

## INTRODUCTION

As new global markets emerge, and existing markets become increasingly segmented along ethnic or subcultural lines, the need to market effectively to consumers who have different cultural values has never been more important. Thus, it is no surprise that in the last several years, culture has rapidly emerged as a central focus of research in consumer behavior. This development followed on the heels of extensive social psychological research on culture, which provided a strong theoretical foundation for the consumer-behavior studies that followed.

*What is culture?* Culture consists of shared knowledge that provides the standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, feeling, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historical period, and a geographic location. As a psychological construct, culture can be studied in multiple ways – across nations, across ethnic groups within nations, across individuals within nations (focusing on cultural orientation), and across situations through the priming of cultural values. The dimensions of individualism versus collectivism, independence versus interdependence, and analysis versus holism have in recent years received significant research attention. This attention has resulted in a great number of studies revealing both antecedents and consequences of the cultural differences between East Asian and North American cultures. As discussed subsequently, regardless of how culture is studied, cultural distinctions have important implications for advertising content, persuasiveness of appeals, consumer motivation, and consumer judgment processes.

*Article scope and overview* This article reviews major cultural constructs and theoretical implications of cultural differences in consumer information processing, judgments, and choices. Our review is necessarily selective, focusing on findings specific to the consumer domain rather than

providing a general review of cultural differences (for an excellent general review, see Wyer, Chiu, and Hong, 2009). It should also be noted that because of space limitations, this article does not cover some major topics in cross-cultural consumer behaviors such as self-regulation and risk-taking, as well as methodological issues such as response styles and biases (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009; Shavitt, Torelli, and Wong, 2009).

In this article, the cultural constructs of individualism/collectivism and the independent/interdependent self-construals associated with them are given special attention because extensive research has demonstrated the implications of these distinctions for processes and outcomes relevant to consumer behavior. The most recent refinements to these constructs are briefly reviewed in an attempt to identify additional cultural variables likely to enhance the understanding of cross-cultural consumer behavior. We also review cultural differences in thinking styles as a major emerging cultural distinction and focus on their implications for consumer-behavior research. Finally, we close with a review of cross-cultural differences in advertising content and the persuasiveness of appeals.

## KEY CONSTRUCTS AND DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

*Individualism versus collectivism.* The constructs of *individualism* and *collectivism* represent the most broadly used dimensions of cultural variability for cross-cultural comparison. In individualistic cultures, people value independence from others and subordinate the goals of their in-groups to their own personal goals. In collectivistic cultures, in contrast, individuals value interdependent relationships to others and subordinate their personal goals to those of their in-groups (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). The key distinction involves the extent to which one defines the self in relation to others. In individualistic cultural contexts, people tend to have an independent self-construal whereby the self is defined as autonomous and unique. In collectivistic cultural contexts, by contrast, people tend to have an interdependent self-construal whereby

## 2 cross-cultural psychology of consumer behavior

the self is seen as inextricably and fundamentally embedded within a larger social network of roles and relationships (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

National cultures that celebrate the values of independence, such as the United States, Canada, Germany, and Denmark, are typically categorized as individualistic societies in which an independent self-construal is common. In contrast, cultures that nurture the values of fulfilling one's obligations over one's own personal wishes, including most East Asian and Latin American countries, are categorized as collectivistic societies in which an interdependent self-construal is common (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995).

A large body of research in psychology has demonstrated the many implications of individualism/collectivism and independent/interdependent self-construals for social perception and social behavior (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). These findings indicate consistently that individualists and people with an independent self-construal are oriented toward products and experiences that promote achievement and autonomy, offer personal benefits, and enable expression of one's distinctive qualities. On the other hand, collectivists and people with an interdependent self-construal are oriented toward products and experiences that allow one to avoid negative outcomes, maintain harmony and strong social connections with others, and dutifully fulfill social roles.

