

THE IMPACT OF A SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS ON CONSUMER ETHNOCENTRISM RESEARCH: A CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Consumers in the global marketplace are becoming more sensitive to their cultural and ethnic identities resulting in increasing levels of nationalism around the world. One of the ways in which these individuals manifest this nationalism is through consumer ethnocentrism. Therefore, the ability to accurately measure levels of cross-national consumer ethnocentrism becomes an important concern for both academic researchers and marketing practitioners. At the same time different factors may intervene to prevent accurate assessment of consumer ethnocentrism. This paper proposes that one of these factors is a social desirability bias. Utilizing cross-national samples, this study explores the relationship between the measurement of consumer ethnocentrism and social desirability bias.

INTRODUCTION

In the study of international consumer marketing phenomena, questionnaires are one of the most often used method of measuring constructs. The popularity of questionnaire measures is not surprising given that they are relatively easy to use, inexpensive and often are the most plausible alternative for measuring unobservable constructs such as individuals' values, attitudes, and beliefs about foreign- and domestic-made products and services.

However, in the use of any questionnaire measure, a number of factors can have a negative impact on measurement reliability and validity. One such critical factor is social desirability bias in subjects' responses (Crowne and Marlowe 1964). Social desirability "refers to a need for social approval and acceptance and the belief that this can be attained by means of culturally acceptable and appropriate behaviors" (Marlowe and Crowne 1964). Thus, social desirability bias can be regarded as a bias in the responses of subjects caused by respondents' desires, either consciously or unconsciously, to gain prestige or to appear in a different social role.

It has been found that the assessment of the effects of bias toward socially desirable responses is particularly important in studies in which the central hypotheses involve self-inventories such as self-reports of beliefs and attitudes (Ganster, Hennessey, and Luthans 1983). Culturally-based models often employ a number of self-reported measures; thus, it seems particularly likely that findings in the cross-cultural marketing literature may be subject to attenuation as a consequence of bias toward socially desirable responses. The goal of this study is to investigate this phenomena in the context of consumer ethnocentrism.

ETHNOCENTRISM AND CONSUMER RESEARCH

Ethnocentrism has been defined as the tendency of individuals to reject that which originates from outside their own culture while, at the same time, being willing to accept that which originates from their culture without question (Booth 1979; Worchel and Cooper 1979). The fundamental defining characteristic of a purely ethnocentric individual is that person's tendency to categorize other people, and things associated with these people, into a group which they either identify with or "contraidentify" with (Forbes 1985). High levels of ethnocentrism will lead individuals to unquestioningly embrace anyone or anything in their identifying group and to systematically reject all which falls outside of this group. Ethnocentrism has been shown to be a highly significant predictor of individuals' willingness to accept that which does not fall within the respondents' cultural orientations (Ho 1990).

While this outlook may manifest itself through identification with religious, racial, or social class groups, one of the most common forms is identification with one's nationality--i.e. nationalism (Forbes 1985). Ethnicity and nationalism are one of the strongest motivating forces in the modern global marketplace (Pfaff 1994) and it has been predicted that nationalism may lead to the creation of as many as 150 new countries within the next 50 years (Moynihan 1994). One of the ways ethnocentric individuals can tangibly exhibit their cultural orientations and beliefs, particularly nationalism, is through consumptive behavior limited to domestic products (i.e. consumer ethnocentrism).

Consumer ethnocentrism is one manifestation of a nationalistic orientation in consumer behavior; thus consumer ethnocentrism involves the tendency of consumers to exhibit a predisposition toward products originating from their own country while rejecting imported products (Shimp and Sharma 1987; Netemeyer, Durvasula, and Lichtenstein 1991). From a marketing point of view such a disposition could be substantial both from the perspective of foreign firms attempting to enter a market as well as domestic firms seeking to differentiate their products in the face of foreign competition. Thus, the ability to *effectively* measure the presence of consumer ethnocentrism could be very valuable in terms of assessing the consumer environment in the modern global marketplace.

The CETSCALE (Shimp and Sharma 1987) represents an accepted means of measuring consumer ethnocentrism. However, little research exists which empirically addresses biases encountered in conducting consumer ethnocentrism research (Albaum and Peterson 1984). One of these biases is the tendency of some individuals to measure their responses to any outside inquiry based on what they perceive society would want them to respond. From the perspective of reliability and validity in consumer ethnocentrism research such a bias represents a potentially serious confounding influence. On the one hand, a highly ethnocentric individual will reject all which does not fall into their "identifying" group. At the same time the desire to socially belong to this identifying group may cause them to subjugate or moderate ethnocentric beliefs if they perceive their social group to be unreceptive to such a perspective.

It has long been accepted that the measurement of cross-national phenomena is of dubious value if not subjected to some assessment of the underlying psychometric properties of the instrument employed (Netemeyer, Durvasula, and Lichtenstein 1991; Parameswaran and Yaprak 1987; Douglas and Craig 1983;

Davis, Douglas, and Silk 1981). Failure to do so may result in the gathering and analyzing of inaccurate information leading, in the case of consumer ethnocentrism, to a faulty perception of consumer attitudes and their decision making process. Netemeyer, Durvasula, and Lichtenstein (1991) have specifically addressed some of these issues from the perspective of the CETSCALE, yet their exclusive focus on the psychometric properties of this widely used measurement instrument ignores other potential problem areas.

