Culture and consumer behavior: the role of horizontal and vertical cultural factors

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We examine the influence of culture on consumer behavior with a particular focus on horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. Cultures vary in their propensity to emphasize hierarchy, a distinction captured by examining horizontal/vertical cultural orientations or contexts. These cultural factors pattern personal values and goals, power concepts, and normative expectations applied to the exercise of power. We review implications for how consumers respond to brands in the marketplace, service providers, and each others' needs.

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Entering a shopping mall in Boston or Beijing, one may be struck by the similarity in retail spaces and offerings. But do consumers in these marketplaces approach their decisions in the same way? What roles do cultural factors play?

Consumer behavior encompasses a broad range of phenomena, and cultural factors have been shown to influence many of them. Culture shapes what general goals consumers have [1••], and how they respond to prices [2,3•], brand images [4•], and advertising elements [5]. Culture also influences the processing strategies and thinking styles of consumers (see [6,7••] for reviews). These differences in cognitive processes influence whether brands, prices, and other marketing elements are thought about in relation to one another [3•,5,8•,9], and shape the role of feelings and personal preferences in consumer decision-making [10•,7••]. However, consumer research is not limited to the understanding of acquisitive processes. Increasingly, research on culture and consumer behavior has examined pro-social behaviors such as making charitable donations [11••,12,1••] or choosing socially responsible brands [13]. These pro-social consumer

decisions are illuminated by research on cultural differences in power and hierarchy.

Hierarchy and horizontal/vertical cultural orientations

In this article, we examine culture and consumer behavior with a focus on *horizontal* and *vertical* individualism and collectivism. Cultures vary in their propensity to emphasize hierarchy. Although extensive research has addressed individualism/collectivism, there is increasing attention to cultural classifications that address how hierarchy and power is patterned across societies, and their associated privileges and obligations. Much of this work comes from consumer psychology, an emphasis that is natural for a domain that seeks to understand, for instance, the pursuit of status and the appeal of luxury goods.

To address issues of hierarchy, recent research has productively built upon a distinction within individualism and collectivism introduced by Triandis and colleagues [14,15••] — between cultural orientations that are *horizontal* (valuing equality) and those that are *vertical* (emphasizing hierarchy). In Vertical-Individualist (VI) societies, such as the U.S., Great Britain and France, the emphasis is on gaining personal status through achievement, competition and surpassing others [14,15••]. An individualistic form of hierarchy is emphasized, where winning is linked to the individual self, and people seek opportunities to stand out and to impress others [16••]. In contrast, in Horizontal-Individualist (HI) societies, such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Australia, people value equality and focus on expressing uniqueness rather than improving personal status. The emphasis is on self-reliance and self-expression, not on hierarchy [17,14]. In Vertical-Collectivist (VC) societies, such as Korea, Japan and India, people prioritize their in-group goals over personal goals, and emphasize compliance with authority figures. The emphasis is on fulfilling duties and obligations [15••]. Finally, in Horizontal-Collectivist (HC) societies, such as Brazil and some other Latin American contexts, people value interdependence and sociability within an egalitarian framework. The emphasis is on benevolence and sociability, not hierarchy [16••].

In addition to between-country differences, the horizontal–vertical orientations of U.S. ethnic cultural groups also appear to differ, with Hispanic-Americans showing a greater tendency than European-Americans to be horizontal collectivists and lesser tendency to be vertical individualists [16••,18•]. Robust gender differences have

Figure 1
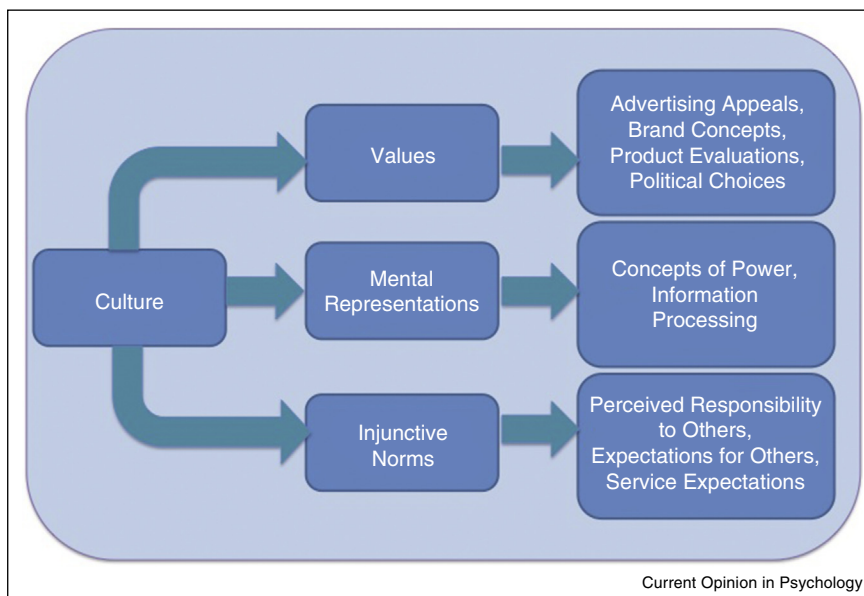
Differences between Horizontal and Vertical Cultures.

also been observed, with females being higher than males in HC and lower in VI [19,3[•],17].

Figure 1 outlines three broad ways in which horizontal and vertical cultural contexts differ. First, they nurture distinct values that are reflected in cultural artifacts such as advertisements, and that predict consumers' reactions to brands, products, and even political candidates. Second, horizontal and vertical cultural distinctions predict how power concepts are mentally represented and how consumers process information when power concepts are activated. Finally, injunctive norms — beliefs about what behaviors are approved of or disapproved of by others [20] — also vary across horizontal and vertical cultures. In particular, consumers show cultural differences in the degree to which they feel responsible for others, and accordingly their expectations for others' behavior toward them, including the behavior of service providers.

Personal values, goals, and judgments in the marketplace

To capture horizontal/vertical cultural orientations at the individual level, Triandis and Gelfand [15[••]] validated a 16-item scale that assesses each orientation with four attitudinal items, including: ''I'd rather depend on myself than others'' (HI); ''Winning is everything'' (VI); ''The well-being of my co-workers is important to me'' (HC); and ''It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want'' (VC).

Scores on the HI subscale are best predicted by self-direction values; VI by power values; HC by benevolence

values; and VC by conformity values [21]. People with an HI cultural orientation value being distinct and self-reliant. As a result, they score higher than others do on Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE; [22]), the tendency to view oneself positively and to give an inflated assessment of one's skills and abilities. Indeed, whereas HI scores predict SDE, VI scores and other cultural orientations do not [23].

People who are high in VI value achievement and impressing others [17,24]. Accordingly, they have more vivid and emotional representations of past experiences in which they stood out and impressed others [16[••]], reflecting the goal-relevance of these experiences.

People with an HC cultural orientation value being sociable and benevolent [24,15[••]]. As a result, they score higher than others on Impression Management (IM; [22]), the tendency to present one's actions as appropriate and normative. Indeed, whereas HC scores predict IM, VC scores and other cultural orientations do not [23]. People who are high in HC value cooperation and helping others [16[••]]. Accordingly, they have more vivid and emotional representations of experiences in which they gave valued help and support [16[••]], reflecting the goal-relevance of these experiences.

Horizontal/vertical cultural values are reflected in the marketplace in various ways. Advertisements are cultural artifacts that shed light on the goals and values of a society (e.g. [25,26]), and evidence suggests that differences in horizontal/vertical cultural values are reflected in the ad