

**A Cross-Cultural Study of Interpersonal  
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### **ABSTRACT**

Research conducted primarily in the United States has shown that interpersonal influence arising from opinion exchange behavior is an important factor in consumers' product adoption and brand choice decisions. An important managerial question in the international arena is whether information giving and seeking behaviors depend on culture. In a study representing 11 nationalities, we explore the role of culture in moderating consumers' opinion exchange behavior. Results indicate that the cultural characteristics of power distance and uncertainty avoidance [Hofstede 1980] influence the focus of consumers' product information search activities, but not their tendencies to share product-related opinions with others. Following earlier opinion leadership studies, we find that individual characteristics such as product category interest and involvement are most indicative of active opinion leadership behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

As markets become global, managers must look for ways to compete effectively in multiple countries while simultaneously controlling costs. In response to this problem Levitt (1983) has argued that multinational firms should seek to target consumer segments which span the globe, and thus benefit from the scale economies of global branding. Farley and Lehmann (1994) similarly have argued that markets do not abruptly change when borders are crossed; they support this argument with empirical evidence of similarity in international market response to equivalent marketing efforts. These and other articles support an increasingly accepted view that international marketing campaigns can often be standardized to a great extent without alienating local consumers. Although the wisdom of this argument has been a subject of much debate, empirical investigations remain scarce [Jain 1989, p.70]. One issue requiring further attention is that of identifying and profiling potentially global consumer segments.

An obvious target in the search for global segments is the well-educated, cosmopolitan individual who travels, studies, and/or conducts business in more than one country. Such persons tend to speak more than one language, shop in international department stores, read internationally distributed newspapers and magazines, and watch globally broadcast television stations. As such, they constitute a segment of consumers who can easily be reached with focused marketing programs that are replicated worldwide. While capturing the purchases of such individuals may itself be a major objective of many global marketing campaigns, the broader intent often may be to indirectly influence the purchasing behavior of other consumers who look to this group as opinion leaders [Anderson and Engledow 1977]. Measured effectiveness of efforts to target the cosmopolitan sector would be greatly magnified if others were to emulate the purchasing habits of this group.

Despite the apparent logic that cosmopolites would be opinion leaders for consumer products worldwide, empirical support for this claim is limited. Most academic studies of opinion leadership have been conducted in the United States with little consideration of international generalizability [Feick and Price 1987; Feick, Price and Higie 1986; Kiel and Layton 1981; King

and Summers 1970; Leonard-Barton 1985; Myers and Robertson 1972; Price and Feick 1984; Reynolds and Darden 1971; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1988; Summers 1970]. Exceptional in this sense is the work of Hans Thorelli and colleagues who have found that information seekers, defined as readers of consumer magazines such as *Consumer Reports*, exist in many industrialized countries, but in varying proportions of the population [Thorelli, Becker and Engledow 1975; Thorelli and Becker 1980]. An important conclusion from the Thorelli studies is that information seekers tend to be well-educated and cosmopolitan, and they see themselves as opinion leaders for many products. These studies, which pioneered research on cross-cultural patterns of consumer information use, set the stage for further investigation of cross-cultural opinion leadership behavior, particularly as it pertains to the *giving of product-related information* to others. Thorelli focused on *information seeking* behavior with respect to impersonal sources such as magazines; consequently, *opinion giving* behavior, an important facet of opinion leadership, was not broadly discussed. Although opinion leadership was measured in the Thorelli studies, the measurement device consisted of two questions, of which only one explicitly referred to an individual's tendency to exchange *product-related* information while the other referred to a more general tendency to express opinions [Thorelli et al. 1975, p. 341]. Moreover, while information seekers in these studies consistently demonstrated higher ratings than average consumers on the general measure, this pattern did not consistently hold across countries on the product-related measure. Hence, we feel that further investigation of cross-cultural product-related opinion leadership behavior is warranted.

A second reason for further examining cross-cultural opinion leadership behavior is to add theoretical insight to the empirical results thus far obtained. Although differences were noted in the Thorelli studies in the number of information seekers across industrialized countries, explanation for this finding was limited to the influence of education and affluence on consumerist tendencies within society [Thorelli and Becker 1980]. While these two factors may explain differences across countries in consumer behavior activities, aspects of the overall cultural environment may also play an important contributing role [Clark 1990]. In order to improve our

general understanding of international consumer behavior, it may be useful to investigate culture's impact on opinion leadership.

