Lessons learned in cross-cultural research of Chinese and North American consumers

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Abstract

This paper describes lessons learned while conducting a cross-cultural study of information search comparing Chinese and North American consumers. The paper looks at such issues as creating relevant samples in cultures where it is difficult to compare occupations, income levels, educational levels and spending parity. The paper also underscores the need for a full understanding of the differences in the marketing environment that may exist in different cultures and how those differences may affect study results. Ways to alleviate the methodological issues in the specific context of cross-cultural research are suggested.

Keywords: Cross-cultural methodology; Information search and use; Decision making; China

1. Introduction

As the marketing world moves more toward globalization, and as new markets are opened up and developed, it becomes essential to understand how consumer behaviour differs from one culture to another. In particular, it is important to understand how consumer decision making differs among members of distinctly dissimilar cultures. One critical area of consumer decision making in this regard is information search and use where members of different cultures are quite likely to vary (Doran, 1994, 1997b).

To create meaningful cross-cultural research, it is necessary first to understand behaviours as they exist in the cultures being studied. Then, and only then, can the task of prediction be reasonably undertaken in the cross-cultural context. This paper reviews lessons learned in a cross-cultural study of information search and use comparing Chinese and North American consumers. Some consideration was put into the selection of what are largely political classifications as “cultures,” since other alternatives existed, but these groups were deemed sufficiently representative. North America represents the most researched culture in the world, as well as the sample basis for most consumer research theory. China, on the other hand, has been the subject of relatively little research, and is culturally very different from North America, yet represents one of the fastest growing and largest developing economies in the world. Since little understanding exists of whether widely accepted models of consumer decision processes describe the decision processes of individuals from other cultures, it is important that initial research control for potential cultural differences.

The study was a longitudinal, multimethod investigation. The methodological focus of the study was the development of grounded theory in the area of cultural differences in information search and use. As such, the paper discusses the use of emergent design, sample issues, triangulation, and cross-cultural parallelism. In addition, the paper examines the use of multiple methods in a cross-cultural context, including preliminary studies, focus groups, in-depth and follow-up interviews, observation, surveys and content analysis. Finally, the paper suggests ways to alleviate methodological concerns in the specific context of cross-cultural research as well as presenting some of the general findings of the overall study. These findings provide a platform for future research into Chinese consumer decision making as well as a framework for future cross-cultural research of this kind.

2. Development of the research program

The focus of this study was the development of grounded theory in the area of cultural differences in information search and use because so little research had been done regarding Chinese consumers. Based on a preliminary study using in-depth interviews of Chinese nationals living in
North America (Doran, 1994), a judgement was made that not enough information was readily available to justify anything but exploratory research at this juncture. A number of studies have alluded to the difficulty and applicability of using scales and other analytical tools across cultures (Albaum and Peterson, 1984; Durvasula et al., 1993; Roseweig, 1994). Even a survey using relatively sophisticated techniques such as back translation could have severe validity and reliability problems because the questions asked were not relevant to the Chinese consumer (see Adler et al., 1989). Therefore, the research utilized a combination of naturalistic inquiry, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Miles and Huberman (1984) and Strauss (1987) as well as quantitative data where possible to provide for different types of data as well as triangulation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jick, 1979; Yin, 1984). In addition, given the epistemological assumptions of the study, the research utilized a certain amount of emergent design (Belk et al., 1989).

Most of the methodological concerns in conducting the study centered on two major elements: developing appropriate product categories to focus on and finding ways to create reasonably comparable sample groups despite cultural differences. Considerable effort was made to achieve trustworthiness for this type of data. The study made use of the five criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and extended by Wallendorf and Belk (1989). These criteria to be strived for in interpretive research are credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity.

