

# *A Comparative Study on the Integrated Marketing Communication Strategies of Unmentionable Products in a Glocalization Perspective—A Case Study of Durex in China, India and the UK*

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**Abstract.** In the framework of glocalization theory, the existing studies mainly focused on food and consumer goods, which pay less attention to "unmentionable products" involving cultural concepts. Based on this, this study takes Durex as an example and uses multi-case comparative analysis to examine its localized integrated marketing communication strategy in China, India, and the United Kingdom. The research finds that the interaction among cultural values, censorship intensity, and language expression in ethnic societies dominates the implementation of localization strategies; the weight of "national society" and "self" reference points increased, while "world system" and "human" played more implicit supporting roles. This study extends the applicability of glocalization theory in the field of sensitive consumer goods and provides practical implications for the integrated marketing communication of multinational brands in different cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Glocalization, Global Field, Integrated marketing, Unmentionable Products, Comparative study

## 1. Introduction

Roland Robertson's theory of global localization regards globalization as a two-way interaction between universality and particularity. His "global field" model encompasses four reference points: national society, world system, self, and humanity, providing an important analytical framework for understanding the communication strategies of multinational brands in different cultural contexts. However, existing studies mainly focus on "non-sensitive" products such as food and cars, less on "unmentionable products" related to cultural sensitivity (mainly including family planning and health care products) [1].

Taking Durex as an example, this study mainly compares its integrated marketing communication strategies in China, India, and the UK through case analysis and discusses the following issues: How do the sub-dimensions within the ethnic society influence strategies? What are the similarities and differences among the three national strategies, and what are their logics? Does the weight of the

four reference points change when the object of analysis changes from "daily consumer goods" to "unmentionable products"? The meaning of this study is to expand the vision of glocalization to sensitive consumer goods, analyze the internal logic of glocalization of sensitive categories, and also provide new empirical verification for the application of Robertson's theory in the digital era.

## 2. Concept definition and theoretical framework

"Glocalization" is the combination of "globalization" and "localization," and its concept can be traced back to the "dochakuka" concept in Japanese business practice in the 1980s [2, 3]. At that time, Japanese companies drew on the concept of "adapting to local conditions" in agriculture and proposed that marketing products should also be adjusted according to different cultures and habits so as to better enter the local market. Since then, the term "glocalization" was officially included in the 1991 edition of the Oxford Dictionary of New Words and has gradually entered the field of academic discussion. In the 1990s, sociologist Roland Robertson introduced this conceptual system into the field of sociological and cultural studies to criticize the tendency of that time to simply equate globalization with economic globalization or cultural homogenization. Robertson pointed out that globalization is not a simple homogenization but a two-way interactive process of "universal specialization" and "special generalization" [4]. Although some studies reckoned that glocalization strategy may face problems such as theoretical paradox, power imbalance, and lack of interculturalism in practice, it is still one of the important core strategic frameworks for the international marketing of multinational enterprises [5, 6].

Compared to general consumer goods, unmentionables face more complex constraints in the communication process due to involving social taboos, moral norms, or cultural sensitivity. Lea Prevel Katsanis defines such products as "unmentionable products," which are deemed offensive, embarrassing, harmful, unacceptable, or controversial by a considerable segment of society. It is further subdivided into two categories: one is products that are controversial or harmful but suitable for public discussion, and the other is products that are beneficial but suitable for private use. The latter is the main research object of this study [7].

Robertson believed that the descriptive concept of Glocalization is still insufficient to explain the complex interaction of multiple agents in the globalization process. For this reason, he introduced the more analytical framework of "global field". This framework interprets globalization as a dynamic network composed of four reference points: national societies, world systems, the self, and all of humanity, each with relative autonomy and mutual constraints [8]. The substitution of "field" for "system" transforms the static structure into a dynamic process, emphasizing boundary negotiation and multiple interactions.

## 3. Research design

This study takes the multi-case comparative study method, adopting Durex's integrated marketing communication strategy in different national markets as the analysis object to analyze the deep relationship between cultural context, institutional environment, and communication strategies through horizontal comparison.

In terms of case selection, this study takes China, UK, and India as the comparison objects, mainly based on the significant differences among the three in terms of cultural context and media regulatory environments. Specifically, Chinese sexual culture is traditionally conservative, but it is undergoing generational transformation. Both traditional media and new media platforms are strictly censored. Indian society is deeply influenced by religious culture. "Sex" remains a taboo topic in

society. However, compared with the restrictions on TV advertisements, online platforms are relatively lenient. In the UK, sexual attitudes are relatively open, and consumers pay more attention to the experience, but the advertising regulator has strict regulations on non-targeted media. The three countries form a contrast in cultural values and censorship dimensions, constituting a relatively ideal comparative sample, which helps to reveal the localization logic of "unmentionable products" in different ethnic social contexts.