The objective of this paper is to explore the opinion leadership behavior of cosmopolitan individuals from 11 industrialized countries which include most of those examined by Thorelli and his colleagues [Thorelli and Becker 1980; Thorelli, Becker and Engledow 1975]. Three key issues are addressed. First, we explore a cultural explanation for Thorelli's findings, based on three dimensions of Hofstede's [1980] identified cultural characteristics. Second, we examine the level of opinion seeking and giving behavior, i.e., opinion leadership behavior, among a sample of cosmopolitan consumers, and we explore the relationship between this behavior and the same set of three cultural characteristics. Finally, we examine individual-level characteristics such as product category interest to determine their relationship to opinion leadership behavior among this sample. Results indicate a relatively high overall level of opinion leadership behavior among our cosmopolitan sample, supporting the Thorelli conclusions, but also point to individual characteristics as moderators of this effect. Importantly, although two of Hofstede's cultural characteristics were found to correlate well with information and opinion seeking tendencies exhibited by different national samples, no relationship was found between the cultural characteristics and the opinion giving tendencies exhibited by national groups. Implications of these findings for international business managers are discussed at the paper's conclusion.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### *Opinion Leadership*

Many studies have documented the importance of personal information sources in influencing consumers' purchase decisions and product evaluations [Arndt 1967; Brown and Reingen 1987, Kiel and Layton 1981] and in diffusing product information [Leonard-Barton 1985]. Although reasons vary for why consumers seek input from others prior to making a purchase, one commonly cited reason is that of gaining credible and objective product information [Price and Feick 1984]. Although normative pressures also serve as a source of personal

influence on purchasing behavior [Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Park and Lessig 1977], empirical studies indicate that informational influence tends to dominate in United States samples, particularly when products are technologically complex [Feick, Price and Higie 1986].

In line with the finding of strong informational purchase influence is the conclusion that opinion leaders, i.e., individuals whose input is commonly sought by others, often are selected because of their product knowledge or expertise [Jacoby and Hoyer 1981; Leonard-Barton 1985; Thomas 1982]. Knowledge alone does not guarantee opinion leadership, however, and a high level of product category interest or involvement may be required before individuals are induced to share their opinions with others [Reynolds and Darden 1971; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1988; Summers 1970]. Although some consumers adopt a “market maven” role, which leads them to offer opinions and information about a wide variety of products which they do not necessarily find involving [Feick and Price 1987], opinion leaders more commonly display a high level of category interest. Finally, opinion leadership for many products has been positively related to demographic variables such as education and income in U.S. samples [Feick et al. 1986; Reynolds and Darden 1971].

Although early research on information exchange hypothesized a one-way flow from impersonal sources through opinion leaders and on to opinion followers, later studies have found evidence of a more complex process. Reynolds and Darden [1971], for example, provide evidence that opinion givers also tend to be opinion seekers who obtain their information from a variety of impersonal *and* personal sources. These findings subsequently have been replicated by others [e.g., Feick and Price 1987; Feick et al. 1986; Price and Feick 1984]. The implication is that individuals who both search for and disseminate product information are the most promising targets for managerial marketing efforts. Targeting these persons should be relatively easy given their high exposure to multiple media, and each such person may inform several others, yielding a high return for a given marketing effort.

### ***Information Exchange and Culture***

Despite recent calls for greater standardization of international marketing programs, the question of how culture might moderate consumer behavior remains largely unanswered. Researchers and managers seem to be converging on a view which accepts a high level of similarity in consumer behavior across countries but allows for some measure of local variation; a position that is embodied in the catch-phrase “think globally; act locally”. Many would agree, therefore, that information search and exchange are “universal” behaviors that are observed in all cultures [Dawar and Parker 1994, Murdock 1945], although the extent and manner with which consumers practice them may vary from country to country. Whether the variance in consumer behavior is systematically related to cultural characteristics, however, is a question requiring empirical investigation.

Rather than define culture on a nation-by-nation basis it may be useful to exploit a more general concept that transcends national boundaries. Clark [1990], for example, urges that nations be characterized by behavioral or personality variables which can replace national identity variables when conducting cross-cultural marketing studies. He notes a high level of agreement among social scientists on three dimensions of national character reflecting 1) relation to authority, 2) relation to risk, and 3) relation to self. One such framework has been advanced by Hofstede [1980] who identifies three cultural characteristics that seem relevant to consumer behavior: (1) power distance as a reflection of authority orientation, (2) uncertainty avoidance as a reflection of risk orientation, and (3) individualism as a reflection of self orientation.<sup>1</sup> Following extensive empirical investigation, Hofstede [1980] has provided scores on each of these dimensions for a broad range of countries. Using this framework as a basis for investigating cross-cultural variation in information use might allow for group differences to be attributed to cultural factors which would enrich our understanding of the results.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Power Distance***

Hofstede’s first two characteristics reflect a culture’s orientation toward different types of authority. The first dimension, power distance (PDI), measures the degree of power inequality



between superiors and subordinates within a social system. Cultures with high PDI scores tend to be hierarchical, with members citing force, manipulation and inheritance as sources of power; those with low scores tend to value equality, with members citing knowledge and respect as sources of power. Given the focus on power accorded to individual members of society, this characteristic reflects a culture's attitude toward the authority of individual persons. One consequence of high PDI is a general distrust of others, since power is generally seen to rest with individuals, but to be coercive rather than legitimate in nature [Hofstede 1980 p. 229].

