On the Importance of Non-Dominant Cultural Dimensions: Effects of Vertical Individualism on Consumer Behaviour in Norway

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Our paper focuses on the intracultural variation in vertical and horizontal individualism-collectivism. Our research proves that the non-dominant cultural dimension of vertical individualism within the Norwegian culture can in fact be superior to the dominant dimensions of culture in predicting tendency to engage in national identity construction. Thus the argument is made against applying stereotypes of individualism-collectivism on the country level and the importance of recognizing intracultural variation in cultural orientations is emphasized.

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Rottenstreich’s (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004) experiments demonstrate the influence of the two modes of information processing on valuation and subsequently on preferences for segregation and integration of gains and losses. Additionally, research by Agrawal and Maheswaran (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005) lends support to the assumption that accuracy motivation eliminates outcome-biased judgments.

Based on the previous research on dual process models and valuation we predict that accuracy motivation will foster systematic information processing and will therefore take a substantial impact on how segregated versus integrated gains and losses are perceived and valued. To test the predictions an experimental study was conducted. 160 undergraduate students completed the study for a payment of $5. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups. They were primed either to be accuracy motivated or to evaluate by feelings and assigned to either a gain or a loss scenario. They were presented both an integrated and a segregated scenario and indicated their preference for one of the scenarios.

In general, the current research establishes that accuracy motivation strongly influences or even reverses preferences when people valuate segregated versus integrated gains. However, the results obtained by this research raise interesting issues on how the type of event (gain versus loss) elicits different valuations of multiple events. We assume that loss aversion and specific emotions related to losses influence the way outcomes are evaluated. Therefore, further work is needed to scrutinize the effects of emotions in the context of the valuation of segregated versus integrated losses.

References

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Introduction
Countries and cultures are typically characterised in terms of some dominant cultural variables. For example, the US is described as a vertical individualistic country, whereas Japan is vertical and collectivistic (Triandis 1995). Scandinavian countries are typically found to score high on horizontal dimensions (Nelson and Shavitt 2002; Silvera and Seger 2004). In this paper we promote the point that non-dominant cultural dimensions may play a more important role in explaining culturally related consumer behaviors than dominant dimensions.

Individualism-collectivism (INDCOL)
The original typology was later expanded with a new dimension of vertical vs. horizontal INDCOL (Singelis et al. 1995; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). Vertical dimension of INDCOL captures the degree of status and inequality present in this orientation whereas horizontal dimension captures the degree of egalitarianism (Singelis et al. 1995; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). Intracultural variation in INDCOL is conceptualised as idiocentric vs. allocentric tendencies (Triandis et al. 1985).

Effects of vertical and horizontal INDCOL
Vertical individualist subjects preferred domestic products only when they were perceived as superior, whereas vertical collectivist subjects were found to prefer domestic products regardless of product superiority (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000). When individuals with independent self-construal where presented with promotion focused appeals, i.e. emphasizing gains, hopes and aspirations, the messages were more persuasive than when they were presented with prevention focused appeals, i.e. emphasizing avoidance of losses, duties and obligations (Aaker and Lee 2001). The reverse was true for individuals with interdependent self-constructs. There is also evidence that these effects may hold only for vertical cultures.
The Norwegian culture

The Norwegian culture has been characterized as horizontal rather than vertical (Nelson and Shavitt 2002; Silvera and Seger 2004). The literature points to the predominance of the horizontal value orientations in the Norwegian culture so the researchers tended to use these to explain consumer behavior. However as we argue further and as our data shows other non-dominant dimensions may account for important differences in consumer behavior.

Cultural Embeddedness of Products (CEP)

The concept of CEP is defined as the degree of the various types of national cultural meanings that are transferred from the culturally constituted world (McCracken 1986) to the product category by means of various cultural media (Jakubanecs and Supphellen 2004; Jakubanecs and Supphellen 2005). For instance a product category that has high degree of CEP can serve as a symbol of the national culture. Consumers can draw on the meanings embedded in the product category in order to build their private and social self-concepts as a certain national, promote their national identity and distinguish themselves from other nations (Jakubanecs and Supphellen 2004; Jakubanecs and Supphellen 2005). The dimensions of INDCOL are in turn likely to have effects on CEP due to the importance of INDCOL in the definition of self.

Hypotheses formulation

Intracultural variation becomes an important factor when non-dominant dimensions are likely to account for important consumer behavior. The case is illustrated by the Norwegian example. The horizontal dimensions of INDCOL do not focus on hierarchies or status, which are important in the concept of CEP. Consequently we do not expect these dominant cultural orientations to have effect on this consumer behavior variable. Vertical individualists are likely to engage in national identity construction in order to enhance their status, provided that having strong national identity has a positive connotation. Being a good citizen is valued in the Norwegian culture.

