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## Comparing consumer innovativeness and ethnocentrism of young-adult consumers☆

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of globalization on consumer behavior across demographic cohorts remains important for international marketers balancing standardization–adaptation challenges. The purpose of this paper is to compare young-adult consumers in the Western Balkans (Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia) and China. The study focuses on consumer innovativeness and consumer ethnocentrism, as two critical aspects for marketers catering to young-adult consumers (18–30 years). Despite cultural differences, young-adult consumers in all four markets display high levels of consumer innovativeness and low levels of consumer ethnocentrism. The results show a weak but significantly positive pair-wise correlation between consumer innovativeness and consumer ethnocentrism in Slovenia and Macedonia, contrary to empirical evidence from adults. The study offers theoretical implications related to Global consumer acculturation theory and Social identity theory, as well as implications for marketers seeking to utilize growing China–CEE cooperation.

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### 1. Introduction

Marketing scholars and managers have been examining the impact of globalization on consumer behavior across countries for decades, particularly with regards to standardization–adaptation issues in international marketing (Schmid & Kotulla, 2011). The utopic question of complete market convergence has motivated sociologists, psychologists, and marketers to examine the interaction between global and local influences on consumer behavior within globalization. In this examination, global consumer acculturation emerged from examining culture's influence on consumer behavior (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007). However, such examination mostly focus on “the influences of single dimensions of culture on [...] consumers' behavior [and] rarely includes examinations of how the complex whole affects purchasing and consumer behavior” (Woodside, Hsu, & Marshall, 2011, p. 785).

Young-adult consumers (18–30 years old) are an interesting consumer segment to explore the degree of global consumer acculturation (Carpenter, Moore, Doherty, & Alexander, 2012). They have been attracting increasing marketing attention (Xie & Singh, 2007) due to their high consumer autonomy and spending power (Grønhøj, 2007),

large household influence (Grant & Waite, 2003), insight into adult consumer behavior (Smith Speck & Peterson, 2010), high degree of cosmopolitanism (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999), and cultural openness (Kjelgaard & Askegaard, 2006). Yet they remain under-researched (Wong, Polonsky, & Garma, 2008). This is particularly true for non-Western, emerging/transition markets, where the need to show ones global citizenship and identity may be stronger and larger social differences influence the role brands play in consumer behavior (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to compare young-adult consumers in three Western Balkan countries (Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia) and China. The study focuses on innate consumer innovativeness and consumer ethnocentrism, as two critical aspects for marketers catering to this increasingly attractive segment. Consumer innovativeness represents a predisposition to buy new and different products/brands, instead of sticking to previous choices/consumption patterns (Steenkamp, Hofstede, & Wedel, 1999). Consumer ethnocentrism is related to “appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign-made products” (Shimp & Sharma, 1987, p. 280).

The study contributes to the literature on cultural and demographic determinants of consumer innovativeness (Tellis, Yin, & Bell, 2009) and helps answer Douglas and Craig's (2011) call for better understanding the link between young-adult consumer identity and innovativeness. It also adds to the empirical work on consumer ethnocentrism among Western Balkan adult consumers (Dmitrovic, Vida, & Reardon, 2009) and the work on consumer ethnocentrism among young-adult consumers in China (Wong et al., 2008). By investigating the understudied

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markets of China and the Western Balkans, the study expands existing research on young-adult consumers in emerging markets, where empirical evidence is lacking (Strizhakova et al., 2012).

This research compares the Western Balkans and China for three reasons. All four countries are non-Western emerging/transition markets. Using China as a yardstick allows a unique intra- and inter-regional insight into young-adult consumer behavior. China (a member of the BRIC countries, exemplar of emerging markets) is characterized by young consumers combining nationalism with a desire for American lifestyle (Fong, 2004). A China–CEE comparison is also relevant for marketing managers seeking to capture growing China–CEE cooperation under the 16 + 1 cooperation platform. Despite similar transitional challenges in the emerging markets, there have been considerable differences in their business environments and conditions. Therefore, researching consumer behavior in different contexts is important for international marketing practice.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Consumer innovativeness and ethnocentrism are important behavioral concepts for international marketers dealing with entry into new markets and facing constant marketing standardization/adaptation challenges. While both constructs have been generally well researched (Hauser, Tellis, & Griffin, 2006; Steenkamp et al., 1999; Bartels & Reinders, 2011), this was done mostly on adult consumers in large Western markets. Yet as a recent meta-analysis shows, there is a great deal of empirical ambiguity related to demographic, psychological, and social determinants of consumer innovativeness. It is further accompanied by a need for greater conceptual clarity and methodological rigor (Bartels & Reinders, 2011).