In terms of the analysis framework, based on the global field theory proposed by Robertson, this paper refines the four reference points of the global field into the following specific analysis dimensions: Ethnic societies are subdivided into cultural values, language expression, and censorship intensity, which serve as the core of the comparison among three countries. The world system is manifested as global brand management. "Self" directed individuals' emotional needs and identity recognition; humans are about universal values and social responsibility.

#### **4. Case analysis of Durex's localization marketing in China, Britain and India**

##### **4.1. Self: consumers' identity cognition and emotional connection**

In Roberson's theory of global field, the reference point of "self" refers to the individual's identity cognition and meaning construction in the process of globalization. For "unmentionable products," how to transform private consumption into shareable identity expression and guide purchase behavior has become a challenge faced by brands.

In the Chinese market, the female active purchase rate is relatively low, which means there exists a potential market space. And Generation Z female consumers pay more attention to products with social currency and emotional expression attributes. Durex launched the "Sweet Plan" series of gift boxes during Valentine's Day, transforming condoms from functional products into "emotional gifts." By combining food gift boxes in the shapes of chocolate and cheesecake with portable handbag packaging, the products possessed social attributes that could be shared and displayed. In the marketing process, emotional scenes such as "Memorial Day gift" and "Cold War reconciliation" were designed to encourage consumers to buy and share gift boxes in order to enhance their identification with intimate relationships and romantic partner identity to a certain extent. Industry feedback shows that this strategy has gained high attention and good marketing results among female consumers and young groups. From this case, it seems like when the brand transforms the product from "shame" to "emotional consumption" and "identity," consumers are more likely to continuously confirm and strengthen their identity through repeated purchases.

India's market differences between "self" construction paths with China. Due to the strict constraint of the "Sex topic" in India's society, it's hard for brands to connect with individuals through emotional narrative directly. Durex uses the discourse of "power" and "social responsibility" to provide consumers with a new way of identity recognition. For instance, in the video advertisement for Father's Day, the tragic story of personified sperm sharing "abandonment" in a mutual aid group was presented through a black comedy. Eventually, it was pointed out that "abandoned sperm are better than abandoned children," and the reality data of about 11 million abandoned babies in India were cited. This idea elevates male consumers from mere "product users" to "responsible fathers." By binding product use with social responsibility, brands provide male consumers with an identity-building path that can both satisfy their needs and obtain moral legitimacy.

In the British market, where the sexual concept is relatively open but the condom usage rate continues to decline, Durex not only promotes "safety" but also endows the product with the concept

of "self-care" [9, 10]. In Afterglow's marketing campaign, Durex partnered with KOL in the beauty field to transform lubricant from a "sex product" into a part of daily self-care, with "self-care practice" as the core proposition, taking "self-care practices" as the core proposition, thereby providing consumers with a channel for identity recognition and lifestyle expression.

## 4.2. National society: the deep construction of local cultural context

The deep differences among the cases of the three countries are rooted in their respective "ethnic society" contexts. The following text will analyze from three dimensions: cultural values, language expression, and review intensity.

### 4.2.1. Cultural values

In China, influenced by Confucianism for a long time, the attitude towards sex is relatively implicit. The traditional concept of sex emphasizes the ritualistic system and the reproductive function and restricts the expression of emotions. Although there was an upsurge in the discussion of "sex" during the May Fourth Movement period and the criticism of ethics increased, it focused mainly on the elite class and was difficult to extend to the whole society [11]. Despite the influence of Western concepts in modern society, family sex education and sexual concepts are still generally conservative and show apparent differences between urban and rural areas [12]. Therefore, Durex's "sweet plan" strategy is to establish a commercial cultural channel between the traditional ethic's restrained requirement for emotional expression and the contemporary consumption of intimate relationships.

In Indian society, religious culture and the conservative concept of realistic society are contradictory to sexual expression. On the one hand, sex is sacred in religious traditions; on the other hand, the real society tends to be conservative, and the public space strictly controls sexual expression [13]. In response to the conservative social atmosphere in India, Durex has launched a "jeans" packaging design. The outer packaging resembles the leather label sewn on denim jeans and is sold in open cans at pharmacy counters, reducing consumers' embarrassment when purchasing sexual-related products. The contradiction between sex and public space in Indian culture is reduced through the visual symbols of routine and desensitization.

