



The effect of culture on perception and cognition: A conceptual framework[☆]



Minas N. Kastanakis^{a,*}, Benjamin G. Voyer^{a,b}

^a ESCP Europe Business School, Department of Marketing, 527 Finchley Road, Hampstead, London NW3 7BG, UK

^b London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

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ABSTRACT

Researchers are increasingly recognizing the role of culture as a source of variation in many phenomena of central importance to consumer research. This review addresses a gap in cross-cultural consumer behavior literature by providing a review and conceptual analysis of the effects of culture on pre-behavioral processes (perception and cognition). The article highlights a series of important perceptual and cognitive differences across cultures and offers a new perspective of framing these differences among cultures—that of “culturally conditioned” perceptual and cognitive orientations. The article addresses several theoretical issues and suggests directions for future research as well as managerial implications.

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1. Introduction

Cultural differences often lead to notorious misunderstandings. For example, some cultures perceive certain simple gestures as positive (e.g., a thumbs-up signals approval in American and European cultures), whereas others view them as negative (Islamic and Asian cultures consider the same gesture offensive) (Knapp & Hall, 2009). Recurring market failures when launching products in non-Western regions of the world illustrate the importance of understanding cross-cultural differences regulating international consumers and markets. Brands and markets are increasingly global, but understanding of consumer perceptions and consequent marketing strategies are still culturally bound (De Ruyter, Van Birgelen, & Wetzels, 1998; Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2002) impeding effectiveness. Extensive cross-cultural consumer research suggests that cultural differences account for variation in consumer reactions to several phenomena, including perceptions of advertising and brands (Pollay, Tse, & Wang, 1990; Sung & Tinkham, 2005), consumer evaluations of and reactions to service (Zhang, Beatty, & Walsh, 2008), utilitarian versus hedonic consumption (Lim & Ang, 2008), and consumerism in general (Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989). Scholars are increasingly interested in studying “cultural-conditioning” effects (Hirschman, 1986), but cross-cultural consumer psychology research remains in its infancy (Shavitt, Lee, & Johnson, 2008) in several important domains. A substantial lack of

knowledge has led to calls for investigations into the differences or similarities of consumers across nations and regions (Zhang et al., 2008) to understand their origins and specific dimensions.

Cross-cultural marketing literature (e.g., Engelen & Brettel, 2011) mainly describes observed differences in behaviors across cultures. This article goes beyond mere description of cross-cultural differences in consumer behavior to address the roots of these differences, that is, the existence of fundamental cross-cultural differences in pre-behavioral processes – namely, perception and cognition. Business-related research in these domains is growing (De Mooij, 2009; Rugman & Collinson, 2009) yet relatively little research examines cross-cultural differences or similarities covering these two areas to lend significance to consumer behavior, with even less attempt to synthesize existing evidence. Perception and cognition play a central role in subjective human experience (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1999) and thus studying differences in these two domains is crucial to understand cross-cultural consumer behavior. The article contributes to the literature on cross-cultural consumer psychology by showing how differences in perception can drive differences in cognition, both of which shape behavior. Evidence is drawn from many disciplines to provide a structured review of the role of culture in shaping individual perception, which in turn affects the processing of information from the surrounding environment. The study's main focus is on Western versus Eastern cultural differences, in line with most research on cross-cultural differences (Matsumoto, 1999). The article is the first to jointly review the consequences of cultural differences on perception and cognition and to explore their marketing significance. An extensive search of the multi-disciplinary psychology and marketing literature included both the terms “cross-cultural” and “cultural” and either the term “perception” or “cognition.”

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* Corresponding author at: ESCP Europe Business School, 527 Finchley Road, Hampstead, London NW3 7BG, UK.

E-mail addresses: mkastanakis@escpeurope.eu (M.N. Kastanakis), bvoyer@escpeurope.eu (B.G. Voyer).

An understanding of the conditioning effect of culture on perception and its subsequent effect on cognition can help explain cross-cultural consumer behavior to improve marketing research and practice. First, a conceptual framework offers an overview of the different mechanisms by which culture conditions perception and cognition. Second, a review of important cross-cultural differences in perceptual and cognitive processes is undertaken followed by key resulting theoretical, methodological, and managerial issues pertinent to the review. Overall, a new perspective for understanding cross-cultural behavior highlights the role of culturally conditioned pre-behavioral processes offering a greater understanding of conditioned perspectives to improve predictive validity in behavior.

2. Cultural conditioning effects on perception and cognition

Shavitt et al. (2008, p. 1103) assert that culture includes “shared elements that provide standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historical period, and a geographical location.” Markus and Kitayama (2010, p. 422) further contend that “the word culture is a stand-in for a similarly untidy and expansive set of material and symbolic concepts ... that give form and direction to behavior [and that] culture is located in the world, in patterns of ideas, practices, institutions, products, and artifacts.” These widely accepted definitions incorporate factors that are both *external* to people, such as societal values or similar cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1991, 2001; Schwartz, 1992; Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2006), social practices (Nisbett & Masuda, 2003), and artifacts (Craig & Douglas, 2006), and *internal*, such as an independent/interdependent self-construal or other traits (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), including the overlooked aspect of language (Ambady & Bharucha, 2009; Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002; Sen, Burmeister, & Ghosh, 2004).

