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# Motives underlying the choice of business majors: A multi-country comparison



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the motives that affect students' choice of business majors. Based on a literature review, five motives affecting students' choice of business majors were identified. These motives were measured using data collected from undergraduate business students in China, UAE, UK, and USA. Factor analyses of the four datasets revealed a remarkably similar factor structure indicating that the motives underlying the choices of different major in these four countries are similar. Across the four countries, the importance of these motives is the same for two motives and only partially different for the remaining three motives. Overall, the results suggest that there is considerable global convergence in consumer behavior in the business education context.

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## 1. Introduction

Besides engendering economic interdependence among countries, globalization is also engendering cultural convergence by facilitating the sharing of ideas and values across countries. Given the trend toward international cultural convergence, a key international business research stream seeks to identify similarities in culture-specific beliefs and attitudes across different contexts including consumer behavior (Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005; Pudelko, Carr, Fink, & Wentges, 2006). This study contributes to this research stream by examining similarities in the consumption behavior for business education in a four-country setting.

Webber (1969) identified technology, the widespread adoption of pragmatic societal values, and education as the key drivers of cultural convergence. Convergence of education occurs when similar educational content and delivery in different countries fosters similar values and beliefs. There is some evidence of similarities in business education across different countries. The flagship business degree, the MBA is characterized by significant commonalities in content and pedagogical approaches across many countries (Armstrong & Krasnostein, 1995). These commonalities are attributed to the dominating economic and political standing of the United States in the world, especially in the post second world war era (Djelic, 1998; Hofstede, 1980, 2001). The adoption of scientific approaches to management and the creation and dissemination of formal management knowledge has been spearheaded by American institutions, which has contributed to significant convergence in business education all over the world.

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But, is the convergence of business education programs compatible with the needs of consumers in different countries? This study examines if the motives of students for choosing among business majors are similar or dissimilar across countries and whether the relative importance of these motives varies across countries. Considerable research has been reported in the business education literature regarding the motives that drive the choice of business majors but generally extant research has a pedagogical focus and is not cross-cultural (e.g., Kim, Markham, & Cangelosi, 2002; Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005; Moberg & Walton, 2003; Pritchard, Potter, & Saccucci, 2004; Roach, McGaughey, & Downey, 2011). This study examines the motives that drive the choice of business majors in a cross-national context. The study has relevance for university administrators. Over the last two decades, there has been a growing trend among universities of entering foreign markets (Lewin, 2008). Many American, British, Australian, and Indian universities have opened campuses in foreign locations. But, not all these ventures have been successful. For example, a number of American schools have withdrawn from foreign markets (Pope, 2011). International business research that uses an education context can generate findings that are useful to educational administrators who seek to expand their programs in foreign countries.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the motives that affect students' choice of business majors are identified. Next, two research propositions about how these motives would be similar and dissimilar across different cultures are developed. Next, the research method is described, the results examined, and the implications of the study are discussed.

## 2. Literature review

Institutional theory explains the processes by which norms from the wider cultural environment become rationalized and socially accepted for guiding behavior in organizations and for individuals (Scott, 1995, 2001). Institutionalism reflects regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional processes embedded within culture, including the social networks of individuals or organizations. Overall, these processes contribute to the diffusion of work values between organizations across the world (Peterson & Smith, 2008). These processes act as pressures or forces that enable organizations to acquire legitimacy through conformity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Conformity is facilitated by adherence to professional standards, sanctions and reactions toward environmental uncertainty (Gates, 1997). According to institutional theory, the role of education is prone to institutional forces, and explains why many universities in different localities are more similar than might be expected (Hodson, Connolly, & Younes, 2008).

Applied to higher education, it is posited that normative processes that represent social norms are the most influential of these processes. The kind of training prescribed, educational standards obligated, and accreditation, screening and selection of personnel evaluated can shape cultural values through institutional carriers. These carriers represent a complexity of influences that include the media, the state, the corporation, the professions, and the family (Scott, 2003). Regulation processes can impact on values about the purpose of education, since high state intervention can restrict personal choice, limit freedom of expression and may affect smooth transition into the workplace.

Specifically focusing on business education, students of vocational education are likely to treat their majors as an investment in their future career, with distinct sets of motives. Motives may be shaped by cultural values toward the workplace, and these may be institutionalized within education. For example, the motive of university reputation might be attributed to how faculty present their professionalism through not only academic qualifications, but affiliation to learned bodies, and outside interests.

Motives offer reasons for particular behavior through interests and goals that are closely aligned to values (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Motives can be intrinsic or extrinsic.

Intrinsic motives rest on perceptions of knowledge about the qualities of objects of learning such as interest in the content of an academic major. Intrinsic motives applied to education include learning for its own sake, as an end in itself, as well as to satisfy inner needs such as curiosity. Extrinsic motives rest on the perceived outcomes from such majors (Berlyne, 1966; Vroom, 1964). A student's extrinsic motives rest on rewards external to the studying situation (e.g., ease of achieving grades, and career opportunities).

Based on an extensive literature review, six motives that affect students' choice of a business major are identified. These motives include: personality match to subject perception, lifestyle perceptions about discipline, relative ease of completion of major, reputational effects, career outputs, and need for developmental skills. The related characteristics of these motives for major choice are listed in Table 1.

The first composite motive reflects interest in the subject as a key determinant of the choice of business major, reflecting personality (Kim et al., 2002; Pappu, 2004; Strasser, Ozgur, & Schroeder, 2002). Closely related to personality is how the major is perceived to match the aspirations of students that will affect their enjoyment (Kumar & Kumar, 2013; Noel, Michaels, & Levas, 2003; Strasser et al., 2002; Zhang, 2007), hereafter referred to as *lifestyle aspirations*. A third motive is the expected difficulty in successfully completing a major (Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Lewis & Norris, 1997; Van Etten, Pressley, McInerney, & Liem, 2008). This is referred to as *relative ease of completion of major*. Students can have tunnel vision on achieving top grades, avoiding majors widely interpreted to require more effort to succeed (Becker, Greer, & Hughes, 1995). Students become more motivated when they believe they have control over their academic work. Ease of major can also be associated with opportunity cost of forgoing alternatives, leading to less certain outcomes.

A fourth motive underlying the choice of major is *reputational effects* (Gabrielsen, 1992). Reputational effects can have a bearing on different levels such as the university, department, and the faculty (Kim et al., 2002; Malgwi et al., 2005; Mazzarol,

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