Although a given self-construal can be more chronically accessible in a particular culture, cultures generally provide sufficient experiences with independent and interdependent views of the self to allow either type of self-construal to be primed (Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier, 2002; Oyserman and Lee, 2007). Numerous studies have established that these activated self-views impact judgments in ways that parallel cross-national differences (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009), for instance, by activating distinct self goals (Lalwani and Shavitt, 2009). People in general, and especially bicultural people, can readily switch back and forth between independent and interdependent cultural frames in response to their contexts. For instance, Lau-Gesk (2003) found that independent (interdependent) self-construals were temporarily activated when bicultural

consumers were exposed to individually focused (interpersonally focused) appeals.

In sum, the distinctions between individualistic and collectivistic societies, and independent and interdependent self-construals, are crucial to the understanding of cross-cultural differences in consumer behavior. The studies to be reviewed here offer extensive evidence that these cultural classifications have fundamental implications for consumption-related outcomes.

*Refined individualism versus collectivism.* The conceptualizations of individualism and collectivism, and independence/interdependence, have historically been broad and multidimensional, summarizing a host of differences in focus of attention, self-definitions, motivations, emotional connections to in-groups, as well as belief systems and behavioral patterns (Hofstede, 1980; Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier, 2002). In addition, recent studies have proposed useful refinements to these broader cultural categories (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009). These studies suggest that the nature and meaning of individualism and collectivism varies across gender and ethnic lines, as well as across family groupings and institutions. Although the breadth of the individualism-collectivism constructs lends integrative strengths, research indicates that further refinements of these categories can enhance the prediction of consumer behavior.

**The horizontal/vertical distinction.** With in the individualism-collectivism framework, Triandis *et al.* (Triandis, 1995; Triandis and Gelfand, 1998) have recently introduced a further distinction between societies that are *horizontal* (valuing equality) and those that are *vertical* (emphasizing hierarchy), and a scale to measure these orientations at the individual level. The horizontal/vertical distinction emerges from the observation that American or British individualism differs from, say, Norwegian or Danish individualism in much the same way that Japanese or Korean collectivism differs from the collectivism of the Israeli kibbutz. Specifically, in vertical individualist (VI) societies (e.g., United States and Great Britain), people strive to become distinguished and acquire status via competition (Shavitt, Torelli and Wong,

2009); whereas in horizontal individualist (HI) cultural contexts (e.g., Sweden and Norway), people value uniqueness but are not especially interested in becoming distinguished and achieving high status (Nelson and Shavitt, 2002). In contrast, in vertical collectivistic (VC) societies (e.g., Korea and Japan), people emphasize the subordination of their goals to those of their in-groups, submit to the will of authority, and support competitions between their in-groups and out-groups. Finally, in horizontal collectivist (HC) cultural contexts (e.g., exemplified historically by the Israeli Kibbutz), people see themselves as similar to others, and emphasize shared goals and sociability, but instead of submitting to authority, their view of power focuses on benevolence and helping others (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009).

However, the modal comparisons in consumer research are between the United States (VI) and any of a number of Pacific Rim countries (VC). This means that much of what is known about consumer behavior in individualistic and collectivistic societies reflects vertical forms of these syndromes and may not generalize, for example, comparisons between Sweden (HI) and Israel (HC) or other sets of horizontal cultures. As an example, conformity in product choice, as examined by Kim and Markus (1999), may be a tendency specific to VC cultures, in which deference to authority and to in-group wishes is stressed. Much lower levels of conformity may be observed in HC cultures, which emphasize sociability but not deference (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998). Thus, differences in consumers' conformity between Korea (VC) and the United States (VI) may not characterize broad individualism-collectivism differences, because levels of product conformity in HC contexts might not exceed those in HI contexts.

Indeed, several recent studies of this horizontal/vertical cultural distinction have provided evidence for its value as a predictor of new consumer psychology phenomena and as a basis for refining the understanding of known phenomena (Shavitt *et al.*, 2006). For instance, Lalwani, Shavitt, and Johnson (2006) showed that differences in the self-presentational responses observed for individualists and collectivists are mediated at the individual level

by the horizontal but not the vertical versions of these cultural orientations. This suggests that culturally linked self-presentational efforts reflect distinct goals of being seen as self-reliant and capable (valued in HI contexts) versus sociable and benevolent (valued in HC contexts).