### ***Uncertainty Avoidance***

Hofstede's second characteristic, uncertainty avoidance (UAI), on the other hand, reflects a culture's attitude toward the authority of rules. Cultures with high UAI scores are highly intolerant of ambiguity, and as a result tend to be distrustful of new ideas or behaviors. Accordingly, they dogmatically stick to historically tested patterns of behavior, which in the extreme become inviolable rules. Those with very high levels of UAI thus accord a high level of authority to rules as a means of avoiding risk.

Despite their difference in focus, both of these dimensions of cultural personality bear an inverse relation to a society's general openness to objective sources of new information. Hofstede indicates this clearly for UAI, noting that those cultures low in UAI take a more empirical approach to understanding and knowledge, while those high in UAI seek a more absolute "Truth" [1980, p. 182]. As such, it is reasonable to assume that countries high in UAI and PDI would be least likely to have high readership of consumer magazines such as *Consumer Reports*. Such an empirically-driven source of knowledge would be considered more useful in cultures that are not oriented toward absolute fonts of authority. On the other hand, both UAI and PDI might bear a positive relation to a culture's general tendency for information search among personal sources. Although high PDI indicates a general distrust of others, this would not extend to close associates. Moreover, trusted associates would be seen as an unlikely source of foreign ideas, thus posing less of a threat within high UAI cultures. Indeed, the opinions of friends and relatives might be even more valued when outside ideas are deemed questionable. In summary, as

indicated in Table 1, we expect an inverse relation between Hofstede's [1980] first two cultural characteristics and measures of a society's consumer magazine readership, but a positive relationship between the two characteristics and a society's propensity for opinion search among personal sources.

The relationship between Hofstede's first two characteristics and the tendency for individuals within a cultural group to actively give product-related opinions to their friends and associates is unclear. A trusted individual within a high UAI or PDI culture may offer an opinion when requested without necessarily actively promoting his/her views on a broader basis. Consequently, a high propensity for individuals to seek product information from personal sources does not necessarily indicate a correspondingly high propensity for individuals to give such information to others. Therefore, we make no predictions about the relationship between Hofstede's [1980] PDI and UAI dimensions and a nation's tendency to engage in the giving aspect of opinion leadership behavior.

### ***Individualism***

Finally, Hofstede's third cultural characteristic refers to a society's general conception of self. Cultures that are high in individualism (IDV) tend to reward and accept individual initiative while those low in individualism generally subjugate the individual to the group. This does not mean that individuals fail to identify with groups when a culture scores high on IDV, but simply that personal initiative is accepted and endorsed [Hofstede 1980, p. 229]. Since pre-purchase information search and acquisition behavior results in more informed decision making, it is reflective of individual initiative on the part of the concerned consumer. Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect a positive relationship between a culture's degree of individualism and the extent to which consumers exhibit information search and exchange behavior. This should be true regardless of whether the information stems from personal or impersonal sources. Thus, we expect a positive relationship between individualism and measures of consumer magazine readership, as well as a society's propensity for information search among personal sources (see Table 1).

As argued above, there is no reason to expect a high propensity for information seeking from personal sources to indicate a high propensity for personal information giving. It might be the case, however, that individuals within high IDV cultures more commonly express their personal opinions than those within low IDV cultures. Thus, it seems reasonable to expect a positive relationship between individualism and the opinion giving aspect of opinion leadership behavior, as summarized in Table 1.

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 Table 1 about here  
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## **EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

### *Sample and Questionnaire*

A questionnaire assessing knowledge, intentions and behaviors toward consumer electronic products was completed by 619 MBA students at a major European business school immediately after commencement of their studies. Students represented 11 European and North American countries, as detailed in Table 2. The broad category of consumer electronics was deemed appropriate for our study for four reasons: (1) the products are technologically complex, and thus are likely to be the subject of interpersonal influence [Park and Lessig 1977], (2) the category is globally distributed, allowing for opinion leaders to exist in all countries represented in the sample, (3) variations in the physical product offering across countries are minimal, thus eliminating any variance in consumer behavior that might stem from product differences, and (4) there are varying levels of expertise within the category, thus creating the possibility for variance in opinion leadership tendencies among members of each country. The chosen sample was deemed appropriate for the study for three reasons: (1) as previous investigations have identified a key target group for consumer electronics to be young, mobile and educated [see Gatignon and Robertson 1985], an appropriate match was made between product category and sample, (2) as shown in Table 2, this particular group of students is rather affluent, with a high level of work experience and international exposure, thus placing them within the cosmopolitan segment for

which we wish to examine product-related opinion leadership behavior and (3) students in the sample represent most of the industrialized countries studied by Thorelli and his colleagues, thus facilitating comparison between our results and those of prior studies. Our sample includes nationals of Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States. Thorelli and Becker [1980] discuss information seeking from impersonal sources for Scandinavian countries as a group, North America, Benelux, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Southern European countries as a group.

