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Does Culture Affect how People Receive and Resist Persuasive Messages? Research Proposals about Resistance to Persuasion in Cultural Groups

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Introduction

During the past three decades or so, consumers' contacts with and immersion in other cultures have increased exponentially. The rapid development and spread of accessibility of online messages, blogging and other social media have made communication and persuasion even more complex and impersonal today as the lines among information, entertainment, and personal communication have become blurred. Persuasive messages today are much more global, reach multicultural audiences, and are carried around the globe through the migration of people. Thus, deeper study of persuasion, resistance to persuasion, and the many other aspects of marketing communications have become imperative. Learning about how the persuasion process works in different cultural environments and how consumers process persuasive messages in different cultural contexts can help managers design effective communication strategies. Better understanding of how attitudes, beliefs and perceptions can shape persuasion and resistance to persuasion can contribute to more successful marketing strategies.

Marketing communications have also become more subtle, devious, complex, and impersonal as consumers have become more informed, sophisticated and global (Perloff, 2010). As nations' commerce, communications, and governance mechanisms have become increasingly intertwined and as they have moved away from regulated to market-driven economies, driving customer-satisfaction and affecting attitude change has become more important. Thus, better understanding of the cultural circumstances under which people are likely to receive or resist counter-attitudinal persuasion attempts should contribute significantly to succeeding in designing effective consumer communication campaigns.

Persuasion has been a widely researched topic in consumer behavior. Since the first issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* was published in 1974, persuasion studies have evaluated the effects of consumers' strategies for decoding, processing, and coping with persuasive communication attempts (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Sanbonmatsu & Kardes, 1988; Reynolds, Gengler, & Howard, 1995; Kimani, & Zhu, 2007; Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen, Sundie, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2009; Friestad and Wright, 1994; Krugman, 1965; Krishnan, & Kothari, 2009). The great majority of these studies, however, have involved American consumers and focused on persuasion itself, with very few addressing *resistance to* persuasive attempts (Ahluwalia, 1992). None has addressed resistance to persuasion in a cross-cultural context. We aim to contribute to closing this gap in the literature with this paper. Specifically, we aim to expand knowledge of the persuasive process by applying the cultural dimensions of self-construal and face negotiation theories to Gopinath and Nyer's (2009) work conducted on American consumers about the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion. We will explore the extent to which, and under what conditions, culture affects the degree to which people receive and resist persuasive attempts. Our research focus is on why people from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds will receive or resist persuasive messages differently. Understanding the effects of cultural differences on a person's reception of, or resistance to, counter-attitudinal persuasion should be valuable to managers who make decisions about cultural adaptations and target audience changes.

A special contribution of our study is our introduction to the persuasion literature of the notion that resistance to persuasion will alter as the consumer adopts different facework behavior strategies based on their cultural identification. We anchor this notion in face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This perspective addresses different types of image (face) maintenance

and restoration that are chosen by people from different cultures, thus shedding light on processes underlying persuasion and resistance to persuasion mechanisms as influenced by culture. Resistance to persuasion can be considered antithetical to persuasion, but by understanding persuasion processes, we can develop a better understanding of resistance to persuasion and will most likely manage this process better. Furthermore, the focus on resistance does more than supplement the study of persuasion since it unlocks new influence strategies (Knowles & Linn, 2004).

In the next sections, we review the literature on resistance to persuasion, especially how it is influenced by culture through the lenses of self-construal and face negotiation theories (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Ting-Toomey 2005). We then propose a model in which (1) issue importance mediates the relationship between public commitment and resistance to persuasion, (2) *self-construal* moderates the relationship between public commitment and issue importance, and (3) facework moderates the effect of self-construal on the relationship between public commitment and issue importance. We introduce research questions and proposals regarding these relationships. Next, we discuss how our model and the research propositions we derive from it will potentially advance theory and practice. We conclude with describing the limitations of our work and offer new questions for future research.

