



Cultural and identity antecedents of market mavenism: Comparing Chinese at home and abroad



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ABSTRACT

Marketers recognize the vital role played by market mavens in terms of their broad marketplace knowledge and ability to persuade others. Theorists have advanced that normative pressures explain the influence of market mavens, and have urged researchers to consider cultural values and social identities as antecedents of market mavenism. We submit that vertical and horizontal dimensions of individualism-collectivism inform consumers' strength of identification with ethnicity and identification with global consumer culture which, in turn, affect market mavenism. These relationships are contrasted for Chinese living in China ($n = 502$) with those born in China but living abroad in France ($n = 229$). Our findings demonstrate that individualism-collectivism affects mavenism primarily indirectly, via identification with global consumer culture.

1. Introduction

Scholars have long advocated that marketers should focus their efforts on those consumers who exert disproportional influence upon other consumers' consumption decisions (Dawar, Parker, & Price, 1996; Thorelli & Becker, 1980). Seen as credible, objective and hence risk-reducing sources of product information, market mavens introduce new ideas and norms to other consumers and wield considerable sway over their behaviors (Clark, Goldsmith, & Goldsmith, 2008; Kiani, Laroche, & Paulin, 2016; Laroche, Pons, Zgolli, Cervellon, & Kim, 2003; Rogers, 2010). Market mavens' general marketplace involvement and knowledge distinguishes them from the constricted product- or category-involvement and expertise held by opinion leaders (Feick & Price, 1987). Identifying market mavens and understanding their psychological and social makeup is critical for successful network marketing campaigns, word-of-mouth marketing and the diffusion of products (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Valente, 2011).

Whereas previous studies have focused on demographic correlates, personality traits and motivational forces of market mavens (Chelminski & Coulter, 2007; Clark & Goldsmith, 2005; Clark et al., 2008; Goldsmith, Clark, & Goldsmith, 2006; Mowen, Park, & Zablah, 2007; Price, Feick, & Higie, 1987; Stokburger-Sauer & Hoyer, 2009; Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004), very little is known about how market mavenism is shaped by cultural values and social identities (Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). This paucity is a curious omission, because

self-concept and social identities are important factors that motivate interpersonal communication, as reiterated by authors in the fields of impression management and self-presentation in interpersonal behavior (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The sensitivity to and weight of other consumers' opinions are particularly pronounced in collectivistic (e.g. Chinese) cultures, where societal members tend to have an interdependent self-construal. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991, p. 229), “in an interdependent view, in contrast to an independent view, others will be assigned much more importance, will carry more weight, and will be relatively focal in one's own behavior.” These traits insinuate that collectivists assign greater importance to explicit and unspoken product information from interpersonal (vs. commercial) sources, which has critical ramifications—not only for the diffusion of innovations but also for the formation of brand preferences (e.g., Apple vs. Huawei mobile phones).

Even though scholars have repeatedly implicated susceptibility to normative influence as an explanation for the influence of market mavens on other consumers (Clark & Goldsmith, 2005; Walsh et al., 2004), very little research to date has attempted to empirically link cultural values and social identities to market mavenism. Numerous authors have identified this issue as an important research gap and call for more research on how cultural values and socialization processes impact market mavenism (Chelminski & Coulter, 2007; Iyengar et al., 2011; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). Authors have addressed how country-level cultural values in terms of Hofstede's (1991)

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individualism-collectivism continuum (hereafter, I-C) explain market mavenism, opinion leadership, and related constructs, but found no or only minimal variations for consumers from individualist versus collectivist countries (Cheung, Anitsal, & Anitsal, 2007; Dawar et al., 1996; Sun, Horn, & Merritt, 2004). Drawing firm conclusions is hampered because these studies lacked explicit measures for I-C. To the best of our knowledge, the only researches that have related market mavenism to I-C at the consumer level are Zhang and Lee's (2013) and Kiani et al.'s (2016) studies of consumers in North America. Given that North-American societies rank particularly high on individualism (Hofstede, 1991), it remains indeterminate whether these findings generalize to consumers from predominantly collectivistic societies. Moreover, it is well established that the predictive power of general constructs (here I-C) is typically constrained when used to directly predict more concrete behavioral outcomes (here market mavenism) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005).

The core objective of this research is to shed light on the psychological processes that explain how vertical and horizontal dimensions of I-C (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995) relate to market mavenism for Chinese consumers—a cultural group portrayed as highly collectivistic. We formulate hypotheses in which we conceive two cultural identity dispositions—ethnic identification (EID) and identification with global consumer culture (IDGCC)—as mediator variables between I-C and market mavenism. Hence, our theoretical framework is a hierarchical model with the constructs arrayed along an abstraction continuum (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), from fundamental cultural values (I-C) to more concrete cultural identities (EID, IDGCC) and thence, the particular behavioral trait of market mavenism that we attempt to explain. The impact of cultural values and identity dispositions on market mavenism may depend on a consumer's immediate social environment which, especially among visible minority immigrants (e.g., Chinese in France), may trigger identity salience given enhanced self-awareness of distinctiveness (Forehand, Deshpandé, & Reed, 2002). To offer insights into the relative stability and potential dynamics of the previously outlined relationships we test the proposed conceptual model with data collected from consumers living in China as well as with data collected from Chinese living abroad in France.

