Research Dialogue

Refining the tightness and looseness framework with a consumer lens

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Abstract

In their paper, Li, Gordon and Gelfand (this issue) introduced the Tightness–Looseness (T–L) framework to the consumer domain, and offered several ideas on how this framework could be applied to consumer behavior. In this commentary, we examine the T–L framework through the consumer lens and discuss how the uniqueness of the consumption context can refine and broaden this psychological framework. We identify four questions that aim to enrich our discussion of this framework from the perspective of consumer research, and to motivate future research questions. Specifically, we consider 1) how the interplay between the tightness/looseness of a culture and its effect on consumer behavior can be a bi-directional relationship, 2) how variances in T–L in different consumption subcultures and aspects of society (e.g., economic, political) can impact consumer behavior, 3) how the examination of T–L at different stages in the consumption process is a relevant and important question to consider, and 4) how T–L may contribute to further investigation and understanding of punishment toward business and consumer norm violators.
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Consumption phenomena involving social norms have caught the attention of consumer researchers in recent years. For example, research has explored how social norms can influence food consumption and conservation behaviors (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010a, 2010b), and how consumers can be punished by their fellow consumers for violating social norms (Lin, Dahl, & Argo, 2013). At the same time, understanding cross-cultural differences in consumer behavior has continued to garner interest in the field (Maheswaran & Shavitt, 2000). For instance, researchers have examined how cross-cultural differences can contribute to how consumers perceive gift-giving and receiving (e.g., Pusaksrikit & Kang, 2016; Valenzuela, Mellers, & Strebel, 2010), process information due to linguistic differences (e.g., Schmitt, Pan, & Tavassoli, 1994; Tavassoli, 1999), and make decisions related to brand-switching (e.g., Ng, Kim, & Rao, 2015). As social norms are culturally dependent, investigating the convergence of these two areas of research has the potential to lead to fruitful avenues of future research.

In the paper by Li, Gordon, and Gelfand (2017–in this issue), the authors introduce the theoretical framework of Tightness–Looseness (T–L) of cultures. T–L refers to the strength of social norms and rules that exist within a culture, how norm violations are perceived cross-culturally, and the severity of punishment delivered to norm violators in various cultures. Beyond discussing the T–L framework the authors also propose a number of ways in which it can be applied to consumer behavior research (i.e., messages in advertising, branding, product diffusion/new product adoption, and health-related behavior among consumers). While the application of the T–L framework to consumer behavior is an interesting first step, we propose that the richness of consumption as a research context can assist in broadening and refining the T–L framework. In this commentary, we identify four questions for discussion specific to the interplay between norms and norm violations that exist within a larger society (i.e., a country), and specific consumption behaviors within that society.

First, we offer our thoughts on the interplay between the cultural T–L of the broader society and specific consumer behaviors inherent in the society. Specifically, we argue that rather than simply looking at how cross-cultural T–L differences may influence or be *applied* to consumer behavior, it would also

be interesting for researchers to consider reverse causality wherein consumer behavior can instead be the antecedent (rather than the outcome) of T–L differences observed across cultures. Second, we postulate how different consumption subcultures and key aspects of a society can vary in T–L and what this means for consumer behavior. Indeed, variance in T–L within a country's economic, political and social systems may have unique implications for consumers and consumption behaviors. Third, we discuss how the norms that influence consumers' behaviors likely change depending on where they are in the consumption process (e.g., pre-purchase vs. purchase vs. post-purchase). Stated differently, the level and impact of T–L is not likely to be uniform throughout one's consumption experience. Finally, we offer our insight on the outcomes of norm violations that can occur in the consumption context. To achieve this, we discuss previous research that has explored how businesses and consumers can be punished for committing norm violations and then elaborate on how these findings can contribute to the T–L framework.

Q1. What is the T–L framework's relationship with consumption? Is it bi-directional?

