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# The Effects of Store Environment on Shopping Behavior: The Role of Consumer Idiocentrism and Allocentrism\*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this research is to identify how idiocentric consumers and allocentric consumers respond to retail store environments and how such responses affect their consumer behaviors in a sustainable consumption setting.

**Method** – Data were collected from 422 U.S. adult consumers via a web-based survey. Two store settings were created, perceptually related (eco-friendly clothing displayed with greenery) or perceptually-unrelated (eco-friendly clothing displayed without greenery), and consumers were asked to take the survey based on the given store setting.

**Results** – Allocentric consumers perceived a product and its display environment were related whereas idiocentric consumers perceived the two were unrelated. Also, the former exhibited higher purchase intentions when the product and store environment were related (eco-friendly clothing displayed with greenery), but the latter did when the two were unrelated (eco-friendly clothing displayed without greenery).

**Conclusions** – This research suggests that retailers should consider consumer self-concept at personal-level when implementing marketing strategies. This research also demonstrates that consumers are influenced by store environment in relation to their self-concept and that self-concept can be temporarily modified by various stimuli such as visual displays.

**Keywords:** Idiocentrism, Allocentrism, Store Environment, Eco-friendly Clothing.

**JEL Classifications:** M14, M21, M31.

## 1. Introduction

Culture is one of the most influential factors on consumers' purchasing decisions, and various researchers have made attempts to explain the cultural influences on consumer behaviors (Ndubisi, 2004). Geert Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions have been the center of these efforts (Yang, 2004). In his seminal work, Hofstede (1980) has introduced five dimensions of culture: individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Although all dimensions are significant in examining consumer behaviors, the dimension of individualism and collectivism has received much attention because it appears to be the most vital factor that differentiates cultures (Triandis, 2001).

One of the concerns in using the individualism/collectivism dimension in cross-cultural studies is that researchers assume consumer homogeneity within the same culture (Yang, 2004). In fact, an individual in a highly individualistic culture may have a collectivistic tendency but one in a highly collectivistic culture may have an individualistic tendency. The terms idiocentrism and allocentrism has been introduced as personality traits of individualism and collectivism (Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clark, 1985). For instance, idiocentrism and allocentrism at the personal level represent individualism and collectivism at the cross-cultural level (Dutta-Bergman & Wells, 2002; Sun, Horn, & Merritt, 2004; Triandis et al., 1985). Although idiocentric individuals are more common than allocentric individuals in individualistic cultures (Triandis, 2001), any cultures can have both idiocentric individuals and allocentric individuals (Triandis et al., 1985). Therefore, considering individual differences in personality traits at both etic-level (cross-cultural level) and emic-level (personal level) in consumer behavior research is important.

Research shows that consumers respond to store environment differently based on how they view themselves (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009), and the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism is the main source of defining an individual's self-view (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). As the importance of emic-level individualism and collectivism in behavioral research is growing, a need to understand idiocentric consumers and allocentric consumers in various settings is es-

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sential (Dutta-Bergman & Wells, 2002; Sun et al., 2004; Yang, 2004).

The purpose of this research is to identify how idiocentric consumers and allocentric consumers respond to retail store environments and how such responses affect their consumer behaviors. We first discuss the concept of individualism/collectivism and their relationship to idiocentrism/allocentrism and self-view. Then, we compare idiocentric consumers' and allocentric consumers' behaviors toward product evaluations and purchase intentions in relation to different store environments.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Individualism and collectivism

Culture affects individuals' cognitions, emotions, and motivations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and, in turn, shapes consumer decision-making behavior (Leo, Bennett, & Härtel, 2005). In this regard, numerous researchers have investigated cultural influences on consumer behaviors, and Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions are utilized frequently in these attempts (Yang, 2004).

Individualism and collectivism is one of the cultural dimensions that Hofstede developed based on the value scores of employees who worked for a multinational corporation in 53 different nations (Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Triandis (1995) has suggested that individualism and collectivism are distinguished from each other based on the following four aspects: the definition of self, the priority of goals, the focus of cognition, and the sustainability of a relationship. Individualists are those who perceive themselves as independent, emphasize personal goals, behave according to personal attitudes, and maintain relationships with others on the basis of self-interests. Collectivists would be those who show the opposite propensity to individualists. Specifically, they perceive themselves as interdependent, emphasize group goals, behave according to social norms, and maintain relationships with others even when relational disadvantages arise (Triandis, 1995). Further, the distinctions between individualism and collectivism are believed to define consumers' purchase decision-making styles (Leo et al., 2005).

