

Comparative Consumer Research: The Next Frontier?

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Comparative consumer research is one of the neglected areas of marketing and consumer behaviour. This article advocates the importance and contribution of comparative consumer research to the field of consumer behaviour. Following a brief discussion of the "emic", "etic", and hybrid approaches to comparative consumer behaviour, the article focuses on the major considerations in the design of comparative consumer studies. It concludes with a brief discussion of the consumer behaviour and marketing areas which can benefit most from a comparative perspective.

Introduction

All behavioural disciplines have a tradition of comparative research. In sociology (Bendix[1], Elder[2] and Marsh[3]) and political science (Frey[4], Holt and Richardson[5] and Przeworski and Teune[6]), overall systems and their functioning are compared. Cross-cultural psychology (Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike[7], Triandis, Malpas and Davidson[8]), and cognitive anthropology (Ember[9]), on the other hand, compare specific aspects or entities within systems. Comparative research is widely recognised in these and other behavioural sciences as making an important contribution to the development of the discipline.

The fledgling discipline of consumer behaviour, not unlike its marketing parent,*** has yet paid little attention to the potential contribution of the comparative method. Since the establishment of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, only one paper[12] has been devoted to the methodological aspects of comparison, and only five actual comparative studies were reported[13, 14, 15, 16 and 17].**** Yet, at a time when much criticism has been made of the lack of conceptual and methodological rigour, and of creativity in consumer research[19], such neglect appears little justified.

Comparative studies play an important role in the development of any discipline. Bendix[20], for example, concluded that comparative sociological studies help to:

Develop concepts and generalizations at a level between "pure theory" and

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***For a recent review of the comparative marketing literature, see Bodewyn[10]. Further discussion of the status of and need for comparative marketing studies is provided in Wind and Douglas[11].

****A somewhat larger number have been presented at the Annual Conferences of the Association for Consumer Research, including one specifically outlining the advantages of cross-cultural research (Van Raaij[18]).

descriptive area studies. They help to elucidate the time and space limitations of sociological concepts that have less than universal applicability and uncover the generalization hidden in many “composite concepts”. Positively, they can help us develop typologies of social actions and structures and assess their characteristic range of variation.

Similarly, Triandis, Malpass and Davidson[21] suggest with respect to cross-cultural psychology that:

Cross-cultural research can be conducted for a variety of reasons: to check the generality of psychological laws; to increase the range of our observations on variables of interest; to determine the variations found in subjective culture variables in different settings; to take advantage of natural experiments involving combinations of variables that cannot be obtained in the laboratory; to study the manifestation of psychological variables in different cultural contexts; and to study cultures for their own sake. Such research can serendipitously lead to new insights about psychological principles and the laboratory studies to check these insights. To put it another way, one assumption of much psychological work is that the processes under study are invariant across time and place. This assumption is being challenged by cross-cultural psychologists and the challenge seems valid.

The same rationale can and should be applied to the consumer behaviour area. The purpose of this note, therefore, is *to suggest the potential of comparative consumer research for the development of the consumer behaviour discipline*.

Contributions of Comparative Consumer Research

The typical reference to comparative consumer research has been restricted primarily to cross-national comparisons. Despite the importance of such comparisons, the focus of this note is not only on the cross-national level of comparisons but on all comparisons, including those among cultural or sub-cultural groupings within a country. The increased heterogeneity of the US, evidenced by the emergence of strong Cuban, Puerto Rican, Haitian, Afro-American, and other minority cultures, suggests the need for improved comparative consumer research concepts and methods. Studies involving respondents from diverse sub-cultures require the same concepts and methods used in cross-national studies. Ignoring these comparative considerations might lead to misleading findings and conclusions.

Hence, although our discussion utilises mostly cross-national examples, it is equally applicable to any comparative study among sub-cultural or other sub-national groupings within a country.

