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The relation between collectivism, locus of control, and social influence: A seven-countries cross cultural comparison

Abstract:

The paper reports the results of a seven-nation study of the relationship between collectivism, locus of control and social influence in the decision making endeavors, between and within countries. Hypotheses were investigated that revolve around the notion that the more collectivist the person's orientation, the more external one has in their locus on control, therefore, the more susceptible the person will be to social influence in the purchase decision. The findings provide either whole or partial support for the hypotheses. In general, high collectivism results in high/external locus of control, thus high levels of social influence, especially across nations. There are exceptions, however, which highlight the need to incorporate other factors into understanding the role that cultural orientation plays in purchasing decisions.

Introduction:

In an increasingly interdependent world where barriers to trade and to international exchange constantly diminish, cultural differences remain the single most enduring feature that has to be accounted for as one transfer merchandize to and from various countries. Regardless of the destinations, one of the principal aims in international marketing is to identify, categorize, and position the products or services to best suit target customers-- globally and/or locally. Keeping in mind that the cultural variable is very complex, and the way in which it influences behavior is rather difficult to analyze.

Thus the topic that is highly of research interest in recent years concerns various factors that may effect purchasing decisions. Typical buying decisions are subject to influences from a variety of sources: biological, personal, commercial, public and personal reasons. The relative impact of these sources will vary based on

several factors, some personal to the consumer, others related to the product/service and the nature of buying situation. Marketing efforts, therefore, should also focus on understanding the nature and impact of these influences since they can affect virtually all aspects of the marketing mix.

The study reported here examines the relation between collectivism, locus of control, and social influence in consumer purchasing decisions across seven countries: Australia, USA, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, India, and China. The six main hypotheses developed relate to: (1) cultural difference in orientation to collectivism, (2) locus of control, and (3) social influence in purchasing decision; (4 & 5) the differences in the level of external/internal locus of control to characterize the seven countries; and (6) differences that exist in the level of social influence in the buying decision of the people across these countries.

Theoretical Framework

Collectivism/Individualism. Collectivism and individualism refer to concepts of the self and others (as assumptions located within persons) as well as various interactions between people. Collectivism in international business and marketing literature is often associated with the seminal works of Hofstede (1983, 1984, 1991), whose classic study provided insights on fundamental cultural differences that serve to differentiate the national cultures of the world. In Hofstede's work, individualism/collectivism is one of four primary distinguishing cultural constructs, the others being power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity (to which was later added the dimension of Confucianism). Although Hofstede developed these concepts

in relation to organizational issues and through collection of data at the corporate level, they are largely transferable to the society as a whole.

There also exists a considerable literature on collectivism/individualism in the social sciences that delves deeply into the construct. This literature will be reviewed selectively below, since it provides the primary bases from which hypotheses are developed to link collectivism and other social constructs. It will be followed by a discussion of the marketing related literature that suggests a relationship between collectivism, locus of control, and social influence in marketing-related situations.

Locus of Control (LOC). The first basic issue in relation to self-reliance versus dependence is whether people consider they have an external or an internal locus of control. This particular social construct was initially developed by Rotter in 1966. He theorized the concept of “internal or external reinforcement control,” in which external control exists when a reinforcement is perceived as following some action of one’s own but not being entirely contingent upon one’s action. It is typically perceived as the result of luck, chance, fate, as under the control of powerful others, or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding that individual. Conversely, internal control reflects the perception that the event is contingent upon one’s own behavior or one’s relatively permanent characteristics. Therefore, the externals and internals hold different beliefs about the extent to which their actions can affect the outcomes in their lives.

As a consequence of the findings mentioned, LOC has been the subject of considerable social science research recently. Individuals with an external LOC feel that they lack control over what happens to them and they actively look for external

controls in their environment that are congruent with their feelings. Burns (1984) suggested that LOC is associated with the general attitude that one has toward oneself, one's behavior and one's capacity to influence events. Social science research has also reinforced these general definitions of internals and externals across many domains (Spector 1986; Strickland 1989; Parker 1989; Lefcourt 1991; Kren 1992 and Marks 1998). In conclusion, those who are identified as external LOC will be more likely to see the events in life as a consequence of their own luck or chance, whereas the internals see the world as a consequence of their own behavior.

