

# Cross-cultural styles of thinking and their influence on consumer behavior

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There has been a lot of interest in culture as a driver of consumer behavior. This article focuses on styles of thinking (analytic versus holistic) stemming from cultures with different social organizations. Early research in this area focused on broad cultural differences in consumer behavior. More recently, researchers have recognized that culture does not have a pervasive effect on consumer behavior. Rather, a variety of situational variables dictate when cultural differences due to styles of thinking will emerge. The authors examine the effect of analytic and holistic thinking across a range of consumer-related phenomena: brand extensions, brand knowledge structures, price–quality relationships, spatial biases, and context effects.

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Culture has been an important topic of inquiry within consumer behavior during the last couple of decades [1–5]. This research has broadened our view of how consumers in different parts of the world engage in consumption activities. A variety of different cultural frameworks have been used to understand consumer behavior, such as individualism–collectivism, independent–interdependent self-construal, analytic–holistic thinking, and high–low power distance [6,7,8\*,9,10]. Social differences between cultures can alter how people view social bonds and relationships [11]. In this article, we focus on styles of thinking stemming from cultures with different social organizations [8\*]. Social differences between cultures promote certain cognitive processes more than others. Individuals in Eastern cultures, embedded in many social relations, have beliefs about focusing on the field and paying attention to relationships between objects. In contrast, individuals in Western societies, who have fewer

social relations, have beliefs that the world is discrete and discontinuous and that an object’s behavior can be predicted using rules and properties. In this way, Eastern cultures promote holistic thinking, whereas Western cultures promote analytic thinking. *Holistic thinking* is defined as “involving an orientation to the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships” [8\*]. *Analytic thinking* “involves a detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the objects behavior” [8\*].

Within psychology, a considerable body of research supports these styles of thinking. Since Easterners focus on relationships between an object and its environment, they have been shown to be more field dependent than Westerners [12–15]. In one study, American and Chinese children were asked to pick two objects that were most similar from a set of three objects and indicate why they went together. American children adopted a style of thinking where objects were grouped based on category membership or attributes (e.g. a jeep and boat grouped together because both have motors). However, Chinese children adopted a relational-contextual style of thinking, in which similarities were based on thematic relationships between objects (e.g. table and chair grouped together because you sit on the chair to eat at a table) [14].

The analytic and holistic thinking framework has been shown to be a powerful predictor of consumer behavior in a variety of different domains. Here, we review recent developments in the area focusing on *when* cultural differences are more likely to emerge.

## Basic cultural differences

Early research on analytic and holistic thinking within consumer behavior was focused in the area of branding. This was not surprising given that styles of thinking could be tied to consumers’ perceptions of brands and whether brands could be stretched to other product categories. For example, when exposed to a dissimilar brand extension (e.g. McDonald’s chocolate bar), analytic thinkers tend to focus on attributes and categories to draw inferences and make judgments [16\*]. Thus, when brand extensions are dissimilar from the parent brand, analytic thinkers do not see any relationship between the parent brand and the extension, and thus judge them poorly (e.g. chocolate bar

is so different from fast food that McDonald's makes). However, holistic thinkers pay attention to the field, and are able to identify other relationships between the parent brand and the extension, such as whether the parent brand and extension can be consumed together (e.g. people who eat at McDonald's may want a chocolate bar), or they may consider relationships between the extension and parent brand in terms of the overall reputation or feeling they have for the parent brand (e.g. McDonald's is a reputed brand, so the chocolate bar would be good). Identifying these types of relationships result in more favorable reactions to brand extensions. Such differences due to styles of thinking have not only been observed across different cultures (e.g. US versus India), but also when analytic and holistic thinking is primed among consumers [16,17].