Relevant Literature

Resistance to persuasion

There has been a long research stream regarding attitudes, and regarding amenability and resistance to counter-attitudinal persuasion attempts. Links between attitudes and behavior make attitude one of the most studied subjects in social psychology. The theory of reasoned action

(Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) posits that a person's beliefs about and evaluations of a behavior combine to produce an attitude toward the behavior; the opinions of referent others and the person's motivation to comply with those opinions combine to produce a subjective norm. Subjective norms and attitudes toward the behavior interact to produce behavioral intentions, which are followed by the behaviors themselves. The importance of attitude is thus tied to its link to behavior. For marketers who attempt to elicit attitude change in individuals and in populations, success in changing attitude can have a significant bottom line effect.

In an effort to increase understanding of attitude change and resistance to change messages, Gopinath and Nyer (2009) examined the effects of having made a previous public commitment to a position on a person's resistance to counter-attitudinal persuasion. In that study, the effects of public commitment were fully mediated by attitude certainty and issue importance. Resistance to persuasion was higher among participants who were told their stated positions on an issue would be made public than among those who were not, but when attitude certainty and issue importance were introduced as covariates, the covariates were significant predictors of resistance and public commitment became non-significant. Public commitment *caused* increased attitude certainty and issue importance for participants, which in turn, caused increased resistance to persuasion. Gopinath and Nyer (2009) also found resistance to persuasion positively related to a person's preference for consistency (having taken a position, not wanting to change), and to the person's distance (geographic, psychic, relational) from the message source. Not surprisingly, participants were more open to attempts from others to change their minds when the others were close, rather than distant. We expect this process to become even more complex when individuals' cultural backgrounds are taken into account.

Culture and the self-construal concept

The impact of national culture on behavior has been amply demonstrated (Clark, 1990; Ralston, Holt, Terpstra and Kai-Cheng, 1997; Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2006; Hewitt, Money and Sharma, 2009). In studies of over 90,000 people, examining cultural data in 66 countries, Hofstede, whose work has been widely reviewed and used (Søndergaard, 1994; Nakata and Sivakumar, 1996) reduced international differences to five culture dimensions: masculinity-femininity (MAS), power distance (PDI), individualism-collectivism (IDV), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and long-term orientation (LTO), which was introduced at a later date. The highest and lowest scores on each of Hofstede's indices were Malaysia and Slovakia (104) / Australia and Austria (11) for PDI, the USA (91) / Guatemala (6) for IDV, Greece (112) / Singapore (8) for UAI, and China (118) / Pakistan (0) for LTO. Though using nation-states as if they were coterminous with culture has been questioned (Lenartowicz and Roth, 1999, 2001), for the purpose of our study, nationalities will serve as proxies for cultures; we will use "country" and "culture" interchangeably.

Much of the earlier research on Hofstede's dimensions focused on the national culture-level of this construct (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Gudykunst & Lee, 2000; Hofstede, 1980; Matsumoto, 1991; Neuliep, 2000; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2002). This view assumed that national culture is the predominant variable influencing an individual's behavior. The individualism-collectivism dimension was researched most frequently and found to have the strongest influence on individual behaviors, and societal value systems (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, & Heyman, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Many researchers followed Hofstede's path (1980, 1983) and analyzed employees' behaviors based on a national culture-level approach (Stohl, 2001). For

example, Stewart, Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida (1986) developed a questionnaire based on Hofstede's (1983) decision-making style questionnaire to evaluate the influence of Japanese managerial decision-making style on Japanese employees' perceptions of communication openness and satisfaction. The individualism-collectivism dimension was found to affect group dynamics such as social loafing (Earley, 1989) and decision shifts (Hong, 1978).