The overall sexual perception in the UK shows an open and inclusive trend. According to a global survey by Durex, the UK ranks 33rd among 36 countries in terms of condom purchase, with only 15% of Britons having bought condoms last year. Related data indicates that consumers are more inclined to "feel" rather than "be safe" [10]. The national tracking survey further shows that the acceptance of premarital sex in British society has increased from 42% in 1983 to 74%, while the traditional gender role identity has decreased to 9%. The visibility of sexual minorities has increased significantly, and religious beliefs affect sexual behaviors more through internalized norms rather than public advocacy [14]. In this context, Durex launched the new Intensity product, which responded to consumers' demand for intimacy with the innovation of "body heat transfer" technology and launched the "This is not a condom" campaign. In view of British society's relatively high openness to sexual topics and consumers' priority for emotional experience, the brand turns condoms from a risk-averting tool to a sensory connection medium, realizing the symbolic reconstruction of the function of the unmentionable products.

#### 4.2.2. Language expression

In the integrated marketing strategies of China, India and the UK, language expression serves as a crucial dimension of Durex's localization creativity. It is mainly reflected in linguistic puns and metaphorical wordplay, enabling the brand to build consumer identification across different cultural contexts. In the Chinese market, Durex fully leverages the diversity of dialects and the ideographic features of Chinese characters to establish cultural connections with local consumers. For example, in Shanghai, the slogan "Bangyou bang bang mang" (a shanghaiese homophonic variation of "pengyou bang bang mang," meaning "friends, lend a hand") is used, while in Guangdong, the phrase "bian du, dou anquan" plays on the Cantonese word "Bin dou" (meaning "where"), creating a phonetic pun. These dialect-based expressions reduce the brand's sense of foreignness, allowing the product to be naturally embedded in everyday language and enhancing consumer identification.

In the Indian market, where sexual topics remain sensitive in public space, Durex employs puns and metaphors to convey information indirectly. For example, the "Explorers Wanted" campaign frames body exploration as global travel, mapping sensitive areas onto "secret destinations." The nape is referred to as "Nape Town" (a play on Cape Town), the thigh as "Thighland" (Thailand), and the chest as "Chest Republic" (Czech Republic). This approach allows the brand to communicate product-related messages effectively while remaining within cultural norms. In the UK market, Durex captures consumers' demand for experiential and emotional engagement by embedding sexual themes within humorous and creative situation. By leveraging the suggestive or slang meanings of real place names (eg., "Wank Mountain" and "Cockermouth"), the brand present sexual innuendo in a playful manner, while maintaining a balance between creativity and social acceptability.

#### 4.2.3. Censor environment

The media regulation of the three countries is significantly different, and the brand strategy shows the characteristics of innovation within the compliance framework: (1) China: Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and other platforms strictly review the content of adult products. By launching peripheral products (such as "Dudu Steam Waist Paste") and combining e-sports scenes and KOL communication, Durex has achieved a balance between content communication and sales growth and even transformed the pressure of censorship into a driving force for innovation. (2) India: Condom advertising is limited on television, while print and online platforms are relatively loose. Durex chooses more Internet marketing, such as Father's Day videos and private message communication, so that brands can promote products within the compliance framework. (3) UK: social platforms (eg., TikTok, Meta) have a filtering mechanism for sexual and sexual orientation language. Brands work with video creators to deliver their advertisement in a "smart and playful" way while maintaining a humorous style and ensuring content is compliant and brand-specific.

#### 4.3. Human beings: universal values and social responsibilities

Durex's public welfare in the Chinese market focuses on AIDS prevention and control. The brand cooperated with the Health China Public Welfare Action Project Office to set up the Blue Ribbon project office to coordinate and mobilize the anti-AIDS forces from all sectors of society. In addition, Durex launched the Healthy China Women's Invisible Health Protection Plan to carry out health intervention for women of the right age. On the 8th, World AIDS Zero Discrimination Day, the brand jointly launched the "Zero Discrimination, Love Full" initiative, which closely integrated

the brand mission with the national public health strategy and implanted a responsible brand image in the hearts of consumers.

In India, where sex education is severely lacking, Durex launched The Birds and Bees Talk, a program that provides sexual health and life skills education to young people. The name of the project is drawn on the euphemism of "conversation between birds and bees" in Western culture to reduce the sensitivity of the topic, and through the expression of "life skills education," the otherwise taboo topic has gained legitimacy in the family and school.

