
Values and lifestyles of individualists and collectivists: a study on Chinese, Japanese, British and US consumers

Tao Sun
Marty Horn and
Dennis Merritt

The authors

Tao Sun is Assistant Professor, Department of Marketing Communication, Emerson College, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. **Marty Horn** is Senior Vice-president, Group Director of Strategic Planning and Research and **Dennis Merritt** is Senior Consultant, both at DDB Needham Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Keywords

China, Japan, United Kingdom, United States of America, Lifestyles, National cultures

Abstract

Based on a multi-national lifestyle survey, this study investigated consumer lifestyle differences between individualist cultures (Britain and the USA) and collectivist cultures (China and Japan). Congruent with previous findings on values and lifestyles differences between idiocentrics (individualists) and allocentrics (collectivists) at the emic level (USA), this etic-level (cross-cultural) study found that consumers in the individualist cultures, compared with those in the collectivist cultures, were more brand-savvy, travel-oriented, satisfied with their lives, financially satisfied and optimistic. They were also more likely to consider themselves better managers of finances. Findings that were incongruent with those at the emic level were also discussed (e.g. dressing behavior, opinion leadership and impulsive buying). Additional findings were provided as well (e.g. family orientation, gender roles, safety/security). The findings carry practical implications for international marketers whose products/services cut across both individualist and collectivist cultures.

Electronic access

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at
www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
www.emeraldinsight.com/0736-3761.htm

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Cross-cultural researchers have attempted to use different constructs to explain cultural differences in consumer behavior. The dimension of individualism/collectivism is among those frequently evoked. For this dimension, researchers have tried to study the dichotomous construct and its effects not only at the cross-cultural level (etic), but also at the individual level (emic) (where idiocentricism stands for individualism and allocentricism for collectivism). The study by Dutta-Bergman and Wells (2002) described the values and lifestyles of idiocentrics and allocentrics at the emic level (within the USA). They called on future researchers to explore their original lifestyle questions at the etic level. Answering this call, this paper represents a follow-up study to test the individualism/collectivism theory by investigating some of the same values and lifestyles questions at the etic level – between two individualist cultures (Britain and the USA) and two collectivist cultures (China and Japan). Analogous results conducted at the emic and etic levels would strengthen the individualism/collectivism theory. On the other hand, disparate results based on the two-level analyses of the same phenomena will qualify the theory as weak or insufficient in explaining certain cross-cultural differences (Dutta-Bergman and Wells, 2002). More importantly, the cross-cultural findings on consumer lifestyle differences will carry significant implications for global marketers to position and promote their products/services in different cultural settings.

Individualism/collectivism

The distinction between individualistic and collectivist societies is crucial to the cross-cultural understanding of consumer behavior (Maheswaran and Shavitt, 2000). This dimension has been identified as one of the major aspects of culture (e.g. Hofstede, 1980) and is perhaps one of the most significant ways in which societies differ. The complexity of the dimension has been indicated in studies of motivation, affect, cognition, self-concept, and social behavior (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow and Triandis, 1991; Triandis *et al.*, 1990; Shkodriani and Gibbons, 1995).

Generally speaking, this dimension refers to the relationship one perceives between one's self and the group one belongs to (Hawkins *et al.*, 2001). Individualism was defined as emotional independence from "groups, organizations, and other collectivities" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 221).



Compared to people in collectivist cultures, people in individualistic societies tend to be more self-centered, self-enhanced; less willing to sacrifice for their in-groups, less loyal and emotionally attached to in-groups, and less concerned with their in-group needs, goals, norms, interests, integrity and consequences. They tend to consider the individual self as the basic unit and a source of life identity, purpose and goals (Hofstede, 1991; Kagitcibasi, 1997). On the other hand, those in collectivist cultures value their group membership, respect group processes and decisions, and expect other in-group members to look after or protect them in case of needs or crisis. For them, keeping good and harmonious relationships inside their in-group is a priority; and avoiding loss of face is important (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). Their identity is based on the strong and cohesive in-groups to which they belong. In collectivist cultures, cooperation is high within in-groups, but is unlikely when the other person belongs to an out-group. As a comparison, people in individualist cultures are good at forming new in-groups and getting along with those from out-groups (Hofstede, 1980; Hui and Triandis, 1986; Triandis *et al.*, 1988).

Idiocentricism and allocentricism

Often orthogonal to each other, “allocentricism” and “idiocentrism” were personality traits that refer to collectivism and individualism respectively, at the individual emic level (Triandis *et al.*, 1985). Idiocentrism emphasize self-reliance, competition, uniqueness, hedonism, and emotional distance from in-groups. Allocentrism emphasize interdependence, sociability, and family integrity; they take into account the needs and concerns of in-group members (Cross *et al.*, 2000). In all cultures, there are both idiocentrism and allocentrism in different proportions (Triandis *et al.*, 2001). The allocentrism in individualist cultures are more likely than the idiocentrism to join groups (e.g. gangs, unions). The idiocentrism in collectivist cultures are more likely than the allocentrism to feel oppressed by their home culture and to seek a departure from it (Triandis, 2002). Allocentrism was found to be correlated positively with social support and negatively with alienation and anomie; idiocentrism was found to be correlated positively with achievement orientation and perceived loneliness (Triandis *et al.*, 1988). Allocentrism and idiocentrism were also labeled as interdependence and independence respectively (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

In a study focused on the individual-level manifestations of individualism-collectivism,

Dutta-Bergman and Wells (2002) explored values and lifestyles of idiocentrism and allocentrism within an individualist culture (the USA). Based on five self-concept variables from the 1995 DDB Needham Life Style data, Dutta-Bergman and Wells used the technique of a median split to draw a comparison between ideocentrism and allocentrism among US consumers. They found that compared with allocentric consumers, idiocentric consumers were more satisfied with their lives, more financially satisfied and optimistic, more likely to be opinion leaders, more innovative in terms of product usage, more fashion-conscious, more brand-savvy, more impulsive in relation to buying. Idiocentrism also considered themselves better managers of finances. Compared with idiocentrism, allocentrism were found to be more health-conscious, and more into food preparation. The authors argued that the implications drawn from the comprehensive analysis of idiocentrism and allocentrism might be extrapolated to the realm of individualism/collectivism at a cross-cultural level. They believed that the process of generating knowledge about the etic and emic level phenomena could be cyclical. While etic research suggests a nomological framework for emic studies, findings from emic research provide theoretical questions to be explored at the cross-cultural level. To achieve a convergence between the two levels, Dutta-Bergman and Wells proposed some lifestyle questions to be explored at the etic (cross-cultural) level, just as they did at the emic level (in the USA). For example, they wonder whether individualistic and collectivist cultures also differ in terms of impulse buying and fashion consciousness, just to name a few.