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 Table 2 about here  
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The questionnaire was administered in English, a language with which all respondents were familiar. Knowledge of English is extremely widespread throughout the world, especially among the cosmopolitan segment of consumers whose behavior we wish to explore. Thus, an English-language questionnaire was appropriate for our study. This decision also made it possible to avoid the potential problems of translation-based differences in the questionnaire [Douglas and Craig 1983]. It is important to keep in mind that common knowledge of a language does not necessarily imply commonality of culture, as clearly demonstrated by earlier studies which have found cultural differences among English speaking sample members [Hofstede 1980]. Furthermore, cultural differences have been found to persist even among individuals who have a common occupation [Hofstede 1980]. Thus, it would be premature to predict uniformity of opinion leadership behavior among the culturally diverse members of our sample simply on the basis of shared language and career aspirations.

The questionnaire collected information about respondents' nationality, opinion exchange behavior, and a number of individual-level variables previously examined in the interpersonal influence literature. Included in the latter are information search patterns, category interest and knowledge, and self-confidence [Park and Lessig 1977, Price and Feick 1984, Reynolds and Darden 1971, Thomas 1982]. Opinion giving and seeking behaviors were measured at the

category level with 7-point scales which assessed the likelihood that subjects would "give (seek) advice to (from) others on their purchases of electronics products". Country-level indices of opinion exchange propensity were subsequently calculated from these measures by subtracting the percent of a country's subjects with low likelihood of the behavior (scores 1, 2 and 3) from the percent with high likelihood of the behavior (scores 5, 6 and 7). This type of country-level scoring follows that used by Thorelli et al. [1975]. Information search from other sources was assessed with a battery of dichotomous (yes/no) items which asked subjects whether they often relied on newspapers, personal friends, consumer magazines, tv commercials, radio commercials, and/or salespersons when purchasing home electronics. In addition, subjects rated the likelihood that they would do research before making a purchase. Finally, subjects indicated the number of magazines and newspapers they subscribed to and the number of shops they typically visited when making consumer electronics purchases.

Category interest was assessed by measuring respondents' purchase intentions (on a 10-point scale) and actual ownership of ten different consumer electronic products and appliances. An additional 7-point scale was used to collect self-assessments of product knowledge ("very little"/"a lot") for each of these items. Overall indices of category knowledge and purchase intentions were formed by averaging subjects' responses across the ten different products; similarly, an index of category ownership was calculated as the total number owned of the ten products included in the questionnaire. Another set of questions asked subjects to compare themselves to the average person on 7-point scales ("a lot less"/"a lot more") in terms of their venturesomeness and their self-confidence. Category innovativeness was measured on a 7-point scale assessing the likelihood that subjects would purchase the latest electronic gadget. Finally, subjects' demographic profiles were collected (age, nationality, measures of asset wealth, etc.) with a variety of direct measures.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### *Opinion Seeking and Culture*

The first question we addressed was whether Hofstede's [1980] dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, power distance and individualism are related to Thorelli's findings of cross-cultural differences in the proportion of consumers who actively seek product information from impersonal consumer magazines. Drawing from a variety of sources, Thorelli and Becker [1980] ranked countries and regions on this dimension as follows (in order of increasing proportions of information seekers): 1) southern Europe; 2) central European countries of Austria, Switzerland and France; 3) Benelux plus United Kingdom and Germany; 4) North America; and 5) Scandinavia. We calculated Spearman correlations between these ranks and each country's scores on UAI, PDI and IDV. In addition to the countries explicitly named by Thorelli and Becker [1980], we included Italy, Portugal and Spain as southern European countries, Belgium and Netherlands as Benelux countries, and Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden as Northern or Scandinavian countries; these countries were chosen because of their inclusion in Hofstede's [1980] database, which provided scores on UAI, PDI and IDV. Table 3 shows Thorelli and Becker's [1980] rankings as well as scores on Hofstede's [1980] three cultural dimensions for countries included in this part of the analysis. Although all countries are relatively advanced in terms of industrial development, their scores on the cultural characteristics range from 23 to 104 on UAI (versus 8 to 112 for Hofstede's full sample), 11 to 68 on PDI (versus 11 to 94 for Hofstede's full sample), and 27 to 91 on IDV (versus 12 to 91 for Hofstede's full sample), thus suggesting reasonably strong differences in culture.

