



STOP BEING WEIRD

How psychological cultural dimensions influence decision-making

Words ELINA HALONEN



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The goal of marketing is to change consumers' behaviour in ways that benefit the company, and as such, it is fundamentally based on psychology. Much of marketing theory is created in the USA – many popular textbooks are by American authors, and new ideas frequently originate there.

In psychology, the story is similar: 96% of our knowledge of the human mind and behaviour is based on 12% of the world's population. This we call the 'WEIRD' samples – Western, educated people living in industrialised, rich and democratic countries. Two-thirds of the 12% are made up of Americans. Even though marketing strategies might

be localised to some extent, they are based on an implicit model of universal human decision-making, which is typically Western.

WHY CULTURE MATTERS

Human decision-making is influenced by ecology, economies, societal structures, language, social norms and pace





of life, as well as how we relate to others. As we navigate the world from childhood onwards, we learn logical rules to solve recurring problems. While our desired destination is often the same, the road we take might be different.

Many books have been written on how to negotiate or communicate across cultures, and it is not controversial to suggest people differ in their values, beliefs and manners. Yet we tend to assume that the differences are mostly on the surface, and deep down our minds work the same way – in other words, there might be differences in the content of our minds, but the processes are similar.

INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM

Cultural differences exist in many dimensions, but the most common and widely studied one is known as individualism versus collectivism.

In Western countries, we tend to have a more independent view of the self, which means that we see ourselves as separate from even those who are closest to us, like our family. We prioritise our personal needs and goals. Other people's views do matter, but personal preferences guide our choices above all else.

We also have a desire to be unique or different. Our identities are based on our inner attributes – we are hard-working, creative, adventurous – which are the same in different situations and across our lifespan, directing our behaviour.

In non-Western countries, on the other hand, people tend to have a more interdependent view of self, which means that the boundaries between people are not as clear. People understand that their behaviour is influenced by the perceptions of other people's thoughts, feelings and actions. They pay attention to how their behaviour affects other people, and they consider their roles within each social context.

The interdependent self is not a separate entity but instead embedded in a larger social group. Social norms are already integrated into their preferences, whereas for independent selves that is something external – and usually seen as negative. In other words, social norms and other people's expectations are often a stronger influence on behaviour than personal preferences in non-Western countries.

HOW SOCIETY SHAPES US

These cultural differences in psychological processes embedded in our minds are a product of different societal structures. Close-knit societies encourage harmony; loosely-knit ones encourage looking out for yourself only. For example, countries with histories of a strong pioneering, self-reliant spirit like the US and Australia tend to foster more independent selves.

Self-view is the lens of culture: our social environment tells us who we are and who we should be, and subsequently directs our attention to information that seems most relevant, organises it, and prioritises what we want to do. In short, it helps us make sense of the world.

These different mindsets, known as analytic and holistic modes of thought, accompany the different self-views.

When your primary focus in life is on your own needs and you strive for individual goals, you apply this analytic way of thinking to everything else. This mode of thought removes things from their context, evaluates them by their constituent parts and explains other people's behaviour like their own – with internal reasons and personal characteristics. For example, if you are late for work, it is because you are lazy and disorganised.

If, on the other hand, you value group harmony and belonging above all, and other people are an integral part of how you perceive yourself, it is natural to have a more holistic mindset and evaluate things relative to their context. You are also more likely to consider people's

Inside...

- ◆ Most people deciding strategy belong to the **smallest group of consumers**
- ◆ Individualism or collectivism has a **strong influence** on how people choose brands
- ◆ Automatic thinking only gives you a **partial view of the world**

behaviour influenced more by situational factors instead of their personality – if you are late, you must have had a difficult commute.

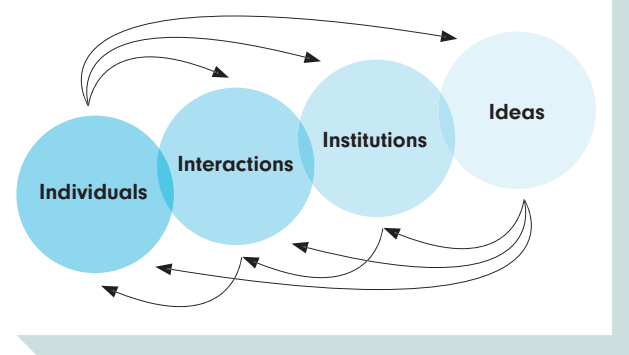
PSYCHOLOGY APPLIED TO MARKETING

These differences in seeing the world also influence how consumers evaluate brand extensions, emotional appeals, and what kind of advertising they find persuasive. More tenuous extensions under umbrella brands tend to be more easily accepted by consumers in Asian countries, thanks to their holistic way of thinking, while in Western countries the analytic mindset tends to be stricter on acceptable product categories.

It also influences what emotions we think are ideal. Research on Facebook profile pictures, chief executives' pictures in annual reports and advertising has shown that expressions of high-energy emotions such as joy are ↗

Spheres of influence

Society shapes psychological processes by telling us the right way to behave





more aspirational in USA, whereas low-energy emotions like contentedness are preferred in Asia because the primary focus is on group harmony, not the individual.

Advertising aimed at more independent selves with analytic minds tends to focus on the benefits for the individual themselves, while advertising that emphasises connectedness and benefits to others resonates more with those who have interdependent selves.

There are also considerable differences within countries in the form of subcultures such as social class, manifested in an exaggerated form in now-famous ads by Cadillac and Ford in 2014. The former focused on individuality, uniqueness and influence over others, while the latter emphasised relatedness and being rooted in a social context.

Recent research suggests that, for example, attending university fosters a more independent self-view and a

SOCIAL NORMS AND OTHER PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS ARE OFTEN A STRONGER INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIOUR THAN PERSONAL PREFERENCES IN NON-WESTERN COUNTRIES



more analytic mindset through years of repeated conditioning.

Our mental models provide us with default assumptions about the people with whom we interact, the situations we face and the information we encounter. However, this automatic thinking only gives us a partial view of the world. It is deceptive because you might think you have the same view as someone else because you're both looking outside, even though the view is always slightly different. So, if we are the 12%, how do

we ensure we truly understand those who are different from us?

The answer lies in an old anecdote about a meeting between two fish. The first one asks: "How's the water?", to which the second one answers: "What's water?" Like the fish, the first step is to become aware of the water, and then to understand our own inherent WEIRDness. ◇

Elina Halonen

is a behavioural science consultant at Square Peg Insight



Standing out versus blending in

A parent and daughter with independent self-views discuss what to wear and the daughter will choose something that makes her unique from others.

A parent and daughter with more interdependent self-views may want to know what other people are buying and wearing, to guide their decision.

Although the parent and daughter with independent self-views are aware of prevalent social norms, their behaviour is mostly influenced by what they personally like. On the other hand, while the parent and daughter with more interdependent self-views have personal preferences, these influence their choices far less. Instead, they

subconsciously internalise the views of others and situational norms so that they mirror their own preferences.

Adjusting to these norms is not a struggle, nor is it seen as a weakness to take others' views into consideration. You are not a doormat, because this helps to fit in with others and foster group harmony.

