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Zeroculturality: A New Phenomenon in the Digital Space. Genesis, Characteristics, Consequences

ABSTRACT

This article explores a recently discovered phenomenon in the digital landscape, labeled as “zeroculturality.” Unveiled through the author’s recent research in the realms of politics, culture, and communication, zeroculturality represents a transformative shift where cultural boundaries are not only spontaneously vanishing but are also intentionally obliterated. Individuals embodying zeroculturality consciously reject conventional cultural norms while preserving specific values, adapting their identity to synchronize with the dynamic demands of time and place. Essentially, these individuals may discard certain cultural behaviors while retaining the fundamental values associated with them. While not yet pervasive, zeroculturality merits significant consideration, particularly for entities striving to effectively communicate, manage relationships, and disseminate information. Traditional approaches in persuasive communication, grounded in demographics, psychosocial factors, or values, may be losing efficacy. The author’s research on zeroculturality aims to have a practical impact by offering insights that can guide effective communication, business strategies, and political decision-making in the digital age. The article provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals embracing zeroculturality navigate cultural boundaries, offering practical solutions for communicators to engage effectively with this audience. In the business sphere, the research seeks to inform marketers on tailoring strategies to the unique purchasing behaviors of those embodying zeroculturality. Additionally, the author hopes policymakers will leverage these insights to make informed decisions on societal values in the face of evolving cultural norms. Ultimately, the research aims to bridge the gap between academic understanding and practical application, empowering professionals across various sectors to navigate the challenges posed by zeroculturality in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: social media, zeroculturality, multiculturalism, political science, digital communication

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STRESZCZENIE

Zerokulturowość: nowe zjawisko w przestrzeni cyfrowej. Geneza, charakterystyka, konsekwencje.

Badania, które autorka prowadziła przez ostatnie lata w przestrzeni cyfrowej, pozwoliły jej zidentyfikować nowe zjawisko zarysowujące się na pograniczu świata polityki, kultury i komunikacji. „Zerokulturowość” – jak je nazwała – zasada się na przekonaniu, iż granice między kulturami nie tylko coraz częściej spontanicznie zanikają, ale także są bardzo świadomie usuwane. Jednostka, nieidentyfikująca się z emanacjami kultury, ale nadal czująca przywiązanie do określonych wartości, próbuje kształtować swoją tożsamość w taki sposób, aby odpowiadała wymogom czasu i miejsca. Innymi słowy, osoby zerokulturowe mogą odmawiać przyjęcia określonych sposobów postępowania (nośników kultury), ale wciąż podzielać wybrane idee czy wartości, z którymi związane były te wzorce. Choć zjawisko bez wątpienia nie jest powszechne, zasługuje na poważną analizę, szczególnie przez te podmioty, które pragną skutecznie komunikować się z odbiorcami, zarządzać relacjami oraz informacją.

Dotychczasowe czynniki skuteczności dialogu perswazyjnego, zaszczepające się na próbach targetowania na podstawie podstawowych kryteriów demograficznych, psychospołecznych czy argumente wartości, mogą bowiem wykazywać się coraz mniejszą efektywnością. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu dostarczenie praktycznych wskazówek pozwalających na usprawnienie procesów komunikacyjnych, strategii biznesowych oraz mechanizmów decyzyjnych w erze cyfrowej. Tekst wyjaśnia, w jaki sposób osoby manifestujące zerokulturowość przekraczają tradycyjne granice kulturowe oraz jak zjawisko to może wpływać na różnorodne procesy w przestrzeni publicznej. W obszarze biznesowym wiedza ta może się okazać cenna dla marketerów, pomagając im w adaptacji strategii zakupowych do wyzwań wynikających z zerokulturowości. W sferze politycznej decydenci mogą wykorzystać ją z kolei do podejmowania bardziej świadomych decyzji, szczególnie tych dotyczących systemu wartości w kontekście zmieniających się norm kulturowych.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: media społecznościowe, zerokulturowość, wielokulturowość, nauki polityczne, komunikacja cyfrowa