Further evidence for the value of the horizontal-vertical distinction comes from a study of country-of-origin effects. Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000) demonstrated that the tendency to favor products from one's own country over foreign products emerged more strongly in Japan (a VC culture) than in the United States (a VI culture). Mediation analyses using individual consumers' self-rated cultural values further indicated that only the vertical aspect of individualism and collectivism accounted for the country-of-origin effects in Japan. In other words, the collectivistic tendency to favor one's own country's products appeared to be driven by cultural values that stress hierarchy, competition, and deference to in-group wishes, not by values that stress interdependence more generally.

In line with this, as noted earlier, research suggests that mental representations of power in terms of status and competition versus benevolence differ reliably between vertical and horizontal cultural backgrounds and orientations. These differences impact consumer information processing and the interpretation of power-related stimuli (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009). Finally, content analyses of magazine advertisements in several countries suggested that status-oriented themes of hierarchy, luxury, prestige, and distinction were generally more prevalent in societies presumed to have vertical cultural profiles (e.g., Korea, Russia) than a horizontal cultural profile (Denmark) (Shavitt *et al.*, 2006).

*Culture and thinking styles.* East Asian and North American cultural differences have been well documented in social psychological research, especially in terms of the differences in individualistic-collectivistic values and independent-interdependent self-systems (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Many of these cross-cultural studies of consumer behavior have provided evidence that advertising (such

#### 4 cross-cultural psychology of consumer behavior

as magazine ads, Internet advertising, and TV commercials) from Western cultures is in general more individualistic and less collectivistic than advertising from Asian cultures (Morling and Lamoreaux, 2008), and that consumers from Western cultures are more likely to be persuaded by individualistic ads and those from East Asian cultures are more likely to be persuaded by collectivistic ads (Han and Shavitt, 1994). However, relatively little research has been done on cross-cultural differences in consumers' thinking orientations. The following section provides a general review of cultural differences in thinking styles in addition to the findings of relevant studies of consumer behavior and advertising effects.

*Analytic versus holistic thinking.* Broadly speaking, Westerners tend to adopt an analytic thinking style that emphasizes the independence of individual objects, whereas East Asians tend to adopt a holistic view emphasizing that the world is composed of interrelated elements (Nisbett *et al.*, 2001). The analytic style of Westerners and the holistic style of East Asians have been demonstrated in various cognitive domains such as attention, causal reasoning, perception of change, tolerance of contradiction, and categorization.

The analytic style of attention is field independent (mainly oriented toward an object itself), whereas holistic attention is field dependent (focused on the relationship between objects and/or the field in which they are embedded) (Nisbett *et al.*, 2001). This difference in the orientation of attention is also seen in the way East Asians and Westerners perceive and explain social events. East Asians tend to assume that each element in the world is somehow intertwined, and thus an event or object can be understood only in the context of the whole set of relevant factors. By contrast, Westerners tend to explain a certain event in terms of direct causal links, thereby considering fewer reasons than East Asians, who tend to consider a broader set of reasons, regardless of their relevance to the event (Choi *et al.*, 2003).

Furthermore, in explaining causality of a social event, analytic thinkers tend to focus on the internal dispositions of an actor, whereas holistic thinkers tend to consider a broader set of

reasons (including both dispositional and contextual information) and are therefore less likely to attribute an outcome to an actor's internal characteristics (Nisbett *et al.*, 2001). This has implications for brand judgments, as well. Monga and John (2007) found that negative publicity influences analytic (vs. holistic) thinkers more heavily, and thus changes their beliefs about a brand to a greater degree because analytic thinkers are less likely to consider contextual information, and thus are more likely to attribute negative product information to the brand.

From the analytic perspective, objects exist independently, and thus the essence of the objects is stable over time. This assumption promotes a linear perception of change in which no drastic deviation is expected in the pattern of stability or change of a phenomenon (Nisbett, 2003). By contrast, the holistic view of the world assumes that objects are interrelated, and therefore it is less likely that a phenomenon will remain stable over time. This perspective results in a cyclic perception in which people tend to predict fluctuating trends for an event. For example, in predicting future stock-market trends and making investment decisions, Canadians are more likely to make judgments based on recent trends than are Chinese people; thus, when compared to the Chinese, Canadians are more willing to buy stocks when they are in an increasing trend and less willing to buy when stock prices are decreasing (Ji, Zhang, and Guo, 2008).