According to Li et al. (2017–in this issue), the T–L of a given culture is shaped by various environmental factors, including ecological and historical threats, and socio-political institutions that exist within the larger society. They also suggest that the T–L of a given society is likely to shape how consumers react to various marketing cues, including the types of messages used in advertising (e.g., prevention vs. promotion-oriented messages), and the way new products are adopted and introduced in the marketplace. In sum, the authors propose that the T–L of a society will have a direct impact on the consumption behavior of individuals within that society. Although we agree that the relationship between T–L of a larger society ➔ consumer behavior is an important one to establish, we also believe that it is equally important for researchers to consider how the specific consumption behaviors within a society can influence and impact the norms of the larger society, and in turn, the broader societal environmental factors that exist (i.e., consumer behavior ➔ the T–L of a larger society itself).

In their paper, Li et al. (2017–in this issue) discuss how looser cultures are more likely to present images of diversity, whereas tighter cultures are more likely to stick to uniformity. This frames consumers as a passive audience to the influences of the larger society. However, at a time in which consumerism is playing a significant role in shaping the culture of the larger society, helped to a large extent by the presence of social media, it seems quite probable that consumer behavior may influence the T–L of a given society. In other words, we argue that it is just as likely that the strategies and messages being used in marketing campaigns and the activities of consumers themselves are shaping the cultural norms of the larger society. In fact, recent work by Twenge and Kasser (2013) finds that generations who grew up during a time in which higher national advertising spending was observed (e.g., Millennials/

GenMe), valued materialism more than generations that grew up with less advertising expenditures (e.g., Baby Boomers). As another example, the rise of major global technology and social media brands such as Apple, Facebook, and Google have also shifted the way people communicate and interact with one another throughout the globe. In doing so, one can also conjecture that the consumption behavior that surrounds these brands has narrowed some of the differences that the T–L framework has sought to identify.

As a final example, there has been a trend to include heavier models in advertising and fashion. In addition to Dove's Real Beauty campaign, major publications such as Vogue and Sports Illustrated have featured "plus-size" actresses and models on their covers in recent years (e.g., Conniff, 2014; Schlossberg, 2016). Even toy brands, such as Mattel, have followed suit, with the recent launch of Barbie dolls with curvier body shapes (Pearson, 2016). Whereas some may argue that these marketing strategies are simply a reflection of the changing trends in society (i.e., people in various Western countries are getting heavier, so marketers are revising their marketing cues accordingly), others have suggested that marketers can use these messages and images to change the beauty norms that exist within a society (e.g., Lin & McFerran, 2016). Admittedly, such causality questions are not always easy to answer, but we believe the potential bi-directionality between T–L in the larger society and specific consumer behavior should, at the very least, be acknowledged and examined further in future work.

Q2. How does T–L vary across consumption subcultures and different aspects of society, and what are the implications for the consumer?

As Li et al. (2017–in this issue) indicate, geographical regions within the U.S. vary in T–L. We suggest that this type of differentiation can extend to a host of different consumption subcultures that often underlie consumer behavior. Indeed, we believe that consumption subcultures within a society are likely to be a fertile ground for T–L research to provide unique insights and understanding. An example of a consumption subculture can be found among consumers of health and fitness products and services. Although consumers purchase these products and services with a goal of healthier living, subcultures that can form from the consumption of this product category can vary greatly in their level of T–L. CrossFit, for instance, has strong norms of community, competition, and performance (Dawson, 2015) — it has a tight culture. Indeed, participants of CrossFit oftentimes expand their norm conformity in physical exercise to other behaviors, such as food consumption (e.g., Paleo diet). In contrast, membership at a regular gym may be looser culturally and place less emphasis on the norms of community, as most gym patrons exercise alone. With this example in mind, it would be interesting for researchers to examine how the T–L of these consumption subcultures influences the health and fitness norms of the larger society. Further, examination of the influences of the consumption subculture's T–L on the larger society may also provide insight into why tighter cultures have been found to be healthier than looser cultures.