Introduction

In the sociocultural landscape of 1960s Italy, Viola Franca found herself entangled in a distressing narrative when she became the victim of a heinous crime – rape. The aftermath of this traumatic event unraveled against the backdrop of a tight-knit community governed by deeply ingrained

cultural norms and a legal system that reflected the prevailing societal ethos. In the face of this reprehensible act, the community, motivated by a collective commitment to preserving familial honor, engaged in discussions centering on a culturally sanctioned solution: reparatory marriage.¹

Picture 1. An article on the trial of Filippo Melodia and his accomplices published in La Stampa on December 17, 1966.



Source: Historical archive of La Stampa (2023).

This practice, rooted in traditional norms, posited that the assailant could rectify the perceived transgression by marrying the victim. The rationale behind such a proposition was intricately woven into the fabric of societal values that prioritized family reputation and communal standing. Within this framework, the notion of reparatory marriage was considered not only culturally acceptable but, remarkably, a remedial course of action.

1 In 1965, Filippo Melodia, seeking to force the reluctant Franca Viola into a relationship, broke into her home with a group of mafia associates to abduct her. Several days later, the teenager was found in an abandoned building belonging to Filippo's sister. She was exhausted, beaten, and had been subjected to multiple assaults. The perpetrator believed that by raping Franca, he would compel her to marry him, thus absolving him of disgrace. In those times, it was argued that wives could not be raped, so by entering into a marital union, Filippo would supposedly be immediately exonerated from charges. Franca, however, refused, leading to a wave of criticism against her family, including rejection by the Church. As she fought tirelessly for justice, her case garnered attention not only from the media but also from the parliament. Franca Viola became the first woman to defy the system. It was only in 1981 that Italy abolished laws sanctioning honor killings and reparatory marriages. However, it took a bit longer for rape to cease being solely considered a moral offense and become recognized as a crime against the person, a change that occurred in 1996 (Everhart, 2021).

From a contemporary perspective, however, the very idea of reparatory marriage is profoundly shocking and repugnant. Modern sensibilities vehemently reject any notion of coerced matrimony between a victim and perpetrator, recognizing it as an egregious violation of fundamental human rights and a direct contravention of principles espousing justice and personal autonomy. The reprehensibility of such a practice is underscored by the stark incongruity between historical acceptability and the ethical standards that define our current societal landscape.

The historical examination of Viola's situation, juxtaposed against contemporary values, serves as a compelling lens through which to assess the evolution of societal attitudes and legal frameworks. The unequivocal rejection of reparatory marriage in today's context underscores the progress made in dismantling regressive practices that compromise individual agency and perpetuate gender-based violence. Viola's resilience in the face of societal expectations, demanding compliance with a practice now deemed abhorrent, further underscores the imperative of ongoing endeavors to eradicate antiquated customs and foster a legal and social environment aligned with principles of justice, equality, and the protection of individual rights.

Just as Viola Franca's story serves as a poignant emblem of societal evolution, the traditional game of Buzkashi in Middle Asia standing as another compelling example, challenging us to navigate the delicate interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary ethical considerations in the 21st century. In the culturally rich tapestry of Middle Asia, the traditional game of Buzkashi, also known as Kok-Boru in some regions, stands as a symbol of national pride and communal identity. This centuries-old sport, played with fervor in countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and others, has deep historical roots, intertwining with the cultural fabric of the region (Quilty, online). However, as the world progresses into the 21st century, aspects of this traditional game raise ethical concerns that prompt reflection on the intersection between cultural traditions and contemporary values. Buzkashi is a game that involves riders on horseback competing to secure possession of a headless animal carcass, usually a goat or calf. The objective is to carry the carcass across a goal line or into a designated area, and the game is marked by its intense physicality and strategic maneuvers. While the celebration of national heritage through sports is a commendable aspect of cultural preservation, the use of a dead animal's corpse as the focal point of the game poses a moral dilemma (Kulju, 2020).

Picture 2. Traditional Buzkashi game.