This paper tries to answer some of the important research questions raised by Dutta-Bergman and Wells. Specifically, the study seeks to understand whether individualistic and collectivist cultures could demonstrate similar lifestyle differences in terms of impulse buying, fashion consciousness/personal appearance, food preparation, health consciousness/concerns, brand consciousness, money management, life satisfaction, financial satisfaction and optimism, opinion leadership, and product innovativeness. In addition, the study also examines cross-cultural differences in terms of family orientation and consumers' security concerns and attitude toward gender roles.

Methodology

In this study, samples from China and Japan constitute collectivist cultures and subjects from

Britain and the USA individualist cultures. The suggestion that China and Japan are predominantly collectivist and Britain and the USA primarily individualist cultures has been consistently and repeatedly documented (e.g. Hofstede, 1980).

Our data were based on the 2001 DDB Needham multinational brand capital study, which includes a total of 23 countries. China, Japan, Britain and the USA were selected for this study. The questionnaire contained a list of questions about consumer attitudes, interests, opinions and activities, which covered such areas as:

- diet/nutrition;
- cooking/baking;
- health/health concerns;
- brand names;
- buying behavior;
- current financial concerns;
- future financial outlook;
- money management;
- socio-political attitudes/conservatism;
- religion;
- energy/environment;
- life satisfaction;
- opinion leadership;
- personal appearance/fashion;
- home and family; and
- eating/ordering out.

The data also included some demographic variables. All questions concerning attitudes, interests and opinions asked in China, Japan and UK used a four-point scale, where 1 means “definitely disagree”, 2 “moderately disagree”, 3 “moderately agree”, and 4 “definitely agree”. This differs from the six-point scale used in the USA, where 1 represents “definitely disagree”, 2 “generally disagree”, 3 “moderately disagree”, 4 “moderately agree”, 5 “generally agree”, and 6 “definitely agree”. For the sake of comparison, the US six-point scale was recoded to the four-point scale via the following conversions: 1 = 1; 2 or 3 = 2; 4 or 5 = 3; and 6 = 4. Among the four nations, the activities questions were all measured on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 “none in past year”, 2 “1-4 times”, 3 “5-8 times”, 4 “9-11 times”, 5 “12-24 times”, 6 “25-51 times”, and 7 “52+ times”.

Ipsos-Reid, the research firm in charge of the international portion of the brand capital study, engaged its research partners to undergo an extensive review of a draft questionnaire. The final questionnaire resulting from this was sent to all research partners for local translation. As an additional quality control measure, Ipsos-Reid back-translated all versions of the questionnaire using its pool of foreign bilingual contractors. Concerns, errors and observations were

communicated to each of its partners, and further changes and modifications were made. The revised translated questionnaires were sent back to Ipsos-Reid for yet another round of back-translation and any further modifications were made to the final versions. Each of the research partners then proceeded with formatting the final translated version(s). Final formatted questionnaires were sent to DDB Needham for formal approval before mass production and data collection began. In all countries, the questionnaires were self-administered. In certain markets (e.g. China), particularly where door-to-door recruiting/interviewing was used, interviewers were present during the interview providing direction or answering questions when required. In all non-USA countries, data were entered locally with 100 percent verification. Questionnaires were entered twice to ensure complete accuracy. Furthermore, each local research firm was required to process the data and produce top-line results. Ipsos-Reid Data independently processed the local data and also produced top-line results. The two sets of top-lines were compared and verified for a 100 percent consistency.

Household panels were used in Japan, the UK and the USA, where panelists had already been screened for long self-completed questionnaires and were simply sent a questionnaire for completion. The surveys were collected in Japan between October 18 and November 19 (2001), in Britain between November 6 and November 27 (2001), and in the USA between October 19 and November 26 (2001). In China, recruiting was done using a random door-to-door approach in ten major cities, which cover the nation’s all main regions. Samples were proportionately distributed across these cities based on actual population distribution. The surveys were collected between November 3 and November 26 (2001).

Over-recruiting was done to ensure that a minimum of 800 fully completed questionnaires was returned for each market. To create a representative sample, the final data sets were weighted in each country based on demographic variables, such as gender, age, race and marital status for the USA, and gender, age, region, household, student status, work status, and marital status for the other three countries. It should be noted that in each market, only respondents aged 18 to 69 were included in the sample. A total of 827 samples were collected in China, 802 in Japan, 802 in UK, and 1,553 in the USA.

In order to find out meaningful and unambiguous lifestyle differences between individualist and collectivist consumers, three steps were taken in sequence. First, independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to examine lifestyle

differences between individualist (with Britain and the USA pooled) and collectivist (with China and Japan combined) cultures in general. Second, as the composite results might not reveal a concrete picture about the cross-cultural differences (e.g. the two-country means might be skewed by extreme ratings from one country), individual country means were also compared to make sure that on those lifestyle differences identified in the first step. The two nations representing collectivist cultures (China and Japan) show consistently different patterns of mean ratings from the other two nations representing individualist cultures (Britain and the USA). Third, since there might exist cross-cultural scalar differences in approaching the metric scales (Tafarodi *et al.*, 1999), and the comparisons of mean ratings across countries might be still insufficient to clarify interpretational ambiguities (e.g. the differences might be simply in extent, not in kind), the original four-point scale was recoded into a dichotomous scale (agreement vs disagreement). This was done to make certain that consumers from collectivist nations would demonstrate similar patterns of agreement/disagreement (either higher or lower) on the same items identified in the previous two steps, the patterns that are different than those consumers from individualist nations. Only those items that pass the criteria in all the above three steps were presented in the following results section.

Results

Findings that corresponded to the emic level

The following findings on values and lifestyles at the etic level were analogous to those found at the emic level by Dutta-Bergman and Wells (2002).

