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Food Symbolism and Consumer Choice in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the symbolic meaning of meat in Brazil, by exploring the values endorsed by meat buyers and how these values influence food choice. A survey of 378 Brazilians found that vertical values predicted red meat consumption beyond that accounted by attribute importances, implying that social hierarchy is one cultural association of red meat in Brazil. This finding calls to mind the intriguing proposal of some sociologists and anthropologists that red meat symbolizes hierarchy in cultures that have hierarchical social relations.

INTRODUCTION

In a series of studies, Allen and his colleagues (i.e., Allen & Baines, 2002; Allen & Ng, 2003; Allen, Wilson, Ng, & Dunne, 2000) found that individuals make dietary choices by examining the cultural and symbolic meanings of a food. For instance, Allen and Ng (2003) found that red meat symbolizes the endorsement of social hierarchy more than other food groups, and that individuals compare this meaning to their self-concept. The more an individual personally supports hierarchy, the more favourably he or she evaluates the symbolic meaning of red meat and, by extension, red meat itself. However, that research is limited in that Allen's studies were carried out in two nations (i.e., Australia and New Zealand) that are from the same cultural group, i.e., what Huntington (1996) terms "Historically Protestant." This limitation is important because some sociologists and anthropologists from the US, UK, and other Historically Protestant nations qualify their claim that red meat symbolizes hierarchy to their own cultural group (e.g., Heisley, 1990; Twigg, 1983). Thus, we might expect that Allen's finding that the endorsement of hierarchy guides red meat attitudes is restricted to Historically Protestant nations.

On the other hand, other sociologists and anthropologists suggest that red meat symbolizes hierarchy in some cultures that are not Historically Protestant (e.g., Barthes, 1957). One interesting proposal by some theorists is that red meat symbolizes hierarchy in cultures that have hierarchical social relations (e.g., Adams, 1990; Douglas, 1973; Fiddes, 1991; Sanday, 1981). Thus, the key issue is not whether a nation is Historically Protestant but the extent to which the culture is hierarchical. We would expect that in nations that have greater social hierarchy, individuals within the nation form red meat attitudes by comparing the hierarchy symbolism of red meat to their own human values. As a starting point on this claim, we sought to examine food choice in a nation that endorses social hierarchy but is a different cultural group than Australia and New Zealand. Hence, we selected Brazil, which is "Historically Catholic" (Huntington, 1996) and where social hierarchy is supported and endorsed by its members (Torres & Dessen, 2003). The World Bank (2002) reports that Brazil has greater income inequality than Australia and New Zealand. Thus, we predict that the endorsement of social hierarchy will form the basis to Brazilians' red meat attitudes and consumption.

In psychology, explanations with a social-cognitive orientation have prevailed in the consumer behaviour field, as with other areas of psychology. Some traditional economic theories envisage the value of a product as solely its exchange value in the market. On the contrary of those, other researchers (e.g., Dittmar, 1992; Richins, 1994) suggest that what gives a product value is what the product means to consumers. The meaning attributed to the product may encompass two broad categories: utilitarian and symbolic. The utilitarian meaning represents the tangible and functional aspects of the product that allow the individual to control the environment. In this category, the meaning is derived from the practical utility of the product, and is intrinsically linked to the product's efficiency and performance. An example the utilitarian meaning of red meat is its nutritional benefits, such as its high-protein content (i.e., the meat's tangible attributes).

Attributes that are intangible and culturally shared are the image or symbolism of the product. Thus, symbolic meaning is connected to the culture of a group (Dittmar, 1992). However, as Kilbourne (1991) alerts, the term symbolic does not imply the lack of utilitarian meaning. Rather, the term "refers to an object which symbolic meaning takes precedence over the functional" (p. 405). As an example of symbolic meaning we can observe the social "status" associated with premium cuts of red meat, in part because of the luxury that these cuts might represent in some societies.

