What We Will Feel Depends on Who We Are: Cross-Cultural Differences in Affective Forecasting of “Ego-Focused” Versus “Other-Focused” Emotions

Vanessa Patrick, University of Georgia, USA
Henrik Hagtvedt, University of Georgia, USA

In this research we aim to demonstrate that cross-cultural differences exist in the way individuals construct future events and consequently predict specific emotions. Five hundred and sixty-two participants from USA and India completed one of ten different versions of a questionnaire that varied 1) the positivity of the future experience, 2) whether the future experience was an individual vs. a group experience, and 3) familiarity with the future experience. Open-ended analysis is designed to reveal cross-cultural differences in the way future events are constructed. Quantitative assessment is designed to reveal differences in the forecasted emotions associated with these events.

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Pathway 3: Consumer Socialization and Intergenerational Influence

Brands can also serve a social purpose by reflecting social ties to one’s family, community, or cultural group (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Since the family is typically a consumer’s most significant reference group, one way in which these social ties may be formed is via intergenerational transfer (Moschis 1985, 1987). In our surveys, many consumers revealed that they became emotionally attached to brands that they grew up with and their parents never used other brands. Many respondents also reported EAB with brands that their parents used as a way to “honor” the family tradition. The “family tradition” theme is not only limited to high-involvement, expensive branded goods, our respondents also reported their attachment to brands of fast-moving consumer goods such as soft drinks, laundry detergent, mayonnaise, and cookies.

Pathway 4: Sentimentality and Emotional Memories

Our fourth pathway to EAB involves an especially personal and meaningful pairing between a brand and some situation(s), experience(s), place(s), and/or person/people. For example, a woman might recall the “ritual” of visiting her grandfather as a child, sitting on the front porch of his house, and sharing Coca-cola and a Snickers candy bar. Now as an adult, she often has Coca-cola and a Snickers bar, and it reminds her of her grandfather, his house, and their front porch talks. With Pathway 4, specific brands become powerfully connected to sentimental and emotionally-imbued memories involving some meaningful place, situation, experience and/or person. It is as if repeatedly returning to the brands invokes a commemorative re-experiencing of some favorable or even longed-for past. It should be noted that inter-generational transfer doesn’t require sentimental/emotional memory. Transfer alone could involve a user of Tide simply saying her grandmother used it, her mother used it, and so she uses it too. Likewise, Sentimental and Emotion memory does not require inter-generational dynamics. Someone might say he drank Taster’s Choice coffee with his first long-term girlfriend in college while they stayed up nights to study. He reflects back fondly on those times to this day when he buys Taster’s Choice. Thus Pathway 4 can correlate with Pathway 3, but not necessarily.

Conclusion

We expand the understanding of the EAB construct, initiated by TMP, by showing the pathways through which consumers form their EAB. We were also successful in having respondents report on brands with extreme levels of emotional attachment. While TMP’s results suggest that brands to which consumers are emotionally attached tend to be high involvement and symbolically or hedonically related, our results show that EAB is also evidenced in low involvement and functionally related product categories. This finding could be more formally tested by controlling brands within different product categories (e.g. low vs. high involvement, utilitarian vs. hedonic). Future research should also examine the strength of each pathway, as well as the relation between EAB and market leadership.

References


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Abstract

In this research we aim to demonstrate that cross-cultural differences exist in the way individuals construct future events and consequently predict specific emotions. Five hundred and sixty-two participants from USA and India completed one of ten different versions of a questionnaire that varied 1) the positivity of the future experience, 2) whether the future experience was an individual vs. a group experience, and 3) familiarity with the future experience. Open-ended analysis is designed to reveal cross-cultural differences in the way future events are constructed. Quantitative assessment is designed to reveal differences in the forecasted emotions associated with these events.
Recent research in consumer behavior has begun to examine the role of emotions in a cross-cultural context (Aaker and Maheshwaran 1997; Aaker and Williams 1998; Aaker and Lee 2001; Williams and Aaker 2002). However, the role of cross-cultural differences in the forecasting of emotions is an area that remains uninvestigated in the extant literature and forms the focus of the current research.

**Affective Forecasting: Prediction of Future Affective States**

A vast array of consumption activity is based on how consumers predict they are likely to feel at a future point in time. The choice and decision to consume is often based on a prediction of the emotional consequences of the consumption experience.

