

# How creative are you? Study shows culture impacts creativity

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

With the "creative class" on the rise, many businesses are trying to capitalize on imagination and innovation. But when it comes to creative juices, some societies have a faster flow than others. That's because, as new research from Concordia University suggests, creativity is tied to culture.

The study, recently published in the *Journal of Business Research*, compared nearly 300 individuals from Taiwan, a collectivist society, and Canada, a more individualistic country. Results show that those from individualist societies generate a greater number of [ideas](#) as compared to their collectivist counterparts - though the cultures were on nearly equal footing when it came to the quality of that creative output.

Gad Saad, a professor at Concordia's John Molson School of Business, co-authored the study with Concordia graduate student Louis Ho and Mark Cleveland from the University of Western Ontario. They theorized that where a country falls on the individualism vs. collectivism continuum would affect the creative juices that might be "permitted" to flow from members of a particular culture.

"Brainstorming is often used as a proxy for creativity, so we decided to conduct brainstorming tasks using culturally neutral stimuli in Taiwan and in Canada," Saad says.

He and his co-authors hypothesized that members of an individualistic society would perform particularly well in a task that promotes out-of-the-box thinking such as coming up with the proverbial million-dollar idea, compared with those from a collectivist ethos, who wouldn't be as willing to engage in that kind of thinking because they would be more reluctant to stand out from the group.

The researchers recruited students from two universities in Taipei and Montreal and collected data on five measures that will be familiar to anyone who has had to brainstorm in a group:

1. The number of generated ideas
2. The quality of the ideas, as evaluated by independent judges
3. The number of uttered negative statements within the [brainstorming](#) groups, such as "This is a dumb idea that will fail."

4. The valence of the negative statements—"This is the all-time dumbest idea" has a stronger negative connotation than "This idea is rather banal."
5. The confidence level exhibited by group members when asked to evaluate their performance in comparison to other teams.

## **When it comes to creativity, quality trumps quantity**

"The study largely supported our hypotheses," Saad says. "We found that the individualists came up with many more ideas. They also uttered more negative statements—and those statements were more strongly negative. The Canadian group also displayed greater overconfidence than their Taiwanese counterparts."

But when it came to the quality of ideas produced, the collectivists scored marginally higher than the individualists.

"This is in line with another important cultural trait that some collectivist societies are known to possess—namely being more reflective as compared to action-oriented, having the reflex to think hard prior to committing to a course of action," Saad says.

Studies like this one are instrumental in understanding cultural differences that increasingly arise as the globe's economic centre of gravity shifts towards East Asia.

"To maximize the productivity of their international teams, global firms need to understand important [cultural differences](#) between Western and Eastern mindsets," Saad says. "Brainstorming, a technique often used to generate novel ideas such as new product innovations, might not be equally effective across cultural settings. Even though individuals from collectivistic societies might be coming up with fewer creative ideas, the quality of those ideas tends to be just as good as or marginally better

than those of their individualistic counterparts. Employers need to recognize that."

Provided by Concordia University

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