Life satisfaction

Generally speaking, consumers from individualist cultures indicated high levels of satisfaction with their current lives. Individualist consumers rated higher on the statements, "I am very satisfied with the way things are going in my life these days" (Collectivist consumers = 2.47; Individualist consumers = 2.76; $p < 0.01$; hereafter called "Collectivist" and "Individualist" respectively); and "I would be content to live in the same town the rest of my life" (Collectivist = 2.59; Individualist = 2.86; $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, consumers from collectivist cultures were more pessimistic about their current states of being. They rated higher on the statements, "I dread the future" (Collectivist = 2.34; Individualist = 1.81; $p < 0.01$); "I wish I knew how to relax" (Collectivist = 2.66;

Individualist = 2.39; $p < 0.01$); "If I had my life to live over, I would do something entirely different" (Collectivist = 2.89; Individualist = 2.71; $p < 0.01$); and "I wish I could leave my present life and do something entirely different" (Collectivist = 2.50; Individualist = 2.20; $p < 0.01$). Compared with consumers from China and Japan, consumers from the USA and Britain were consistently more satisfied with their current lives. Chinese and Japanese consumers were more eager to switch to something different if given the chance (see Tables I and II).

Financial satisfaction/optimism and money management

Compared with consumers from collectivist cultures, those from individualist cultures reported a higher level of financial satisfaction and optimism. They rated higher on the statements "Our family income is high enough to satisfy nearly all our important desires" (Collectivist = 2.06; Individualist = 2.63; $p < 0.01$), and "I pretty much spend for today and let tomorrow bring what it will" (Collectivist = 1.86; Individualist = 1.96; $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, collectivist-culture consumers were less likely to consider themselves good managers of finances. They agreed more with the statements "I do not know much about investing money" (Collectivist = 2.78; Individualist = 2.55; $p < 0.01$) and "I am not very good at saving money" (Collectivist = 2.58; Individualist = 2.28; $p < 0.01$). Specifically, consumers from Britain and the USA were more confident about their abilities of financial management, and more financially satisfied and optimistic (see Tables I and II).

Brand-savvy shoppers

Compared to consumers from collectivist cultures, those from individualist cultures indicated a higher tendency to stick to well-known brand names (Collectivist = 2.05; Individualist = 2.51; $p < 0.01$) (also see Tables I and II).

Travel

Consumers from individualist cultures showed a higher inclination to explore the world. They agreed more with the statement, "I like to visit places that are totally different from my home" (Collectivist = 2.74; Individualist = 2.91; $p < 0.01$) (also see Tables I and II).

Findings that contradict the emic level

The following findings at the etic level contradicted those found at the emic level by Dutta-Bergman and Wells.

Table I Mean ratings of lifestyle statements among four nations

Lifestyle variables	China (n = 827)	Japan (n = 802)	UK (n = 802)	USA (n = 1,553)
<i>Life satisfaction</i>				
I am very satisfied with the way things are going in my life these days	2.43	2.51	2.77	2.76
I would be content to live in the same town the rest of my life	2.51	2.68	2.73	2.93
I dread the future	2.03	2.66	1.82	1.81
I wish I knew how to relax	2.77	2.54	2.34	2.42
If I had my life to live over again, I would do something entirely different	2.88	2.91	2.72	2.71
I wish I could leave my present life and do something entirely different	2.46	2.54	2.19	2.21
<i>Financial satisfaction/optimism and money management</i>				
Our family income is high enough to satisfy nearly all our important desires	1.75	2.38	2.61	2.64
I pretty much spend for today and let tomorrow bring what it will	1.86	1.86	1.92	1.98
I don't know much about investing money	2.67	2.90	2.52	2.57
I am not very good at saving money	2.48	2.69	2.19	2.33
<i>Brand name consciousness</i>				
I try to stick to well-known brand names	2.21	1.89	2.40	2.57
<i>Travel</i>				
I like to visit places that are totally different from my home	2.63	2.85	2.93	2.90
<i>Personal appearance</i>				
Dressing well is an important part of my life	2.91	2.90	2.54	2.52
<i>Unplanned or impulsive buying</i>				
I am an impulse buyer	2.37	2.30	2.20	2.26
I very seldom make detailed plans	2.55	2.69	2.35	2.25
<i>In-group contact/influence</i>				
I like to be sure to see the movies everybody is talking about	2.25	2.11	1.89	2.10
My opinions on things do not count very much	2.28	2.30	2.10	2.18
I hate to lose even in friendly competition	2.93	2.51	2.06	2.34
<i>Family orientation</i>				
Children are the most important thing in a marriage	2.89	3.10	2.35	2.50
I feel guilty when I serve convenience foods to my family	2.27	2.97	2.14	2.16
We usually have a large family breakfast on weekends	2.76	2.66	1.72	2.18
I worry a lot about the effects of environmental pollution on my family's health	3.11	2.90	2.60	2.65
My home life is chaotic	1.93	1.90	2.10	1.94
<i>Gender roles</i>				
A woman's place is in the home	2.04	2.16	1.53	1.82
Men are smarter than women	2.33	2.04	1.53	1.72
Men are naturally better leaders than women	2.51	2.38	1.89	2.07
The father should be the boss in the house	2.78	3.16	1.88	2.24
<i>Security/stability</i>				
On a job, security is more important than money	2.93	3.13	2.76	2.73
Changes in routine disturb me	2.38	2.41	2.21	2.32
When making an investment, maximum safety is more important than high interest rates	2.85	3.13	2.82	2.68

Note: Items measured on a four-point scale, where 1 means "definitely disagree", 2 "moderately disagree", 3 "moderately agree", and 4 "definitely agree"

Table II Percent of agreement in lifestyle statements among four nations

Lifestyle variables	China (n = 827)	Japan (n = 802)	UK (n = 802)	USA (n = 1,553)
<i>Life satisfaction</i>				
I am very satisfied with the way things are going in my life these days	50	53	68	68
I would be content to live in the same town the rest of my life	55	58	62	72
I dread the future	30	57	22	21
I wish I knew how to relax	70	52	41	45
If I had my life to live over again, I would do something entirely different	71	68	60	58
I wish I could leave my present life and do something entirely different	50	52	38	38
<i>Financial satisfaction/optimism and money management</i>				
Our family income is high enough to satisfy nearly all our important desires	16	45	59	62
I pretty much spend for today and let tomorrow bring what it will	23	21	26	26
I do not know much about investing money	60	70	52	53
I am not very good at saving money	50	61	36	43
<i>Brand name consciousness</i>				
I try to stick to well-known brand names	34	19	47	57
<i>Travel</i>				
I like to visit places that are totally different from my home	57	68	74	75
<i>Personal appearance</i>				
Dressing well is an important part of my life	74	73	54	53
<i>Unplanned or impulsive buying</i>				
I am an impulse buyer	43	41	37	40
I very seldom make detailed plans	53	62	41	36
<i>In-group contact/influence</i>				
I like to be sure to see the movies everybody is talking about	38	32	25	30
My opinions on things do not count very much	35	34	29	31
I hate to lose even in a friendly competition	73	49	30	42
<i>Family orientation</i>				
Children are the most important thing in a marriage	67	78	43	53
I feel guilty when I serve convenience foods to my family	38	75	33	32
We usually have a large family breakfast on weekends	64	55	20	39
I worry a lot about the effects of environmental pollution on my family's health	83	74	60	61
My home life is chaotic	23	12	31	26
<i>Gender roles</i>				
A woman's place is in the home	29	32	13	23
Men are smarter than women	43	22	8	16
Men are naturally better leaders than women	51	43	25	31
The father should be the boss in the house	64	82	25	40
<i>Security/stability</i>				
On a job, security is more important than money	74	85	67	69
Changes in routine disturb me	45	43	36	41
When making an investment, maximum safety is more important than high interest rates	71	73	64	59

