

Consumer sentiment shaped by differing cultural attitudes toward power

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Cultures nurture different views of what is desirable and meaningful to do with power, according to new research by University of Illinois marketing expert Sharon Shavitt. Credit: Jason Lindsey

In the battle of egos, Donald Trump vs. Hugo Chavez might be a draw. But as symbols of power, each resonates differently with different cultures, as cultures nurture different views of what is desirable and meaningful to do with power, according to new research by a University of Illinois marketing expert.

Sharon Shavitt says the relation between culture and one's concepts of power emerge from one's cultural orientation, and how that culture shapes one's beliefs, attitudes and goals.

"People's views of powerful people and what powerful people are supposed to do, as well as what legitimizes power, differs by society and by cultural values," said Shavitt, a professor of [business administration](#).

The study, co-written by Carlos J. Torelli, of the University of Minnesota, examined the role of culture in the meaning and purpose of power by examining the way people perceived, evaluated and responded to power-related [stimuli](#).

The researchers categorized the reactions according to a four-category typology: horizontal versus vertical, and collective versus individual. Their findings highlight the value of advancing existing models of power relations by identifying a key role for cultural variables.

According to the research, the two most contrasting power relations were vertical individualism and horizontal collectivism.

A vertical-individualistic cultural orientation was linked to conceptualizing power as something to be used for advancing one's personal agenda, thereby maintaining and promoting one's powerful status, Shavitt says. By contrast, a horizontal-collectivistic cultural orientation was linked to conceptualizing power as something to be used for benefiting others.

"Cultures predicts distinct power concepts, and those were the two groups that most strikingly contrasted with each other, the self-interested use of power versus benevolence," Shavitt said.

In American culture, for example, it's legitimate for someone who has power to use it for personal, status-oriented gains. Donald Trump, for example, could be seen as a symbol of such culturally nurtured power, because he's "out for himself, and makes no bones about it," Shavitt said.

But in other regions in the U.S., that attitude may not be looked upon quite so charitably. Trump may be popular in Manhattan, but he wouldn't be nearly as popular in, say, North Dakota, Shavitt said.

"We've found that there are distinctions and gradations," she said. "People of different ethnic backgrounds and different cultural orientations – that is, those who espouse different values – respond differently to these ideas of power."

Nor would the Donald be quite so popular in other countries, where the native culture may promote the use of power for the benefit of others – for example, having higher taxes to subsidize health care and higher education – rather than for achieving status and prestige.

"In Latin America, for example, the power paradigm swings away from self-interested zeal for status in favor of more benevolent and less brazenly self-interested ways of conceptualizing power," Shavitt said. "Powerful political leaders such as Hugo Chavez drape themselves in collectivism and are frequently idealized as benefactors whose primary goal is to protect helpless individuals."

While other countries' notion of equality is an equality of outcomes, in the U.S., "our notion of equality is equal opportunity – each one of us each has an equal opportunity to have a good outcome or a bad outcome depending, supposedly, on how hard we work," Shavitt said.

Businesses can use this knowledge of cultural attitudes toward power to their advantage.

"A vertical-individualist orientation predicted liking for brands that symbolize personalized power values of status and prestige, whereas a horizontal-collectivist orientation predicted liking for brands that embody concerns for the welfare of others," she said.

The study included groups commonly used in cross-cultural research (European Americans and East Asians, for example) as well as under-researched groups (Hispanic immigrants, students in Brazil and Norway), thereby increasing the potential coverage of vertical and horizontal cultures and allowing for findings across a broader range of cultures.

Out of the groups surveyed, Brazilians exhibited the highest horizontal-collectivist scores, liking brands that symbolized pro-social values better, while Norwegians scored among the lowest in vertical-individualism orientation, liking brands that symbolized personalized power values less than all the other groups.

Shavitt noted that Scandinavian cultures are much more horizontal and focus more on personal modesty as well as obligations to others.

"If you look at their social policies, they show a strong emphasis on equality of outcomes and provision of help to the least fortunate," she said. "But they're not collectivistic; they're still very individualistic."

In the U.S., with the demographic trend lines pointing to a more multi-cultural society, businesses can adjust their marketing and advertising accordingly by identifying a key role for cultural variables.

"What we're doing is adding another element to the way that marketers can segment their markets – by emphasizing how ethnicity, geography and [cultural values](#) come into play in consumers' power motivations," Shavitt said.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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