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 Table 3 about here  
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Table 4 shows the results of the correlation analysis. As seen there, both UAI and PDI have significant negative correlations with Thorelli and Becker's [1980] ranking of information seeking tendencies, as predicted ( $\rho = -.51, p < .05$  and  $\rho = -.65, p < .01$ , respectively). Thus, the

greater the uncertainty avoidance and power distance exhibited by a country, the smaller the proportion of consumers who search for product information from impersonal and objective magazines such as *Consumer Reports*. Contrary to expectations, however, Hofstede's [1980] individualism index is not significantly related to the information seeking ranks ( $\rho = .32, p > .22$ ). Overall, these results indicate that cultural orientations toward authority and risk may help to explain the information search behavior of consumers. These initial results pertain only to search among impersonal sources, however, without addressing the question of how culture relates to opinion exchange.

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 Table 4 about here  
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In the second stage of analysis we explored the interpersonal opinion exchange behaviors of our international sample of cosmopolitan students. Prior to conducting a cross-cultural analysis, however, we examined the sample's overall opinion leadership propensity. Students on average expressed a greater tendency to seek product information from others rather than share their own opinions with others prior to purchase ( $\bar{x}_{seek} = 5.53$ ;  $\bar{x}_{give} = 4.32$ ). Nevertheless, the opinion giving tendencies are relatively high for a product of this type. Fifty-three percent of our total sample rated their opinion giving tendency higher than the scale midpoint (i.e., 5, 6 or 7); moreover, this proportion exceeded 50% for each country studied. The managerial significance of this result can be seen by comparing it to Feick et al.'s [1987] finding that 12.9% of a large and representative sample of U.S. heads of household considered themselves to be opinion leaders for consumer electronic products. Thus, the common presumption that opinion leadership for technological products is high among cosmopolitan consumers in industrialized countries is supported by our data.

#### ***Additional Correlates of Opinion Seeking***

We also examined subjects' use of various product information sources as a function of opinion seeking and giving tendencies. Table 5 shows the percentage of those high versus low in

opinion seeking as well as the percentage of those high versus low in opinion giving who report frequent use of friends, consumer magazines, salespeople, newspapers, and TV and radio ads as input to purchase decisions. As seen there, opinion seeking is not significantly related to information source, with the exception of personal friends ( $p=.97$  and  $p=.82$  for high and low opinion seekers, respectively,  $\chi_1^2 = 30.56$ ,  $p<.01$ ), which simply confirms our measure of opinion seekers as those who are more likely to rely on the input of friends. Reliance on consumer magazines and salespeople is reasonably high (total sample,  $p=.70$  and  $p=.68$ , respectively), reliance on newspapers is moderate (total sample,  $p=.45$ ), and reliance on TV and radio commercials is weak (total sample,  $p=.23$  and  $p=.07$ , respectively), regardless of opinion seeking tendency ( $p's > .33$ ).

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 Table 5 about here  
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More interesting results are apparent for the opinion giving groups. Those claiming to be high in opinion giving show greater reliance on consumer magazines ( $p=.75$  and  $p=.60$  for high and low givers, respectively,  $\chi_1^2 = 13.48$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and newspapers ( $p=.49$  and  $p=.40$  for high and low givers, respectively,  $\chi_1^2 = 4.20$ ,  $p<.05$ ), but less reliance on salespeople ( $p=.63$  and  $p=.74$  for high and low givers, respectively,  $\chi_1^2 = 7.69$ ,  $p<.01$ ) than those claiming a low tendency to share their views with others. In addition, reliance on personal friends is uniformly high (total sample,  $p=.95$ ), whereas reliance on TV and radio commercials is uniformly low (total sample,  $p=.22$  and  $p=.07$ , respectively), regardless of opinion giving tendency ( $p's > .11$ ). These results fit with earlier research demonstrating that opinion leaders use multiple sources of product information, both of personal and commercial types, and they demonstrate a particular desire for factual or objective information such as that found in print media [Feick and Price 1987; Feick et al. 1986; Price and Feick 1984; Reynolds and Darden 1971]. Thus, opinion leadership among our sample members is likely to be informational in nature, as is the case for U.S. samples.



### *Opinion Leadership and Culture*

We next examined the relationship between opinion leadership and culture by calculating Spearman correlations between our sample indices of opinion exchange and Hofstede's [1980] UAI, PDI and IDV scores. Although fewer countries were included in this phase of the analysis than in the first phase of cross-cultural analysis (due to non-representation in our sample of students), scores on the cultural characteristics still ranged from 23 to 94 on UAI, 18 to 68 on PDI, and 51 to 91 on IDV, as seen in Table 3. Scores for the country-level opinion exchange indices are also provided in Table 3.

