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A Test of the Validity of Hofstede's Cultural Framework

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This paper examines the reliability and validity of Hofstede's cultural framework when applied at the individual level. Respondents were asked to classify each item, indicating which dimension it was intended to reflect. The items exhibited marginal face validity; on average, subjects "correctly" identified the items only 41.3% of the time. Subjects were also asked to respond to each item. The reliability of each dimension was low, and a coherent factor structure did not emerge. It is hoped that these findings will spur development of a robust and valid cultural instrument that can be used by marketing academicians and practitioners alike.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper examines the validity of Hofstede's (1980) cultural framework when applied at the individual unit of analysis. Although other researchers (e.g., Triandis, 1995, Schwartz, 1999; House et al., 2004) have also made substantial contributions to our understanding of culture, it is Hofstede's framework that has provided the theoretical foundation upon which much cross-cultural research has been based. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that, "Hofstede has inspired a great improvement in the discipline by specifying a theoretical model which serves to coordinate research efforts" (Redding, 1994).

Hofstede's cultural framework has been applied in a wide variety of contexts, across most (if not all) of the behavioral science disciplines. In marketing, Hofstede's cultural framework has been applied in studies of advertising (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee, 1993; Gregory and Munch, 1997; Zandpour et al., 1994), global brand strategies (Roth, 1995), and ethical decision making (Blodgett et al., 2001), and is discussed in numerous textbooks (e.g., Keegan and Green, 2003). Clearly, Hofstede's cultural framework has provided the catalyst for many studies throughout the social sciences, and has helped shape marketing thought.

Given the pervasive influence of Hofstede's work across the academic community, it would be reasonable to assume that the validity of the cultural framework has been fully established. However, despite the many studies that have employed Hofstede's framework, it has not been subjected to rigorous tests of reliability and validity (as per Churchill, 1979 and Schwab, 1980). Indeed, several studies raise concerns about the empirical validity of Hofstede's framework (Kagitcibasi, 1994; Soondergaard, 1994; Bakir et al., 2000).

In order to examine the empirical validity of Hofstede's cultural framework an exploratory study was conducted. Subjects were asked to review Hofstede's original 32-item cultural instrument and to indicate which dimension (power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity) each particular item was intended to reflect. The percentage of subjects who "correctly" classified a particular item was then calculated in order to provide a measure of "face validity." Subjects were also asked to respond to each item (as in a typical questionnaire), thus indicating their underlying values. This data was then used to compute the reliabilities of the four dimensions; and was factor analyzed to determine whether the various items loaded in a manner that is consistent with Hofstede's framework, thus providing evidence as to discriminant and convergent validity.

The sample (n=157) was drawn from two different populations. One group of respondents consisted of 97 MBA students, all of whom have full-time work experience. Another group consisted of 60 faculty members from the behavioral sciences (marketing, management, psychology, sociology, and communications). Given that faculty in the behavioral sciences typically are well trained in construct development their inclusion provides a strong test of the reliability and validity of Hofstede's framework.

Overall, the 32 items were correctly matched by the subjects to their underlying dimensions only 41.3% of the time, on average (see Table 1). The individualism/collectivism items were correctly classified, on average, 43.1% of the time; the uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/ femininity items were successfully identified 30.4% and 26.0% of the time; and the power distance items were

correctly classified by subjects 63.1% of the time. Overall, these rates indicate that most of the items lack face validity.

Cronbach's alpha was then computed for each of the four dimensions. Higher levels of alpha indicate that the various items behave in a consistent manner, and reflect the extent to which the items are measuring the same, underlying construct. Unfortunately, none of the four cultural dimensions appears to be sufficiently reliable. Although individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity display moderate levels of reliability (.666 and .651), the reliabilities for uncertainty avoidance (.351) and power distance (.301) do not approach minimally acceptable standards (see Nunnally, 1978).

In order to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of Hofstede's instrument principle components factor analyses were performed. If each of the four dimensions is indeed distinct one would expect to find four factors, with similar items loading together to form a coherent structure. Several different analyses were performed, one with the number of factors constrained to equal four. A coherent factor structure did not emerge. Instead, the results indicated that the cultural framework, when applied at the individual unit of analysis, is lacking in both convergent and discriminant validity.

There is no doubt that the concept of culture is legitimate. The authors commend Hofstede for his pioneering work in this area, and for bringing the concept of culture to the forefront of the various behavioral science disciplines. The issue for marketers, however, is how to best capture this construct and its various dimensions. This study presents evidence that Hofstede's cultural instrument lacks sufficient validity when applied at the individual unit of analysis. This critique is not meant to be overly critical of Hofstede's framework. Instead, it is hoped that these findings will eventually lead to a valid measure that captures the richness of the various cultural dimensions and can be deployed at an individual level. Given the diversity of the world marketplace, it is essential that marketers have a robust measure of culture so that our understanding of consumer behavior can keep pace with a rapidly changing environment, and that the academic discipline can make a meaningful contribution to both theory and practice. With that goal in mind, the authors plan on conducting future studies to assess the reliability and validity of other cultural measures, such as those by Schwartz (1999), Triandis (1995), Maznevski and DiStefano (1995), and the GLOBE instrument developed by House et al. (2004).

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