Several distinct philosophies seem, at least implicitly, to underlie current research on consumer decision making. Much of the research seems to ignore the impact of culture. For example, Bloch et al.’s (1986) study of information search looked at a variety of potential determinants, motives and outcomes of both prepurchase and ongoing search, but did not look at any cultural differences. From this, one might infer that the researchers are just concerned with their own culture. A second philosophical approach admits that culture affects the content of decision making; that is, the specific information searched, the information deemed important, the information actually used and the decisions that are made. On the other hand, this philosophy suggests that the decision-making processes used by consumers (e.g., the manner of, or rules used in, making a decision) are universal. This type of philosophy appears to underlie the work of McGuiness et al. (1991) in their examination of Chinese perceptions of sales strategies. A third philosophical approach assumes that culture affects both content and process. This approach underlies Arnould’s (1989) Niger study of preference formation. In this study, culture was found to affect both the innovation characteristics and types of innovations that were accepted (content), as well as how these product adoptions were made (process). One of the expressed objectives of the current study was to explore at what levels the cultural background of North American and Chinese consumers did or did not influence their information search and use.

3. Data collection

3.1. Cross-cultural parallelism

Achieving cross-cultural parallelism is an important objective for research that examines more than one culture. In particular, there was an established link between a product’s meaning to the consumer and his/her level of involvement with the product (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985; Zaichowsky, 1985). This concept was especially important for an information search study, since higher levels of involvement tended to lead to increased levels of information search (Bloch et al., 1986). When examining cultures with different religions and philosophical roots, attributed product meanings would differ strongly for the same product (McCracken, 1986, 1988a, 1990). In the current study, focus groups were used to identify products with similar levels of involvement in each culture. The focus groups were also able to help the researcher understand the potential symbolic meanings of those products.

Product meanings for some similar product categories differed dramatically between the two groups. For example, in North America, televisions were viewed as a piece of standard equipment, almost a piece of furniture. In China, however, televisions were imbued with deep symbolic meanings (Doran, 1997a), which resulted in much higher levels of involvement and information search.

Controlling differences in the marketing environment that would change information search characteristics, but were not culturally related, was also important. Several methods were used to develop a deep understanding of how the two market environments differed structurally. These differences included advertising and store differences, along with significantly different living conditions.

3.2. Preliminary study

As a result of both the lack of applicable cross-cultural studies and the general dearth of consumer research on Chinese subjects, a preliminary study was undertaken to help develop theory for the current research (Doran, 1994). Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with Chinese nationals attending graduate school in Montreal. The focus of the pilot study was in two areas. First, the study looked at the general stages or phases of the decision process to ascertain whether they paralleled those of the stages described in studies focusing on North American populations. Second, the study investigated in depth the search for and use of information within those phases. The study was designed to produce a descriptive examination of the search and choice characteristics of the Chinese expatriate living in Montreal buying consumer electronics.
In addition, the preliminary study proved extremely useful in developing the initial focus group and interview protocols to be used in both China and North America. Finally, the pilot study gave some insight into how consumer scripts changed when a move from China to North America was undertaken.

3.3. Focus groups

Three focus groups of five or six members each were conducted in each culture studied. Focus groups served a particularly compelling purpose when linked with other forms of data collection. Morgan (1988, p. 11) notes that focus groups are valuable in this context for:

- orienting oneself to a new field;
- generating hypotheses based on informants’ insights;
- developing interview schedules and questionnaires;
- getting participants’ interpretations of results from earlier studies.

The focus groups were especially productive in identifying appropriate product categories to be discussed in each culture, as well as in helping to define interview questions. Maximizing information search was a critical element in ensuring that there would be enough data from each culture to support a deep description of processes. Therefore, product categories were chosen that ranged from very high levels of involvement, to high involvement, to moderately high involvement. Based on focus group responses, television, clothing and cosmetics were chosen for the Chinese sample each representing a different level of consumer involvement. automobiles, television and clothing were chosen for the North American sample. Comparisons were then possible in two ways: first, a direct product-to-product comparison was possible for televisions and clothing; and, second, a comparison of different products with similar involvement levels (e.g., North American cars with Chinese televisions) was also possible. The focus groups were also used to check interview protocols for their appropriateness and comprehensiveness in each culture. Focus group members were helpful in pointing out areas that might have been overlooked as well as questions that might have been considered culturally insensitive or were irrelevant based on the marketing environment.