The cyclic perception of change and expectation of instability prevalent among East Asians renders a Yin-Yang belief that a characteristic of an object can potentially transform into its opposite. Consequently, East Asians tend to hold a dialectical perception in which apparently opposing concepts can simultaneously be true and can peacefully coexist (Nisbett *et al.*, 2001). When confronted with opposing propositions, East Asians tend to resolve contradictions by choosing a middle ground, whereas Westerners tend to rely on formal logic in resolving contradictions by choosing one of the opposing propositions. For example, US consumers tend to resolve incongruities with an attenuation strategy in which one piece of information is favored over another inconsistent piece of information. In contrast, Hong Kong Chinese consumers tend

to follow an additive strategy in which both pieces of information are combined to influence judgments (Aaker and Sengupta, 2000).

East Asians and Westerners also perceive conflicting emotions in different ways. For example, Bagozzi, Wong, and Yi (1999) showed that Chinese tend to hold a dialectical perception that pleasant and unpleasant emotions can be experienced at the same time. Thus, their frequency judgment for pleasant emotions is positively correlated with their frequency judgment for unpleasant emotions. By contrast, this study found that for Americans the perceived frequency of pleasant emotions is inversely correlated with the perceived frequency of unpleasant emotions. Schimmack, Oishi, and Diener (2002) analyzed 38 nationalities and demonstrated that this cultural difference results from dialectical thinking, not from a difference in individualistic-collectivistic values. Moreover, Williams and Aaker (2002) demonstrated that opposing emotions (e.g., both happiness and sadness) in persuasion appeals elicit more positive attitudes among Asian Americans than among European Americans.

Westerners pay more attention to individual objects and attribute causality to them, whereas East Asians focus more on the field. Westerners are more accustomed to formulating rules that govern internal properties of objects and tend to categorize things by applying those rules. In contrast, East Asians organize objects on the basis of their relationship to other objects or to the field (Nisbett, 2003), and therefore they tend to categorize objects according to their overall similarities. Thus, when presented with pictures of a panda, a monkey, and a banana, East Asians tend to categorize the monkey and banana together based on the relationship between the two, whereas Westerners tend to categorize the panda and monkey into one group based on the traits that characterize them (Ji, Zhang, and Nisbett, 2004).

Cultural differences in the way people categorize objects (rule/trait-based vs. similarity/relationship-based) also appear in the way they organize and store brand information. For example, Ng and Houston (2006) showed that Americans are less likely to retrieve brand exemplars (i.e., specific products or subcategories) than brand beliefs (i.e., general

descriptive or evaluative thoughts), whereas the reverse was the case for Singaporeans. These results emerged from an analytic tendency to focus on "global beliefs" abstracted from prior product experiences and a holistic tendency to focus on contextual and incidental details about the product. Similarly, Monga and John (2008) found that, compared to Americans, Indians tend to perceive a higher degree of fit between a parent brand (e.g., Kodak) and its brand extension (e.g., Kodak filing cabinet, Kodak greeting cards), and to evaluate the brand extension more positively. This result reflects Indians' holistic tendency to base their judgments more heavily on the relationships between brand extensions and parent brands than do their American counterparts.

A variety of methods and techniques have been developed to measure cultural differences in thinking styles (Choi, Koo, and Choi, 2007; Ji, Zhang, and Nisbett, 2004; Monga and John, 2007), including responses to cognitive tasks, scenarios and questions, physiological measures, a scale, and analyses of various cultural products. Furthermore, priming an independent versus interdependent view of self has also been found to promote analytic and holistic modes of thinking, respectively. For example, people primed with an independent self-view were more likely to focus on a focal object and thus were better at finding an embedded figure by separating the figure from its background than were those primed with an interdependent self-view (see Oyserman and Lee, 2007, for a review).