Little specific LOC cross-cultural research has been conducted. Triandis (1984) noted that LOC relates to the extent to which a cultural group believes that it is superior to nature or is subjugated to nature. When examining cultural differences in causal reasoning, members of independent cultures judge the individual to be the responsible agent of action, while members of interdependent cultures judge situation or social groups to be the directors of action (Holland 1986 and Ross 1977). Individuals with an independent self tend to recognize their surroundings in regard to their components (Peng 1999), focus on his/her dispositions to the exclusion of the other components in an environment (Morris 1994 and Shweder 1984), and attribute power to the collective (Menon 1999). In short, men and women in interdependent cultures perceive group collectives as the determinants of their behavior, whereas men and women in independent cultures perceive individuals as causal agents of their behavior.

Social Influences. As cultural variables reflecting the values of people across cultures, individualism and collectivism can undoubtedly be identified as value

orientations with respect to a person's or group's relationship to others. According to Triandis et al. (1990) and Schwartz (1994), the values of collectivists include security, good social and personalized relationships, and in-group harmony. Collectivism, therefore, emphasizes the goals of the group over personal goals, stresses conformity and in-group harmony, and defines the self in relation to the group (Triandis 1995). Individualism, on the contrary, can be broadly characterized as the tendency to regard the individual over the group and give priority to personal goals over group goals (Triandis 1989). From this analysis, social influence in terms of group conformity, group harmony, and subjective norms is often depicted as an important determinant of intention and/or behavior.

According to the Fishbein's behavioral intentions model (1969 and 1975), a person forms intentions to behave or not behave in a certain way, and these intentions are based on the person's attitude toward the behavior as well as his or her perception of the opinions of significant others. Congruent with this notion, Lee (1991) argue that although the basic framework of the Fishbein behavioral intentions model has been generally accepted for Americans, there are questions concerning the validity of the independence of attitudinal components and social influence components among people in Asian cultures. Americans' individualist nature is clearly manifested by their resentment of conformity (Hui 1986). Most Koreans, on the other hand, feel strong social pressure to comply with group norms regardless of their own private view (Yau 1994 and Lee 1991).

Since social norms reflect what in-group members consider appropriate behavior, stronger social norms should heighten people's involvement in the situation

and accentuate their felt obligation to help (Schwartz 1994). For collectivist, helping in-group members conforms to the existing social norms. Thus, collectivism may result in the person's feeling good about doing what norms require, which leads to an increased conformity to group norms, and results in the development of strong tradition (Yang 1986). For example, in collectivist cultures, there is more consensus concerning the role of men and women than in individualist cultures (Williams and Best 1990). Men are expected to make major decisions in the family whereas women are expected to subordinate their roles to those of men.

General Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, the present study is designed to test the following hypotheses: (1) Overall, Asian subjects are relatively more collectivist than Western subjects. (2) Asian subjects are likely to have external locus of control, therefore, (3) they have higher propensity to social influence in decision making than their Western counterparts. As for testing the relation between the three mentioned constructs, the following hypotheses are also tested: (4) Regardless of nation, relative collectivists are more subject to having external locus of control than relative individualists. Therefore, (5 & 6) they are more subject to social influence in purchasing behavior.

Country selection. Since there have not been prior studies that classify national cultures as being characterized by internal or external LOC, the current study employed a surrogate indicator derived from the literature. Hofstede (1980 & 2001) classified countries according to the levels of individualism/collectivism exhibited by their people. As noted above, individualism/collectivism has been associated with

LOC by several authors: individualists tend to have an internal LOC, whereas collectivists an external LOC. Based on Hofstede's (1980 and 2001) findings, the selected countries occupied extreme positions on Hofstede's individualist/collectivist scale: India 48, Singapore and Thailand 20, while Taiwan 17. This finding indicates that Singapore and Thailand are the same strength on the collectivist orientation, followed by Taiwan. India, however, appeared to be the least collectivist at the score of 48. The Western subjects exhibited to be 91 for USA and 90 for Australia, both at the extreme position for individualists. Data for China was not available at the time of Hofstede's study in 2001, thus was omitted from making prior comparison.

