

Research Dialogue

# Tightness–looseness: A new framework to understand consumer behavior

Ren Li, Sarah Gordon, Michele J. Gelfand\*

*Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, United States*

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## Abstract

Previous cross-cultural research in the field of consumer behavior has focused almost exclusively on cultural values. In this article, we expand on this tradition by integrating research on tightness-looseness (TL)—the strength of social norms and tolerance for deviance—into consumer behavior research. We first examine how TL influences persuasion in advertising, suggesting that advertising themes in loose cultures will focus on the promotion of ideals, permissiveness, and norm deviance, whereas advertising themes in tight cultures will emphasize prevention focus, uniformity, and norm abidance. Next, we examine brand-consumer relationships and product diffusion and discuss how they may vary across tight and loose cultures. Finally, we explore the implications of TL for consumer well-being by examining different strategies for encouraging healthy decision-making across tight and loose cultures. Taken together, the integration of TL and CB research constitutes an exciting frontier for theory, research, and practice.

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## Introduction

In February of 2011, U.S. electronics and entertainment retailer Best Buy closed all nine of its branded stores in China after only five years in the market. Although analysts had believed that China held promise for large growth opportunities, Best Buy ultimately captured less than 1% of the market and struggled to compete against local rival companies Gome and Suning, each of which had more than 1000 branded stores in the country (Waldmeir, Strauss, & Birchall, 2011). According to research conducted by China Market Research Group, a strategic market intelligence firm based in Shanghai, Best Buy's failure ultimately resulted from a lack of understanding of Chinese consumer norms for smaller, conveniently located stores (Rein, 2011). Similarly, a Financial Times article explained that the company's store strategy of dividing up items by category rather than leading brands was "at odds with local habits" (Waldmeir et al., 2011).

Failures of this magnitude illustrate the critical need for cross-cultural research in consumer behavior (CB). Once primarily a Western enterprise, the field has begun to go global (Maheswaran & Shavitt, 2000; Torelli & Rodas, 2016). In just the last two decades, CB research has examined how culture influences brand loyalty (Kim, Forsythe, Gu, & Jae Moon, 2002; Lam, 2007; Luo, Zhang, & Liu, 2015; Ogba & Tan, 2009; Palumbo & Herbig, 2000; Subramaniam, Al Mamun, Permarupan, & Zainol, 2014; Yoo, 2009), brand extensions (Buil, de Chernatony, & Hem, 2009; Grønhaug, Hem, & Lines, 2002; Han & Schmitt, 1997; Monga & John, 2007; Ng, 2010; Tang, Liou, & Peng, 2008), consumer decision-making (Aaker & Sengupta, 2000; Alden, Stayman, & Hoyer, 1994; Goodrich & de Mooij, 2014; Leo, Bennett, & Härtel, 2005; Nayeem & Casidy, 2015; Petersen, Kushwaha, & Kumar, 2015; Zhou, Arnold, Pereira, & Yu, 2010), consumer purchasing behaviors (Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Chan & Lau, 2002; Gentina, Butori, Rose, & Bakir, 2014; Kacen & Lee, 2002; Kim et al., 2002; Legohérel, Daucé, Hsu, & Ranchhold, 2009), and advertising effectiveness (Cho & Cheon, 2005; Choi, Hwang, & McMillan, 2008; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Ju, 2013; Kim & Markus, 1999; Möller & Eisend, 2010; Taylor & Okazaki, 2015; Uskul,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [mgelfand@umd.edu](mailto:mgelfand@umd.edu) (M.J. Gelfand).

Sherman, & Fitzgibbon, 2009; Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997), among other topics. This work has been critical for not only extending consumer behavior theory and research beyond Western samples but also making the practice of consumer behavior more successful in a global context.

Yet at the same time, much of the cross-cultural research in consumer behavior has focused almost exclusively on one dimension of culture, individualism–collectivism (IC), to the neglect of other potential sources of culture that may be important drivers of consumer behavior. As an analogy, the exclusive focus on IC in CB research is akin to personality research only examining one personality dimension, such as extraversion, to the exclusion of neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. In this article, we expand this focus by integrating recent research on the strength of social norms—or what has been referred to as *tightness–looseness*—with CB research. Tightness–looseness (TL) has been shown to differentiate both traditional societies (Pelto, 1968) and modern nations and states (Gelfand et al., 2011; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014). TL has increasingly been shown to have implications for social and organizational processes including CEO discretion (Crossland & Hambrick, 2011), perceptions of leadership (Aktas, Gelfand, & Hanges, 2015), negotiation (Gunia, Brett, Nandkeolyar, & Kamdar, 2011), stigmatization (Kinias, Kim, Hafenbrack, & Lee, 2014), creativity (Chua, Roth, & Lemoine, 2015; Ozeren, Ozmen, & Appolloni, 2013), expatriate adjustment (Geeraert, Li, Ward, Gelfand & Demes, under review; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2014), entrepreneurship (Lettau, 2016; Wit, 2013), and even stock price synchronicity (Eun, Wang, & Xiao, 2015). Yet to date, there has been no research on TL and CB, which we view as an exciting frontier for both basic cultural research on TL as well as CB research.