Even though the I/C approach has been prevalent in early intercultural research, some researchers (e.g., Wilson, Cai, Campbell, Donohue, and Drake, 1994) argued that it is far too simplistic in suggesting a direct causal relationships between culture and individual behavior. Wilson et al. (1994) claimed, for instance, that individuals' cultural values and cognitions affect their interactions, but other variables, such as situational, structural, and contextual factors may also be important. As a result, many scholars moved away from explanations that include only cultural predictors of human behavior, and recognized that both individual and cultural variables jointly influence behavior (e.g., Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Gudykunst & Lee, 2000; Kim, 1995; Samovar & Porter, 2000). Some researchers (e.g., Gudykunst & Lee, 2000) go as far as suggesting that if the research does not include both cultural and individual level constructs or variables it is not valid.

In response to this need, the concept of self-construal (independent and interdependent self-construals) was introduced to the literature by Markus and Kitayama (1991) to refer to the individual's view of the self, which may sometimes differ from the individual's broader culture. This has led to much research and revision of theory. Some scholars who originally examined only the cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism revised their theories to include the self-construal (e.g. Gudykunst, 1995; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2002). As a result of employing the concept of self, researchers introduced "independent –

interdependent construals of self" that parallels the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The independent and the interdependent construals of self can be measured at an individual level while individualism – collectivism can be measured on a national (or societal) culture level. That is, it is possible to find individuals with the independent self- construal in collectivistic societies, and individuals with the interdependent self- construal in individualistic societies.

Face negotiation theory

The concept of face originated in Chinese culture, and Goffman (1955) was one of the first Western scholars to examine it. He conceptualized face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a participant contact" (p. 213). Although individual verbal and nonverbal behaviors vary culturally researchers believe that the concept of face applies universally, and communication scholar Ting-Toomey constructed the face-negotiation theory based on it (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005). As cultural members engage in presenting and maintaining impressions during their interactions they need to maintain their "faces" either to control, to be accepted, admired or respected (Lustig & Koester, 2003). The concept of *face* is about identity respect, and it is tied to the emotional significance that we attach to our own social self-worth and the social self-worth of others. A face-threatening act can arouse a mixed package of emotions related to our sense of identity. *Facework* refers to the specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors that we engage in to maintain or restore face loss and to uphold and honor face gain. According to Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) facework is especially important in a cultural situation when we experience embarrassment or threat, become excessively polite or apologetic.

While face and facework are universal phenomena, how we interpret the meaning of face and how we implement facework may vary from one culture to the other. Individualism-collectivism shapes members' preferences for self-oriented facework versus other-oriented facework. Self-face is the protective concern for one's own image when one's own face is threatened in the situation. Other-face is the concern or consideration for the other party's image in the situation. Mutual-face is the concern for both parties' images and the image of the relationship (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 1999). Members of individualistic cultures tend to be more concerned with protecting self-face images during any threatening situation, while collectivists tend to be more concerned with either accommodating the other-face images or saving mutual-face images (Ting-Toomey, 2005). In addition, small/large power distance shapes members' preferences for horizontal-based facework versus vertical-based facework. What may be an appropriate and acceptable face-negotiation strategy in one culture may not be in another. As noted by Ting-Toomey (1988), face concerns become especially important during interactions between members of individualistic low-context, small power-distance cultures and collectivistic high-context, large power-distance cultures, e.g. the U.S. and China. The former tend to give more importance to face restoration or safe-guarding their own face, while the latter tend to engage in protecting another's face. Face can be negotiated along two different dimensions. The first dimension ranges from self-face concerns at one end of the spectrum to other face-concerns at the other end. The second dimension ranges from positive- face need to negative face-need. An individual who approaches conflict with positive face builds inclusion in the relationship and communicates respect, approval, and appreciation to the other party. On the other hand, approaching the conflict with negative face refers to exclusion and claiming basic rights of privacy and noninterference. Collectivistic, high-context, larger power-distance cultures and

individuals with interdependent self-construals tend to adopt positive-face/other face-concerns behavioral strategies while individualistic, low-context, small power-distance cultures, and individuals with independent self-construals tend to adopt self-face concern/negative face needs. Consequently, relationship orientation and indirectness characterize collectivist high-context cultures (interdependent self-construals members) while directness and open expression reflect individualistic low-context cultures (independent self-construals members).