Note: Among the respondents in each nation, shows how many of them agreed with each of the above statements (percent)

Personal appearance

Consumers from collectivist cultures were more concerned about their personal appearance and about how they are seen by others. They rated higher on the statement "Dressing well is an important part of my life" (Collectivist = 2.90; Individualist = 2.53; $p < 0.01$) (also see Tables I and II).

Impulsive/unplanned buying

Compared to consumers from individualist cultures, those from collectivist cultures tended to be more likely to claim themselves as impulsive buyers and unplanned consumers. They consistently loaded higher on the statements like "I am an impulse buyer" (Collectivist = 2.34; Individualist = 2.24; $p < 0.01$) and "I very seldom make detailed plans" (Collectivist = 2.62; Individualist = 2.28; $p < 0.01$) (also see Tables I and II).

Additional findings

The following results are additional values and lifestyles questions investigated at the etic level.

In-group contact/influence

While consumers from collectivist cultures were more willing to be influenced by their in-group members, they were less likely to consider themselves as opinion leaders. On the one hand, collectivist-culture consumers loaded higher on the statement "I like to be sure to see the movies everybody is talking about" (Collectivist = 2.18; Individualist = 2.03; $p < 0.01$); on the other hand, they rated higher on the statement "My opinions on things do not count very much" (Collectivist = 2.29; Individualist = 2.15; $p < 0.01$).

Collectivist-culture consumers cared more about saving their faces in front of their in-group members. They loaded higher on the statement, "I hate to lose even in a friendly competition" (Collectivist = 2.73; Individualist = 2.24; $p < 0.01$) (also see Tables I and II).

Family orientation

Consumers from collectivist cultures were more family oriented. They rated higher on the following statements, "Children are the most important thing in a marriage" (Collectivist = 2.95; Individualist = 2.45; $p < 0.01$); "I feel guilty when I serve convenience foods to my family" (Collectivist = 2.61; Individualist = 2.15; $p < 0.01$); "We usually have a large family breakfast on weekends" (Collectivist = 2.71; Individualist = 2.02; $p < 0.01$); and "I worry a lot about the effects of environmental pollution on my family's health" (Collectivist = 3.00; Individualist = 2.63; $p < 0.01$). On the other

hand, compared to consumers from individualist cultures, those from collectivist cultures rated lower on the statement "My home life is chaotic" (Collectivist = 1.91; Individualist = 2.00; $p < 0.01$). Specifically speaking, consumers from Japan and China were invariably more family-oriented than those from Britain and the USA (see Tables I and II).

Females' role and perception

Consumers from collectivist cultures were more conservative in their attitudes toward the gender roles in the society. They rated higher on the statements, "A woman's place is in the home" (Collectivist = 2.10; Individualist = 1.72; $p < 0.01$); "Men are better at investing money than women" (Collectivist = 2.45; Individualist = 2.08; $p < 0.01$); "Men are smarter than women" (Collectivist = 2.19; Individualist = 1.66; $p < 0.01$); "Men are naturally better leaders than women" (Collectivist = 2.45; Individualist = 2.01; $p < 0.01$); and "The father should be the boss in the house" (Collectivist = 2.97; Individualist = 2.12; $p < 0.01$). Tables I and II showed consistently higher ratings for Chinese and Japanese consumers, as compared to their British and US counterparts, on the specific statements regarding the gender roles in their societies.

Security and stability

Consumers from collectivist cultures were less tolerable of risks and uncertainty. They agreed more with the statements, "On a job, security is more important than money" (Collectivist = 3.03; Individualist = 2.74; $p < 0.01$); "Changes in routine disturb me" (Collectivist = 2.40; Individualist = 2.28; $p < 0.01$); "When making an investment, maximum safety is more important than high interest rates" (Collectivist = 2.99; Individualist = 2.72; $p < 0.01$). Particularly, Chinese and Japanese consumers were more likely to play safe in their lives. They tended to stick to their routine lifestyles (see Tables I and II).

Discussion

A current debate in cultural psychology is about the right approach for conducting research across cultures. The emic approach favors within-culture investigation, arguing that theorizing is culture specific and as a result should be inductive. This orientation demands that a structural pattern be identified during the analysis of a culture. In contrast, the etic approach advocates generalization and focuses on things universal to all cultures. Both emic and etic approaches are valid and contribute to our understanding of

consumer behavior in the global context. These two perspectives can converge and enrich cultural research (Maheswaran and Shavitt, 2000). This study adopts such a convergence approach in hopes of gaining a better understanding of cross-cultural lifestyle differences.

Our etic-level findings revealed some of the similar patterns of values and lifestyles of individualists (idiocentrics) and collectivists (allocentrics) discovered at the emic level. Similar to the differences between idiocentrics and allocentrics from an individualist culture like the USA, consumers from individualist cultures (Britain and the USA), as compared to those from collectivist cultures (China and Japan), were more brand-savvy, travel-oriented, satisfied with their lives in general, financially satisfied and optimistic in specific. They were also more likely to consider themselves better managers of finances. These analogous findings further boost our confidence that these characteristics help us make a distinction between individualist and collectivist tendencies. However, no significant differences were identified in this study between collectivist-culture consumers and individualist-culture consumers in terms of food preparation, health consciousness/concerns, and product innovativeness, as were done by Dutta-Bergman and Wells at the emic level.