Based on this distinction between utilitarian and symbolic product meanings, Allen and colleagues (e.g., Allen, 2000; Allen, 2001; Allen & Ng, 1999) proposed a "two-route" model to describe the influence of human values on consumer choice. Previous models (e.g., Gutman, 1982; Lindberg, Garling & Montgomery, 1989; Scott & Lamont, 1973), based partly on the multi-attribute model (Fishbein, 1967), suggest that the human values would influence consumer choice through only one route: by influencing the product attribute importances. So, a calculative and rational product evaluation would be the responsible for the product choice. In contrast, Allen suggests that human values will shape product choice through two routes. First, when consumers are evaluating the utilitarian meaning of the product and, thus, making a piece-meal, attribute-by-attribute judgment, human values influence the importance given to tangible product attributes, which would then sway the product preference. For example, the human value "a life of excitement" might lead an individual to place higher importance on a tangible attribute such as "fast engine", which in turn leads the individual to form a positive attitude toward Ford Mustangs. However, when consumers are evaluating the product's symbolic meaning and making an intuitive and affective judgment about it, human values would influence the product preference directly. In particular, Allen (2002) showed that individuals examine the human value content of a product's image: the more they support the value, the more they like the product.

Allen's "two-route" model has been tested with several products and services, such as holiday destinations, cars, eyeglasses, and food items (e.g., Allen, 2000; Allen & Ng, 1999). While studying a basic food item, i.e., red meat, Allen and Ng (2003) acknowledged its important position in the food system, and also recognized the human value symbolism attached to this product. It has been suggested that red meat is one of the most culturally valued foods in Western society (Douglas, 1973), that it depicts a "power" symbolism (Fiddes, 1991; Twigg, 1983), being associated with the qualities of aggression and strength, and symbolizing environmental control more than other foods. In essence, red meat appears to symbolize the endorsement of hierarchy and inequality within the society. As a result, people from those societies might choose to consume meat because they personally endorse the values symbolized by red meat. Allen and Ng (2003) provided evidence for this relationship. They observed that the Australian public perceives red meat as symbolizing the endorsement of hierarchy values more than other food groups, and symbolizing hierarchical power more than

other values. Also, they found that individuals who endorse hierarchy and inequality values had more favourable red meat attitudes. Allen et al. (2000) also found, as expected, that omnivores more strongly supported social dominance orientation, a value closed associated with hierarchy. Allen and Baines (2002) found that making the hierarchy symbolic meaning salient to participants strengthened the relationship between hierarchy endorsement and red meat attitude.

The concept of verticality (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995) brings the recognition that inequalities between people necessitate a certain amount of conformity in the service of hierarchy, while horizontalness increases the sense that individuals should be free from others' influences. There is some scientific evidence (e.g., Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Triandis, Chen, & Chan, 1998) demonstrating the importance of knowing whether a culture is more vertical or horizontal.

We could assume that Brazilian culture is as an example of a culture where verticalism is the preferred cultural pattern. Traditionally, Brazil has been categorized as a collectivist culture (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Van Horn & Marques, 1999). So, as members of a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1980), Brazilians see themselves as belonging to an in-group. Yet, Brazilians see the members of their in-group as different from each other (Dessen & Torres, 2002), some having more status than others. Furthermore, it was suggested that Brazilians recognize and accept inequality and differences in status (Pearson & Stephan, 1998).

Candido (1972), using a metaphor to discuss the Brazilian national culture, suggested that Brazil could be represented by a picture of a large family, in which there are few formal rules but a consensus towards the authority of the father. Candido's interpretation of Brazil is supported by evidence from some empirical findings. Schwartz (1992) observed that Brazilians scored low in intellectual and emotional autonomy (which is related to Hofstede's dimension of individualism) and high on conservatism and hierarchy (correlating with Singelis et al.'s notion of verticalism). Similarly, Friedlmeier (1995), comparing implicit theories of educators, found that Brazilians stressed conformity and adaptation. In their research, Strohschneider and Güss (1998) found that Brazilian college students have a high tendency to accept any situation as given, and not to inquire about its causes, when an ill-defined ambiguous situation is presented to them.

Related to these results, Droogers (1988) suggested that an important concept to understand the Brazilian's worldview is the one of the jeitinho. Jeitinho is a Brazilian term that is difficult to translate, but that carries the meaning that when a problem is presented, even without a real possibility of being solved, the social group will come up with a way to solve it. When we observe the country as a whole, research has demonstrated that the Brazilian culture is significantly more collectivist and vertical than the culture in other countries, especially those from an Anglo-Saxon origin (Pérez-Nebra & Torres, 2002). For instance, Pearson and Stephan (1998) found that the negotiation style in Brazil is more collectivist than the one in Australia, and also that in that former country, social hierarchy is highly valued. Other evidence (e.g., Ettorre, 1998; Santos, 199l; Torres, 1999), also suggest that the Brazilian culture is highly collectivist.