There are four major areas in which comparative research can contribute to the consumer behaviour discipline:

- (1) *As a vehicle for testing the universality and generality of theories and concepts developed in relation to a single country (mostly the US), culture, or sub-culture.* This involves a specific assessment of the appropriateness of various consumer behaviour concepts and findings under conditions of different *types* and *degrees* of social, cultural, economic, technological and

political settings. Cross-national comparisons are uniquely suited for the examination of the generality of concepts and theories under different *types* of environmental conditions[22]; for example, the examination of consumer behaviour in countries with commercial television vs those without it or communist vs capitalist countries. Yet, most differences in environmental conditions, even across countries and especially within countries, are not a difference in *kind* but rather in *degree*. Consider, for example, the degree of exposure to commercial television in various countries, a country's degree of capitalism, and, more generally, the differences in consumer behaviour one might expect from different ethnic, socio-economic, religious, occupational, age, regional, or life-style groupings within and across countries.

- (2) *As a stimulant for the development of more rigorous conceptual and operational definitions of consumer behaviour concepts.* A necessary condition for any comparison is to establish the comparability of items to be compared. Experiences, items, or objects can only be compared with regard to some common denominator or dimension, and hence must belong to a common categorisation class[23]. The comparison is then made on the basis of some relevant properties of this categorisation class. An upper middle income US housewife and a German businessman, for example, can be compared as consumers with regard to attitudes toward advertising, or toothpaste attribute preferences. They can also be compared as members of the upper middle income class with regard to conservatism or leisure activities. But they cannot be compared with regard to sex — not as businessmen or as housewives. Similarly, Puerto Rican and Chinese New Yorkers can be compared as consumers or as different New York ethnic groups, but not as members of the Puerto Rican or Chinese sub-culture. Such comparisons, therefore, require the establishment of conceptual definitions which are comparable — *functionally equivalent* — in all the contexts studied (e.g. countries, cultures or sub-cultures). This, in turn, calls for greater rigour in the development of operational definitions and measures of each concept.
- (3) *As a path toward the identification and development of new or more refined concepts and theories.* Comparative studies also help in broadening the base of existing knowledge. A comparison of various studies on marital authority and role patterns in different countries including the US, Yugoslavia, Greece, Denmark and France has, for example, suggested a model integrating the "ideological" and "resources" theories of marital roles[24]. This "resources in a cultural context" theory suggests that the prevailing national cultural ideology, e.g. attitudes towards sex roles, will mediate the impact on authority relationships of relative resources brought by each partner to the marriage.

Within a country, a comparison between working and non-working wives which revealed no significant differences in shopping and purchase patterns has led us (in an unpublished, large-scale commercial study and in a small exploratory study in the US and France) to explore the mediating effects of the amount of time spent outside the home by the non-working wives, the type of occupation of the working wives and the perceived role conflicts of each of

the groups. All three sets of variables did have significant effects on the shopping and purchase behaviour of the sample. None of these effects would have been investigated had it not been for the results of the initial *comparison* between the two groups.

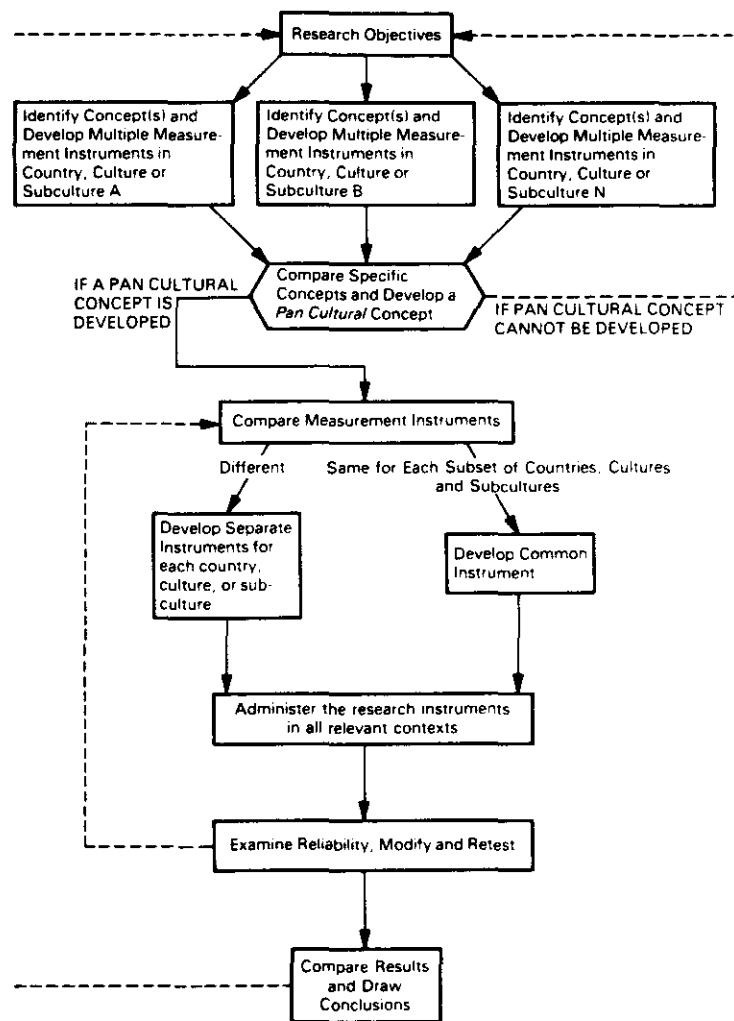
(4) *As a spur to the development of improved and better calibrated research methodology.* The design and execution of comparative studies involves a number of complex methodological issues such as comparability and equivalence of units of analysis, of samples, of research instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis, and organisation and co-ordination of research. These issues should be addressed in all comparisons, whether among sub-groups within a country or across countries. Yet, the importance and impact of these issues is greater in cross-national research due to the diversity of national research environments. These problems and the critical issue of the interrelationship between concepts and their measurement are briefly discussed in the following two sections. First the philosophy guiding comparative consumer research is outlined, and then, some of the key research design considerations are examined.