The findings that those from individualist cultures reported more satisfaction with their lives replicated previous reports that individualism is associated with positive subjective well-being, another way to describe life satisfaction (Arrindell *et al.*, 1997; Diener *et al.*, 1995; Basabe *et al.*, 2002). For example, Diener *et al.* (1995) found that only individualism persistently correlated with life satisfaction when other predictors were controlled. Perception of life satisfaction is influenced by how one consumer compares his/her own life with those around them (Smith *et al.*, 1989). It was found that higher collectivism scores were associated with an increased desire to make upward comparisons and a decreased desire to make downward comparisons (Chung and Mallery, 1999). As people in collectivist cultures tend to live closer to each other (physically and psychologically), it might provide more opportunities for them to make upward comparisons. The more upward comparisons collectivist-culture individuals make, the more disgruntled and frustrated they might become with their own states of being.

According to attribution theory, if consumers attribute failures to meet expectations as the fault of outside parties other than their own behavior, they will feel more dissatisfied (Mowen and Minor, 1997). While collectivist-culture consumers tend

to portray the self as interrelating to close others, individualist-culture consumers are inclined to describe the self as distinct from others and emphasize separateness and self-sufficiency (Singelis, 1994). Accordingly individualist-culture consumers should be more likely to consider life contentment as a domain of their own. Because of this high internality, individualist-culture consumers might feel more responsible for not only their successes, but also their failures (Diener *et al.*, 1995). As a result, they might feel less dissatisfied as compared to collectivist consumers, who might be more prone to attribute their life successes and failures to their in-groups. Collectivists not only have higher expectations from their in-groups, but also they are more concerned about making their in-group members happy. Thus highly contextual and relational collectivists might be more likely to tie their own perceived happiness to the happiness of their in-groups. It is, therefore, possible that in such self-administered surveys as used in this study, collectivist consumers' own perceived happiness level might be tempered by their propensity to evaluate the overall happiness of not only themselves, but also their in-groups (especially their closed family members). As a comparison, self-centered individualist consumers might simply consider well-being as their individual pursuit and thus enjoy absolute say over their life satisfaction levels. Since financial satisfaction is part and parcel of overall life satisfaction, it is conceivable that individualists also reported higher levels of financial satisfaction at both emic and etic levels.

As our results indicated, while hedonistic individualist-culture consumers (Triandis, 1995) were more brand-savvy and travel-oriented than their collectivist counterparts (a result that corresponded to the emic-level findings), they were also less conscious of their dressing behavior (which contradicted the emic-level results). Also incongruent with the emic-level findings, collectivist consumers were more likely to claim themselves as impulsive buyers. These disparate results based on the two-level analyses of the same phenomena suggest two possible scenarios. One is that appearance consciousness and impulsive buying are trait indicators of neither individualism nor collectivism. The other scenario is that these constructs might have been interpreted differently across cultures. Dressing well (a form of conspicuous consumption) might convey a sense of individuality among consumers in individualist cultures. However, it might be interpreted by collectivist-culture consumers as a way to demonstrate their in-group identity, show their concerns with in-group norms, follow in-group

trends and avoid loss of face in front of in-group members.

Impulsive buying can be an expression of self-identity among individualist-culture consumers. For example, in a study on British consumers, Dittmar *et al.* (1995) found that men tended to buy impulsively instrumental and leisure items projecting independence and activity, while women tended to buy symbolic and self-expressive goods concerned with appearance and emotional aspects of self. However, for the collectivist-culture consumers, impulse buying might be considered a hedonic desire that should be consciously suppressed in favor of group goals and interests (Kacen and Lee, 2002), and even a buying-related "sin" that should be constantly reflected upon. Kitayama *et al.* (1997) found that for people with dominant independent self views, self-esteem hinges primarily on identifying and expressing positive features of self while avoiding and discounting negative features, whereas for people with dominant interdependent self views, self-esteem hinges on the incorporation of both positive and negative self information. The individuals concerned with maintaining connections with others may focus on fulfilling obligations and avoiding mistakes and, may even focus on potentially negative aspects of the self and situations to avoid future social mishaps, so that they could become a better, more unified part of the relevant social unit (Lee *et al.*, 2000). As individuals with a dominant independent self are more likely to focus on positive versus negative information regarding themselves, it is not surprising that the individualist-culture consumers were more liable to claim themselves as impulsive buyers, since they might have considered impulsive buying as positive self information. Actually Kacen and Lee (2002) found that people in individualist cultures usually ignore the potential negative consequences of their impulsive buying behavior and prefer to focus on the positive consequences and on their own feelings and goals. On the contrary, collectivist-culture consumers were found to be more prone to consider themselves as impulsive buyers in this study, possibly because they tend to focus on this potentially negative part of information for the purposes of self-criticism and self-improvement. However, the self-reported buying impulsiveness does not necessarily imply that collectivist-culture consumers will make impulsive buys more than individualist-culture consumers do. Kacen and Lee (2002) found a weaker correlation between the self-reported buying impulsiveness trait and the frequency of impulsive buying behavior for collectivists as compared to individualists. They also found that overall, Asian collectivist consumers engaged in

less impulsive buying than Caucasian individualist consumers did. Previous researchers have identified such inconsistent attitude-behavior relationships among collectivists (Kashima *et al.*, 1992). This inconsistency among collectivists is probably due to the high-context nature of the collectivist culture, where most of the information communicated is located in the physical context or internalized in the person's behavior, but very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message (e.g. Hall, 1977), as appeared in the self-reported surveys.

The suggestion that people in collectivist cultures tend to be more self-effacing and self-depreciating (e.g. Triandis, 2001) might also help explain why collectivist consumers were less likely to consider themselves better managers of finances, less likely to express satisfaction with their lives and to claim that their opinions count much. Lee *et al.* (2000) found that those with a chronically accessible interdependent self are sensitive to the presence or absence of negative features, thus having a bias toward prevention focus; whereas those with a chronically accessible independent self are sensitive to the presence or absence of positive features, having a bias toward promotion focus. They believed that the pessimism among the interdependent self might be driven by this kind of prevention focus. This perspective on regulatory focus might help further explain the more pessimistic life attitudes among the collectivist consumers. Chung and Mallery (1999) suggested that those high in collectivism might make upward comparisons motivated by self-depreciation. This upward comparison orientation might render collectivist consumers even more dissatisfied. On the contrary, the promotion-focused individualists might tend to overestimate their positive aspect, in this case, subjective wellbeing.