Society- and individual-level perspectives about culture are used as a conceptual framework (see Fig. 1) to review an extensive but fragmented literature from fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, medicine, marketing, and business. The conceptual framework and associated literature review assists understanding

of how culture conditions perception and cognition. Specifically, use of proxies of culture demonstrate how cultural elements, including norms and values conveyed by individualist and collectivist societies, dominant modes of independent and interdependent self-construal, and language, affect individual perception and cognition and eventually result in behavioral differences (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999).

The recursive nature of most cultural processes (Kitayama, 1992) leads to the expectation that behavior reinforces the mechanisms by which culture influences individual-level psychological mechanisms. Research supports the idea that culture conditions individual perception and cognition by providing sets of values, life expectations, and needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), which affect people’s basic sensory perceptions. Culture serves as a source of lay theories about the world and shapes how people attend, think, and react, crafting their life views and philosophies. For example, people in Western cultures perceive an advertisement showing a woman wearing a white dress (in which white is traditionally associated with purity) differently than people in Eastern cultures (in which white signifies death). Hence, perception and cognition are dependent on sensory inputs at an individual level, but they also involve various top-down processes that are automatically recruited to construct a conscious percept from the input (Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, & Larsen, 2003); these basic exogenous sensory inputs (e.g., colors, shapes, sounds) cannot fully account for the emerging percept, which can be modified by factors that are endogenous to the perceiver, such as cultural expectations, internalized values, emotions, and needs (Bruner, 1957). Culture affects perception and subsequently cognition at both the society and individual level.

2.1. Culture, self-perception and perception of others

Cultural differences in perception, or the process by which people become aware of their environment (Weiner, Healy, & Proctor, 2003), emerge in the ways Westerners or Easterners perceive the self versus others alongside other key areas of perception (Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, & Drolet, 2001) such as the perception of emotions, the environment and sensory perceptions.

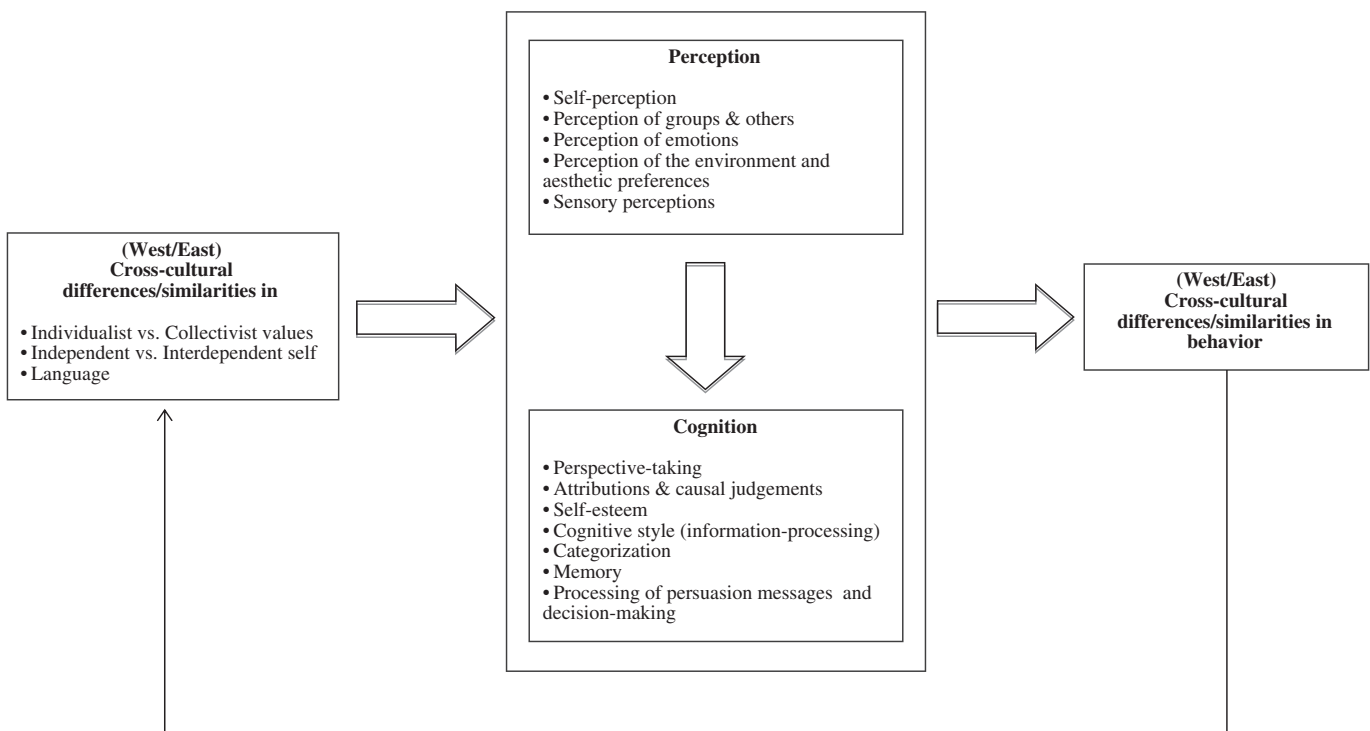


Fig. 1. A framework of the role of culture on consumers' perception and cognition (and eventual behavior).

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