When demonstrating the relationship between human values and red meat attitude, Allen and Ng (2003) measured hierarchy and inequality, but not individualism and collectivism. Individualism-collectivism refers to a cultural dimension, or an aggregation of cultural and human values, which was first identified by Hofstede (1980; 1983; 1984; 1991). It reflects the extent to which people emphasize personal or group goals. Hofstede's research showed that people have different intentions, give different attributions, and behave differently in their cultural group. A good deal of evidence has been found supporting the variations associated with Hofstede's dimensions (e.g., Smith et al., 1994). This suggests that consumer behaviours and perceptions will also vary as a result of this difference in cultural values. Some scholars (e.g., Triandis, 1994) suggest that the individualism-collectivism value is essential for the analysis of a culture, since several studies (e.g., Ashmos & McDaniel, 1996; Campbell, Bommer, & Yeo, 1993; Smith & Bond, 1999; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990) have demonstrated the influence of this dimension in the behaviour of members of a social group, including consumption-related behaviours (Kahle, 1996). Also, and more importantly for the present research , a limitation of Allen and Ng's (2003) and Allen et al.'s (2000) studies is that only predominantly individualist cultures, that is, Australia and New Zealand respectively, were tested. Despite their geographical location, collectivist Latin American cultures have not been treated in the literature as "Western" cultures, a term that has been traditionally associated with Anglo-Saxon tradition, and some European countries (e.g. Sweden). Although it is believed (Hofstede, 1980) that Brazil is more collectivist than Australia or New Zealand, there is little evidence that the individualism-collectivism of a culture is related to meat symbolism, so we do not make any predictions involving this dimension.

To sum, Allen's two-route model suggests that a human value has a direct influence on product choice when the individual examines the symbolic meaning of the product, and has an indirect influence (via attribute importances) when a consumer assesses the product's utilitarian meaning. Further, if red meat symbolises hierarchy in cultures that have hierarchical social relations, such as Brazil, and if Brazilian consumers evaluate the symbolic meaning of a food when forming attitudes toward the food, then;

Proposition: Vertical values should influence red meat consumption via the direct route.

Allen's model recognizes that culture has an impact in consumer choice and behaviour (Allen, Ng, & Wilson, 2002), however this does not mean that it can already been generalized to different cultural groups (Triandis, 1995). As noted elsewhere (Smith & Bond, 1999), some social behaviours may not have the same representation in other cultures. Thus, there is a need to test the model for contexts where the self is interdependent and the social organization follows a hierarchy, up to a certain point, quite rigid.

METHOD

Participants

University students and the population in general were included. College students were recruited in class in a large university of Brazil. Copies of the questionnaires were given to students in class, and they were encouraged to return the completed survey in one week. When the completed surveys were returned to researchers, three more copies were given to the students who, then, were asked to pass them on to general population participants, such as their parents and friends. General population respondents also had one week to respond to the survey, hand them in to students, who would then pass them on to researchers. With this procedure, from the 650 surveys sent out, 378 were satisfactory returned, yielding an effective response rate of 58%. The sample comprised of 49% male and 51% female , age range of 17 to 54 (median=23), and median education level of High School.

Instruments

A 6-page, self-administered questionnaire was given to participants. The questionnaire contains, in the following order, a Portuguese version of the Singelis et al.'s (1995) Values Scale (44 items), Allen and Ng's (1999) Meaning and Judgment Scale (19 items), and a Food Attribute Importance Questionnaire (25 items), the Consumption Behaviour measure, and a small questionnaire on demographic data. Participants took 20 to 25 minutes to answer to entire survey. With all instruments, the translation-retranslation technique (Brislin, 1980; Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973) was used to make sure the survey had language equivalence in Portuguese.

Values Measure. With the objective of measuring Brazilian cultural patterns, Singelis et al.'s (1995) Values Scale was employed. The original English version of the scale has 32 items, and was designed to measure the individualist-collectivist vertical and horizontal values at the individual-level. A version of the scale validated in Brazil has 44 items that individuals rate on a 1–9 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree' scale. To validate this version, focus groups with Brazilian college students were used to add items with content and language structure relevant to the Brazilian culture. The version was then translated and back translated, and was first presented elsewhere (Torres & Pérez-Nebra, 2002). To test our hypotheses, scores for 4 subscales were first obtained: Verticalism (reliability coefficient=0.82), Horizontalism (Cronbach's alpha=0.79), Collectivism (alpha=0.81), and Individualism (alpha=0.72). Then, we calculated an Individualism vs. Collectivism score for each participant (which was Individualism minus Collectivism), and a Verticalism vs. Horizontalism (Verticalism minus Horizontalism).