In an individualist culture like the USA, those with individualist traits (e.g. independent, assertive) are more likely to survive and succeed because this trait-culture match. This might explain why idiocentrics tend to claim themselves as opinion leaders. However, in a collectivist culture that emphasized connectedness and relationship (e.g. Triandis, 1995), the information (e.g. about product or service) flows more easily between ingroup members (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998) and individual experiences are more likely to be shared within in-groups. Consumer decisions are also more likely to be made with family or group members involved. As a result, people in a collectivist environment are probably more willing and therefore more likely to seek opinions from other in-group members (e.g. movies). Probably they are also more willing to

offer opinions to others, although they are reluctant to admit that their opinions count very much, due to their self-effacing and unassuming tendencies.

Implications for future research

Our additional findings suggested that consumers from individualist and collectivist cultures were different in terms of family orientation, and attitudes toward security and gender roles. However, items measuring these same factors appeared in the 1995 lifestyle data (analyzed by Dutta-Bergman and Wells), but were not reported as significant enough to distinguish individualism and collectivism at the emic level. The incongruent results might suggest that these concepts were not clear indicators of either individualism or collectivism. This qualifies the individualism/collectivism theory as insufficient in explaining these differences, as the dichotomy may overlook multifaceted social and historical situations. Kagitcibasi (1997) cautioned about the danger of using individualism/collectivism too readily to explain every behavioral variation between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Instead, Kagitcibasi urged researchers to show whether the observed differences are actually due to some other cultural/group characteristics that may at least partially overlap with individualism/collectivism. For example, some of those additional findings could be accounted for by other cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (1980), such as uncertainty avoidance (for differences in terms of security/safety), and power distance (for differences in terms of gender roles).

Hofstede's four dimensional constructs do not necessarily form opposite poles and may coexist in individuals or groups at the same time in different situations or within different target groups or toward different interactional goals (Kagitcibasi, 1997).

No single cross-cultural value construct can explain every lifestyle question. Other dimensions of cultural values can be and should be evoked to account for something unaccounted for by individualism/collectivism. The question is: "How can we be able to identify disparate values at the right time for the right place?" It is always a challenge to establish meaningful relationship between values and behaviors, if not a causal one. This study is such an attempt in this direction. However, to answer this question, future studies might want to take one step backward by exploring a deeper question: "Certain values are associated with particular attitudes, interests, opinions and consumption activities. Then what might be the

antecedents of these values?" When it comes to the value dimension of individualism/collectivism, Kagitcibasi (1990, 1996) suggested a main shift toward a combined (coexistence) model, as these two satisfy two basic human needs. For instance, individualism serves to gratify the human need for agency (autonomy) and collectivism the need for relatedness. Future studies may need to add these need sets to the mix of individualism/collectivism and specific behaviors. A structural equation model can be developed to explore these relationships. A possible causal pattern can be: The human need for agency (autonomy) leads to individualism, which in turn leads to brand name consciousness and exploratory behavior (e.g. traveling). These two basic needs can be expanded to include Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A future research question can be: "Is individualism tied to higher levels of Maslow's need hierarchy (e.g. self-esteem or self-enhancement) than collectivism is (e.g. safety or belongingness)?" The same question can be asked on the need or motivational antecedents of other value dimensions (e.g. power distance).

The degree of correspondence between values/attitudes and behavior is a perennial problem in social psychology. In collectivist contexts this would appear to be an even trickier issue, given the greater sensitivity to situational demands (e.g. subjective norms). In individualistic contexts, however, there are less situational constraints on behavior, which therefore might better reflect personal attitudes or values (Kagitcibasi, 1997). Collectivism depends very much on which in-group is present, in what context and what behavior was studied (Triandis *et al.*, 1988). The definition of the in-group, in collectivist cultures, depends to some extent on the situation. While "family and friends" is the main definition, fellow villagers, political allies, or the country as a whole (in time of war) become the relevant in-groups for particular behaviors. A person may be idiocentric in relation to specific in-groups, but allocentric in relation to other in-groups (Triandis *et al.*, 1988). Future research needs to look at ingroup as a possible mediating variable between individualism/collectivism and specific consumption behaviors.

The difference in behavior toward in-groups and out-groups is much larger in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures, where individuals do not feel as attached to any in-group when there are numerous in-groups to which they can be attached, and when each in-group provides only a small portion of their material and emotional security (Triandis *et al.*, 1988). In other words, collectivism is correlated with in-group harmony and sharp in-group-out-group

distinctions. Future cross-cultural lifestyle studies need to investigate whether consumers in collectivist cultures behave (e.g. dress) differently from out-group members and similarly within an ascribed in-group, and whether consumers in individualist cultures behave consistently in both group settings.

Extreme individualism has been found to be associated with certain forms of social pathology, such as high crime, suicide, divorce, child abuse, emotional stress, and physical and mental illness rates. Higher levels of social support in collectivist cultures make it more likely that a person will stop smoking, lose weight, persist at a task under unfavorable conditions (Triandis *et al.*, 1988). Future research might want to test the association between individualism/collectivism and deviant consumer behavior (e.g. drug and alcohol abuse) at both emic and etic levels. Triandis *et al.* (1990) proposed that individualism is tied to loneliness. Future studies can also investigate whether some loneliness-related consumer behaviors (e.g. pet ownership) correlate with individualism at both emic and etic levels.

Limitations

This study conducts cross-cultural comparisons based on the assumption that individualism/collectivism is an independent variable, and that China and Japan are collectivist cultures and British and US individualist cultures. In other words, the levels of individualism or collectivism of the subjects in these two cultures were not directly measured but were assumed on the basis of their national status. The argument for this assumption is that cultural elements change slowly. In societies with long traditions, the collectivism/individualism elements may persist, although the societies have become very complex (e.g. Japan). Hofstede (2001) also argued that value system was so stable (especially at the cultural level) that his data were still valid. However, more than 30 years have passed since his data were collected. Culture is dynamic and will change over time due to socio-economic changes. It must continually evolve in order to function in the best interests of a society (Wells and Prensky, 1996). As a result of information revolution, economic globalization and international travel, cross-cultural differences between traditionally individualist and collectivist nations might have been reduced. Future cross-cultural studies along individualism/collectivism need to measure this dimension in separate cultures to avoid any unsafe assumptions.

Nationals differ in a variety of ways (including culture) and these uncontrolled differences might

complicate the attribution of observed cross-cultural differences to cultural values (Maheswaran and Shavitt, 2000). Some of its alleged effects (observed behaviors) may be determined by other (societal) antecedent conditions (e.g. economic development). One reason for this attributional error is the tendency of psychologists toward psychological reductionism. They look for psychological explanations for behavioral regularities that may in fact have socio-economic bases (Kagitcibasi, 1997). How to control for socio-economic factors is another issue facing cross-cultural value researchers. This seems to be a lesser issue in this study since it included developed countries in both camps (Japan vs Britain and the USA).