Source: J. Rybicki (2016).

It is crucial to recognize that no cultural tradition remains immutable and impervious to questioning, and there always exists a nuanced dialogue between preserving heritage and evolving ethical standards.² While Buzkashi may be deeply ingrained in the cultural identity of these nations, the ethical implications of using a dead animal in a sporting event cannot be disregarded in the context of the 21st century. Moreover, the globalized nature of communication, facilitated by the internet and social media, has contributed to increased awareness and scrutiny of cultural practices. As such, Buzkashi, once confined to the local context, is now subject to international discourse, inviting perspectives that challenge the ethical dimensions of the game.

These two case studies exemplify a broader phenomenon wherein cultural evolution is not only occurring but is imperative. At the heart of this shift lies an acknowledgment that cultural norms are dynamic constructs that must adapt to the evolving needs of time and place.³ Vio-

2 As P. Sarnecki rightfully stated, “national heritage is not only the legacy of achievements that society ... can take pride in, but also those elements that are rightfully condemned, if they can serve as a component of social education” (Sarnecki, 2016, p. 234).

3 Increasingly numerous researchers also observe that the human personality ceases to reflect a monolithic pattern and appears as a flexible hybrid capable of combining values and traditions drawn from various environments. It is believed that these changes are a direct consequence of transculturality – a phenomenon that, as U. Kusio stated, “encompasses not only cultures understood in ethnic and national terms but also so-called urban, alternative, artistic, economic, or media culture. Transculturality takes on various forms, emerging in local arrangements, narrow community circles resulting from amalgamation, as well as in large, global, networked intercivilizational communities. It unfolds at different levels of social organization,

la's experience, while specific to a particular cultural practice, mirrors a broader global phenomenon where individuals, communities, and societies critically scrutinize established norms that may no longer be conducive to the current societal landscape. This dynamic process is particularly pronounced in the age of social media, a potent tool that has facilitated unprecedented connectivity and information dissemination.

Tracing the Shift from Tradition to Zeroculturality

The beforementioned perspective translates into the necessity to examine contemporary social / cultural realities and interpret them in the context of the digital transformation, characterized by Philip Kotler and Hermawan Kartajaya as the “next tech” era (Kotler, Kartajaya, 2021). To understand its impact, let's examine some relevant figures, with a particular focus on the Polish context. According to the “Digital 2023 – Poland” report, in January 2023, 36.68 million people in Poland actively used the Internet, constituting 88.4% of the total population (Digital 2023, online). Kepios' analysis indicates that between 2022 and 2023, the number of users increased by 2.9 million (+8.5%), and the upward trend continues. It is noteworthy that during this period (January 2023), 27.5 million users were registered on social media platforms, representing 75.0% of the total Internet audience in the country, regardless of age (Digital 2023, online). The popularity of these tools is not significantly dependent on gender, with 50.6% of social media users in Poland being women and 49.4% men (Digital 2023, online). Data demonstrate a significant extension of the time that Poles dedicate to using these platforms. It is estimated that individuals aged 16–64 used the Internet for various purposes for 6 hours and 42 minutes daily, including over 2 hours spent on social media. Interest in next-tech solutions is also on the rise, with 1.36 million Polish households reported to have digital smart home solutions in January 2023, signifying a 19.2% increase compared to the previous period (Digital 2023, online).

Analyzing Society 5.0, it is crucial to also observe phenomena and trends that extend significantly beyond the utilitarian and technical dimensions. People, accustomed to personalized solutions, flexibility, and the ability to tailor individual aspects of reality to their consumer needs, are beginning to recognize the need for greater flexibility in the realm of axiology. This entails a heightened demand from other members of society for increased tolerance towards one's individuality, as well as the right

both in the private sphere, at the micro level, and in the community sphere, thus at the macro level” (Kusio, 2022, p. 79).

to freedom and self-determination. Individuals increasingly express reluctance towards societal labeling and categorization, expecting respect and acceptance for their uniqueness. It is noteworthy that individuals seek to satisfy this need not only in the offline world but also in the online sphere.

