
Introduction

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The main interest in a call for a special issue on cultural catalysts in evolving environments is to understand if cultural identity still acts as a cultural catalyst. Identity is a value related to firms' home culture, their context, and relational networks, and the main question is: does identity act as a catalyst today?

In chemistry, a catalyst is known as a substance that modifies and increases the rate of a reaction without being consumed by the process. In the same way, in social science, the term catalyst is used to refer to something that precipitates a process or event without being effected by its consequences. It is a social mechanism able to trigger changes and preserve identities. With this definition of catalyst, the special issue is aimed at understanding if culture can act as a catalyst, helping firms to create hybridisation, without losing their identities.

In the past, local networks were cultural catalysts, and people and institutions were held together by their common history, language, traditions and educational heritage. This shared identity allowed firms and economic players to create and maintain effective relationships because they were embedded in the same context. Local relationships allowed firms to evolve and face environmental turbulence. The embedment in the local network facilitated relationships, and mutual understanding, creating the basis for increasing levels of competitiveness. Local networks were sources of material goods, but much more of hidden ideas, innovation, and reputation.

Nowadays, globalisation has reduced the importance of the home context. Because of globalisation, the role of local networks and home culture seems to have changed. In a globalised environment, firms have a double challenge: preserving their identity while adapting to different and evolving environments. Businesses have no borders, and firms increase their competitiveness through the relationships they forge around the globe. In a globalised world, characterised by strong competition and a high level of technological transience, relationships are still the cornerstone of successful business, but their nature

is different: relationships are no longer local but global. To succeed globally, firms need to adapt to different cultures, and promote hybridisation.

The tendency towards globalisation, however, does not reduce the importance of cultural identity and the role it can have as a catalyst. The process of change while preserving requires a catalyst that is as hat is as a mechanism able to create homogeneities among different factors, and interdependence among different aims. The different articles show indeed that culture acts as a catalyst. The main point is not whether culture counts or not, but how it impacts business and firms' capability to compete globally. In some cases, adaptation to local culture is the key-factor of success. In others, the capability to create a common culture is key to making the company more competitive. Both the firms' culture and the host market culture are relevant, and in some cases when they are strongly interrelated, being part of the local context becomes a source of competitive edge.

The debate which has led to this special issue started in the occasion of the XI IACCM Annual Conference on 'Political change, cultural dynamics and competitiveness of firms', which took place in Naples (Italy) at the Università Parthenope di Napoli on June 20th–22nd 2012, organised by Prof. Francesco Calza and Chiara Cannavale. Some of the articles are an extended and revised version of those presented during the conference.

With their contribution on 'Analysing gender and diversity management issues across cultures from multiple perspectives: a Thai-German case', Marie-Thérèse Claes and Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger open the debate on the effect of globalisation on transnational firms. They focus on the challenges deriving from gender and diversity. In the case-analysis of a German engineering company in Thailand, they show how multinationals are 'receivers' as well as 'promoters' in the paradoxical movements of convergence and divergence in management practice. The authors highlight the importance of a balance between standardisation and adaptation, concluding that in order to exploit international or global synergy, organisations must understand the paradoxical forces between headquarters and subsidiaries, and recognise where, when and why culture matters.

The debate on challenges deriving from management of different cultures continues with the second article, 'Exploring national diversity and identity regulation: managerial discourses and material practices in a transnational company' by Mario Pezzillo Iacono, Vincenza Esposito, Lucia Silvestri, Marcello Martinez and Luigi Moschera. The authors examine how diversity management is a way to shape the perception of collective identity, and a means of regulating the organisational behaviours of minority groups. They discuss the case-study of a large Italian-French company and show how the dominating group tries to affect the sense of group identity/diversity in order to establish models of action, and to preserve the company's identity. In this respect, the discourse and praxis of diversity management act as a catalyst reinforcing the collective identity, and enhancing the existing power relations.

With their paper on 'Cross-cultural analysis of comfort with foreign cultures in multinational firms', Vijesh Jain and Rahul Singh again analyse the effects of diversity in multinational firms, focusing on organisational environment. They explore the effects of culture on employees' capability to adapt to multicultural work places. The authors give insight into the factors affecting the level of comfort of local employees with foreign employees in culturally diverse work places of multinational firms. The level of comfort with foreign cultures (CFC) is a new framework which attempts to read the comfort level

of local employees with respect to foreigners and vice versa. Using Geert Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, the authors explore the CFC in ten different countries, and pin point specific differences among nations in this respect.

The convergence-divergence dilemma is well depicted in the contribution given by Frank M. Go and Mariapina Trunfio, 'A cultural hybridisation approach to reinterpreting the integration-diversity dichotomy: the case of Guggenheim's master branding Bilbao'. The trade-off between standardisation and adaptation, as well as the issues connected to the impact of cultural barriers on organisational performances, concern every kind of organisation involved in international expansion. This paper explores how urban players leverage iconic branding as a cultural catalyst to fill the void left by the declining narrative of the nation. The case of Guggenheim's master branding Bilbao furthers our understanding of how a cultural hybridisation approach can help to reinterpret the 'integration-diversity' dichotomy embedded in iconic branding. The paper also highlights the impact of hybridisation on urban socio-cultural, economic and political institutions.

With the article 'Effects of brand and quality management on consumers' purchasing willingness of indigenous handicrafts in Taiwan, Wen-Chih Liao, Chun-Chou Tseng and Jui-Ho Lee explore the role of cultural identity as a factor of products' competitiveness. They test the hypothesis that the adoption of a handicraft quality certification system will promote consumers' willingness to purchase indigenous handicrafts in Taiwan. The results show that both a brand effect as well as a quality management effect can encourage consumers to spend more money buying accredited indigenous handicrafts. The authors highlight how the creation of a local network can become a source of competitive advantage, helping small firms to differentiate their products, by building a brand image. The embedment in the local network acts as a catalyst: local culture becomes a source of differentiation and, at the same time, allows small firm to enlarge their market without losing their identities.

To summarise, in this special issue, which we are commending to the readers of EJCCM, we obtain insight into the complex debate of cultural catalysts. We find that social mechanisms, related to identity and respect, are relevant in a fast changing globalised world. The concept of cultural catalysts has been explored according to different perspectives: some contributions focus on the importance of cultural identity and on the value of local embedment for products' competitiveness. While others focus on the increasing challenges connected to gender and cultural diversities within international firms. The capability to fit with foreign culture is crucial to a multinational. Finding a balance between the necessity to preserve their own identity, on one hand, and the need to adapt to distant culture on the other, has been explored through different case-studies. Authors suggest the importance of creating a collective culture, in order to overcome the challenges connected with fast changes and global environments. Hybridisation is the essence of globalisation, posing important challenges to every kind of organisation involved in international expansion.