



# How national culture impacts teenage shopping behavior: Comparing French and American consumers



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## ABSTRACT

The global teen market has significant spending power and an important impact on the world economy. However, much remains unknown about the social motivations of teenage consumers and cross-national cultural differences in teenage shopping. This research studies teenage shopping motivations in two nations: the U.S., which is a highly individualistic national culture with low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance, and France, which is perhaps a somewhat more collectivist, more inter-dependent national culture with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. This research samples 570 teenage consumers. Susceptibility to peer influence (SPI) drives teenage consumer shopping in France, while both need for uniqueness (NFU) and SPI motivate teenage shopping in the U.S.

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## 1. Introduction

Managers increasingly need to understand the impact of national culture on teenage shopping behavior. Nearly 2.5 billion people, or one third of the world's population, are expected to be younger than 18 by 2020 (Zmuda, 2011). Global companies increasingly target teens throughout the world, including MTV, which reaches nearly 287 million homes across 88 countries (Moses, 2000), and Coca Cola, which recently targeted teens in 100 markets (Zmuda, 2011). Adolescents emphasize self-image and personal appearance (Piacentini, 2010). Clothing represents an emotionally imbued, socially visible product category; and teens spend a substantial amount of time and money shopping for clothing (Haytko & Baker, 2004). American and French teens, for example, will spend an estimated \$220 billion (Parker, Hermans, & Schaefer, 2008) and \$13.1 billion (€10 billion) (Consojunior, 2012) on clothing in 2012. Despite the significance of this market, teenage shopping remains under represented in cross-cultural consumer research.

Studies of teenage shopping behavior to date have focused primarily on singular nations – sampling teens from specific national cultures one by one, rather than making cross-national cultural comparisons. Previous research focuses primarily on the U.S. (e.g., Breazeale & Lueg,

2011; Haytko & Baker, 2004), with additional research conducted in Spain (Sarabia-Sanchez, De Juan Vigaray, & Hota, 2009), China (McNeal & Ji, 1999) and Malaysia (Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003). This focus on teenagers within singular nations has left issues regarding the impact of national culture on shopping behavior largely unaddressed. One study by Parker, Hermans, and Schaefer (2004) describes the fashion consciousness of teens across Asian nations. That study, however, did not examine cross-national differences in the social motivations of teenage shopping.

The research presented in this paper systematically compares teenage shopping behavior in two national cultures: the U.S. and France. Hofstede (2001) characterizes the U.S. as a highly individualistic national culture with low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance. In contrast, the French national culture is characterized as somewhat more collectivist and more inter-dependent, with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001). Teenagers in both nations should share a common motivation, the need for social belonging, but the means of meeting or actualizing this need may vary according to differences in national cultures. To tease out these differences, two social-identity motivations that focus on the consumer domain, susceptibility to peer influence and the need for consumer uniqueness are examined. Similarities and differences in these motivations in two nations are further assessed as well as their impact on two teenage shopping tendencies: a) novelty/fashion consciousness, a consumer's tendency to seek new and fashionable products, and b) recreational/hedonic shopping consciousness, the extent to which a consumer views shopping as recreational and entertaining (Kim, Yang, & Lee, 2009). Differences in

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national culture are demonstrated to play a key role in shaping the way teenagers shop.

## 2. Theoretical foundations

Culture is often defined as the beliefs, values and norms of a specific location group (Dawar & Parker, 1994; Triandis, 1995). Members of a national culture aggregately possess a distinct national character, and exhibit stable patterns of behavior and values (Clark, 1990; Luna & Gupta, 2001). National culture pervades all aspects of life, frames cultural perceptions (Hofstede, 2001) and impacts consumer behavior (Engelen & Brettel, 2011). Several marketing and psychology studies empirically demonstrate the predominance of national culture over other cultural/subcultural levels (regional, age, education, and ethnic group) (Schwartz & Ros, 1995; Singh, Pereira, & Kwon, 2003; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2004). These findings and the frequent use of national culture in previous studies (Hofstede, 2001) suggest its potential importance in examining the social processes underlying teenage shopping styles.

Several studies highlight the importance of peer groups and the social nature of teen shopping within a singular nation (Breazeale & Lueg, 2011; Haytko & Baker, 2004; Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003; McNeal & Ji, 1999; Sarabia-Sanchez et al., 2009). Other studies compare ethnic subcultures. Shim (1996) and Shim and Gehrt (1996), for example, explore the impact of American subcultures (Hispanic and Native Americans) on teenage consumer decision-making. Native Americans exhibit a more Social/Hedonist orientation than Hispanics Americans. Kim et al. (2009) compare children from two Canadian subcultures. Chinese-Canadian children were more utilitarian and felt more overwhelmed by brand and store choices, as evidence by their increased use of utilitarian- and confused-by-over-choice-decision-making styles than their Caucasian-Canadian counterparts (Sproles & Kendall, 1986). No study to date, however, has explicitly examined teenage consumer shopping styles and social motivations in consumption across national cultures.