Meaning and Judgment Measure. Allen's (2001) Meaning and Judgment scale comprises 19 items and measures the preference for judgment type (piecemeal or affective) and importance of product meaning (utilitarian or symbolic). Participants responded each item on a 1–7 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree' scale. To test the scale, and the associations between preference for judgment and product meaning, a factor analysis with varimax rotation was executed with the Brazilian data (KMO=0.87; Bartlett's Chi-square=1715.29; p<0.0001). From this, two factors or subscales were obtained and the sample's scores calculated. The first factor included 9 items (alpha=0.75), which measure Piecemeal Judgment and Utilitarian Meaning Tendency. The other factor, with 10 items (alpha=0.69) measures Affective Judgment and Symbolic Meaning Tendency. Only the latter subscale was used for the present study (sample items: "The image a product portrays is an important part of my decision whether or not to buy it" and "The instant I see a product I know if I like it").

Food Attribute Importance Measure. Using a 1–10 'Not at all important' to 'Very important' scale, respondents rated the importance of 25 food attributes. The 25 attributes were then reduced with a factor analysis, varimax rotation (KMO=0.76; Bartlett's Chi-square=3241.25; p<0.0001), which yielded 6 factors, corroborating partially with the food attributes found by Allen and Ng (2003). The first factor refers to Quality attributes of foods (e.g., light food, tasty, prepared with high-quality ingredients), with an alpha of 0.76. The other factors include Nutrition (e.g., natural food, nutritious, rich in minerals and vitamins), alpha=0.72; Exotic Food (e.g., unusual food, exotic, food from another country), alpha=0.71; Pleasant To The Senses, with an alpha of 0.66 (e.g., tasty, sweet, salty); Popular Food, alpha=0.64 (e.g., inexpensive, popular); and Easy to Prepare (e.g., easy to obtain, easy to prepare), alpha=0.66.

Consumption Behaviour Measure. In the survey, "Considering the past 3 days, how many servings did you eat of each of the following food types? Red meat (e.g., beef); White meat (e.g., chicken, pork, etc.); Fruit; Cereals; Dairy products (e.g., milk, cheese, etc.); Vegetables; Seafood/Fish?" was asked. Only participant's red meat consumption was analysed in the present study.

RESULTS

The main proposition was that vertical values should influence red meat consumption via the direct route. To test the proposition, we used the analytical process outlined in Allen (2001). This procedure is advantageous over other methods because it reveals the overall strengths of the direct and indirect routes, as well as the specific relationships. This method involves several steps.

First, correlations were calculated between human values and food attribute importances, revealing that Verticalism (+) vs. Horizontalism (-) significantly correlates with Quality (r=.11, df=389, p<.05), Simple and Popular (r=.20, df=389, p<.001), and Easy Preparation (r=-.25, df=389, p<.001), whereas Individualism (+) vs. Collectivism (-) correlates with Nutritious (r=-.14, df=389, p<.01), Pleasant to Senses (r=17, df=389, p<.001), and Easy Preparation (r=.33, df=389, p<.001). Second, human values were regressed onto red meat consumption, resulting in a significant prediction (Multiple R=.24, F(2,357)=10.4, p<.001). In particular, Verticalism (+) vs. Horizontalism (-) was positively associated with red meat consumption (beta=.20, t=3.7, p<.001), as was Individualism (+) vs. Collectivism (-)(beta=.19, t=3.5, p<.001). Finally, a two-block regression was carried out in which the food attribute importances were regressed onto red meat consumption in Block 1, and human values in Block 2. Block 1 achieved a significant prediction of red meat consumption (Multiple R=.38, F(6,358)=10.0, p<.001), produced by three significant predictors: Nutritious (beta=-.11, t=-1.9, p<.05), Simple and Popular (beta=.14, t=2.5, p<.01), and Easy to Prepare (beta=.32, t=6.5, p<.001). Block 2 significantly added to the prediction of red meat consumption beyond that accounted by food attribute importances (Multiple R change=.03, F(2,356)=5.0, p<.01). Verticalism (+) vs. Horizontalism (-) was positively and directly associated with red meat consumption (beta=.17, t=3.1, p<.001). Both Blocks combined strongly predicted red meat consumption (Multiple R=.42, F(8,356)=9.0, p<.001).