*Additional dimensions.* Numerous other cultural distinctions deserve further attention in consumer research. A focus upon these relatively under-researched constructs as antecedents may allow for broadening the range of cultural differences beyond those currently investigated. For instance, Schwartz's (1992) circumplex structure of values, which is highly robust cross-nationally, parallels the HI, VI, HC, VC typology and offers a particularly detailed and comprehensive basis for classification. In his large-scale studies of work values, Hofstede (1980) derived three other dimensions of cultural variation in addition to individualism: *power distance* (acceptance of power inequality in



## 6 cross-cultural psychology of consumer behavior

organizations, a construct conceptually relevant to the vertical/horizontal distinction), *uncertainty avoidance* (the degree of tolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty about the future), and *masculinity/femininity* (preference for achievement and assertiveness versus modesty and nurturing relationships). Indeed, individualism was the second dimension identified by Hofstede (1980), whereas power distance emerged as the first dimension. A few marketing-oriented studies have employed Hofstede's nation-level classifications (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009), but more potential remains for identifying consequences for consumer judgments and behaviors. For instance, uncertainty avoidance has been conceptualized as a syndrome related to anxiety, rule orientation, need for security, and deference to experts (Hofstede, 1980). As such, one might speculate that the level of uncertainty avoidance in a culture will predict the tendency for advertisements to use fear appeals or appeals to safety and security, and the tendency for advertisements to employ expert spokespersons. Differences along this cultural dimension may also predict patterns in the diffusion of product innovations, particularly innovations whose purchase entails a degree of risk.

### CULTURE AND PERSUASIVE APPEALS

Most research on cultural influences on judgment and persuasion has examined the implications of individualism/collectivism or independent/interdependent self-construals. In general, the findings suggest that the prevalence or the persuasiveness of a given type of appeal matches the cultural value orientation of the society (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009). For instance, appeals to individuality, personal benefits, and achievement are usually more prevalent and persuasive in individualistic compared to collectivistic cultures, whereas appeals to group benefits, harmony, and conformity are usually more prevalent and persuasive in collectivistic compared to individualistic cultures. Such evidence for "cultural matching" in the nature of appeals has been followed by studies examining the distinct psychological processes driving persuasion across cultures. These studies suggest that culture can affect how people process and interpret product-related

information. It can determine the type of information that is weighed more heavily for making judgments (e.g., product attributes vs other consumers' opinions). However, brand and product characteristics can constrain the role of cultural variables in information processing and persuasion, with some brands and products serving as stronger carriers of cultural values (Shavitt, Torelli and Wong, 2009).

*Cultural differences in the content of message appeals.* Cross-cultural content analyses of advertisements can yield valuable evidence about distinctions in cultural values. For instance, American advertisers and consumer researchers often assume that consumer learning about the brand precedes other marketing effects, such as liking and buying the brand. Thus, advertisements that attempt to teach the consumer about the brand are typical in the United States, although other types of advertisements are also used.

In contrast, as Miracle (1987) suggested, the typical goal of advertisements in Japan appears very different. There, advertisements tend to focus on "making friends" with the audience and showing that the company understands their feelings. The assumption is that consumers will buy once they feel familiar with and have a sense of trust in the company. Because Japan, Korea, and other Pacific Rim countries are collectivist cultures that tend toward implicit and indirect communication practices (Triandis, 1995), Miracle suggested that the mood and tone of commercials in these countries will be particularly important in establishing good feelings about the advertiser. Several studies have supported these notions, showing that advertisements in Japan and Korea, compared to those in the United States, rely more on symbolism, mood, and aesthetics and less on direct approaches such as brand comparisons (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009). The ads may be equally informative about the brand across cultures. It is the type of appeal that will vary.

For instance, a content analysis of magazine advertisements revealed that in Korea, compared to the United States, advertisements are more focused on family well-being, interdependence, group goals, and harmony, whereas they are

less focused on self-improvement, ambition, personal goals, independence, and individuality (Han and Shavitt, 1994). However, as one might expect, the nature of the advertised product moderated these effects. Cultural differences emerged strongly only for products that tend to be purchased and used along with other persons (e.g., groceries, cars). Products that do not tend to be shared (e.g., health and beauty aids, clothing) are promoted more in terms of personal, individualistic benefits in both countries.