## 3. Hypothesis development

On the basis of the considerations outlined above, a conceptual model is developed to test the moderating effect of national culture on teenage shopping behaviors. The following sections discuss the rationale of this model depicted in Fig. 1.

### 3.1. Social belonging and social motivations in consumption

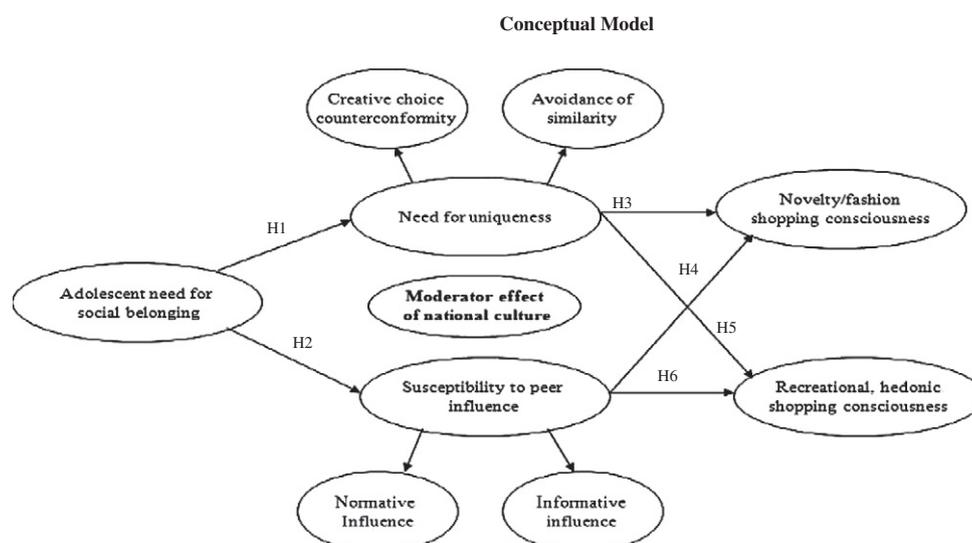
Individuals from all cultures share a basic psychological need for social belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This need becomes particularly important and increasingly actualized through peer groups during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents affectively detach themselves from their parents, develop their social identities through peer-group associations (Steinberg & Morris, 2001), and utilize products and brands to enhance their sense of social belonging (Haytko & Baker, 2004). Peer groups provide emotional support, a source of self-worth (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), and a reference for teen attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Childers & Rao, 1992; John, 1999; Yang & Laroche, 2011).

According to optimal distinctiveness theory, individuals have two opposing fundamental needs that they strive to balance – assimilation, a need to affiliate with others, and distinctiveness, a need for uniqueness or differentiation from others (Brewer, 1991). Adolescent peer groups provide a prototypical example. Teens comply with the expectations of their friends (Childers & Rao, 1992), and consistently demonstrate preferences that distinguish them from other groups (Ling Ling, 2008). Clothing exemplifies these behaviors. Yalkin and Elliott (2006) describe the “conformity of small contrasts”, where teen friendship groups exhibit a shared code or style in clothing, but each member adds individual touches to this style. These group-oriented behaviors relate to social belonging and allow teens to simultaneously balance their need for assimilation with their need for distinctiveness (Piacentini, 2010).

Social motivations in consumption should reflect the interplay between these needs. Susceptibility to peer influence (SPI) examines consumers' tendencies to enhance their image in the opinion of others, which relates to affiliation. Need for uniqueness (NFU) examines consumers' pursuit of distinctiveness or differentiation in consumption. Both specifically examine social motivations in consumer behavior that should relate to social belonging. For that reason, we expect positive relationships between teenagers' need for social belonging and both *susceptibility to peer influence* (SPI) (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989) and the *need for uniqueness* (NFU) (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001).

**H1a.** Adolescent need for social belonging relates positively to the need for uniqueness (NFU).

**H2a.** Adolescent need for social belonging relates positively to susceptibility to peer influence (SPI).



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual model. \*For clarity, moderating influences of national culture are not represented by arrows in the figure. Yet, they are hypothesized to influence all relationships in the figure.

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