Table 4 shows the results of the correlation analysis. As predicted, uncertainty avoidance and power distance are positively correlated with our country-level index of opinion seeking propensity ( $\rho = .56, p < .08$  and  $\rho = .74, p < .01$ , respectively). Although the statistical significance of the UAI correlation is marginal, the estimate is based on few observations (11 countries), suggesting that stronger results might have emerged if more countries had been represented in the sample. The PDI correlation, on the other hand, is statistically highly significant. Contrary to expectations, however, individualism was not significantly correlated with our opinion seeking index ( $\rho = -.03, p > .94$ ); this matches our earlier results from the rankings of impersonal information seeking tendencies. Jointly, our analyses suggest that countries with high levels of uncertainty avoidance or power distance show a greater tendency to seek product information from personal sources rather than impersonal sources such as *Consumer Reports*. This does not mean that high PDI and UAI countries reject impersonal information sources, but simply that their influence may be not be as strong as in other countries with lower PDI and UAI scores. Generally, the findings are consistent with Hofstede's [1980] descriptions of the two cultural characteristics, which predict greater openness among low UAI and PDI countries and greater reliance on historically tested information sources among high UAI and PDI countries.

Table 4 also shows that none of the three cultural dimensions is significantly correlated with our country-level index of opinion giving tendency ( $\rho = .02, p > .95$  for UAI;  $\rho = .10, p > .76$  for PDI;  $\rho = .13, p > .70$  for IDV). Although we made no predictions about a relationship with

UAI or PDI, we did expect a positive relationship between opinion giving and IDV. As is the case for information search, however, IDV bears no apparent relation to information giving propensities. Combined, the results indicate that this important part of opinion leadership behavior, i.e., information dissemination, is unrelated to cultural characteristics as defined here. Thus, while members of our sample exhibited a high level of opinion leadership behavior overall, the tendency does not seem to vary systematically with culture.

#### *Additional Correlates of Opinion Leadership*

This raises the question of whether other variables can better explain the opinion giving tendencies of our sample. In exploring this question we correlated our measures of opinion giving and seeking tendency with the set of individual-level variables measured in our questionnaire. Table 6 shows the results. As seen there, few of the individual-level variables are significantly correlated with opinion seeking. Opinion giving and opinion seeking show a mildly positive correlation ( $\rho=.09$ ,  $p<.03$ ), reflecting the argument that opinion givers tend also to be opinion seekers, as discussed by others [Feick et al., 1986; Reynolds and Darden 1971]. The only other significant correlations with opinion seeking are the likelihood of doing research before buying ( $\rho=.29$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and the number of shops visited before buying ( $\rho=.08$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Although these variables indicate that opinion seekers obtain product information from multiple sources other than personal friends and acquaintances, it is noteworthy that correlations between opinion giving tendencies and the same two information search variables are much stronger and equally significant ( $\rho=.40$   $p<.01$  for research, and  $\rho=.20$ ,  $p<.01$  for shop visits). Thus, while both seekers and givers may engage in extensive information search activity, the propensity appears stronger among opinion givers, reinforcing the argument that opinion leaders generally are well informed about the product category of interest.

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 Table 6 about here  
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As found in several other studies [e.g., Reynolds and Darden 1971; Richins and Root-

Shaffer 1988], opinion givers in our study displayed a high degree of product category interest and involvement. Those high in opinion giving claimed a high level of category knowledge ( $\rho = .35, p < .01$ ) and a high willingness to innovate by buying the latest electronic gadgets ( $\rho = .40, p < .01$ ). They also displayed a somewhat higher level of product category ownership ( $\rho = .11, p < .01$ ) or intention to buy within the product category in the near future ( $\rho = .18, p < .01$ ). Finally, as previously found by Reynolds and Darden [1971], opinion givers reported higher self confidence than those less willing to share their views with others ( $\rho = .12, p < .01$ ).

### *Opinion Leadership: Summary*

Overall, the results of the research suggest that opinion leadership depends very much on personal characteristics of the consumer. Though a cosmopolitan lifestyle increases the chances that an individual will become an opinion leader for complex products like consumer electronics, the individuals most likely to actively share their views are those with a personal interest and involvement with the category. Fortunately, it is relatively easy to target such individuals with global media campaigns. While their exposure to the media commonly accessed by average consumers may be low, their exposure to internationally distributed media such as business newspapers and magazines, satellite news channels, and airline magazines is likely to be high. Thus, targeted efforts to reach the opinion leaders for technological products should be highly successful when placed in such international media. Their efficacy can be further enhanced, however, by tailoring the message to satisfy the information needs of the highly involved consumer.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper set out to empirically contribute to the understanding of consumer behavior across cultures, with a focus on information exchange activities. Building on previous research, we addressed three broad questions. First, are cosmopolitan consumers likely to be opinion leaders for technical products in countries other than the United States? Our finding that fifty-three percent of a sample of cosmopolitan MBA students are likely to give product-related

information to others confirms general beliefs that the cosmopolitan sector is an attractive target for marketing communications intended to stimulate word-of-mouth communications.