According to Hofstede (1980), the U.S. is the most individualized country, and most English-speaking countries such as the U.K and Australia as well as Western European countries score high in individualism. Conversely, Asia, Africa, South America, and some European countries (e.g., Italy and Greece) can be described as collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980). However, recent studies have provided the evidence of the co-existence of individualism and collectivism within a culture. For example, individuals from coastal areas of China (e.g., Shanghai) demonstrate more individualistic propensities than those from inland China (Koch & Koch, 2007). Also, Yi's study (2004) has advised that Americans' and Koreans' level of individualism or collectivism may be geographic-dependent. These findings raise the awareness of consumer heterogeneity in consumer behavior research. Consequently, in the context of in-

dividualism and collectivism, researchers should investigate consumers' individualistic and collectivistic tendencies within the same culture.

### 2.2. Idiocentrism and allocentrism

As consumer heterogeneity within cultures is reported in the literature (e.g., Koch & Koch, 2007; Sun & Wu, 2004; Yi, 2004), individualism and collectivism need to be examined at personal level as well. Because the dimension of individualism and collectivism is a continuum, an individual stands somewhere between an individualist and a collectivist (Triandis et al., 1985). However, the individual from an individualistic culture is most likely to exhibit individualistic characteristics while one from collectivistic culture is seemingly to display collectivistic characteristics (Triandis et al., 1985). In other words, both individualists and collectivists coexist within any given culture.

Triandis (1995) has introduced the concept of idiocentrism and allocentrism as the emic-level (personal-level) individualism and collectivism within the same culture. Dutta-Bergman and Wells (2002) have investigated the differences of idiocentric consumers and allocentric consumers as reflected in personal values and lifestyles in individualist culture (U.S.). Sun et al. (2004) have replicated Dutta-Bergman and Wells's (2002) study to compare idiocentric consumers and allocentric consumers in collectivistic culture (China and Japan) and individualist culture (U.K. and U.S.). These studies have confirmed that individuals within the same culture are different in values and lifestyles depending on their individualistic or collectivistic tendencies.

### 2.3. Individual self-concept

An individual's self-concept is an integral part of consumer research because it affects consumer lifestyles, values, and behaviors (Dutta-Bergman & Wells, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sun et al., 2004). For example, Wong and Ahuvia (1998) have theoretically proposed, and Tsia (2005) has empirically supported, that consumers' purchase motivations differ depending on their perceptions of selves. Culture, especially individualism and collectivism, affects the formation of individuals' self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Singelis (1994) used the term "independent-self" to describe consumers who identify themselves with private factors such as personal goals, self-governing, and belief reflecting their independence and the term "interdependent-self" to explain those who relate themselves to in-group goals, social norms, and interdependent beliefs. By definition and attributes specified in the literature (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994), idiocentrism and allocentrism are equitable representation of independent-self and interdependent-self, respectively.

### 2.4. Store environment and consumer behavior

Consumers are influenced by their surroundings. In the context of retailing, environmental cues presented along with the

product such as in-store display or signage affect consumer behavior (Mehta & Chugan, 2014; Prashar, Raja, Parasaran, & Venna, 2015). As the importance of store environment in consumer shopping behavior is growing, retailers allocate substantial resources to store environments. Consumers use the stimuli that are perceptually or conceptually associated with a product for product evaluations and purchase decisions (Whittlesea, 1993). For example, when the color of orange is a dominant color in the merchandise display, consumers opt for more orange color products (Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008). Similarly, consumers are inclined to purchase green color products when they are exposed frequently to the color of green prior to shopping (Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008).

While the influence of store environments on consumer behavior is universal, consumer response to these environments differs depending on their self-view. Zhu and Meyers-Levy (2009) affirmed that independent self-view consumers evaluate a product contrast to its display surrounding (contrast effect) whereas interdependent self-view consumers process a product and its display surrounding as a continuous entity (assimilation effect). For example, in evaluating a product displayed in a natural setting, independent self-view consumers perceive the product to be less natural while interdependent self-view consumers perceive it to be more natural. Likewise, a product displayed in a non-natural setting is perceived to be more natural by independent self-view consumers and less natural by interdependent self-view consumers (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009).