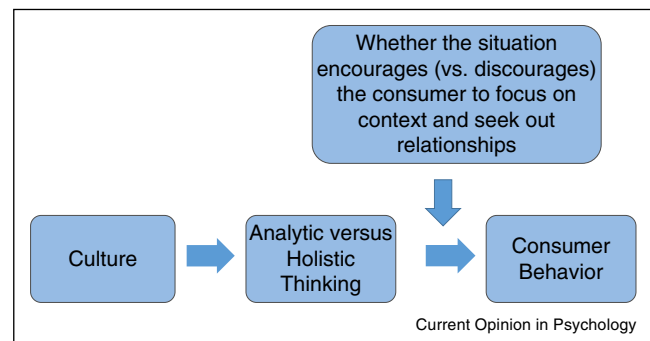
Cultural differences in styles of thinking also result in differences in the way consumers organize brand information in memory [18,19]. Information about a brand such as Sony could be stored as a summary global evaluation (across all of Sony's products) or as a collection of separate sets of beliefs about the different products of Sony (e.g. Sony PDA, Sony Walkman). Analytic thinkers' tendency to ignore contextual information causes them to store brand information in the form of global evaluations, and ignore individuating information (information about individual products for the brand). Holistic thinkers' tendency to focus on context causes them to focus on individuating information for each product (e.g. usage situation). Consequently, analytic thinkers tend to ascribe the same set of beliefs to the different products of a brand, while holistic thinkers tend to possess different sets of beliefs for each product [19].

Other research in the area of assimilation and contrast effects examined how analytic and holistic thinkers react to products placed on different table surfaces (glass versus wood) [20]. This research finds that holistic thinkers, who focus on context, are more likely to assimilate their product evaluations to the surrounding table surfaces, evaluating a neutral product as more modern when presented against a more modern, glass surface versus a less modern, wooden surface. In contrast, analytic thinkers, who separate an object from its context, are more likely to contrast their product evaluations from the surrounding table surface, evaluating a neutral product as more modern when presented against a wooden surface than a glass surface.

### Boundary conditions for cultural differences

More recently, researchers have begun to realize that broad cultural differences are not pervasive, and thus do not provide a complete picture of consumer behavior. This has given way to a more nuanced approach, which delineates the conditions under which cultural differences in styles of thinking may dissipate or even reverse (Figure 1). For example, within the context of brand

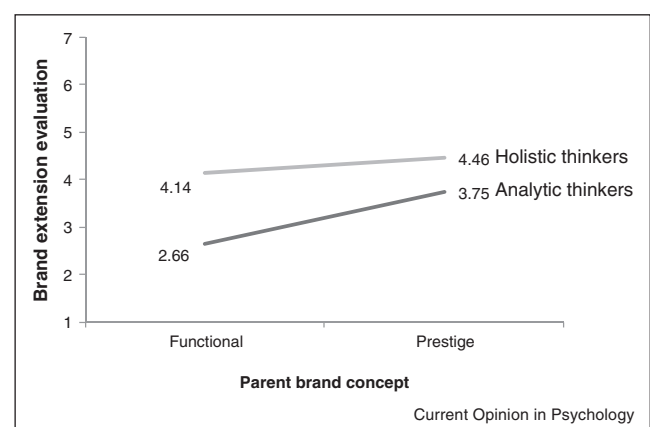
Figure 1



Conceptual model.

extensions, although analytic thinkers respond more favorably than holistic thinkers to brand extensions of functional brands (e.g. Toyota), these differences dissipate when prestige brands (e.g. Mercedes Benz) are examined [23]. When functional brands extend to dissimilar product categories (e.g. Toyota wallets), analytic thinkers do not evaluate the brand extension favorably, because they do not see any basis of similarity between cars and wallets. Holistic thinkers identify other relationships (e.g. Toyota is a reliable brand, so the wallets would be reliable), and thus evaluate the brand extension more favorably. However, prestige brands are more abstract in nature allowing them to accommodate a wider range of products that share few features (e.g. Rolex could successfully extend into ties and scarves [21]). As a result, for prestige brands, abstract associations are accessible to both analytic and holistic thinkers, allowing both groups to draw connections between the prestige brand and the extension category (e.g. Mercedes Benz wallets would be prestigious), resulting in similar responses to such brand extensions (Figure 2). Thus, different cultures appear to

Figure 2



Differences in brand extension evaluation emerge for functional brands, but not for prestige brands. ©Journal of Marketing.

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