Based on this discussion we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Vertical individualism has a strong positive effect on CEP (Cultural Embeddedness of Products) even in countries where vertical individualism is a non-dominant dimension (e.g., Scandinavia).

Methodology

The hypothesis was tested on a non-student sample from Norway (N=158). Vertical-horizontal INDCOL construct was measured by a 16-item, 7-point Likert scale (Singelis et al. 1995). The survey included 8 product categories: ketchup, bunad (a Norwegian national costume), cars, meat cakes (a national meat dish), make-up, goat cheese, pizza, cross-country skis. The concept of CEP was measured by a 22-item, 7-point Likert Cultural Embeddedness of Products (CEP) scale (Jakubanecs and Supphellen 2004; Jakubanecs and Supphellen 2005). The CEP Scale items included such as: “If I traveled abroad, and was asked about a typical Norwegian product, I could mention this one”, “When I was a child my family referred to this product as one of the symbols of our Norwegian identity”, “If other Norwegian were to see me using this product, he or she would perceive me as a typical Norwegian”.

Results

Consistent with earlier studies, horizontal collectivism is the most dominant dimension in the Norwegian culture followed by vertical collectivism. Norwegians are also high on horizontal individualism and as expected rather low on vertical individualism.

EFA of CEP Scale resulted in the three-dimensional structure (Tradition, Identity-building and Relationship CEP) for the eight product categories. The data was subjected to path analysis via LISREL (Joreskog and Sorbom 1993). Some of the LISREL model fit indices were: for ketchup-chi-square/df=2.895, GFI=.981, CFI=.974, RMSEA=.110; for pizza-chi-square/df=2.122, GFI=.983, CFI=.979, RMSEA=.085. The results strongly support H1. Vertical individualism has strong effects on the Tradition CEP (e.g., .359*** for meat cakes, .239** for cars; ***=p< .01), Identity-building CEP (e.g., .510*** for meat cakes, .335*** for ketchup) for most product categories, whereas very few effects are observed for the other INDCOL dimensions.

Discussion

The most dominant cultural orientation of the Norwegian society-horizontal collectivism has little explanatory power when it comes to perception and construction of the national identity. The same conclusion applies to the other dominant dimension-horizontal individualism. Instead the dimension of vertical individualism, existence of which previously was ignored in the studies of the Norwegian culture, provides consistent explanations in this behavior cluster across the product categories. It could be the case that in the Norwegian culture, the national cultural meanings could serve status-enhancing purpose of being a good citizen which is important to vertical individualists.

Implications

We find support for importance of recognising and measuring allocentric and idiocentric tendencies when conducting cross-cultural consumer behavior studies. Reliance on nation-level studies and ignorance of the intracultural variation may weaken research validity.

References

Flip-Flopping of General Action and Inaction States: A Study on the Mental Representation of Action and Inaction Goals

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Extended Abstract

Being active or inactive is essential to human life. People, cultures, and eras appear to vary in requisite levels of energy and productivity. Thus, we examined the possibility that general tendencies to engage in or abstain from behavior irrespective of the domain (e.g., buying, using drugs, exercising) can be due to the setting of general action and inaction goals. We have investigated general action goals that reside at the meta-level of goal systems (for goal-facilitation of specific behaviors, see Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Chartrand & Bargh, 1996; Kruglanski, 1996; for the concept of general action and inaction goals, see Albarracin, in press). Action goals are generalized goals to engage in action (e.g., activated with instructions such as “go”). The counterpart to these action goals are general inaction goals, which are generalized goals to not engage in action (e.g., activated with instructions such as “rest”). Importantly, general action/inaction goals are diffuse desired ends that can mobilize the execution of more specific activities. Hence, their activation may trigger the pursuit or interruption of any particular (overt or covert) behavior that is subjectively relevant to the goal. Action goals imply a need to “do” irrespective of what one does; inaction goals imply a need to abstain from doing, irrespective of the domain of abstinence.

Research by Albarracin and her colleagues (see Albarracin, in press) have shown that people with general action goals preferred action-oriented tasks, identified more behaviors, performed better on a text comprehension task, and formed attitudes on a novel topic more than people with inaction goals. Given these differences in performance across these domains, we wanted to further explore these goals at the level of mental representations. In this study, we explored the activation of the action/inaction goals via a priming task with icons related to action and inaction and in turn, identified the conditions that led to the satisfaction of those goals. Our basic hypothesis is that the action goal is “turned off” via satisfaction of that goal and as a result, the inaction goal is “turned on.” Thus, the purposes of this study were 1) to identify if general action and inaction goals are mentally represented and 2) to examine the “on and off” manner of action and inaction goals.