By incorporating the concept of idiocentrism and allocentrism into Berger and Fitzsimons's study (2008) and Zhu and Meyers-Levy's study (2009), a reasonable assumption is that idiocentric consumers are more likely to evaluate a green color product greener if the product is displayed in a non-green color setting (perceptually-unrelated setting) than in a green color setting (perceptually-related setting). Further, idiocentric consumers are more likely to purchase a green color product if they are exposed to a non-green color (perceptually-unrelated setting) rather than a green color (perceptually-related setting) before shopping. Under the same condition, allocentric consumers will exhibit the opposite behaviors. That is, evaluating a green color product a greener and tending to purchase a green color product in a perceptually-related setting than perceptually-unrelated setting. Thus, the following hypotheses are advanced:

- <H1> Idiocentric consumers perceive a product and its display environment to be perceptually-unrelated.
- <H2> Allocentric consumers perceive a product and its display environment to be perceptually-related.
- <H3> Idiocentric consumers exhibit higher purchase intentions toward a product if it is displayed in a perceptually-unrelated environment than perceptually-related environment.
- <H4> Allocentric consumers exhibit higher purchase intentions toward a product if it is displayed in a perceptually-related environment than perceptually-unrelated environment.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data collection procedure

The present research tests aforementioned hypotheses in sustainable consumption settings. To measure the impact of perceptually-related and perceptually-unrelated store environments on idiocentric and allocentric consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions toward eco-friendly clothing, two store settings were created: eco-friendly clothing displayed with greenery (green store hereafter) and eco-friendly clothing displayed without greenery (plain store hereafter). The retail greenery positively affects individuals' sustainable shopping behaviors (Joye, Willems, Brengman, & Wolf, 2010). Thus, the presence or absence of plants and flowers as in-store displays determines a perceptually-related (green store, see Figure 1) or perceptually-unrelated store environment (plain store, see Figure 2) in the context of sustainable consumption.



<Figure 1> Perceptually-related store environment (green store)



<Figure 2> Perceptually-unrelated store environment (plain store)

Study participants were recruited through an online consumer research firm. A total of 500 U.S. consumers whose age was minimum 18 years agreed to participate in a web-based survey. As a warm-up activity, each individual was randomly asked to write about either a memorable time/event that he/she engaged in solely by himself/herself or that he/she had with family and friends. Research supported that this activity is effective in swaying individuals to conceptualize "self" in a certain way confirming the former induces individuals' idiocentric-orientation and the latter induces their allocentric-orientation (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009). The validity of this process also was supported by a pre-test. A total of 27 college students participated in one of two aforementioned activities and then took an 11-item individualism-collectivism survey in which the lower score indicated the stronger idiocentric tendency (Wagner & Moch, 1986). The t-test result confirmed that the group which wrote about a time/event that they engaged in solely by themselves ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) scored lower than the group which wrote about a time/event that they had with family and friends ( $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ );  $t(25) = 8.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, this warm-up activity has successfully induced individuals' idiocentric- or allocentric-orientation.

Seventy eight participants were dropped from the research due to invalid or incomplete self-concept warm-up activities. Once the remaining 422 participants' self-concepts were either idiocentric- or allocentric-oriented by design, they were assigned randomly to view one of store pictures along with a scenario that they were shopping for clothing and then asked to complete the survey examining their perceptions and purchase intentions toward clothing. A total of four groups were identified after this stage: idiocentric consumers in the green store (Group 1); idiocentric consumers in the plain store (Group 2) allocentric consumers in the green store (Group 3) and allocentric consumers in the plain store (Group 4). The group 1 and 4 represent consumer shopping in a perceptually-unrelated store environment, and the group 2 and 3 denote consumer shopping in a perceptually-related store environment.