Figure 1 summarises the relationships uncovered in the above three steps (signs indicate the direction of the relationship). Individualism (+) vs. Collectivism (-) has an indirect influence on red meat consumption in two ways. First, individuals who value individualism over collectivism do not want a food that is nutritious, and people who do not want a nutritious food consume more red meat. Second, people who value individualism (over collectivism) want a food that is easy to prepare, and this leads to greater consumption of red meat. Verticalism (+) vs. Horizontalism (-) values have a direct influence on red meat consumption, indicating that the more an individual supports verticalism (over horizontalism) the more they consume red meat.

Finally, Symbolic Meaning and Affective Judgement Tendency positively correlates with red meat consumption (r=.15, df=350, p<.01). Also, it should be noted that all the regressions described in this section were recalculated to control for demographic data (gender, age, and education). In those regressions, demographic characteristics were entered in a first block, then food attribute importances (Block 2), followed by values (Block 3). The results of these regressions paralleled the original regressions, demonstrating that demographics do not account for the findings.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the main proposition, the study found that verticalism (over horizontalism) influenced red meat consumption

FIGURE 1
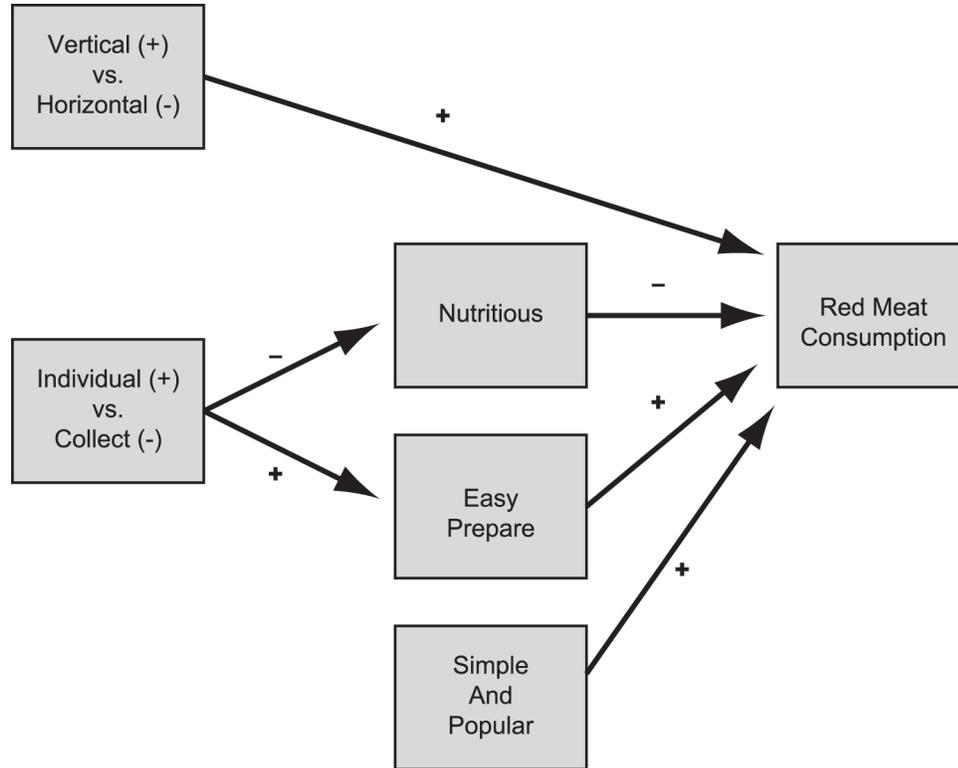
via the direct route. Given that the direct route occurs when consumers are evaluating the symbolic meaning of a product (e.g., Allen and Ng, 1999), this finding implies that 1) red meat symbolises social hierarchy in Brazil, and 2) Brazilian consumers are evaluating that meaning when forming attitudes toward red meat and related behaviour outcomes. Consistent with the latter, the study found that red meat consumption and the Symbolic Meaning and Affective Judgement Tendency scale were positively correlated, signifying that individuals who have a predisposition to examine the image of a product consume more red meat. These findings confirm those of Allen and Ng (2003), and partially the results found by Allen et al. (2000), and Allen and Baines (2002). Red meat consumption is positively associated verticalism, which in turn relates to support for inequality and power values (Singelis et al., 1995), as predicted by Allen and Ng. Yet, and more importantly, this also holds true for Brazilians.