3.3.1. Interviews

Interviews were chosen as the principal method for data collection, since interviews allow for the development of a better cross-cultural understanding where long-term cultural immersion and participant observation are not possible. Interviews also provided an opportunity to identify cultural preconceptions that might not be possible with other methods, such as surveys (McCracken, 1988b). Interviews were of two types: initial in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews. The in-depth interviews served as the data foundation for the study. Primary data gathering in China occurred in late 1994 and in North America stretched over most of 1995. Follow-up interviews were conducted on seven subsequent trips to China and in North America over the following 3 years. First, follow-up interviews allowed clarification of unclear issues that had emerged during data analysis. Second, they allowed the researcher to investigate issues not originally included, but that became important during data analysis. Third, follow-up interviews allowed the researcher to determine if attitudes and behaviours were changing over time.

3.4. Other data gathering methods

In addition to focus groups and interviews, content analysis, store and product analysis and consumer observation were also used. Content analysis of print marketing information helped determine structural and environmental differences between the Chinese and North American markets. For example, the relevant advertising media differed between the two markets, as did the content of the advertising. Advertising in North America was much more heavily focused on price than advertising in China, which was focused on brand image, quality and specific product characteristics. Predominant media for those ads also differed. In North America, for example, television ads were predominantly found in print media, especially freestanding inserts (FSIs) in Sunday newspapers. In China, there were no FSIs, and while televisions were advertised in newspapers, most advertisements for televisions were broadcast on TV.

Data concerning store and goods characteristics were also informative in analyzing cultural and structural differences between China and North America. Finally, consumer observation was undertaken in various retail establishments as well as at consumers’ homes. The primary purpose of observation was to verify that behaviours described in the focus groups and interviews actually reflected what was happening in stores and homes.

4. Study samples

One of the most daunting concerns in the study was finding appropriate participants. Theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989) was used in gathering data. In this study, participants were chosen because they were representative of the average consumer. In China, this meant that respondents had access to consumer markets, and a standard of living high enough to actually be “consumers.” On the other hand, in North America the main concern was that respondents were representative of “mainstream” North American culture (Peñaloza, 1994). Participants were prescreened briefly to determine their suitability. Participants in China were required to have an education level that would allow for literate information search and an income level that would allow for real consumption. Prescreening in North America
was generally used to determine the extent to which a given respondent was mainstream. North American respondents were required to be native English speakers who were born in North America and whose parents were born in North America. Interviews were conducted in Chinese and English, using translators as necessary. In addition, since focus groups and interviews were videotaped, additional translators were used to check translation at a later time.

Early in the development of the research plan, it became clear that it would be impossible to find samples matched across the appropriate factors in the two cultures studied. For example, overall income levels as well as disposable income levels are wildly different in the two cultures. In addition, the monetary value assigned to various professions was very different, creating another problem. This particular issue was put well by a senior professor at Renmin University in Beijing. He noted that his income was slightly less than that of his son, who had just been hired to mop floors at a Beijing McDonald’s. Furthermore, huge differences exist in the educational background required to qualify for certain professions in the two cultures. As a result of these and other differences, the research design was changed to consist of two parallel studies whose insights would be compared later.

5. Data analysis

As with most qualitative research, data gathering and data analysis took place concurrently (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), although analysis continued beyond the data gathering stage. As data was gathered and analyzed, each type of data was coded to help with theme development and analysis. Coded data was then sorted and built into a series of comparisons and themes.

In addition to offering an opportunity to ask additional questions based on issues raised during data analysis, the longitudinal nature of the study allowed for an opportunity to assess changes in content and process over time.

Data analysis followed a five-step process. First, data were analyzed to create an understanding of how the marketing environment in the two cultures differed. Second, data were analyzed to develop a finely tuned understanding of product meaning for all the products investigated. Third, data were analyzed to discover and describe both content and process for information search and use. Fourth, follow-up data were compared with earlier data to develop an understanding of how information search and use changed over the course of the study. Finally, the results of the analysis for each culture were examined to develop culturally based insights.