As we navigate this era of interconnectedness, social media emerges as a catalyst for change, enabling individuals to challenge deeply ingrained norms and advocate for a cultural landscape that respects human rights and individual autonomy. These platforms often function as virtual windows into the lives of others, enabling individuals to witness diverse perspectives and lifestyles. This exposure profoundly challenges ingrained societal and community roles, providing a means to critically evaluate norms inherited from one's upbringing. As individuals engage with a myriad of experiences presented online, they find themselves in a position to question the legitimacy of certain norms, weigh them against broader ethical principles, and determine whether they align with contemporary values. Furthermore, social media facilitates the global exchange of ideas, fostering a collective consciousness that transcends geographical boundaries. As individuals from diverse backgrounds share their stories, struggles, and triumphs, a collective reevaluation of cultural norms gains momentum. This phenomenon is characterized not by a wholesale rejection of tradition but rather by a discerning examination of cultural practices in light of evolving societal expectations.

Decoding Zeroculturality – Definitional Dilemmas

To investigate the emerging phenomenon which I identified at the intersection of multiculturalism and cyberculture, further research was undertaken. The starting point was adopting the thesis that culture is not – and has never been – a static and unchanging phenomenon. It has evolved with its surroundings because people are the sole guarantors of its survival. Throughout history, culture allowed for self-identification, provided a sense of security, and defined belonging to a specific community (Mach, 2011, p. 61). Undeniably, it also bestowed power upon those who could exploit it to unify society around a particular idea. However, it remained alive only as long as it could satisfy the needs of individuals who chose to embrace it. Social realities, global changes, technological and scientific advancements, increased awareness, as well as new expectations and needs of people, inevitably influence cultural phenomena. Therefore, despite our inclination to perceive culture as the sole stable foundation of social life, it must be assumed that it too will change, develop, or fade away, often following unpredictable trajectories.

One of these “unpredictable trajectories,” as postulated based on preliminary observations, may be the desire to abandon cultural patterns and “zero out” cultural carriers in an individual’s life. The thesis suggested that there is an increasingly noticeable attitude characterized by individuals discarding specific carriers of cultural content (*lieux de memoire*), such as behavioral patterns, traditions, customs, or stereotypes, not necessarily negating the values associated with them. In other words, these individuals may reject adopting certain modes of behavior while still sharing the ideas or values connected with those patterns. Since I observed symptoms of this phenomenon on social media, I chose to conduct research using these platforms.

I did so between 2021 and 2023 and, due to delicate nature of the research, I relied on non-participatory observation. Using preliminary analysis of published content, I identified and selected profiles on social media (mainly on Instagram and supplementarily on Facebook) that met specific criteria: my priority was to choose accounts where the authors consistently presented content characterized by simultaneously referencing specific cultural values and questioning conventional carriers of those. The studied group included representatives of various genders, age groups, from both Poland and beyond its borders, engaged in diverse professional activities. The initial stage of the research involved analyzing published content on selected social media profiles. These materials included texts, photos, graphics, videos, as well as interactions with users. The aim of the analysis was to understand how authors presented their values and their relationship with culture.

Through systematic comparison of content and community reactions, I sought to identify consistent trends that could indicate changes in the understanding and shaping of culture. The accumulated data underwent qualitative analysis and were contextualized within the current state of theoretical research. Ultimately, they served as the basis for attempting to define a new phenomenon for which I ultimately proposed the term “zeroculturality” (alternatively, zero-culture). As proposed in my book, I use this term “to describe an attitude manifested by individuals abandoning specific carriers of cultural content (*lieux de memoire*), such as behavioral patterns, traditions, customs, or stereotypes, not necessarily negating the values themselves. In other words, individuals embracing zeroculturality may reject adopting specific modes of behavior while still sharing the ideas or values associated with those patterns” (Grzechynka, 2023, p. 149).

