The Impact of Culture on Product Evaluations: a Dialectical Perspective

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In everyday life, consumers are surrounded with conflicting advertising claims and product reviews. In this study, we investigate consumers' resolution of these conflicts and examine the impact of dialectical thinking, the cognitive tendency that accepts contradiction, in this process. We propose that East Asian individuals who are highly influenced by Chinese philosophical traditions may more readily accept contradictory product information in their decision process than Western individuals, but depending on product knowledge and motivation levels, the reverse can be also true.

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The Impact of Culture on Product Evaluations: A Dialectical Perspective

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There are many differences in thinking styles between Western and Eastern cultures. In this study, we investigate the consumers’ resolutions of conflicting product information and examine the role of culture in this process. Specifically, we expect that the degree to which an individual uses a “dialectical thinking” to resolve conflicts may influence consumers’ product evaluations. Dialectical thinking, which is rooted in ancient Chinese philosophical traditions, refers to the cognitive tendency that accepts, tolerates, and seeks to resolve contradiction (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Although dialectical thinking is not limited to East Asian cultures, this phenomenon is not represented in Western society as deeply as in East Asian society (Peng and Nisbett 1999).

CULTURE AND DIALECTICAL THINKING

Western systems of thought are in large part rooted in the traditions and philosophy of ancient Greece, which emphasize three principles of Aristotelian logic: the law of identity (A equals A is always true because A and A are identical), the law of non-contradiction (A cannot equal not A because no statement can be both true and false), and the law of the excluded middle (there is no middle term in two contradictory arguments) (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Distinct from this Western formal logic, East Asian thinking process is represented in dialecticism that is influenced by Chinese philosophical traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism. Dialectical thinking is based on three basic principles: the principle of change (existence is in constant flux and changeable), the principle of contradiction (two opposing arguments can be both true), and the principle of holism (nothing is isolated, but everything is connected) (Peng and Nisbett 1999).

Based on the disparity of thinking styles between Western and Eastern societies, Peng and Nisbett (1999) found that Chinese people, in contrasts with Americans, are more likely to use dialectical thinking to avoid conflicts by taking a compromised approach to resolve the social conflicts. Chinese people also tend to prefer arguments based on holistic principles over arguments based on the rule of non-contradiction, and are more likely than their American counterparts to accept two opposing arguments as both true. Because of this compromised approach, we propose that for the subsequent product evaluation, East Asian individuals compared with Western individuals are more likely to include opposing sides of an argument and are less likely to offer a one-sided (either strictly positive or negative) product evaluation.

Proposition 1: Upon exposure to conflicting product information, the higher the degree of dialectical thinking, the more modest the subsequent product evaluations.

PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE

Individuals may not only compare two inconsistent arguments, but also may utilize their knowledge of the product category and past experience, if any, during the decision process. As a consequence, dialectical thinking can be accessible for consumers of both cultures. Dialectical thinking is not limited to East Asian cultures (Peng and Nisbett 1999). In Western society, it is suggested that dialectical thinking can be developed with age (Basseches 1980). Based on this notion, we suggest that dialecticism can occur among consumers who are highly knowledgeable of a particular product, and that these consumers’ product evaluations can be more holistic than otherwise. With their high degree of the relevant knowledge needed to carefully scrutinize advertising arguments, they may expect that no product is really perfect, but that one brand may be better with regard to certain attributes than the other, and vice versa. Thus, when product knowledge is high, Western individuals may approach contradictory product information more dialectically than when it is low.

Proposition 2: When product knowledge is high versus low, Western individuals will use a more dialectical approach to resolve inconsistency, whereas the level of product knowledge has no effect on dialectical approach used by East Asian individuals.

MOTIVATION

Do East Asian individuals always think dialectically? In order to assess this question, we will first evaluate how people in the West process conflicting arguments. According to the heuristic-systematic processing model, people must be motivated to expend the effort that systematic processing entails (Chaiken 1980). Thus, when people are not motivated, they will process information heuristically by using only available information to make quick and efficient decisions. According to Maheswaran and Chaiken (1991), however, when people are not motivated and are presented with two pieces of conflicting information, their confidence in the heuristic-based judgments is undermined, and they step up systematic processing effort to attain sufficient confidence level. Therefore, regardless of the motivation level, people tend to process two pieces of inconsistent information systematically.

We do not expect this is the case for East Asians, however. With their dialectical thinking that accepts contradiction, when East Asians are not motivated, it is likely that they process contradictory information heuristically. We propose that when the motivation is high, East Asians will engage in systematic, effortful analyses of the arguments, rather than relying on heuristics. As a result, dialectical processing will be undermined.

Proposition 3: In a high-motivation setting versus a low-motivation setting, East Asian individuals will use a less dialectical approach to resolve inconsistency, whereas the level of motivation has no effect on the resolution approach used by Western individuals.

REFERENCES