Paralleling the overall cross-national differences, a content analysis by Kim and Markus (1999) indicated that Korean advertisements, compared to US advertisements, were characterized by more conformity themes (e.g., respect for collective values and beliefs) and fewer uniqueness themes (e.g., rebelling against collective values and beliefs). Website content in Eastern and Western countries also appears to differ in the emphasis on individual versus collective activities (Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2009).

Finally, it is important to note that, in countries experiencing rapid economic growth, advertising content does not necessarily reflect existing cultural values, instead promoting new, aspirational values such as individuality and modernity. For instance, in China, in recent years, westernized ad appeals are increasingly common. Appeals to youth/modernity, individuality/independence, and technology are especially salient in Chinese advertisements that target the younger generation (Zhang and Shavitt, 2003). Similarly, during a period of rapid transition in South Korea's economy (1968–1998), content analysis of advertisements revealed substantial shifts toward individualistic, modernity-oriented appeals (Han and Shavitt, 2005).

#### *Cultural differences in judgment and persuasion.*

Research suggests that the persuasiveness of appeals may mirror the cultural differences in their prevalence. An experiment by Han and Shavitt (1994) showed that appeals to individualistic values (e.g., “Solo cleans with a softness that you will love”) were more persuasive in the United States and appeals to collectivistic values (e.g., “Solo cleans with a softness that your family will love”) were more persuasive in Korea.

Again, however, this effect was much more evident for products that are shared (laundry detergent, clothes iron) than for those that are not (chewing gum, running shoes).

Zhang and Gelb (1996) found a similar pattern in the persuasiveness of individualistic versus collectivistic appeals in an experiment conducted in the United States and China. Moreover, this effect appeared to be moderated by whether the advertised product is socially visible (camera) versus privately used (toothbrush). Finally, Wang and Mowen (1997) showed in a US sample that individual differences in separateness/connectedness self-schema (i.e., the degree to which one views the self as independent of or interconnected with important others) predicts attitudes toward individualistic versus collectivistic ad appeals for a credit card. Thus, cultural orientation and national culture have implications for the effectiveness of appeals. However, such cultural differences would only be anticipated for those products or uses that are relevant to both personal and group goals.

Cultural differences in persuasion are also revealed in the diagnosticity of certain types of information. For instance, Aaker and Maheswaran (1997) showed that consensus information regarding other consumers' opinions is not treated as a heuristic cue by Hong Kong Chinese (as it is in the United States) but is instead perceived and processed as diagnostic information. Thus, collectivists resolve incongruity in favor of consensus information, not brand attributes. This would be expected in a culture that stresses conformity and responsiveness to others' views. On the other hand, cues whose (low) diagnosticity is not expected to vary cross-culturally (e.g., number of attributes presented) elicit similar heuristic processing in the United States and Hong Kong.

Finally, because cognitive associations with power vary with horizontal and vertical cultural orientations and with ethnicity, as noted earlier, Torelli *et al.*, found differences in the interpretive processes and mindsets triggered when power is salient. Specifically, people whose cultural orientation predisposes a status-oriented view of power activate cognitive processes that facilitate defending their power, such as reasserting control by confirming

## 8 cross-cultural psychology of consumer behavior

prior stereotypes about a brand. In contrast, people whose cultural orientation predisposes a benevolence-oriented view of power activate cognitive processes that facilitate helping others, such as by forming accurate, careful impressions of brands (Shavitt, Torelli and Wong, 2009).

### CONCLUSIONS

As marketing efforts are increasingly globalized, understanding cross-cultural consumer behavior has become a key focus of consumer research. In recent years, research in consumer behavior has addressed a broadening set of cross-cultural issues and dimensions. Research has provided an enhanced understanding of the relations between culture and self-construal, motivation, thinking style, and consumer persuasion. Research has also begun to address the psychological mechanisms underlying cross-cultural differences in consumer judgments, and the products and contexts for which these differences are most likely to be observed. Understanding cultural differences has become crucial for effective marketing and advertising. In future research, it will be important to further distinguish cultural similarities and differences in consumer judgments, identify within-culture or subgroup differences that parallel between-culture differences, and explore their rich implications in consumer behavior.

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