Research Questions and Proposals

Our interest in this paper is the influence of culture, manifested in individualism-collectivism, on the reception or rejection of messages directed at counter-attitudinal persuasion. We address the question: how does the degree of conformity or individualism prevalent in a society influence the impact of a message designed to produce change, when the change message comes from cultural outsiders (foreigners)? In a comprehensive meta-analysis of studies using Asch's (1952, 1956) line length perception/conformity experiments, Bond and Smith (1996) found that individualism/collectivism (IDV) moderated the effects of conformance on resisting a clear counter-factual message. None of Hofstede's other cultural dimensions had any effect. To extend the Gopinath and Nyer (2009) model of resistance to persuasion as influenced by public commitment (PC) and issue importance (II) we propose a model of resistance to persuasion moderated by self-construal, and the type of facework behavior. We now introduce a series of research propositions about immigrants to the United States to explore the potential impacts of culture, on their self-construal change and face negotiation strategies.

Research questions

The general tendency in extant research has been for scholars to generalize culture to an entire national population, with the additional assumption that culture effects apply to all individuals in that society. Markus and Kitayama (1991) challenged this perspective and argued that culture should be studied at the individual level as well, proposing that this could be done through understanding individuals' self-construals (viewed as independent vs. interdependent). We therefore raise the following question:

RQ1: To what extent do the independent/interdependent self-construals influence the degree to which people receive or resist persuasive attempts to change their attitudes?

As indicated by Ting-Toomey in her face negotiation theory (2005) individuals with independent self-construals adopt self-oriented facework while individuals with interdependent self-construals adopt other-oriented facework. This leads us to the following question:

RQ2: To what extent does facework behavior (self-oriented, other-oriented) influence the degree to which people receive or resist persuasive attempts to change their attitudes?

Research proposals

We consider Gopinath and Nyer's (2009) conceptualization of resistance to persuasion as a good start, but incomplete and in need of extension to develop a deeper understanding of how resistance to persuasion process works. Thus, we begin with their conceptualization that proposes that the effect of public commitment (PC) to an idea on resistance to persuasion (RP) is mediated by both attitude certainty (AC) and issue importance (II). To develop a more complete picture of how this process works, we theorize that the relationship between public commitment (PC) and issue importance (II), and the relationship between issue importance (II) and resistance to persuasion (RP) are both moderated by both (a) culture (as operationalized by the

individualism/collectivism construct from Hofstede, 1983, 2001, and Triandis and Gelfand, 1998), and (b) the self-construal of the individual (as operationalized by the independent/interdependent construct from Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Since individuals with independent self-construals are less affected by group members' influence while individuals with interdependent self-construals are more affected by group members influence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), we offer the following research proposals:

> *P1:* At the individual level, the independent self-construal will be associated with lower issue importance, while the interdependent self-construal will be associated with higher issue importance.

 We further theorize that the relative influence of these effects will vary depending on facework behaviors adopted by individuals as envisioned by Ting-Toomey (2005). In this context, we propose that (a) in other-oriented facework behavior, the collectivistic dimension and the interdependent self-construal will be more dominant for people coming from collectivistic countries; (b) in the self-oriented facework behavior, the individualistic dimension and independent self-construal will be more dominant. We therefore offer the following research proposals:

> *P2:* For people with interdependent self-construals from either individualistic or collectivistic countries, the effect of public commitment on issue importance will be positively moderated by type of facework behavior, while for people with independent self-construals from either individualistic or collectivistic countries the effect of public commitment on issue importance will be non-significant.