When considering human values, the present research investigates one aspect of the subjective culture. For Triandis (1996), the analysis of the subjective culture leads to the understanding of how people perceive, categorize, develop their beliefs, and give value to their environment, which was demonstrated by our results. But also important is that the present research provided evidence for the etic validity of Allen's two-route model in collectivist cultures. In other words, the two routes by which human values influence product preference appear to be of universal equivalence. Furthermore, the more individuals endorse vertical values, the higher the preference for red meat consumption, independent of their culture. And what is arguably more important, this relationship follows a direct route. Moreover, what has been demonstrated by this finding is that the

relationship between vertical values and red meat consumption is present in the vertical, collectivist Brazilian culture. Triandis and Gelfand (1998) suggested that the discrepancy between incomes within a country could be used as a measure of verticality. This measure would be "the ratio of the incomes of the top 20% to the bottom 20% of the population of the country" (p. 126). Triandis and Gelfand observed that in 1993 this ratio in Brazil was about 35, and there are reasons to believe that the ratio has increased since then (Santos, 1991; Ettorre, 1998; Torres, 1999). Although we can often find larger differences among the sub-cultures within a country than between cultures across countries, if the argument about the etic validity of the Model is correct, then we can assume that choice between the routes for product preference and the symbolism attached to the product is universal. Again, more samples for different countries must be included in order to provide a strong basis for this argument.

It is important to note that meat was chosen because many people tend to consume more meat when compared to other foods (e.g., National Diet and Nutrition Survey, 1998), meat appears to be the central food in Western culture (e.g., Douglas, 1973), and there appears to be a consensus among sociologists and anthropologists about the human values that red meat symbolize (i.e., hierarchy and inequality, or simply stated, verticality)(e.g., Adams, 1990; Douglas, 1973; Fiddes, 1991; Heisley, 1990; Sanday, 1981; Twigg, 1983). As a result, our findings suggested that Brazilian consumers use their vertical values to evaluate the hierarchy and inequality values symbolized by red meat. Establishing the extent to which human values have an impact in the consumption of food items would have important implications for models of food choice.

Psychological theories suggest that food evaluation stems from previous positive or negative experiences with a food (e.g., Garcia, McGowan, & Green, 1972). Less understood is how the culturally constructed meanings of food and aspects of the individual's self-construct, such as their human values, influence the food evaluation and choice of food. Research about this topic may give important contributions to theories of food choices, and consequently, to health promotion programs.

It could be argued that the image of red meat itself was not measured in the present research. However, as described in the two-route model (Allen, 2002), values that influence product choice via the direct route reveal the image of the product. When the individual is using the indirect route, he or she is performing a mathematical, calculative evaluation of the product's utility. But, when the direct route is being used, the individual is focusing the attention directly on the image of the product. The value itself represents the product image. Therefore, the lack of measurement about the red meat image does not appear to be a limitation of the study. Yet, for the individual, red meat may symbolize a lot of things other than verticality. Red meat may symbolize, as suggested elsewhere, masculinity (Adams, 1990), what not measured here, representing one limitation of the study.

Future research should also include other cultures, especially those low in hierarchy. In other words, future research should also be conducted at the country level of analysis "in which the unit of analysis is the nation" (Smith, Dugan, Peterson, & Leung, 1998; p. 358). Thus, the findings of those studies will be applicable to cultures, and not to individuals; within-culture (i.e., individual-level) sources of variance will not be discussed at the country level of analysis. This suggestion appears to be important because, as noted by Klein, Dansereau and Hall (1994), few theorists and researchers address country-level issues in their studies. Klein et al. (1994) discuss that a result found in a study that is focused on one level of analysis cannot necessarily be generalized to another level. Therefore, the inclusion of other countries in future research will provide a true test of the 'etic' validity (Triandis, 1996) of the model, across a number of cultures.

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