be seen with the expansion of Wal-Mart into Germany. Upon entering a Wal-Mart in the US you are welcomed by the now globally renowned “Wal-Mart greeters” “The idea behind this is that the welcome creates a more personal feel to the customers’ hypermarket shopping experience” (Towers 2004, p. 4) Upon entering the German market; done so by a series of acquisitions, Wal-Mart did not glocalize their brand and as result struggled to make an impact. Upon realizing the social differences between America and Germany adaptations were made in order to be able to integrate into their German surroundings, Germans found the greeters too superficial and therefore they were removed.

Glocalization, in terms of its most common incarnation; that of a marketing action, is the adaptation products for different markets and what this serves to do is to give the impression of hybridization. Hybridization is “A process whereby cultural forms literally move through time and space where they interact with other cultural forms and settings, influence each other, produce new forms, and change the cultural settings.” (Lull, 2000, P.242) Hybridization is seen as being a organic process and a great example of hybridization taking place can be seen with evolution of the Pizza. Pizza, in some form or another, is said to have been around since the neolithic age, but pizza as we would commonly recognize it is dated as originating in 18th century Naples. The peasants of Naples, and as it grew in popularity the whole of Italy, would add tomato, oregano and garlic to their flat bread as it was baking to create what in our modern eyes we would see as a crude pizza. In the late 19th century the USA saw a great influx of immigrants and there was a large contingent that came from Italy, they naturally brought with them their culture and traditions. Pizza was reinvented upon entering the USA, it became hybridized, the dish that was once a simple peasant food; essentially just flat bread and tomato sauce, started mixing with the abundance of foods stuffs available in a prosperous USA. Pizzas began getting exotic toppings which could have only been dreamed of by the 18th century peasants who initially created it and upon moving around the globe the pizza has continued to change, and this can be seen as a basic example of hybridization in action.

I would suggest that glocalization is the simulation of the process of hybridization, it is the changing and evolution of products, but it does so in an inorganic way. Businesses cannot be seen as being invading foreign entities or the local populations will reject them, in order to be able to grow businesses have to provide the image of being integrated with the host culture. As demonstrated with the Wal-Mart example earlier, upon entering Germany Wal-Mart followed the Levitt school of thought regarding international expansion and tried naively to overtly force its American culture onto the Germans and they naturally did not respond favorably, therefore Wal-mart had to adapt, it had to hybridize.
Hybridization however is not a one way street, somewhat like Gramscian hegemony while Wal-Mart has adapted to Germany, Germany will in turn adapt to Wal-Mart. In the business glocalization case study entitled “Wal-Mart: A Glocalized Company” it is interesting to note that it states “It appears however that the German population were not ready for the ‘Wal-Mart greeters’” (Towers 2004, p. 9) this sentence on the surface appears to be a rather innocuous one however it is in-fact quiet enlightening. What it suggests is that the German public were not currently ready for the Wal-Mart greeters, but they may well be in the future. Rather than genuinely adapting to local cultures I would suggest that what glocalization ultimately does is promote eventual homogenization.

One of the main activities of marketing, and particularly marketing communication, is to change the attitudes and perceptions of their customers, a quick example can be seen with Aldi’s current communication strategy; they are seen as being a cheap brand and through communication they are trying to change the views of their target market that this is not the case. Upon entering a market companies will glocalize in order to attract a base, upon doing this the aim of most international companies, it would be argued; and wether explicitly or not, is to make world markets homogenous, and in doing so the selling of goods becomes more efficient, it becomes cheaper and increases profit margins. The creation of a near homogenous culture can be seen with the emergence of the “global teen” The MTV brand is a global one, and while it will glocalize much of its output to adapt to local taste variations what it ultimately doing is homogenizing teen culture by the way that it presents its content. In No Logo Naomi Klein states that:

“The ‘New World Teen Study’ surveyed 27,600 middle class fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds in forty-five countries and came up with resoundingly good news for the agency’s clients, a list that includes Coca-Cola, Burger King and Phillips. ‘Despite different cultures, middle-class youth all over the world seem to live their lives as if in a parallel universe. They get up in the morning, put on their Levi’s and Nikes, grab their caps, backpacks, and Sony personal CD players, and head for school’ Elissa Moses, senior vice president at the advertising agency, called the arrival of the global teen demographic ‘one of the greatest marketing opportunities of all time’” (p.119)

Glocalization as defined by Robinson; the British sociologist who first popularized the term, is as follows: “ The tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near global basis to increasingly differentiated local and particular markets” (Robertson, 1995, p.28)

But as has been demonstrated their may be much more to glocalization than first meets the eye. All the definitions of glocalization suggest that companies are provocatively; even compassionately if companies were to be personified, adapting there product offerings to local
cultures. However this is not the case at all, it would be naive to suggest that the ability for local cultures to affect the way businesses operate is a one way process, the companies will also, in a gramsican-esq way also affect the culture of the place they are entering. Glocalization could be said to represent a form of hybridization, but I suggest that it is a simulation of hybridization, as hybridization is an organic process whereas glocalization is a planned structured one designed to meet specific aims. I’ve then gone on to suggest that as glocalization is on the whole a marketing tool and that its real purpose is to try and eventually, and only to a limited degree, homogenous elements of cultures and societies in order to make efficiency savings in order to help maximize revenue.

I believe that glocalization is having a more profound effect on society than is being stated within globalization literature and in this essay I have attempted to both briefly and critically look at some potential affects of glocalization could possibly be having on societies and culture.

References and Bibliography.