Methodologically speaking, a lack of functional equivalence might have explained incongruous findings at both emic and etic levels in terms of attitudes toward personal appearance. The argument that individualist-culture consumers tend to view themselves as a separate entity from the social group, and thus express their personal feelings/opinions about a matter in a more direct manner than collectivist-culture consumers might also explain the self-reported differences. Another limitation of this study is due to the nature of secondary data used. As a result, it is impossible for us to look at our lifestyle variables at both levels at the same time on the same combined data, since the lifestyle data do not have questions that measure independent and interdependent self-construals (e.g. Singelis, 1994).

Conclusion

Despite the limitation of the secondary data that we used, our etic-level findings analogous to those emic-level results by Dutta-Bergman and Wells demonstrated the strength of the individualism/collectivism theory in explaining certain aspects of consumer lifestyles across cultures. However, individualism/collectivism cannot explain everything. Other dimensions of cultural values should be evoked to account for something unaccounted for by this dimension. Different cultural values should complement each other in explaining complex cross-cultural differences in consumer lifestyles.

We live in the information and globalization age, when information technologies are breaking down traditional barriers in time and space. However, converging technologies and disappearing income differences across countries will not necessarily lead to homogenization of consumer behaviors (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002). Instead, as the world economy is becoming more and more cross-

cultural, consumer behavior might become more heterogeneous because of newly exposed cultural differences, which make it increasingly important to understand values of national cultures and their impact on consumer behavior (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002). In the context of international marketing, cross-cultural value orientations can profoundly affect the way products are consumed in a culture. Thus knowledge and understanding of cultural values are essential to successful international marketing efforts (McCarty, 1994). It is hoped that marketers involved in the trade between Western and East Asian countries would benefit from this study by gaining an insight into how cross-cultural values are related to specific consumer behaviors.

References

- Arrindell, W.A., Hatzichristou, C., Wensink, J., Rosenberg, E., van Twillert, B., Stedema, J. and Meijer, D. (1997), "Dimensions of national culture as predictors of cross-national differences in subjective wellbeing", *Personality & Individual Differences*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 37-53.
- Basabe, N., Paez, D., Valencia, J., Gonzalez, J.L., Rime, B. and Diener, E. (2002), "Cultural dimensions, socio-economic development, climate, and emotional hedonic level", *Cognition and Emotion*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 103-25.
- Chung, T. and Mallery, P. (1999), "Social comparison, individualism-collectivism, and self-esteem in China and the United States", *Current Psychology*, Vol. 18 No. 4.
- Cross, S.E., Bacon, P. and Morris, M. (2000), "The relational-interdependent self-construal and relationships", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78, pp. 791-808.
- De Mooij, M. and Hofstede, G. (2002), "Convergence and divergence in consumer behavior: implications for international retailing", *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 78 No. 1, pp. 61-9.
- Diener, E., Diener, M. and Diener, C. (1995), "Factors affecting the subjective wellbeing of nations", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 69, pp. 851-64.
- Dittmar, H., Beattie, J. and Friese, S. (1995), "Gender identity and material symbols: objects and decision considerations in impulse purchases", *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 491-511.
- Dutta-Bergman, M.J. and Wells, W.D. (2002), "The values and lifestyles of idiocentrics and allocentrics in an individualist culture: a descriptive approach", *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 231-42.
- Gao, G. and Ting-Toomey, S. (1998), *Communicating Effectively with the Chinese*, Sage Publications, London.
- Hall, E.T. (1977), *Beyond Culture*, Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, NY.
- Hawkins, D.I., Best, R.J. and Coney, K.A. (2001), *Consumer Behavior: Building Marketing Strategy*, Irwin McGraw-Hill, Boston, MA.
- Hofstede, G. (1980), *Culture's Consequence: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, Sage Publications, Boston, MA.
- Hofstede, G. (1991), *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Hofstede, G. (2001), *Culture's Consequences*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Hui, C.H. and Triandis, H.C. (1986), "Individualism-collectivism: a study of cross-cultural researchers", *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 225-48.
- Kacen, J.J. and Lee, J.A. (2002), "The influence of culture on consumer impulsive buying behavior", *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 163-76.
- Kagitcibasi, C. (1990), "Family and socialization in cross-cultural perspective: a model of change", in Berman, J. (Ed.), *Cross-cultural Perspectives: Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 1989*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE.
- Kagitcibasi, C. (1996), *Family and Human Development across Cultures: A View from the Other Side*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Kagitcibasi, C. (1997), "Individualism and collectivism", in Berry, J.W., Segall, M.H. and Kagitcibasi, C. (Eds), *Handbook of Cross-cultural Psychology*, Vol. 3, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA.
- Kashima, Y., Segall, M.H., Tanaka, K. and Kashima, E. (1992), "Do people believe behaviors are consistent with attitudes? Toward a cultural psychology of attribution processes", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 31, pp. 111-24.
- Kitayama, S., Markus, H.R., Matsumoto, H. and Norasakkunkit, V. (1997), "Individual and collective processes in the construction of the self: self-enhancement in the United States and self-criticism in Japan", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 72, pp. 1245-67.
- Lee, A.Y., Aaker, J.L. and Gardner, W.L. (2000), "The pleasures and pains of distinct self-construals: the role of interdependence in regulatory focus", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78 No. 6, pp. 1122-34.
- McCarty, J.A. (1994), "The role of cultural value orientations in cross-cultural research and international marketing and advertising", in Englis, B. (Ed.), *Global and Multinational Advertising. Advertising and Consumer Psychology*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, pp. 23-45.
- Maheswaran, D. and Shavitt, S. (2000), "Issues and new directions in global consumer psychology", *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 59-66.
- Markus, H.R. and Kitayama, S. (1991), "Culture and the self: implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 98 No. 2, pp. 224-53.
- Mowen, J.C. and Minor, M. (1997), *Consumer Behavior*, Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Shkodriani, G.M. and Gibbons, J.L. (1995), "Individualism and collectivism among university students in Mexico and the United States", *The Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 135 No. 6, pp. 765-73.
- Singelis, T.M. (1994), "The measurement of independent and interdependent self-construals", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 20, pp. 580-91.
- Smith, R.H., Diener, E. and Wedell, D. (1989), "The range-frequency model of happiness applied to temporal and social comparisons", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 56, pp. 317-25.
- Tafarodi, R.W., Lang, J.M. and Smith, A.J. (1999), "Self-esteem and the cultural trade-off: evidence for the role of individualism-collectivism", *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, Vol. 30 No. 5, pp. 620-40.
- Trafimow, D. and Triandis, H.C. (1991), "Some tests of the distinction between the private self and the collective self", *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, Vol. 60 No. 5, pp. 649-55.