In UK, Durex has partnered with LGBTQ+ rights charity Stonewall. For every £5 consumers spend on the official website, the brand will donate £1 to Stonewall Equality Limited, which combines daily consumption behaviors with diversified and equal value advocacy to strengthen the brand's social responsibility image.

#### 4.4. World system: global business technology cooperation

Reckitt Benckiser has established a global excellence R&D center in Shanghai and proposed the strategy of Designing for China in China, with the goal of achieving 95% of its products designed for Chinese consumers. The center supports the rapid iteration of more than 40 new gift boxes of "Sweet Plan" throughout the year, and the innovation speed is twice that of other countries. At the same time, the global supply chain also provides manufacturing and logistics guarantees for product iteration. The local innovation experience in the Chinese market is then exported to other global markets, demonstrating the feedback of local innovation to the global system.

The Indian market pays more attention to the two levels of media agency and international cooperation. WPP renewed Reckitt India's media business and expanded its services to e-commerce and instant retail to meet the local needs of its global agency network. Meanwhile, Durex, in collaboration with UNESCO and the National Education Framework (NCF) of India, launched the "Rainbow Classrooms" teacher gender identity curriculum project, providing third-party endorsement for sensitive issues in conservative cultures and reducing social resistance.

As Reckitt's global headquarters, the UK is mainly responsible for the testing of new technologies and new forms, as well as global consumer research tasks. For instance, innovative forms such as the release of global to local brand manuals and dual-screen interactive advertisements were all first launched in the UK. After success, they were then promoted globally, demonstrating the experimental and feedback role of the UK market in the global strategy.

### 5. Discussion

Durex's integrated marketing in China, India, and the UK all take "weak functionalization" as their core strategy and always focus on the local "ethnic society" context, endowing products with the attributes of emotional expression, social responsibility, or self-care from simple physiological products. This commonality can be used as a reference for the localization practice of unmentionable products: a successful localization strategy must closely follow the cultural values and censor environment of the target market and give a meaning beyond the functional level to consumption behavior, so that private consumption can obtain the legitimacy of public discourse.

Under this commonality, the differences in the specific strategies of the three countries mainly stem from the interaction of the three dimensions within the reference point of ethnic society. Cultural values define the basic framework of "discussable;" the intensity of censorship constitutes the rigid constraint boundary, and language expression, as a creative output, seeks localization in the interaction space between the former two. The synergy of the three shapes the differentiated

characteristics of brand strategies in different markets. Through the interaction of the three, the basic logic of difference formation can be extracted: Cultural values play a key role in determining "why" and "what" brands say. The rigid constraints of the intensity of censorship determine "where to say" and "what not to say." As an intermediary, the creativity of language expression determines "how to say," and the interaction of these three dimensions jointly explains the formation mechanism of the differences in localization strategies Durex exerted among the three countries.

The three countries' cases show that the weights of the four reference points are not fully balanced when the global field theory is applied to "unmentionable products." Compared with other reference points, the weight of ethnic society is significantly increased, in which cultural values and censorship constitute the threshold for brands to enter the market and determine the feasible boundary of strategies. At the same time, the role of the "self" as a reference point has also enhanced significantly since the emotional needs of individual consumers have become an important outlet for brand narrative, making consumption behavior transform into the process of identity recognition. Comparatively, the world system mainly provides resource base support, which exists mainly in the background. The promotion effect of universal human value on brand image is long and slow, but it cannot be ignored. In sensitive category marketing, the force of reference points has dynamic features, among which the weight of "ethnic society" and "self" is more prominent. It is precisely in this context that brands seek expressive and acceptable localization paths.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the above comparative analysis, the following suggestions are put forward: In the strategy formulation, the brand should accurately position the market according to the sensitivity of the product. Social responsibility can be considered in the highly sensitive market, emotional expression strategy can be adopted in the transition market, and user experience can be emphasized in the low-sensitivity market. For the private consumption attribute, brands can enhance legitimacy by reducing the sense of embarrassment through emotional care, individual health, and other means and providing "rationalized" psychological support for consumption behavior. More importantly, brands should not passively adapt to cultural traditions but actively participate in cultural evolution while respecting the bottom line and constantly improving the cultural sensitivity of the team to find space to promote positive change.

At the same time, this study has the following limitations: the single-brand case cannot cover the diversity of the unmentionable products category; mainly relying on second-hand data, which is difficult to quantify and compare the communication effect; the horizontal comparison lacks the tracking of the evolution of brand strategy over time. Future research can be deepened from the aspects of expanding category comparison, tracking the evolution of strategies, including more market types, and focusing on the localization governance of digital platforms.

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