6. Study results

The end result of the study was a rich, holistic description of information search and use in two cultures. Some study findings are presented here to give a sense of the breadth and depth of knowledge gained from this type of study.

One particularly unexpected and rich outcome of the flexible research program was information on the symbolic meaning of television in everyday Chinese life (Doran, 1997a). Because the television was infused with so much meaning, it also had tremendous importance for the average Chinese consumer. Consequently, the television stood supreme as the one product category everyone wanted to talk about. While the television is clearly one of the most expensive products a Chinese individual or couple buys, its importance cannot be completely explained by financial logic. The television is also a symbol of economic and political freedom. TV has reached even into rural China as a statement of modern life as it differs from traditional Chinese life.

One particularly vivid illustration of this symbolic importance was the role that the selection and purchase of a television made on wedding plans and marital success. All of those questioned indicated that owning a colour television was a prerequisite to marriage in urban (and many rural) areas. Saving for an appropriate make and model was an ordeal for most that helped set the wedding date. For example, one 46-year-old man in Beijing noted that he had offered to help with the purchase of television as a wedding present for his wife’s younger brother. However, when he suggested to his future brother-in-law that he buy a domestic make, the future groom was scandalized. “Buying a Chinese TV will give my marriage a poor start,” he said. “I must wait until I can buy a Japanese TV to project the right image to my friends.”

Direct comparisons, either of the same product (e.g., Chinese televisions to North American televisions) or the same involvement level (e.g., Chinese televisions and North American cars) yielded some interesting observations. While individuals in each culture exhibited differences in levels of involvement, the Chinese participants seemed to be generally more involved with all purchases than were North Americans. The reasons for this circumstance are unclear. It is possible that since Chinese have less overall experience with purchases, each individual purchase takes on more importance and more risk. On the other hand, it is also possible that Chinese simply get more enjoyment from being able to shop, and therefore have higher levels of purchase involvement.

Information search and use did vary for Chinese and North American respondents, both for different products of equal involvement levels and for similar products with different involvement levels. Chinese participants tended to search more, and rely much more heavily on personal sources of information. On the other hand, North American participants usually did less directed search, but had a greater internal knowledge based both on their personal experience with products and ongoing, nondirected search. In addition, North Americans appeared to make use of many different sources of information, often
divided about equally for high-involvement products. As involvement levels went down, North Americans were much more likely to rely on marketer-dominated sources and internal search.

Generally, North Americans utilized a much greater variety of patterns of information search and use than did the Chinese participants. There was far less uniformity regarding the perceptions of information source credibility than among the Chinese respondents. There was far more impulse buying, even among very high-ticket items such as cars. While women were more likely to shop with friends than were men, there was a great deal of variety regarding shopping alone or with others.

Chinese respondents, on the other hand, exhibited more uniformity in their searches. They made much higher use of personal sources of information than did North Americans. They rarely shopped alone. In North America, where individuality is prized, respondents either shopped alone or with company. While friends might make suggestions, decisions were made individually. The final decision made might reflect reference group patterns and tastes, but the individuals involved were very clear that they believed that they made the decisions alone. Alternatively, Chinese respondents, living in a collective culture, were far less
likely to make individual decisions and much more likely to let reference groups influence choices.

Themes developed from the comparative data included patterns of search and purchase, enjoyment derived from the search and purchase process, time issues, and product use issues. In addition, there were themes relating to the use and credibility of information sources, the relationship between quality brand and price, and the dynamics of product country-of-origin. Finally, as the longitudinal element of the study proceeded, it became clear that change was a major theme in investigating both the role of the marketing environment and the actions of individual consumers.