Affective forecasting (Gilbert et al. 1998) deals with a person’s prediction of a future affective state. Recent research has demonstrated that making accurate affective forecasts is difficult and susceptible to a variety of errors and biases (Gilbert et al. 1998; Loewenstein and Schkade 2000) leading to affective misforecasting (Patrick, MacInnis, and Park 2007). Indeed, people exhibit what has been referred to as “impact” bias (Gilbert et al. 1998), where people tend to overestimate what the duration of their affective states will be, and “intensity” bias (Buehler and McFarland 2001), where people tend to overestimate the intensity with which they will experience a particular affective state.

In this research, we contribute to the extant research in two ways: 1) we investigate these biases in a cross-cultural context, and 2) we demonstrate these biases with specific emotions, namely ego-focused versus other-focused emotions.

**Cross-cultural Differences in Affective Forecasting of Emotions**

Extant research has demonstrated that the recognition and experience of many emotions appear to be cross-culturally robust. There has been support for the universality of basic emotions (Osgood, May, and Miron 1975), specific emotions like anger, surprise, fear, and empathy (Matsumoto 1989), and the recognition of these emotional states (Ekman 1984). However, significant cross-cultural differences do exist. Indeed, Triandis (1993) demonstrated that cross-cultural differences in emotions were a result of systematic cultural variations in the concerns of individuals, which in turn arose from differences in self-construal.

Based on this notion, cross-cultural research on emotions focused on “ego-focused” and “other-focused” emotions, and examined “the degree to which specific emotions systematically vary in the extent to which they follow from, and also foster or reinforce, an independent versus interdependent self” (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 235). Thus, one would expect that in individualistic cultures (e.g., the United States, Western Europe, and Canada) the personal and subjective part of one’s emotional experience is dominant, and “ego-focused” emotions like happiness, pride, frustration, and anger are more salient. On the other hand, in collectivist cultures (e.g., India, China, and Japan) the interpersonal and inter-subjective aspects of one’s emotional experience is dominant, and “other-focused” emotions like empathy, guilt, and shame are more salient.

One might therefore posit that in predicting one’s future emotional state (affective forecasting) people from different cultures would be likely to focus on different emotional/affective states, take into consideration different factors while making the affective forecast, and exhibit different errors or biases in their affective forecasts. The current thinking on the process of affective forecasting is that predictions of future affective states are made by conjuring up images of the future situation and predicting emotional reactions based on reactions to these images (Gilbert et al 2002).

Based on this we can expect that in individualist cultures the prediction of future affective states and subsequent decision to consume will be based solely on one’s own personal tastes and preferences (happiness, pleasure, pride) while in collectivist cultures this prediction will also take into account the interpersonal and inter-subjective aspects of this decision (social approval, guilt, empathy).

**Empirical Investigation and Data Analysis**

This study employed a survey-based method designed to discern the categories of emotions that are forecasted and the nature of the thoughts associated with making the forecast for a variety of future events.

Five hundred and sixty-two participants (from India and USA) completed one of ten different versions of a questionnaire that asked individuals to forecast future experiences that varied 1) the positivity of the experience (e.g., restaurant vs. dentist visit), 2) whether the experience was an individual versus a group experience (e.g., a first job vs. a wedding), and 3) the familiarity of the experience (e.g., a vacation vs. winning the lottery). After constructing and describing the future experience, participants reported the extent to which they thought a set of emotions would occur. Prediction of general positive and negative emotions, as well as ego-focused and other-focused emotions, was assessed. In addition, we measured individual differences in optimism, future orientation, and ability to consider future consequences. We expect that these variables in conjunction with the affective forecasts will help us discern cultural differences in individuals’ ability to construct their future.

The analysis of both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of the data are underway and will be completed by ACR 2008. The qualitative analysis has required the development of an extensive coding scheme to analyze the open-ended data. A brief summary of the preliminary quantitative results are outlined below:

- Participants in the individualist culture (USA) predicted more “ego-focused” versus “other-focused” emotions compared to participants in the collectivist culture (India)
- Participants in the individualist culture (USA) are more polarized in their affective forecasts (demonstrate a stronger impact bias) than participants in the collectivist culture (India). In other words, participants from individualist cultures predict more intense positive emotions for positive events and more intense negative emotions for negative events compared to collectivist cultures
- Participants in the individualist culture (USA) are more confident of their future feelings than participants in the collectivist culture (India)