Consequences of Cultural Boundaries Dissolving

What I observed is the fact that the renunciation of a particular element of heritage in its material form does not imply a simultaneous renunciation of virtues that constitute the core of this heritage. Thus, a specific tradition, a facet of customs, or a way of understanding social roles may vanish, but this does not lead to the elimination of fundamental ideas such as love, respect, tolerance, or human rights. As I suggested in my book, quoting religious leaders, recognizing this distinction an “agnostic would not feel discomfort kneeling before a statue of Christ or Buddha; they would understand that they are not bowing to a bronze figure but to the ideas it represents” (Grzechynka, 2023, pp. 148–149). Similarly, a religious person would not defend symbols or ideas at the expense of another human being’s well-being because they would perceive them as mere emanations of the fundamental value: love and respect for another human being. My observations indicate that the phenomenon of rejecting cultural patterns pertains specifically to cultural “containers,” not “contents.” Individuals solely rebel against outdated carriers of cultural content, the meaning and significance of which have long been distorted.

It seems that this phenomenon often results from a critical examination of culture and an approach to it from the standpoint of individualism, freedom, and self-realization. The term employed – zeroculturality – thus does not signify a resignation from culture but rather a metaphorical “zeroing out” of its external emanations that no longer serve the individual and seem to conflict with their own sense of identity. The idea, therefore, appears to be as follows: I preserve values, only adjusting the form of their cultural expression to align with the evolution of time and place. I have observed that, irrespective of the reluctance or hostility with which these phenomena may be received by proponents of rooted traditions, zeroculturality is not synonymous with anarchy, and it should not be perceived as an enemy of contemporary society.

Zeroculturality does not mean the rejection of social values and norms but rather a conscious and critical appeal to them. This understanding of culture implies that several areas can be identified, within which an individual can decide to effect change, including: gender role determinants in society, determinants related to religion and spirituality, determinants related to lifestyle, determinants related to the purpose of life and success, determinants related to interpersonal relationships, and determinants related to work and career. One can hypothesize that people can appeal to zeroculturality in any area of social life where they wish to reject traditional patterns and ways of behaving, while simultaneously preserving the values and ideas represented by them.

The ramifications of zeroculturality are severe and extend beyond individual consequences, reaching into the very fabric of communication strategies employed in business and politics. One of the fundamental challenges arising from this phenomenon is the erosion of traditional cultural arguments and the reevaluation of values considered universal. In a landscape where individuals embrace zeroculturality, attempting to target them based on conventional cultural or values-oriented parameters proves increasingly ineffective. Zeroculturality disrupts the conventional understanding of audience segmentation, as individuals may reject the traditional markers that were once reliable indicators for tailoring communication strategies. This shift challenges established methods of persuasion, demanding a reevaluation of how messages are crafted and conveyed to resonate with an audience that defies conventional categorization.

Moreover, the rejection of specific cultural behaviors while retaining underlying values introduces a layer of complexity to the communication process itself. Understanding and navigating this nuanced landscape become imperative for entities aiming to effectively manage relationships, and disseminate information. The question arises: how can businesses and political entities guide an audience embodying zeroculturality through the communication process? What should be the foundation of a communication strategy that acknowledges and respects individual values while navigating the absence of traditional cultural norms?

Social media, which plays a pivotal role in influencing and reflecting zeroculturality, becomes both a challenge and an opportunity. The interconnectedness facilitated by social media allows individuals to witness diverse perspectives and lifestyles, further contributing to the erosion of conventional cultural norms. As a result, crafting communication strategies that resonate with a diverse and dynamically evolving audience, becomes an intricate task. The challenge is not only to adapt but also to anticipate the shifting sands of cultural identification and values within this digital realm.

Embracing the Future – Adapting to Zeroculturality

Zeroculturality, by its very nature, challenges the conventional approach to targeting individuals as a cohesive group. Unlike traditional cultural affiliations, zeroculturality does not constitute a new group identity with shared norms and behaviors. Instead, it represents a unique, individualistic expression of values, where individuals selectively reject cultural behaviors while retaining the underlying values associated with them. In the realm of communication campaigns, this paradigm shift necessitates a departure from relying on universal standards to target audiences effectively.