Research Instrument and Sample. The instrument comprised two sets of scales. One is a 10-item (7-point likert scale) collectivism/individualism scale designed by Yamaguchi (1990c). The other comprised a 14 item (5-point Likert scale) LOC scale (Busseri, 1997). As a quasi-experimental research, a buying scenario (*"You need to buy some new sneakers. You are considering two models, one that you like, and another that is liked by the person who is with you. How likely would you be to purchase the sneakers that the other person likes if that person is": mother/father, close friend, boy/girlfriend, salesperson*), and classification questions. "Sneakers" were selected for this study because this product is equally available to the members of each country being investigated. Furthermore, sneakers also have functional equivalence across the samples of these countries, and sneakers are a product that can be purchased regularly and conveniently in both places.

The LOC measure fits the requirements of the research in two major respects. First, it focused specifically on consumer-related LOC issues. Secondly, the scale

items addressed several dimensions of LOC, one of which was social influence, the focus of the present study. After reading the purchase situation scenario, respondents were asked the likelihood (5-point Likert scale from: 1 = very likely to 5 = very unlikely) that they would be influenced by the other person's opinion.

Questionnaires were pre-tested in each of the countries. English was employed in all the questionnaires, since the samples are students in international undergraduate programs. To test the psychometric equivalence of these measures, the author compared the reliability statistics between the countries and checked the variances for floor or ceiling effects (Van de Vijver 1997). Questionnaires were administered in classroom settings. The study employed samples of university students from the seven countries, thus controlling for age, occupational and social class factors. After elimination of respondents for missing data, the sample consisted of 1,069 respondents: Australia = 128, USA = 119, Thailand = 120, Singapore = 124, Taiwan = 182, India = 196, and China = 200.

The measurement scale in this study was examined for its internal consistency by investigating the inter-item correlation matrix and a number of reliability coefficient (Churchill 1979; Nunnally 1994 and Robinson 1991). Rule of thumb for corrected item-to-total correlations is that they should be 0.50 or greater (Bearden 1989 and Shimp 1987). Basic guideline for individual correlations in the inter-item correlation matrix may vary. Robinson and colleagues (1991) recommend the level of 0.30 or better. The most widely used internal reliability coefficient is cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha. The acceptance level can go as low as 0.70 or 0.60

(Robinson 1991). All of the measures used in this study have Cronbach's alpha above 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability.

Analysis. The data were first subjected to principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation to determine validity and to potentially isolate the social influence component of collectivism and locus of control. Relevant factors and total scale results were then subject to analysis of variance across the seven countries to determine: (H1 - H3) cultural difference in orientation to collectivism, locus of control, and social influence in purchasing decision; (H4 - H6) the differences in the level of external/internal locus of control to characterize the seven countries; and differences that exist in the level of social influence in the buying decision of the people across these countries.

Analysis and Results

H1 is a replication hypothesis – i.e., that Asians (Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, India, and China) are typically more collectivist than Westerners (Australians and Americans). Three clean factors emerged from the analysis of the LOC scale accounting for 63.4% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.60 to 0.70 meeting (or very close to) the reliability test for exploratory/human behavior research (Nunnally, 1994 and Robinson, 1991). The data in Table 1 supports this assertion: Thais, Singaporeans, Taiwanese, Indians, and Chinese have mean collectivism scores of 5.11, 5.05, 5.09, 5.30, and 5.37, respectively, versus 4.84 and 4.86 for Australians and Americans, respectively.

Table 1: Collectivist orientation between Asian and Western subjects.

	Australia	USA	Thailand	Singapore	Taiwan	India	China	F (Sig.)
Harmony	5.65 (0.67)	5.83 (0.59)	5.63 (0.55)	5.55 (0.74)	5.43 (0.74)	5.80 (0.79)	5.61 (0.93)	5.37 (0.00)
Support	4.48	4.65	4.68	4.74	4.76	4.90	5.25	13.12

	(0.92)	(0.89)	(0.72)	(0.73)	(0.84)	(1.04)	(0.85)	(0.00)
Conflict	4.51	4.18	5.17	4.96	5.20	5.34	5.26	26.53
Avoidance	(1.12)	(1.03)	(0.87)	(0.93)	(0.85)	(0.95)	(1.13)	(0.00)
Collect	4.84	4.86	5.11	5.05	5.09	5.30	5.37	12.85
Total	(0.73)	(0.64)	(0.53)	(0.62)	(0.65)	(0.69)	(0.83)	(0.00)

As for H2, all of the items of LOC were combined to contrast the differences and to simplify the analysis. The results consistently show that Asians subjects are more likely to have external locus of than their Western counterparts.