Approaches to Comparative Consumer Research

In conducting comparative consumer studies, three major research approaches can be followed:

- (1) The "*emic*" approach: This approach, which traditionally is adopted in anthropology, holds that attitudinal or behavioural phenomena are expressed in a unique way in each culture, and are best understood in their own terms[25]. Hence, concepts and measures are specific to each country, culture, or sub-culture and at the extreme no comparison is possible.
- (2) The "*etic*" approach: This approach has dominated cross-cultural psychology, and is primarily concerned with identifying "culture-free" measures of universal concepts[26]. Triandis[27] has suggested a procedure to operationalise this approach by taking a concept and adapting its measurement to other countries or contexts. This procedure does not recognise, however, that idiosyncratic cultural characteristics may require culture-specific measures.
- (3) A new *hybrid approach* which is designed to overcome the limitations of the first two approaches: The proposed approach develops country, culture, or sub-culture specific concepts *and* measures. These are compared, combined, or modified, and wherever possible common "pan-cultural" concepts which do not have a specific cultural bias, and which reflect the idiosyncratic characteristics of each country, culture or sub-culture to be compared, are identified. Country-specific measures of the "pan-cultural" and country idiosyncratic concepts are developed and compared. To the extent possible, they are combined and the combined and country specific measures are administered, generating the secondary data for the comparison. The approach is outlined in Figure 1, while its comparison with the *emic* and *etic* approaches is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 1. A Proposed Hybrid Approach to the Development of Comparative Constructs and Measures



Psychological constructs have generally been found to be universal[28, 29, 30]. Consequently, explicit testing for idiosyncratic aspects is rarely required. Rather, emphasis is placed on modification or adaptation of measures and measurement procedures to different national and cultural settings[31, 32]. Sociological constructs, on the other hand, tend to require a more, *emic* orientation[33]. Applied behavioural disciplines such as consumer behaviour, which borrow from a wide

range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology and linguistics, seems to be most conducive, however, to a hybrid comparative approach.

Figure 2. Three Approaches to Comparative Consumer Research

	Research Approach		
	EMIC	ETIC	HYBRID
<i>Concepts Developed in:</i>	Each specific country, culture, or sub-culture.	Universal concept.	Research objective guides development of concept in each country, culture or sub-culture modifying the concept and developing a pan cultural concept (which is <i>functionally equivalent</i> in all countries, cultures and sub-cultures.)
<i>Methods Developed in:</i>	Each specific country, culture, or sub-culture.	Adapted to different countries, cultures, and sub-cultures.	Unique to each country, culture or sub-culture where necessary and to the extent that similar methods are used in a subset of countries, cultures or sub-cultures, a common version combining unique and common measures can be developed.
<i>Nature of Comparison:</i>	No explicit comparison is possible.	Likely risk of overemphasis on similarities.	Conceptually most preferred but also most costly to institute.