Communication strategies can no longer lean on broad strokes that assume shared cultural norms or behaviors within a demographic or psychosocial group. Instead, efforts should focus on identifying and understanding individuals on a deeper, more personal level. The key lies in recognizing and respecting the diversity of values embraced by individuals embodying zeroculturality. This demands a departure from traditional segmentation models and a move towards a more nuanced understanding of personal values, aspirations, and identities. As an example, I suggest we examine the traditional concept of marriage, which may be subject to questioning by individuals with zerocultural tendencies. Instead of building communication campaigns around the institution of marriage, a more effective approach might involve emphasizing broader values such as family, home, love, and support. By prioritizing the core values over the specific carriers of those values, communication can resonate more authentically with individuals who reject certain cultural norms / standards while still embracing the underlying principles.

Let's consider a political campaign seeking to connect with a diverse audience characterized by zerocultural tendencies. Instead of relying on conventional demographic segmentation, the campaign adopts a values-centric approach. The focus shifts from appealing to broad cultural affiliations to understanding and addressing the core values that matter to individuals. For example, rather than crafting messages centered around traditional societal structures or cultural norms that may be rejected by zeroculturals, the campaign emphasizes fundamental values such as justice, equality, and individual autonomy. By aligning with these universal principles, the campaign transcends cultural divides and resonates with a broader audience. Moreover, the campaign may leverage social media platforms to amplify these messages. Social media, being a powerful tool in the age of zeroculturality, provides a space for diverse voices and perspectives. By actively engaging with online communities and fostering dialogue, the campaign can create a more inclusive and participatory environment, acknowledging the individualistic nature of zerocultural expressions.

In the realm of business, a company that recognizes the influence of zeroculturality may reconsider its marketing strategies. Instead of relying solely on demographic data, the company seeks to understand the underlying values of its target audience. For instance, if a product traditionally associated with specific cultural norms faces resistance from zerocultural individuals, the company might pivot its messaging. Rather than focusing on the cultural context, the marketing campaign could highlight the intrinsic values the product embodies. If the product promotes sustainability, individual expression, or empowerment, the marketing message

can center around these values rather than cultural connotations. This approach allows the company to connect with a broader audience that shares these core values, irrespective of cultural affiliations.

In both political and business contexts, the key to success lies in authenticity and adaptability. Authenticity builds trust, and by acknowledging the diversity of values within zeroculturality, entities can establish genuine connections. Additionally, adaptability is crucial in refining strategies based on ongoing feedback and evolving societal dynamics.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of effective communication strategies, it is essential to recognize the coexistence of both zeroculturality and traditional cultural segmentation within the broader audience landscape. While zerocultural individuals represent a significant and impactful segment, it is crucial to acknowledge that traditional segmentation groups still constitute a substantial majority of the audience. Building upon this acknowledgment, successful communication strategies must adopt a balanced approach that appeals to both zerocultural individuals and those adhering to traditional cultural norms. This necessitates the development of more nuanced and sophisticated strategies that can navigate the complexities of this diverse audience landscape. On one hand, recognizing the influence of zeroculturality requires communication that transcends cultural divides and resonates with individuals who reject traditional norms. On the other hand, acknowledging the persistence of traditional segmentation groups means crafting messages that align with their cultural values and expectations.

I would like to strongly emphasize, that while traditional cultural norms continue to wield significant influence, the advent of zeroculturality necessitates a paradigm shift in our approach. This phenomenon, amplified by the growing influence of social media and AI, demands ongoing analysis and understanding. Social media, with its unprecedented reach, and AI, with its ability to personalize content, contribute to the amplification of zerocultural voices. Therefore, as we craft communication strategies, it is not only imperative to recognize the enduring impact of traditional cultures but also to adapt to the evolving dynamics of zeroculturality. This dual awareness will enable business and political entities to develop communication strategies that resonate authentically with the diverse fabric of the interconnected world, acknowledging the traditional while embracing the transformative.

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