The results reveal scant empirical support for direct relationships of the four I-C dimensions on market mavenism, but demonstrate I-C's variable effects on the two cultural identity bases which, in turn, predict mavenism. Hence, the present study offers new insights into how cultural dispositions act as antecedents of market mavenism in particular, and the body of knowledge on globalization and consumer behavior in general. We extend the literature on the antecedents of market mavenism by considering two distinct in-group cultural identities (EID and IDGCC) as mediators of the relationships between horizontal and vertical I-C dimensions and market mavenism.

1.1. The research context

The past three decades have utterly transformed Chinese society. As noted by Arnett (2002), the interdependent temperament of mainland Chinese culture “has been shaken by economic changes and by increasing contact with the West, and values have become notably more individualistic” (p. 776). Unlike previous studies relying on static country-level cultural indices (Dawar et al., 1996; Sun et al., 2004), our research design involving individual-level assessments of I-C of Chinese in China and those living abroad (in France) allows us to consider this possibility. Worldwide, the Chinese diaspora exceeds 50 million people,¹ and their upwardly mobile status in many destination countries makes them an attractive market segment. Though constituting a relatively small part of the diaspora, as of 2010, the Chinese in France

number some 700,000,² which represents the largest overseas Chinese community in Europe. The values and behaviors of overseas Chinese—given their more acute exposure to external cultural influences—may be a harbinger of a trajectory of Chinese cultural transformation that with globalization, may come to characterize mainstream culture back in China. Furthermore, being at the vanguard of new ideas and products from the West, overseas Chinese market mavens should hasten the dissemination of marketplace information back to their kin and kind living in the home country.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Market mavenism

Appraising the literature, Clark and Goldsmith (2005) differentiated three forms of influential consumers that represent an attractive target to marketers “because of their tendency to aid the spread of information in the marketplace” (p. 290). The first type, innovators, describes individuals that tend to be early adopters of new products (Rogers, 2010). Second, opinion leaders are individuals who influence other consumers' purchasing behavior in a specific product category (e.g., automobiles) (Feick & Price, 1987). Third, market mavens have been defined as those “individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information” (Feick & Price, 1987, p. 85). The diffuse product information proficiency of market mavens makes them highly attractive to retailers that offer a broad array of goods (Clark & Goldsmith, 2005). Unlike opinion leaders, mavens acquire and disseminate information on products that they may not purchase themselves. Market mavens' influence extends over all stages of the product life cycle, whereas that of opinion leaders applies mostly at the early phases (Walsh et al., 2004). Both opinion leaders and market mavens may enjoy accumulating social capital when they share their market knowledge with acquaintances (Stokburger-Sauer & Hoyer, 2009).

2.2. Individualism-collectivism

The inculcation of cultural values begins early in life, instilled foremost from the socialization efforts of parents so that their children learn the proper ways of behaving (Erikson, 1959). Theorists describe individualism-collectivism (I-C) as the broadest and most fundamental cultural value (Triandis, 2004) that can effectively distinguish occidental and oriental societies. Individualistic people put their own interests ahead of group interests, whereas collectivistic people emphasize group goals above individual desires. I-C may exist concurrently within the same person, with the salience of one or the other varying according to contextual or situational factors (Singelis et al., 1995). In the present study, the context pertains to the country in which otherwise similar Chinese reside (China vs. France).

Singelis et al. (1995) contend that individualism and collectivism have several “species”, with each fashioned by specific cultural attributes: horizontal (accentuating the essential equivalence of individuals) and vertical (stressing social hierarchies) facets. People high on horizontal individualism (HI) perceive the self as essentially autonomous, but also embrace that individuals are inherently equal; they prefer to stand out based on their uniqueness and self-reliant capabilities; virtues not necessarily achieved through competition, but rather attainable by self-transcendence. The ideal of an autonomous self also characterizes vertical individualism (VI); however, vertical individualists consider inequality as inevitable and their motivation to stand apart from others, which they fulfill through competition, social advancement, and power.

¹ <http://www.asiapacific.ca/sites/default/files/filefield/researchreportv7.pdf> (Accessed February 24, 2017).

² <http://www.slate.fr/story/23827/chinois-de-france-ne-veut-rien-dire> (Accessed February 16, 2017).

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