### 2.1. Consumer innovativeness

Consumer innovativeness is defined as a predisposition to buy new and different products/brands, rather than sticking to previous choices/consumption patterns (Steenkamp et al., 1999). Capturing the willingness to adopt innovations at the individual level has been closely related to new product adoptions (Tellis et al., 2009). Bartels and Reinders (2011) present a three-pronged approach to the study of consumer innovativeness, outlining: innate consumer innovativeness (general personal trait), domain-specific consumer innovativeness (product category), and actualized innovative consumer behavior (early adoption ahead of others). The majority of existing marketing research focuses on domain-specific innovativeness and surprisingly shows unclear relationships between innate/domain-specific consumer innovativeness and demographics (Bartels & Reinders, 2011). Individual psychological variables (need for uniqueness, market *mavenism*) and social context variables (cultural values, social identification) play a more important role than demographics (Bartels & Reinders, 2011). Only in the case of actualized innovative behavior do demographics seem to have a stronger role (Bartels & Reinders, 2011).

Innovative consumers, at least in terms of actualized innovative consumer behavior, are usually younger, more open to change, non-ethnocentric, and not nostalgic (Steenkamp et al., 1999). In a study of 15 major economies, Tellis et al. (2009) found that the following four are good predictors of consumer innovativeness across countries: reluctance to expend time and effort to adopt new products, nostalgia, frugality, and suspiciousness. They also confirmed that innovative consumers tend to be better educated, wealthier, and more mobile. Despite differences in describing innovative consumers (Hauser et al., 2006), young-adults are generally considered more innovative (Vandecasteele & Geuens, 2010).

According to Lynn, Zinkhan, and Harris (1993), the cultural environment of a country has been identified as the most important factor affecting differences in consumer behavior across countries. Cross-country comparisons show consumer innovativeness to be culture

specific, particularly for innate and domain-specific categories (Bartels & Reinders, 2011). Steenkamp et al. (1999) found that the degree of individualism and masculinity of a national culture positively influences, while uncertainty avoidance negatively influences consumer innovativeness. Individualism is particularly important in explaining teenage shopping behavior via two mechanisms (susceptibility to peer influence, need for uniqueness) related to social belonging (Gentina, Butori, Rose, & Bakir, 2014). Teens develop their individual identities and a sense of self-worth “through peer-group associations [...] and utilize products and brands to enhance their sense of social belonging” (Gentina et al., 2014, p. 465). This has implications for Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and further connects to the cross-cultural aspect within Acculturation theory in consumer behavior (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007).

This study focuses on innate consumer innovativeness related to FMCGs and tests the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Consumer innovativeness is subject to cultural differences among young-adult consumers across countries.*

The underlying premise of this hypothesis is that the level of innate consumer innovativeness among young-adult consumers will not be universal, since culture has a stronger influence than demographics for such type of innovativeness (Bartels & Reinders, 2011).

### 2.2. Consumer ethnocentrism

Consumer innovativeness is negatively correlated to consumer ethnocentrism according to Steenkamp et al. (1999), which Reardon, Miller, Vida and Kim (2005, p. 740) define as “the belief that it is unpatriotic to buy foreign-made products”. Despite some inconsistencies regarding different antecedents of consumer ethnocentrism (e.g., product category), age is positively, while income and education are negatively related to consumer ethnocentrism (Cleveland, Laroche, & Papadopoulos, 2009). In terms of social and psychological factors, cosmopolitanism (Parts & Vida, 2013) and cultural openness (Cleveland et al., 2009) are negatively related to consumer ethnocentrism. Young-adult consumers are a relatively more globalized consumer segment (Douglas & Craig, 1997), quite homogenous (Strizhakova et al., 2012), with more universal consumer behavior (Kjelgaard & Askegaard, 2006) and a more common global identity (Douglas & Craig, 2011). Strizhakova et al. (2012) point out how globalization spurs at the same time economic growth and growth of nationalistic sentiment, making consumer ethnocentrism still relevant for research – e.g., as international segmentation criteria. Thus, this study tests the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Age is a better predictor of consumer ethnocentrism than cultural differences among young-adult consumers.*

This research hypothesis does not assume that young-adult consumers in the four countries are completely homogenous since empirical evidence suggests that consumer ethnocentrism is much stronger in the Western Balkans (Vida, Dimitrovic, & Obadia, 2008) than in China (Bi et al., 2012). This can be linked to higher export/import orientation of the Chinese economy and emulation of Western lifestyle among the Chinese (Fong, 2004).

## 3. Data and methodology

### 3.1. Data

This study analyses four matched student samples. Such samples are frequently employed in cross-cultural consumer comparisons and are used “to represent different cultures in cross cultural research” (Peterson & Merunka, 2014, p. 1036). Student samples are also

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