



# Profiling the entitled consumer when individualism and collectivism are co-dominant



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## 1. Introduction

In simple terms, narcissism is an overarching emphasis on self. Narcissists are driven by feelings of entitlement and exhibit dominance, aggression and egocentrism in their relations with others (Campbell and Foster, 2007). Increasing evidence for narcissism in both Eastern and Western cultures has led to a renewed research focus in the last decade (Cai et al., 2012; Twenge et al., 2008).

In recognition that narcissistic individuals do shop, Boyd and Helms (2005) coined the term ‘consumer entitlement’ (CE) to capture the presentation of entitled behavior by consumers at the buyer-seller interface. Entitled consumers enter service establishments with the expectation that sales personnel will not only give them special treatment, but automatically comply with all requests made (Boyd and Helms, 2005).

By all accounts, millennials are the most entitled generational cohort that the world has seen (Zboja et al., 2017; Debevec et al., 2013; Twenge and Campbell, 2010). As this cohort becomes interested in purchasing more than clothing, electronics and education, CE may pose an even greater challenge to service marketers. In this day of instantaneous global communication, one Internet video of a confrontation between an antagonized sales assistant and an entitled consumer may be all it takes to tarnish a service provider's reputation (Butori, 2010).

Despite its potential to moderate service quality, research into CE remains fledgling (Zboja et al., 2016) and exclusive to North America. This is hardly surprising given that narcissism is supported by a national culture of individualism, and the United States happens to be the most individualistic nation on the globe (Brewer and Venaik, 2011).

As individualism and narcissism become part of the cultural fabric of even the most collectivist of countries (Santos et al., 2017; Ogiwara et al., 2015) there will be a greater need to undertake CE research outside of its traditional domain. At a more general level, research into CE will also help to correct the insufficient emphasis on the role of the customer (rather than service provider) in achieving service quality (Li et al., 2017).

The current study investigates the extrinsic demographic and psychographic indicators of CE in Barbados; a small, developing society

where individualism and collectivism are co-dominant. We use the term ‘extrinsic indicators’ to refer to those characteristics that can be rudimentarily judged by sales personnel such as age or fashion orientation, in an attempt to be better prepared for entitled behavior during sales encounters, should it manifest. If, for example, CE is shown to be positively related to fashion orientation, then sales assistants can be trained to exercise caution if consumers present wearing the latest styles and fashions.

To date, the demographic associations of CE have only been measured for US consumers (Soster and Bearden, 2009; Boyd and Helms, 2005) and psychographic variables have yet to be investigated. Materialism, fashion orientation and family orientation were selected for this study in light of findings pointing to significant relationships with general narcissism (Velov, Gojković and Đurić, 2014; Sedikides et al., 2011).

The study will also contribute to the broader discussion concerning the influence of culture on consumer behavior. As a ‘dual culture’ society where individualism and collectivism are co-dominant, Barbados does not fit into the traditional national culture descriptions of ‘collectivist’ and ‘individualistic’ (Holder et al., 2014; Punnett, 2006). In such societies, retail shops may be just as much places of business as they are social gatherings based on established relationships between sales personnel and customers.

The article commences with a cultural profile of Barbados, followed by the literature review. The research methodology is then presented, after which the research findings are tabled. The final sections of the article present the discussion and managerial implications and the areas of future research.

## 2. Barbados and the anglo-caribbean

Barbados is one of the fifteen middle income developing countries in the English-speaking Caribbean (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017; UNDP, 2015). Measured on bi-polar scale, this region was classified as either moderately collectivist or moderately individualistic (Punnett et al. (2006) and Punnett (2006)). A sharper definition emerged with the application of the Cultural Perspectives Questionnaire (Maznevski and Di Stefano, 1995), where individualism and collectivism were shown to

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be co-dominant (Punnett, 2006).

This co-existence of individuality and group identity can be explained by the fact that these countries were British colonies populated by African slaves (Eaton and Louw, 2000; Triandis, 1989).

Barbados is a cultural microcosm of the Anglo speaking Caribbean (Punnett, 2006) and the findings for this study will prove useful for engaging entitled consumers in this region of the world, as well as in other developing regions and countries where individualism and collectivism have been shown to be similarly influential value systems. With its history of British colonization, India is one such country (Sinha, 2011).

### 3. Literature review

#### 3.1. Consumer Entitlement – Genesis and Impact

The four dimensions of general narcissism as captured in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory scale are superiority, authority, self-absorption and entitlement (Raskin and Hall, 1981). In defining CE as ‘the expectation of special treatment and automatic compliance with one’s expectations by service personnel in the sales encounter’, Boyd and Helms (2005, 277) drew primarily on the superiority and entitlement dimensions of narcissism.