- Triandis, H.C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism*, Westview, Boulder, CO.
- Triandis, H.C. (2001), "Individualism-collectivism and personality", *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 69 No. 6, pp. 907-24.
- Triandis, H.C. (2002), "Cultural influences on personality", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 53, pp. 133-60.
- Triandis, H.C., Bontempo, R. and Villareal, M.J. (1988), "Individualism and collectivism: cross-cultural perspectives on self-in-group relationships", *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 323-38.
- Triandis, H.C., McCusker, C. and Hui, C.H. (1990), "Multimethod probes of individualism and collectivism", *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, Vol. 59 No. 5, pp. 1006-20.
- Triandis, H.C., Leung, K., Villareal, M.V. and Clark, F.L. (1985), "Allocentric versus idiocentric tendencies: convergent and discriminant validation", *Journal of Research in Personality*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 395-415.
- Triandis, H.C., Carnevale, P., Gelfand, M., Robert, C., Wasti, S.A., Probst, T., Kashima, E.S., Dragonas, T., Chan, D., Chen, X.P., Kim, U., de Dreu, C., van de Vliert, E., Iwao, S., Ohbuchi, K.I. and Schmitz, P. (2001), "Culture and deception in business negotiations: a multilevel analysis", *International Journal of Cross-cultural Management*, Vol. 1, pp. 73-90.
- Wells, W.D. and Prensky, D. (1996), *Consumer Behavior*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.
- Wong, N.Y. and Ahuvia, A.C. (1998), "Personal taste and family face: luxury consumption in Confucian and Western societies", *Psychology & Marketing*, Vol. 15 No. 5, pp. 423-41.

Further reading

- Ahuvia, A.C. (2002), "Individualism/collectivism and cultures of happiness: a theoretical conjecture on the relationship between consumption, culture and subjective wellbeing at the national level", *Journal of Happiness Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 23-36.
- Hofstede, G. and Bond, M. (1984), "Hofstede's culture dimensions: an independent validation using Rokeach's Value Survey", *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 417-33.

Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Differences between group and individual cultures matter to marketers

One of the commonest misconceptions around today is that globalization equates with

homogenization. This mistake is made time and again by advocates and opponents of free trade. There is little to be gained by assuming that what works in Connecticut will also work in Canton, nor is it the case that promoting US brands in China will somehow destroy that nation's culture and traditions.

For businesses seeking to expand in to new markets the issue of culture and its impact on consumer behavior often sits too far down the agenda – we spend a great deal of time worrying about logistics, translating the advertising, recruiting agents and setting the prices, but not enough thinking about how consumers might respond to our message, the way in which informal communications operate and the manner in which local people shop. And, as we read here in Sun, Horn and Merritt's research, one of the central determinants of these issues is the degree to which the people are "collectivists" or "individualists".

Constructing the right message

Self-centered, unwilling to make sacrifices for group interests, disloyal, not bothered about communal interest. Recognize the stereotype? These (rather polemical I admit) representations of an "individualistic" culture influence the way in which brand managers in the USA and UK develop strategies and, most importantly, create the messages associated with the brand.

The problem is that these individualist messages do not go down so well with people for whom group membership is important, who respect intra-group dynamics, seek protection from their in-group and are concerned not to lose face or stand out too much. Furthermore, while there are such folk in the USA, they are swamped by a dominant culture of individualism. In China and Japan the reverse is true – most people look first to the group, be it family, community or clan. It is these groups that set the tone and style of the members, set the ground rules for individual behavior and determine society's dominant mores.

Getting the marketing message right in such societies means pulling away from appeals to exceptionalism, to being different and to the use of the idiosyncratic or eccentric. These types of appeal are very common in US and British advertising and, in many cases, have become an important element of the brand's personality. It would seem that the owners and managers of brands such as these need to rethink the way in which they develop the brand in countries where group is more important than self.

Brands need to be pictured in context – within the group – for maximum benefit in markets such as China and Japan. Associating the product with group activities rather than as something individual, portraying the group as a safe,

reassuring place rather than (as is sometimes the case in the USA and UK) a restrictive, stifling environment and avoiding such phrases as “stand out from the crowd” represent possible approaches to getting the brand communications right in a “collectivist” society.

Group rather than individual targeting

In the USA and the UK, we segment markets and develop targeting tactics on the basis of reaching individuals. We assume (and the research here suggests rightly) that most people see themselves first and foremost as individuals. By targeting individuals we respond to the dynamics of consumer behavior. The only group that retains any resonance within our culture is the nuclear family – mum, dad and the kids – and even this group is seen less and less in advertising and communications messages.

Transferring this approach to cultures where groups remain important ignores the realities of social organization in these places. Individuals within a group may – when asked – give differing opinions, there will, within most groups, be significant demographic variations and the manifest behavior of group members will not be the same. But group preferences will still be respected by individual members, and this may extend to brand choice. Just because one group member expresses a preference does not mean that our brand will be that person’s eventual choice.

Public relations professionals have long used the idea of the opinion former to reflect the fact that some individuals are more influential than others.

This communications theory, however, needs adaptation to work in collectivist cultures since the group leadership’s opinion is more significant. These leaders are more than just influencers and can, in effect, make decisions for the whole group.

Our communications need to shift from communicating with individuals to communicating with groups. And, in this communication, we need to recognize that not all group members are equal and that some will have a disproportionate influence over the group’s decision making. This is, of course, not to say that individuals within collectivist cultures do not make individual decision (that may or may not differ from the prevailing choice of the group). It is to say that the group’s preference will tend to dominate when compared to the individual’s choice.

Understanding the dynamics of group cultures is vital for all of those seeking to sell into markets where this form dominates. We can also see how such understanding as a much wider resonance and importance. We can obtain more insight into the behavior of minority groups (often immigrants from collectivist cultures) in our own countries, the development of collective opinions and the dynamics of politics by looking at how intra- and inter-group dynamics influence social organization and the choices made by society as a whole.

(A précis of the article “Values and lifestyles of individualists and collectivists: a study on Chinese, Japanese, British and US consumers”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)