We also addressed the question of whether culture can contribute to our understanding of product-related information use. Findings indicate that culture is related to information search patterns but not to information dissemination. Despite our restricted focus on only industrialized western countries, we detected differences in the propensity for individuals to seek information from personal sources prior to purchase. These differences were systematically related to Hofstede's [1980] measures of uncertainty avoidance and power distance, with cultures high in UAI or PDI showing higher use of personal information sources. This mirrors our finding that cultures high in UAI or PDI show lower use of impersonal consumer magazines such as *Consumer Reports*. Thus, the uncertainty avoidance and power distance aspects of culture appear to influence the locus of product information search. Hofstede's individualism measure, however, showed no relation to the observed patterns of product information search.

Finally, we explored factors that may contribute to an individual's propensity to share product-related opinions with others. Unlike opinion and information search habits, opinion giving behaviors were unrelated to the three cultural characteristics we examined. In lieu of cultural identity, variables such as product category interest (knowledge and experience) and self confidence appear to explain the willingness of some sample members to share their product-related knowledge. These findings match those of earlier studies that demonstrate opinion leadership stemming from high levels of product category interest.

On the basis of empirical evidence, we would agree with recent arguments that some consumer behaviors are highly similar across cultures. Our study offers evidence that segments of opinion leaders exist in many developed countries, and that their influence is strong within the category of consumer electronics. What differs across countries seems to be the extent to which impersonal and personal sources form the basis of the opinion leader's knowledge. Though members of all countries showed use of multiple information sources for forming opinions about consumer electronics, the relative importance of personal sources seems to be higher among

countries that are high in uncertainty avoidance or power distance.

The observed pattern of results suggests that managers attempting to target opinion leaders in the electronics category with marketing campaigns would do well to focus on cosmopolitan individuals, but to place greater emphasis on potential differences in product category interest rather than culture when tailoring the message to consumer needs. One should not expect Americans, for example, to more freely share their product-related opinions than Europeans. This conclusion suggests that a balanced attempt to reach and interest opinion leaders is justified across developed countries such as those studied here.

### **Study Limitations and Extensions**

Naturally, caution must prevail when interpreting a null result as evidence of similarity in opinion sharing behavior across cultures. Moreover, one must keep in mind that different results might be found for certain non-global or “culture bound” products such as food items [Ohmae 1985]. The potential difference across products raises an interesting question of which comes first, the global product or global consumer behavior? It would be interesting to determine the conditions under which the use of globally uniform strategies could elicit globally similar behavior from consumers. In any case, replications of our study with additional product categories would be worthwhile.

Replication of our study with alternative socio-economic segments matched across cultures is also warranted. Although we focussed on a relevant segment for the consumer electronics category, managers would like to know if the same pattern of results holds among other groups. Our suspicion is that cross-cultural differences in the locus of information search activities might be magnified among samples of less educated or less affluent consumers. The hypothesis follows from arguments that education dampens the effect of culture without completely erasing it [Hofstede 1980]. Whether cross-cultural differences in opinion giving behaviors would also be magnified, on the other hand, is unclear. Though the overall level of opinion giving behavior might be reduced among less cosmopolitan consumers, our feeling is that

category involvement and interest would continue to be the dominating force behind opinion leadership behavior. Verification of these hypotheses remains an important area for future research.

Finally, we would encourage researchers to conduct additional empirical investigations of consumer behavior across cultures. Our findings imply that culture and national boundaries are less important criteria than individual factors in designing marketing campaigns to target the consumer electronics opinion leader. As managers must make decisions about many additional elements of the overall marketing program, however, insights on other cross-cultural commonalities would be highly useful. It is hoped that our study offers encouragement in this direction.

## NOTES

1. Masculinity, a fourth cultural characteristic identified by Hofstede [1980], reflects the extent to which a society shows clearly defined sex roles. As the relationship between masculinity and consumer information search and exchange behavior is unclear, this dimension was excluded from our analyses.
2. Although Hofstede's work was based on management practices, the dimensions have proved useful in generally characterizing cultures and has been recently used in the marketing literature (see, for example, Dawar and Parker, 1994).

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**Table 1.**  
**Information Seeking and Giving:**  
**Summary of Expected Relationships**

Hofstede's Cultural Dimension	Information Exchange Behavior		
	Seeking		Giving
	Impersonal Sources	Personal Sources	
Power Distance	Negative	Positive	N/H
Uncertainty Avoidance	Negative	Positive	N/H
Individualism	Positive	Positive	Positive

Note: N/H signifies no hypothesized relationship.