<u>Our proposed study</u>

To test these propositions, we aim to conduct two studies. In Study 1, we will focus on the self-oriented facework; and in Study 2, we will focus on the other-oriented facework. As an example, in Study 1, we will test the moderating effect of culture on issue importance (II) as between public commitment (PC) and issue importance (II), and its moderating effect on resistance to persuasion as between issue importance (II) and resistance to persuasion on one cultural (independent self-construal members) group. Study 2 will be mirror-images of Study 1, but will involve different cultural group (interdependent self-construal members). We believe that America's ethnic richness provides the perfect laboratory in which to test our proposals.

<u>Discussion and Conclusions</u>

In this paper, we describe a study that aims to expand our knowledge of the persuasive process by applying the cultural dimensions of self-construal and face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005) to Gopinath and Nyer's (2009) work on the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion under several conditions. The unique contribution of our work is in our focus on not persuasion itself, but on changes in the resistance to persuasion as an individual adopts different facework behaviors. While our work was inspired by Gopinath and Nyer'sconceptualization of resistance to persuasion, we argue that this study is incomplete to develop a fuller and a deeper understanding of how the resistance to persuasion process works. We thus propose a new model that we believe explains this process more fully. By doing so, we add to existing knowledge about the complex behavioral processes that underlie individuals' persuasive interactions.

Our work has the potential to shed light on how culture affects persuasion and persuasive processes. Better understanding of how culture influences the manner in which people receive or resist counter-attitudinal persuasion attempts should contribute significantly to the success of promotional messaging by international businesses and managers. Since we will be examining the moderating influence of culture on persuasive attempts, we will be answering the "when" question, hopefully providing managers advice about when to approach "ethnic-Americans" with what types of messages to raise their awareness, liking, and/or preference for their products/services. Answering questions about culture's influence on persuasion/resistance to persuasion should help us as behavioral researchers to understand the persuasive process and to grasp better the ramifications of cultural differences for promoting ideas, and the goods and services that represent them. Further, understanding the effects of cultural differences on a person's reception of or resistance to counter-attitudinal persuasion should be valuable to practitioners who need to decide whether they should adapt to culture or try to change a target audience.

There are limitations to our work. We did not include the expanded concept of horizontal and vertical individualism/collectivism as proposed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998). We further did not consider the concept of chronic self and primed self (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). The chronic self is viewed as a construct frequently activated by social or cultural surroundings, while the primed activated construct can be considered as a recently activated construct. Independent and interdependent self-construals may coexist within every individual and in any culture. However, some situational contexts can prime the latent interdependent self-construal temporarily accessible even for individuals with the independent self-construal (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000).

In later studies we hope to examine the potential effects of other cultural variables, e.g., Uncertainty Avoidance. We might expect that people from cultures high in the UA Index would be more open, at least to considering persuasive messages aimed at changing their attitudes (Gopinath & Nyer 2009). Further, the extent of difference between an individual's source culture and American culture has not been considered. As we have noted, American culture is more individualistic than any other. We might expect that as people from a more collectivistic culture, e.g., Guatemala, are assimilated gradually into American culture, they would become more like Americans in accepting or receiving counter-attitudinal messages.

Even with these limitations, we believe that our research should initiate a series of other studies that will focus on this important and fascinating international marketing phenomenon.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Resistance to Persuasion Model: Effects of Public Commitment on Issue Importance, as moderated by Self-Construal and mediated by Identity Negotiation Stage on Resistance to Persuasion

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┌──────────────┐         ┌──────────────┐         ┌──────────────┐
│   Public     │───────▶ │    Issue     │───────▶ │ Resistance to│
│  Commitment  │         │  Importance  │         │  Persuasion  │
└──────────────┘         └──────────────┘         └──────────────┘
        ▲
        │                     ┌──────────────┐
        │            ◀────────│   Facework   │
        │                     │   Behavior   │
        │                     └──────────────┘
┌──────────────┐
│              │
│ Self- Construal │
│              │
└──────────────┘
```