CE impacts not only the sales encounter, but the salesperson. Fisk and Neville (2011) found that wait staff experienced stress and feelings of low self-worth after encounters with entitled consumers. Demands for free upgrades, larger portions, unusual discounts and undivided attention were reported, as well as instances of verbal and physical abuse. One patron went as far as to insist that the waitress hold his baby while he ate. The obvious vulnerability of service employees has led to a recent call for protective legislation (Yagil, 2017).

Entitled consumers are especially unforgiving of salespeople who seem not to meet their credibility standards (Zboja et al., 2017) and will occasionally express dissatisfaction with service quality though they acknowledge its acceptability (Zboja et al., 2016).

Recovery from a group service failure is also complicated by the presence of entitled consumers. Not only do they admit a greater tendency to grand stand if they are with a group, but they are more willing than other consumers to spread negative word of mouth after the event (Albrecht et al., 2017).

The financial, people-related and reputational challenges that accompany CE underscore the need to know even more about it. The review now turns to a discussion of the demographic antecedents of CE, before considering its possible association with materialism, fashion orientation and family orientation.

#### 3.2. Demographics and consumer entitlement

Though consumer research into demographic antecedents has often proved contradictory, the relatively stable relationships found between general narcissism and variables such as gender and age (Zhou et al., 2012; Wilson and Sibley, 2011; Stinson et al., 2008; Foster et al., 2003; Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001) render support for an investigation into the demographic correlates of CE.

Using a US sample in each case, neither Soster and Bearden (2009) nor Boyd and Helms (2005) found significant demographic associations for CE. However, this lack of association may result from the North American culture.

Not only is entitlement expected to be more of a social norm in the highly individualistic nation that is the United States, but social scientists also point to a modern day narcissism epidemic where the primary emphasis is on ‘loving oneself first’ regardless of gender, age or social class (Twenge and Campbell, 2010). The strong consumer rights framework further exacerbates entitlement and service firms adhere to the philosophy that ‘customer is always right’ (Polyakova et al., 2014).

In comparison, the cultural and economic complexity of Barbados

may cause demographic associations to emerge. Younger and wealthier Barbadians travel more to the US mainland, have greater exposure to US television programming and spend more time on the Internet than persons who are older and/or less financially stable. These acculturating influences (Knight, 2013; Cleveland and Laroche, 2007; Byfield, 2002; Gooch, 1995; Alleyne, 1990) may cause the former to be more individualistic, less forgiving of marketers’ failures and have significantly higher expectations of the sales encounter than their more traditional countrymen (Ferdous and Towfique, 2008; Cui and Chan, 2004).

Given that Boyd and Helms (2005) and Soster and Bearden (2009) are the only two articles to consider the influence of demographics on CE, we return to the very narcissism literature which they used to develop our hypotheses. This section commences with the findings related to income, before addressing age and gender.

##### 3.2.1. Income

Piff (2014) found a positive association between social class and general narcissism. Upper class individuals were also shown to be more entitled when measured on the Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004) since large financial resources may propel individuals to become self-focused and have less regard for the worth and rights of others (Kraus et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2007).

Though collectivist sentiment may temper wealthy persons in the ‘dual culture’ society, the possibly greater income disparities between the rich and poor found in developing countries (United Nations, 2014) may work to make the rich in such societies even more entitled than their North American counterparts.

When compared to the lower income persons in individualistic, economically advanced societies, lower income persons in developing countries are less financially self-sufficient and are expected to have a greater appreciation for the role of harmony and supportiveness in economic survival and emotional wellness (Banerjee and Duflo, 2006). This conscious need for others may extend into the buyer-seller interface and make the lower income consumer in the collectivist or ‘dual culture’ society comparatively less entitled and demanding.

When these comparisons are taken together, one may assume that the entitlement differential in a developing, ‘dual culture’ society, as determined by income level, may be larger than that for developed individualistic societies.

##### 3.2.2. Age

In looking at the US population, Stinson et al. (2008) found a negative relationship between clinical narcissism (the disorder) and age. Apart from a population wide focus on self-love, Twenge and Campbell (2010) propose that the explosion in youth narcissism can be blamed on a school system which inflates the grades given to students and on an increasing immersion in a social media culture which encourages persons to draw attention to themselves. More specifically, younger Americans have demonstrated a greater sense of entitlement than older Americans (Debevec et al., 2013).

We also propose that young Barbadians will be more entitled than older ones, as a consequence of greater exposure to the global youth culture through the Internet and social media. This assumption is based on several developing country studies which demonstrate pervasive Internet and social media use among persons under the age of 35 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Social media not only influences how people communicate, but their views on politics, culture, products, brands, civic life and religion (Perrin, 2015). More importantly, research suggests that developing country youth are using social media more intensely than young people in advanced nations, thereby strengthening its socialization effect (Perrin, 2015).

##### 3.2.3. Gender

Research has shown men to be more entitled than women on a

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