In the sections below, we begin by reviewing historical and contemporary research on TL. We then discuss promising avenues for research on TL and CB, including persuasion and advertising, brand loyalty and product diffusion, and consumer well-being, with a particular focus on health marketing and decision-making. Taken together, we seek to show that there is much to be gained in terms of theory, research, and practice by integrating TL into CB research.

### Historical and contemporary perspectives on tightness–looseness

TL refers to variation in the strength of norms and tolerance for norm deviance across different human groups (Gelfand et al., 2011). Norm strength refers to unwritten rules and social pressures that individuals feel they must follow in a given culture; tolerance refers to the severity of punishments that results when individuals violate norms. Whereas tight cultural entities have strong norms and low tolerance for deviance, loose cultural entities have weak norms and high tolerance for deviance. Below, we briefly trace the history of TL research, provide a broad overview of modern TL theory and its principles, and discuss research that sets the stage for how TL may impact CB research.

The notion that cultures vary with respect to norm strength and sanctioning originates in early anthropological research. Pelto (1968) was the first to quantify this distinction in his study of over 20 traditional societies. He observed, for example, that the Hutterites, Hanno, and Lubara were “tight” in that they had strong norms, were very formal, and had severe punishments for norm violations. By contrast, the Kung Bushman, Cubeo, and Skolt Lapps were “loose” in that they had weaker norms, were much more informal, and had greater tolerance of norm violations. Pelto speculated that variation in TL could be traced to societies’ ecological characteristics. In particular, he argued that societies with high population density and greater crop dependency were tighter given that strong social norms were needed to coordinate for survival in such contexts. On the other hand, societies with lower population density and less reliance on agriculture could afford more permissiveness because they did not require as much coordinated behavior. Later, researchers in many fields of social science—including anthropology, psychology, and sociology—corroborated these. In particular, traditional societies with primarily agricultural subsistence methods were shown to exhibit strict child-rearing practices, stringent roles and expectations for its members, and greater incidence of conformity as compared to those that relied on fishing or hunting (Barry, Child, & Bacon, 1959; Berry, 1967; Boldt, 1978a, 1978b; Boldt & Roberts, 1979; Lomax & Berkowitz, 1972; Witkin & Berry, 1975). After a hiatus of research on TL, Triandis (1989) reintroduced the construct in his *Psychological Review* paper on culture and self, noting that the construct is different from IC and other constructs (see also Carpenter, 2000 for a confirmation of this in traditional societies).

More recently, expanding upon the early work on TL in traditional societies, Gelfand and colleagues developed a multilevel theory of TL in modern societies (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006; Gelfand et al., 2011). Grounded in an eco-cultural tradition (Berry, 1979; Triandis, 1972), modern TL theory is about adaptation—in particular, the adaptation of societies to the characteristics of their ecological environments and the adaptation of individuals to the characteristics of the resultant strength of social norms. As illustrated in Fig. 1, differences in TL are theorized to reflect varying degrees of historical and ecological threat. Societies with more natural disasters, higher disease prevalence, fewer natural resources, and greater threat from territorial invasions are theorized to develop stronger norms and sanctions in order to coordinate to survive such threats. By contrast, societies that lack exposure to serious ecological and human-made threats can afford to have weaker norms and tolerance for deviance given that they have less need for coordinated social action. As seen in Fig. 1 again, the strength of societal norms is further reflected and promoted through institutions that foster narrow versus strong socialization—including the media, schools, government, and police (Arnett, 1995) and everyday situations (Mischel, 1977), which dictate the range of acceptable behavior. In turn, at the individual level, people exposed to chronically higher situational strength have *higher felt accountability* (Frink & Klimoski, 1998)—that is, they feel compelled to obey and conform to normative expectations, lest they face punishment

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