**Table 2**  
**Sample Characteristics**

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Nationality (n):	Belgium	(20)
	Canada	(40)
	Denmark	(19)
	France	(152)
	Germany	(55)
	Italy	(31)
	Netherlands	(33)
	Norway	(10)
	Spain	(28)
	United Kingdom	(157)
	United States	(74)
<b>Age/Experience</b>		
	Average Age	28.2
	Average Years at University	5.9
	Average Years Work Experience	4.6
<b>Asset Wealth</b>		
	Percent Owning $\geq 1$ Home	38
	Percent Owning $\geq 1$ Car	86
<b>International Exposure</b>		
	% Having Visited $\geq 2$ Continents	91
	% Speaking $\geq 2$ Languages	99

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**Table 3**  
**Country-Level Indices of Cultural Personality<sup>a</sup> and Information Use**

Country	UAI <sup>a</sup>	PDI <sup>a</sup>	IDV <sup>a</sup>	Impersonal Information Seeking <sup>b</sup>	Opinion Seeking <sup>c</sup>	Opinion Giving <sup>c</sup>
Austria	70	11	55	2	---	---
Belgium	94	65	75	3	88.88	41.18
Canada	48	39	80	4	77.14	29.36
Denmark	23	18	74	5	76.48	25.00
Finland	59	33	63	5	---	---
France	86	68	71	2	81.30	28.24
Germany	65	35	67	3	76.48	40.42
Italy	75	50	76	1	93.10	7.70
Netherlands	53	38	80	3	75.00	14.28
Norway	50	31	69	5	75.00	14.28
Portugal	104	63	27	1	---	---
Spain	86	57	51	1	85.18	8.34
Sweden	29	31	71	5	---	---
Switzerland	58	34	68	2	---	---
United Kingdom	35	35	89	3	74.82	17.18
United States	46	40	91	4	88.58	32.30

<sup>a</sup> UAI=uncertainty avoidance; PDI=power distance; IDV=individualism; [Hofstede 1980].

<sup>b</sup> Higher numbers indicate greater proportions of the population actively seeking product information from consumer magazines [Thorelli and Becker 1980].

<sup>c</sup> Calculated as percentage of sample indicating a high likelihood (scores 5,6 or 7) of seeking (giving) product information from others minus the percentage indicating a low likelihood (scores 1,2 or 3).

**Table 4**  
**Spearman Correlations Between Cultural Characteristics and Information Use**

Cultural Characteristic <sup>a</sup>	Impersonal Information Seeking <sup>b</sup>	Opinion Seeking <sup>c</sup>	Opinion Giving <sup>c</sup>
UAI	-0.51**	0.56*	0.02
PDI	-0.65***	0.74***	0.10
IDV	0.32	-0.03	0.13

<sup>a</sup> UAI=uncertainty avoidance; PDI=power distance; IDV=individualism; [Hofstede 1980].

<sup>b</sup> Higher numbers indicate greater proportions of the population actively seeking product information from consumer magazines [Thorelli and Becker 1980].

<sup>c</sup> Calculated as percentage of sample indicating a high likelihood (scores 5,6 or 7) of seeking (giving) product information from others minus the percentage indicating a low likelihood (scores 1,2 or 3).

\* Significant at  $p < .10$

\*\* Significant at  $p < .05$

\*\*\* Significant at  $p < .01$

**Table 5**  
**Use of Information Sources, By Opinion Seeking and Opinion Giving (Percent Reporting Frequent Use)**

	Friends	Consumer Magazines	Salespeople	Newspaper	TV Commercials	Radio Commercials
Opinion Seeking						
High	97 <sup>###</sup>	71	69	46	23	7
Low	82	64	66	39	20	5
Opinion Giving						
High	96	75 <sup>***</sup>	63 <sup>***</sup>	49 <sup>**</sup>	22	5
Low	94	60	74	40	24	9

<sup>###</sup> Chi-square test relating opinion seeking to media usage significant at  $p < .01$

<sup>\*\*</sup> Chi-square test relating opinion giving to media usage significant at  $p < .05$

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Chi-square test relating opinion giving to media usage significant at  $p < .01$

**Table 6**  
**Spearman Correlations Between Individual-Level Variables and Information Exchange**

Individual-Level Variable	Opinion Seeking	Opinion Giving
Opinion Seeking	1.00	.09 **
Opinion Giving	.09 **	1.00
Self Confidence	.05	.12 ***
Venturesomeness	.01	.06
Likely to Research	.29 ***	.40 ***
Magazine Subscriptions	-.03	.04
Number of Shop Visits	.08 **	.20 ***
Category Ownership	-.02	.11 ***
Category Intention	.05	.18 ***
Category Knowledge	.10	.35 ***
Category Innovativeness	-.01	.40 ***

\* Significant at  $p < .10$   
 \*\* Significant at  $p < .05$   
 \*\*\* Significant at  $p < .01$



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