### 3.2. Measures

A 3-item measurement scale to measure consumer perceptions of eco-friendly clothing was adapted from Zhu and Meyers-Levy's research (2009). Research participants answered whether displayed clothing in the picture appeared to be eco-friendly, organic, and natural on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "not at all" (1) to "extremely" (7). To assess consumer purchase intentions toward eco-friendly clothing, a 3-item purchase intention scale ("I would/want to/plan to buy eco-friendly clothing) was modified from the previous research (Ko, Cho, & Roberts 2005; Ramayah, Lee, & Mohamad, 2010). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = "highly unlikely" and 7 = "highly likely"). The Cronbach's alpha for each measurement scale was 0.917 and 0.903, respectively.

### 3.3. Analysis

Consumer perceptions and purchase intentions toward eco-friendly clothing were analyzed by means of two-way ANOVA with two levels of self-concept (idiocentric-oriented and allocentric-oriented) and two levels of store environment (green store and plain store). The statistical significance of the interaction between self-concept and store environment was primarily examined as it was pertinent to supporting the proposed hypotheses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Sample characteristics

A total of 422 online responses were analyzed. Sixty-one percent of the respondents were females and 38.4 percent were males. The average respondent age was 36.9 years. After the warm-up activity and store assignment, the following group memberships were identified: Group 1 ( $N = 109$ ), Group 2 ( $N = 101$ ), Group 3 ( $N = 102$ ), and Group 4 (110).

### 4.2. Hypotheses testing

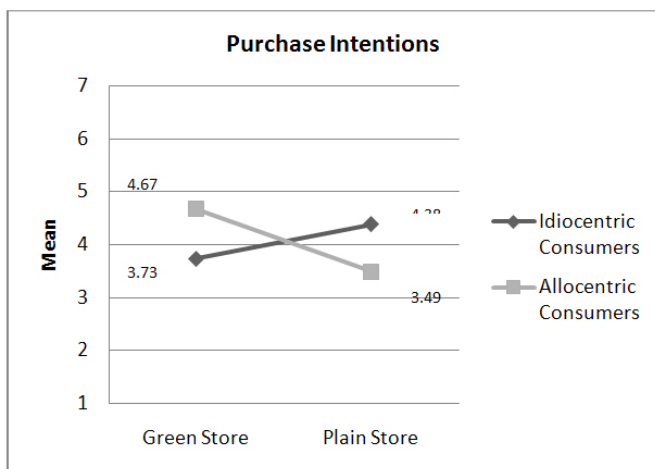
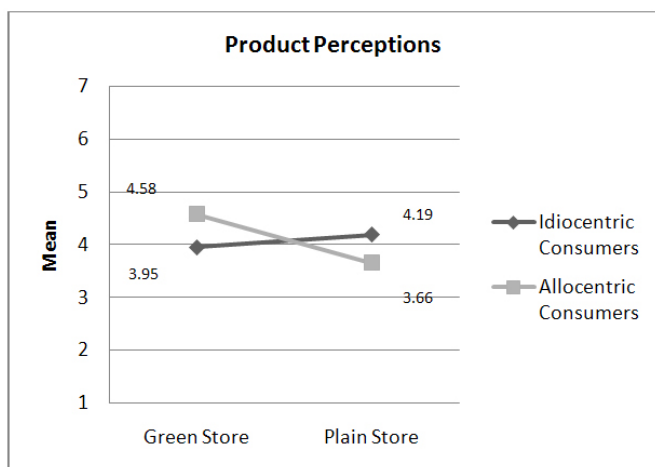
The ANOVA results indicated that the interaction between self-concept and store environment significantly affected consumer perceptions toward eco-friendly clothing. The ANOVA results are presented in Table 1. Idiocentric consumers perceived clothing to be more eco-friendly when it was displayed in the plain store ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) than green store ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). Allocentric consumers perceived clothing to be more eco-friendly when it was displayed in the green store ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) than plain store ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ). These outcomes can be inferred that idiocentric consumers perceive a product and its display environment to be perceptually-unrelated whereas allocentric consumers perceive a product and its display environment to be perceptually-related. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported.

The interaction between self-concept and store environment also significantly impacted consumer purchase intentions toward eco-friendly clothing (see <Table 1>). Idiocentric consumers' purchase intentions toward eco-friendly clothing were higher in the plain store ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) than those in the green store ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). Allocentric consumers' purchase intentions toward eco-friendly clothing were higher in the green store ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) than those in the plain store ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). These outcomes suggest that idiocentric consumers are more likely to purchase a product when the product is displayed in perceptually-unrelated environment than perceptually-related environment. Allocentric consumers are more likely to purchase a product when the product is displayed in perceptually-related environment than perceptually-unrelated environment. Hence, H3 and H4 were supported. <Figure 3> illustrates the means of the interaction between consumer self-concept and store environment.