Table 2: Locus of control comparison between Asians and Westerners.

	Australia	USA	Thailand	Singapore	Taiwan	India	China	F (Sig.)
Locus of Control	2.47 (0.43)	2.36 (0.47)	2.66 (0.38)	2.61 (0.37)	2.83 (0.37)	2.90 (0.34)	2.92 (0.30)	41.87 (0.00)

The third hypothesis related to differences in the impact of social influence reported by the Asian subjects, in comparison to Western subjects. In this case, the dependent variables were the data related to levels of social influence that respondents reported as subject to parents, friends, boy/girlfriends, and salespeople. The independent variables were the seven countries being investigated. ANOVA main effects were significant ($F = 13.4, p < .00$) again indicating significance across the countries. The Scheffe results presented in Table 3 indicates a significant acceptance of the hypothesis. In all cases, with an exception of the salesperson, Taiwanese exhibit lower social influence than the subjects from the six countries.

Table 3: Social influence comparison between Asians and Westerners.

	Australia	USA	Thailand	Singapore	Taiwan	India	China	F (Sig.)
Parents	3.48 (1.66)	3.00 (1.60)	4.30 (1.50)	3.70 (1.75)	3.11 (1.43)	5.98 (1.24)	4.94 (1.84)	79.60 (0.00)
Relatives	4.65 (1.25)	4.00 (1.59)	4.88 (1.21)	4.64 (1.37)	2.57 (1.11)	5.80 (1.14)	5.13 (1.24)	117.23 (0.00)
Friends	5.13 (1.32)	4.63 (1.62)	4.94 (1.34)	5.11 (1.52)	2.65 (1.27)	4.90 (1.79)	5.27 (1.32)	68.36 (0.00)
B/Gfriend	3.16 (1.53)	2.53 (1.41)	3.14 (1.47)	3.26 (1.41)	3.94 (1.63)	3.97 (1.61)	3.64 (1.93)	14.53 (0.00)
Social Influence Total	4.11 (1.01)	3.54 (1.20)	4.31 (0.96)	4.18 (1.13)	3.07 (0.90)	5.16 (1.03)	4.75 (1.19)	73.53 (0.00)

As for H4, H5, and H6, to investigate the relationship between social influence (dependent variable) and the independent variables of individualism/collectivism and locus of control, respondents were categorized into “high” and “low” subgroups based on the subgroup analysis technique employed by Kohli (1989). ANOVA was then applied to determine the significance difference between the subgroups.

After examining the frequency distribution of the collectivism and locus of control scale, and eliminating the (approximate) middle 30% of cases, a median split was used to classify each case as “High/Low” for each variable. Tables 4 - 6 report the outcomes of the relationship between collectivist, locus of control, and social influence. H4 (*Regardless of nation, relative collectivists are more subject to having external locus of control than relative individualists*) is rejected while H5 (*Regardless of nation, relative collectivists are more subject to social influence than relatively individualists*) and H6 (*Regardless of nation, those with external locus of control are more subject to social influence than those with internal locus of control*) are accepted.