Design Considerations in Comparative Consumer Research

Irrespective of the specific comparative philosophy adopted, the design of comparative consumer research requires a number of decisions concerning:

- Selection of the unit of analysis,
- Sample representativeness and composition,
- Instrument comparability,
- Comparability of data collection procedures,
- Data analysis,
- Organisation and co-ordination of research.

Selection of a unit of analysis is a key issue in the conceptualisation of a comparative research design. Multiple units or levels of analysis may be identified, ranging in level of aggregation from the individual or buying centre, sub-cultural or cultural groupings, to countries or country groupings[34, 35]. In making an explicit comparison, it is important to take into consideration the equivalence of the units relative to the phenomena studied, i.e., whether US housewives are equivalent to French housewives, or within the US, black housewives to the typical suburban WASP housewives. A judicious use of multiple units of analysis might be required comparing homogeneous consumer sub-groups across a range of sub-cultures,

cultures, countries or country groupings. The specific unit of analysis depends on the underlying conceptual model and specific research objectives.

Sample representativeness and composition. A related issue concerns the extent to which samples are representative of the units being compared, e.g. a country or subculture. Non-response rates and factors contributing to it may vary from country to country and across different consumer groups[36]. For example, in Middle and Far Eastern countries, difficulties often arise in interviewing women. Consequently, non-response rates may be high. Other factors affecting non-response such as income, age or education may also vary from country to country, or cultural sub-groups, implying different sample compositions and representativeness. If non-probability sampling is used and samples are “matched” with regard to such variables, other spurious factors associated with the “matching” variables may obscure the comparison[37, 38]. The appropriate procedure is thus likely to depend on the specific research objectives. In the exploratory stages of research where attention is centred on identifying relevant aspects for comparison, there may be less concern with sample representativeness than if precise measurements of similarities and differences are to be made. Similarly, if relatively homogeneous groups are being compared, quote samplings within each group may be adequate.

Instrument comparability. A third issue concerns the extent to which research instruments involving verbal or visual stimuli yield comparable results and are subject to similar biases in different national and cultural contexts[39, 40, 41]. This causes a particular problem if the study entails research in different linguistics and/or widely divergent socio-cultural environments. In this case, establishment of the equivalence of verbal or visual meaning and comprehension of instruments in each context is required[42, 43]. This may be achieved by an iterative process involving back-translation of the research instrument by nationals or natives in each country, culture or sub-culture studied. The instrument is thus “decentred” and does not contain any culture-specific bias. Specific response set bias, such as item non-response, yea-saying, or social desirability biases, may also vary across countries and sub-cultures. In addition, they are related to factors such as sex education and income which vary from one cultural sub-group to another[44]. All of these problems may jeopardise the comparability of data and require careful evaluation and control[45, 46].

Comparability of data collection procedures. Data collection procedures vary in their availability, reliability and monetary and time costs across countries, cultures, and cultural sub-groups. Hence, use of identical procedures (for example, personal interview or mail survey) may not be feasible nor would it necessarily yield equivalent or equally reliable results. This is particularly likely to be the case in comparative cross-national research, and comparisons in widely divergent socio-cultural settings within a country (such as a comparison of the ghetto consumer to its suburban counterpart). Use of different data collection procedures which are equivalent in their efficiency and reliability might, therefore, be more appropriate[47]. The bias associated with different types of data (e.g. observational vs survey data) may also vary across countries, cultures and sub-cultures, and is particularly affected by the educational level of respondents[48].

Data analysis. Comparative data can be analysed separately for each unit

examined, or alternatively, it can be conducted simultaneously across all the units studied[49]. The former has the advantage of tailoring the analysis to the specific problems and their particular configuration in each unit, but does not facilitate comparison. Conversely, the latter focuses explicitly on comparison, but may suffer from lack of adaptation to a particular unit or context[50]. While tedious and time consuming use of a multiple-stage approach is often desirable. This involves analysing unit by unit before proceeding to a simultaneous analysis of the relevant units. Existing statistical and analytical procedures, however, are not well adapted to dealing with analysis across multiple units of analysis, particularly when these vary in their composition (different buying centres or cultural sub-groupings, for example), and involve a longitudinal type data.