In the first part of study, half of the participants were exposed to the action primes while the rest were exposed to the inaction primes. To prime action goals, black and white icons concerning specific actions (e.g., running, throwing, and dancing) were employed. To prime inaction goals, black and white icons concerning specific inactions (e.g., lying down, meditating, and relaxing) were used. Participants in the action prime condition were exposed to 10 pictures related to actions and 14 pictures neutral to action. Those in the inaction prime condition were exposed to 10 pictures related to inaction and 14 pictures neutral to inaction. The participants’ task was to identify whether the black part of a picture was larger than the white part.

After the priming task, all participants were given a lexical decision task (LDT) to measure the activation level of action-related and inaction-related concepts. The LDT contained 10 action-related words (e.g., go, move, and create), 10 inaction-related words (e.g., relax, stop, and halt), 20 words neutral to action/inaction matched with inaction/action words on word length and frequency, and 20 other neutral words. The task had 10 blocks and each block contained 12 words. The blocks were divided into first and last five blocks to examine if the participants changed their action/inaction goal states.

Following the LDT, the participants were given an opportunity to either choose to work on questions from GRE (graduate record examination) or to rest. The choice made by participants served as our measure of the “on-off” nature of these goals. For instance, participants who are primed with action and then perform the LDT should “flip” to an inactive state and choose to rest.
First, it was hypothesized that action/inaction priming should lead to activation of associated concepts. Results showed differences in activation, such that the participants primed with action goal icons identified action-related words more quickly than the participants primed with inaction goal icons in the first five blocks of the LDT. However, in the last five blocks there was no significant difference between these two goal conditions on reaction times for action-related words. These results suggest that after performing half of the LDT, participants primed with action might have satisfied this goal by performing the LDT.

Second, it was hypothesized that participants in the action goal condition should flip to an inaction state following the LDT. Results showed that participants primed with an action goal were more likely to choose to rest than perform the GRE, and were more likely to do so than those primed with inaction. In sum, the results verified that these general goals can be activated, and suggest the “on and off” nature of these goals.

The study of these general goals may yield many practical applications in tandem with theoretical advances in goal theory and self-regulatory processes. For instance, action goals may exert effects inadvertently by being included in the title of an intervention such as “Youth in Action Against Drugs” (Lowell Housing Authority, 2005; the emphasis is ours). The richer effect here is that not only might people be primed for action, but that people with action goals are more likely in some instances to be persuaded as well. Albarracin and her colleagues (see Albarracin, in press) have shown that people are more likely to employ external information when they do not have prior attitudes about the topic, hence, are more apt to be persuaded. However, once the primed action goal is satisfied, then perhaps the window for persuasion is closed.

References

How Do Consumers Categorize Websites?
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Background
Similarity judgments have been used in many fields of research to serve as a cognitive categorization mechanism. This research presents the results of the perceptual mapping of stagnant (or mouse-free) images of multiple websites from the consumer perspective. The goal of our research is not from a decision making perspective, but more from a consumer perception framework. We aim to disentangle the internet into multiple separable pieces or frames, gather information from consumers on those frames, and then elaborate on ways in which they are categorized and conceptualized.

One of the key foundations of this pilot research effort is the de-activation of an otherwise interactive medium. Our effort was to gain insight as to how consumers may initially view websites–as images rather than “clickable” interfaces. We contend, then, that at first glance, a user categorizes websites according to some set of attributes. Those attributes, if further understood, can help guide our understanding of deployment of “effective” websites, from a consumer-centric viewpoint. Although the foundations of cognitive categorization are principally psychological, many other fields have employed them through use of mathematical techniques. Broken down at the lowest level, we see or discuss “things”, which then, in order to control for chaos and cognitive boundaries we have, we must categorize. (Smith and Medlin, 1981)

The fields of human factors, information systems, and marketing have also focused on the interesting implications of the internet as an interactive medium. Marketing research often studies the internet as an advertising medium and sees similarities with other forms such as television, where we have visual cues to stimulate action on the part of the consumer. Yet, we make note of something entirely unique in internet environments–the ability to have constant interaction with our consumer. (Hoffman and Novak, 1996) Consumer choice and decision making thus drives much of the literature on how a consumer can interact with the internet. (Peterson et al., 1997; Mandel and Johnson, 2002)

Hence, the contribution of this initial study is to break down and attempt to ascertain “first impressions” of consumers by using static as opposed to dynamic images. We posit that clickstream data, by focusing on either one consumer or one website, and presenting the internet in its full interactive complexity, may not be able to capture those initial categorizations which consumers make.

Experiment
Sixty-seven marketing undergraduates participated in this within subject study by completing a two part survey. Due to the subject matter of this study, namely internet websites, and the experience level of the participants, we considered this a homogeneous data set. Given a total of ten websites, part 1 of the study design called for a set of forty-five paired similarity/dissimilarity judgments. Two context areas, cameras and tourism, were selected, within which we selected five websites each. Our conjecture is that the participants in our study...