One of the most interesting contrasts uncovered by the research is the difference between Chinese and North Americans in their perception of thrift (Doran, 1997b). For the Chinese, buying a high-quality product that will provide superior performance over a long product life is considered thrifty. Alternatively, most North Americans equated thriftiness with cheap, easily replaced items. Budgeting also shaped the search processes of the two groups. For North Americans, budget decisions are made at the beginning of the search, and often become one of the heuristics commonly used to limit the search (see Fig. 1). The Chinese, on the other hand, followed a truncated search pattern where the product was chosen, a budget set, and then they saved for the product. When the money had been saved, a follow-up search was made since considerable time might have passed (see Fig. 2).

Time frame differences were also pronounced. Time differences occurred in three distinct ways. First, North American and Chinese consumers differed on the amount of time they were willing to devote to searching. Second, they differed on the length of time they were willing to wait before buying a product, and third, they differed on how long they expected products to last. North Americans clearly operated on a much shorter time frame, and as a result, emphasized a viewpoint that one respondent viewed as a “throwaway society.” Chinese consumers took their time and generally expected products to last.

In spite of the more developed North American market environment, or perhaps because of it, Chinese consumers got a great deal more enjoyment out of searching and shopping than did the North Americans. Most Chinese respondents, both men and women, referred to “window shopping” as a preferred leisure activity. They also reported that they “like to watch commercials between shows . . . sometimes I tune in just for them . . . I learn a lot” (M, 31). Relatively few North Americans felt they really enjoyed shopping, and the majority felt it was a chore. The greatest reason for a decline in shopping enjoyment on the part of North Americans was lack of time. They also felt that the number of shopping decisions to be made had increased to the point where all decisions were made less important that perhaps they should be: “I just don’t have enough time anymore . . . there’s just too much to do . . . and so far I haven’t had any disasters, so I guess I’m OK” (M, 29).

7. Lessons learned

Research design in multiple cultures, particularly where little previous research exists, is a minefield of potential problems. In most cases, it makes sense to begin a comparative research stream with one or more interpretive studies intended as a foundation for later research. In addition, by using a more holistic approach to the consumer, the study helps to see decision making within a broader context than is commonly seen in experimental or even survey-based research. Zaltman (1997) sees the necessity in current market research to improve methods for capturing and understanding fundamental characteristics in consumers’ behaviour, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

The preliminary study for the larger project proved to be an invaluable help in the overall research program development. The insights provided by immigrants who are not yet fully acculturated can be highly instrumental in identifying areas of cultural divergence that might impact on research results.

Care must be taken in sample selection. In the case of China and North America it is virtually impossible to match samples. Therefore, precautions need to be taken to control for variations to the extent possible. Similarly, direct product comparisons, while interesting, do not always yield the intended results. In the study here, it was far more important that products were matched by extent of search and involvement than by product category. Direct product-by-product comparisons, however, were useful.

Using multiple methods was also an important factor in building credibility, particularly as most methods used were qualitative. For example, supplementing long interviews with in-store observation helped validate the self-reports of the respondents. Further, a careful scrutiny of the consumption environment through content analysis, study of store layouts and product availability, and home visits helped eliminate competing hypotheses for potentially ambiguous data.

Finally, the follow-up interviews were invaluable in pursuing additional information on topics that only emerged in importance through the process of data analysis.

8. Conclusions

Cross-cultural research presents many challenges, particularly in situations where the cultures studied are very different. However, careful planning can greatly ameliorate the likelihood of confounding problems. In most cases, it is important to begin by developing an equal basis of knowledge in the cultures studied. For some studies, that knowledge may be developed from existing research. In other cases, such as this study, it was necessary to create the foundational knowledge.

The next step will be to use the insights gained from this interpretive study to develop appropriate surveys to
confirm the findings. Another aspect of the current study was that the data pointed to some potential use of culture as a determinant of consumer decision making. Further studies of a similar nature need to be conducted in additional cultures in order to provide triangulation for such a hypothesis.

Cross-cultural studies are potential source for extremely rich research streams. Unfortunately, many researchers have not understood the potential pitfalls of such investigations. When approached with care and sufficient forethought, cross-cultural research can achieve high levels of rigor and groundbreaking results.

References