Table 4: Relationship between “High” and “Low” collectivist and Locus of control. H4 (*Regardless of nation, relative collectivists are more subject to having external locus of control than relative individualists*) is rejected.

	n	Locus of Control Mean (Std. Dev.)	F-Score	Sig.
Low Collectivist	326	2.23 (0.40)		
High Collectivist	329	2.34 (0.38)		
			0.096	.913

Table 5: Relationship between “High” and “Low” Collectivism and Social Influence. H5 (Regardless of nation, *relative collectivists* are more subject to *social influence* than relative individualists) is accepted.

	n	Social Influence Mean (Std. Dev.)	F-Score	Sig.
Low Collectivist	326	4.07 (1.18)		
High Collectivist	329	4.52 (1.41)		
			16.64	.000

Table 6: Relationship between “High/External” and “Low/Internal” Locus of control and Social Influence. H6 (Regardless of nation, those with *external locus of control* are *subject to greater social influence* than those with *internal locus of control*) is accepted.

	n	Social Influence Mean (Std. Dev.)	F-Score	Sig.
Low/Internal Locus of Control	314	3.78 (1.21)		
High/External Locus of Control	364	4.25 (1.40)		
			18.341	.000

Discussion

The findings provide evidence that largely confirms the hypotheses, as well as raising questions that invite further research. Levels of collectivism were as predicted: Asians are relatively more collectivist than Westerners. In terms of LOC, the findings

clearly indicated that Asians are likely to have external locus of control than their Western counterparts, explaining the reason for higher level of dependence among Asians as compare to the Westerners. These results are also expected because to be congruent with the literature, the collectivist tend to be more externally oriented than individualist. Although not significant, Taiwan exhibits the highest collectivist values among their Asian peers. Thus, the results for locus of control are in the predicted direction.

The findings for social influence across the nations, however, are more nuanced. In all cases, with an exception of the salesperson, Taiwanese sample exhibits lower social influence than any of the subjects, Asians and Westerners. The result here is the opposite from the expectation, which supposes to confirm that since Taiwanese sample is more external in locus of control than the Asian samples, they should exhibit *more* susceptible to social influence in purchasing outcomes. With respect to the all sources of social influence, however, all the Asian subjects meet the hypothesis requirements.

The social influence findings from this study indicate that LOC may only be partially applied in an international setting when trying to predict the levels of social influence to which consumers are subjected. Although all of the countries exhibit directional supports for locus of control as a result of their collectivist values, results from the Taiwanese sample clearly indicate that social influence may not be the factor that can be easily associated with the locus of control as implied by the literature. Lower social influence scores should reflect more independence in consumer purchasing decisions. The results above obviously indicate that although Taiwanese

samples are more collectivist and have external locus of control than many of the Asian samples, they are not as susceptible to social influence as much as other subjects from other countries.

It appears, though, that the relationship between LOC and collectivism is still a complex one in a cross-national context, and should be the subject of further research. This suggestion is also applicable for relationship between the three constructs (collectivism, locus of control, and social influence) regardless of the nations. The results from this particular study seem to enable collectivist construct to predict the level of social influence but not the locus of control. Further research on a wider scale across various countries may be more powerful in the prediction endeavor.

Managerial Implications & Conclusions

This research has provided marketing insights for both domestic and multinational firms. Internationally, the findings show that significant differences exist between Asian consumers in regard to locus of control orientation, although the consistency for social influence across countries may be questionable. Domestically, the findings also demonstrate varying levels of susceptibility to social influences and significant behavioral differences between consumers with high and low level of collectivist and locus of control.

Knowing the significant differences between Asian customers, marketers are advised to formulate their strategies accordingly. Moreover, since this research has established empirical evidence that consumers across nations have different

orientation to collectivism, locus of control, and social influence, marketers would also have to develop their strategies and tactics, keeping cultural variations in mind.

In developing, positioning, and promoting a product, marketers are recommended to devise their strategies with regards to the behavioral differences between members of different cultures. The level of social influence in purchasing decisions may be different for consumers *within and across* nations. As an example, marketers would have to promote as much with regard to the reference groups as with to the target customers who may purchase the product. Moreover, advertisements may need to stress the acceptance of the reference groups who have both direct and indirect influence upon consumer purchasing decision. Prudent practitioners, therefore, are advised to further investigate the effects of other social variables that may have significant consequences on behavioral differences among consumers across and within global societies.

In short, this research finding indicates that collectivism and locus of control may be applicable in an international setting. However, LOC cannot be consistently used to predict the levels of collectivism in particular cultures, or vice-versa. Other factors may intervene to counter the effects that LOC orientation has on collectivism among consumers in various cultures. It appears, though, that the relationship between LOC and collectivism is a complex one both in cross-and-within national contexts, and should be the subject of further research.

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