Organisation and co-ordination of research. The organisation and co-ordination of research can follow a centralised or decentralised approach. Centralised research design and administration has the advantage of simplifying co-ordination and control. It may, on the other hand, suffer from lack of adaptation and sensitivity to local environmental conditions due to the specific cultural referent of the researcher[51]. This is, however, less likely to pose a problem if the study is conducted within one country in relation to relatively clearly defined and homogeneous consumer groups, e.g. teenagers, senior citizens, or groups which are close to the researcher's own cultural background. Alternatively, allowance should be made for input in both the conceptual and administrative phases of the research from researchers familiar with each local sub-culture, culture or country. This allows for better adaptation and modification, but is likely to give rise to problems of co-ordination of research. An appropriate balance has to be struck, therefore, between excessive centralisation and lack of adaptation to individual units, and extreme decentralisation and added organisational difficulties. In general, effective results can be achieved by decentralisation during the conceptual phases of research (as inputs to a centralised research design effect), decentralised data collection, and centralisation of research administration, co-ordination and data analysis.

Areas of Potential Application

Comparative research is of particular interest in areas where the socio-cultural setting is likely to have an important impact on consumer behaviour. More specifically, it can be helpful in further clarifying the role of certain mediating variables which both reflect and are a part of this environmental context. These include, for example:

- (a) *The composition of the buying unit* and its differing buying and consumption roles. Comparative research can be helpful in understanding the impact of cultural or sub-cultural values, sex role attitudes, economic and time constraints on the role played by different household members in consumption and purchase decisions.
- (b) The impact of *dominant value sets* of a country, culture, or sub-cultures (i.e. modernity, ecological concern) in influencing behaviour as consumers. Thus, for example, one can compare the innovativeness of consumers in countries, cultures or sub-cultures which differ with regard to the degree of modernity.

Similarly, one can compare the purchase of biodegradable products in countries, cultures or sub-cultures which varied with regard to their environmental concern.

- (c) The role of life cycle and *lifestyle patterns* in consumer attitudes and behaviour. In this context, one can compare, for example, the similarities and differences between similar life cycle or lifestyle groups such as teenagers or suburban housewives, within and across countries (e.g. US vs. Japan), cultures (e.g. inner-directed vs traditional) or sub-cultural (e.g. Jewish vs. Catholic).
- (d) The importance of the *retail environment* in moulding purchasing behaviour and processes. Comparisons of this nature are particularly valuable insofar as the character of the retail environment as, for example, the degree of nonstore retailing (e.g. mail, telephone, etc.), the number and size of self-service establishments, etc, differs substantially across countries or areas within a country. The degree of interaction with store personnel, their role in channelling purchase decisions, as also the way in which this influence is exerted, does, for example, vary and frequently exercise an important influence on purchase decisions both within and across countries.
- (e) The effect of different *communication networks* (for example, mass media availability and usage) on the diffusion and communication of information about new and existing products and services. The level of TV advertising, as the availability and penetration of print media, radio and the newer electronic media (e.g. video cassettes, home computers, etc) differs across countries and within any country among various groupings. It, thus, provides the opportunity for a natural experiment examining the impact of such factors on, for example, the socialisation of children as consumers, or the diffusion of new products.

Conclusions

Despite the rich potential of comparative consumer research, few comparative studies have been undertaken. The objective of this note is to encourage more comparative research, both within a country (i.e. comparing sub-groups, regions and institutions) and across countries or country groupings. In effect, the time has come for the emergence of a comparative consumer research tradition. The cost (in terms of monetary and time requirements) is high and the difficulties, particularly in view of the complexity and lack of experience are considerable. Nonetheless, the benefits of such an approach are numerous. Not only can such studies make an important contribution to our understanding of the similarities and differences in consumer behaviour in other countries (the typical focus of comparative studies) but could also contribute to our understanding of domestic consumer behaviour. In this context, a comparative perspective would heighten the need for improved conceptualisation and measurement, and help to underscore the operational link between these two research components. Thus, it is strongly believed that the costs of comparative research would be offset by the added contribution to an improved understanding of consumer behaviour.

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