<Table 1> Results of interaction effects

Source	Dependent Variables	df	Mean	Square	F	Sig.
Self-concept x Store environment	Product perceptions	1		34.56	51.90***	0.00
	Purchase intentions	1		88.88	87.09***	0.00

\*\*\* $p < 0.00$



<Figure 3> Means of interaction between consumer self-concept and store environment

### 5. Conclusion and discussion

This research examined consumer perceptions and purchase intentions in relation to their self-concept and perceptually-related/unrelated store environment. The data collected from the current participants confirmed that idiocentric consumers perceived clothing to be more eco-friendly and their purchase intentions were higher when clothing was displayed without greenery (perceptually-unrelated store environment) than when it was displayed with greenery (perceptually-related store environment).

Conversely, allocentric consumers perceived clothing to be more eco-friendly and their purchase intentions were higher when clothing was displayed with greenery than when it was displayed without greenery. To put these results in a general context, idiocentric consumers perceive that a product and its surrounding are unrelated when evaluating the product and making purchase decisions. Allocentric consumers hold a collective view toward the product and its surrounding, which led them to perceive the two to be related.

Berger and Fitzsimons (2008) found that perceptually-related stimuli influence consumers' product choice or evaluations. Zhu and Meyers-Levy (2009) asserted that interdependent-minded consumers (idiocentric consumers in this research) and interdependent-minded consumers (allocentric consumers) recognize the contrast and assimilation relationships between a product and its display setting respectively and that their shopping behaviors are influenced by these relationships (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009). The present research supports their findings jointly in one experimental setting and contributes to the context effect and consumer behavior literature.

The current research also contributes to the body of knowledge on environmentally responsible shopping behavior by suggesting that sustainable store environments, such as greenery in the store or fixtures made of natural materials, can affect consumers' sustainable behaviors. However, the effect can be positive or negative depending on consumer self-concept. Zhu and Meyers-Levy (2009) suggested that consumer self-concept can be controlled or modified temporarily by design. This research empirically confirmed their argument and extends the current body of literature on priming effects on consumer behaviors.

Store environment is one of the most important marketing tools in retailing. Retailers allocate considerable resources to create store environments that positively affect their customers. The primary goal of retailers is to increase their sales, and they may achieve this goal by creating store environment that is perceptually-related or -unrelated to their products. Because consumers respond to store environment differently depending on their self-concept, and retailers cannot selectively have consumers with the same self-concept, they need to modify consumer self-concept (idiocentric- or allocentric-orientation) favoring to their store setting. For example, if a retailer creates a store environment that is perceptually-unrelated to its product, idiocentric consumers already favor a product display setting, but allocentric consumers do not. The retailer could change allocentric consumers to think and behave more like idiocentric consumers while shopping by playing in-store music about self-confidence and independence and using single person instead of a group

of people in in-store graphics. Another example is more specific to the context of this research. If a retailer carries eco-friendly products and uses plants and flowers as in-store decorations, the store environment is perceptually-related (green store) and already favorable to allocentric consumers. The retailer needs to make idiocentric consumers shop more like allocentric consumer. Hanging in-store graphic portraying a group of people (family, friends, etc.) or playing in-store music about family, friendship, and togetherness may be effective ways to complete this task. Recognizing that consumers are influenced by store environment in relation to their self-concept and knowing that self-concept can be temporarily modified by various stimuli, retailers can wisely use these facts for their marketing and promotions. They can create store environment that is perceptually-related or –unrelated to their products and implement other cues to design their customers' self-concept to favor products displayed in the store environment.

Some limitations have been identified, and these could be addressed in the future research. The research was conducted in an experimental setting where participants viewed the images of the product and store environment online. The data collected from consumers in actual retail stores may provide a more realistic outlook of how consumers respond to store environment. Also, future research may include consumers in collectivistic cultures as well to compare idiocentric and allocentric consumers from both individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

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