The CETSCALE was designed to measure consumer ethnocentrism in an effort to better understand, explain, and predict consumers' tendencies to more favorably evaluate domestic products when compared with foreign products. Shimp and Sharma (1987) utilized a sizeable U.S. sample and obtained sufficient results in terms of its reliability and validity to support the psychometric properties of the CETSCALE. Netemeyer, Durvasula, and Lichtenstein (1991) extended this research by obtained similar support utilizing a four-nation (i.e. United States, France, Germany, and Japan) sample. While this approach provides some statistical support for the instrument (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Churchill 1979; Peter 1979) it appears such analysis may be incomplete given the nature of the phenomenon. The intervening influence of other cultural factors on respondents, as well as the respondent's personal characteristics, may represent significant biases which confound meaningful data interpretation. One of these influences may be the presence of a social desirability bias. The need to explore the effect of socially desirable responses on consumer ethnocentrism is supported by Shimp and Sharma (1987), who state that "the process by which consumer ethnocentric tendencies are socialized is particularly worth examining".

In order to investigate the relationship between social desirability responding and consumer ethnocentrism, this research will: (1) discuss the potential biasing influence of a social desirability tendency and (2) test the effects of social desirability bias on levels of consumer ethnocentrism as measured by the CETSCALE in two countries: the United States and Sweden. These two nations appear to be well suited for such an investigation. The U.S. is a large multicultural nation while Sweden is a small culturally homogenous nation which thrives on imports and exports. If rising tides of nationalism around the world (Brenner 1993) combined with the increasing emphasis being placed on cultural and ethnic identity (Huntington 1993) means that consumer ethnocentrism will be a force in the global marketing environment, then some

differences should exist between levels of ethnocentrism and individual respondent's willingness to self-report ethnocentrism in the two nations.

SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS

A response bias is a systematic tendency to respond to a range of questionnaire items on some basis other than the specific item content (Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman 1991). For example, a subject might choose the answer that is most extreme or most socially desirable. A respondent's tendency to exhibit response bias may be based on a temporary reaction to a situational factor such as time pressure or expected public disclosure. Additionally, a bias may be caused by context effects such as the format of the scale items (Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988); it can also be a response style that is consistent across time and situations (Wiggins 1973).

There are several reasons why a researcher might want to include a direct measure of social desirability bias in a study. The most common reason in the past has been to "verify" the discriminant validity of a self-report content instrument. Discriminant validity can be measured as a correlational effect between the content scale and the social desirability scale; low intercorrelation between the scales confirms that the responses to the content scale is not contaminated by social desirability bias (cf. Shimp and Sharma 1987; Churchill 1979). However, caution must be exercised in interpreting reports of high correlations between self-report instruments and score on a social desirability scale; such relations cannot be assumed to represent contamination and, therefore, deficits in the instruments. In fact, the socially desirable responding component may be a legitimate aspect of the construct being measured.

In some instances, rather than correcting a biased score, one might prefer to eliminate a subject's responses if an accompanying social desirability measure discovered a high degree of bias. The elimination of a particular respondent's "case" is based on some "cut-off" score established by the researcher. The established cut-off score can be utilized to evaluate the "fakeability" of the content instrument. A content scale is resistant to "faking it" if, under fake-good instructions, the socially desirable score exceeds the cut-off point but the content scale does not change (Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman 1991). It is important to recognize that demonstrating that one can "fake good" on a particular instrument does not prove that it is confounded with socially desirable responding under

ordinary conditions (Furnham 1986). Furthermore, faking good can be idiosyncratic (Lautenschlager 1986).

If individual differences such as "faking good" or "faking bad" in socially desirable responding is evidenced in the researcher's data, one must carefully consider why this has occurred. As described above, there may be numerous reasons for this development. Nevertheless, the results of a study that is contaminated by social desirability bias is highly questionable.

Another reason to examine the effects of social desirability bias is to identify if the subjects perceive various consumer constructs differently depending on their degrees of social desirability bias. Hypothetically, consumers high on the social desirability measure can be assumed to overreport levels of consumer ethnocentrism while consumers low on this bias may tend to report low levels of consumer ethnocentrism. If this scenario is true, the results of studies addressing consumer ethnocentrism and its relationship to some other variable such as tendency to "buy American" may be highly questionable.

As discussed previously, the primary objective of this paper is to explore the effects of social desirability bias in consumer ethnocentrism research. The rationale for exploring the issue of social desirability contamination in this setting is that people tend to behave in a culturally acceptable manner even if such behavior departs from the individual's own ideals, i.e., people behave according to the "social norm" that is set by the particular society (Crowne and Marlowe 1964). Thus, social desirability bias may be most evident in cross-cultural research where the issue is to measure the individual's or the culture's degree on some content measure.

HYPOTHESES CONSTRUCTION

Since social desirability bias is a response bias, before developing hypotheses regarding its effect on the degree of consumer ethnocentrism, one first has to address how this bias might influence individuals' responses to items designed to measure such variables. In this research, following the logic of Arnold, Feldman, and Purbhoo (1985), it is hypothesized that social desirability response bias would impact individuals' reactions to socially important psychological factors. This is especially true in the case of consumer ethnocentrism which, as stated earlier, is defined as the tendency on the part of individuals to buy products produced in their own society and reject those products

which are imported from foreign producers. Since the "true" values of the psychological factor is unobservable, the expected relationships cannot be tested empirically. However, if the hypotheses regarding the effects of social desirability bias on self-reports of consumer ethnocentrism is valid, the pattern of the relationship between social desirability response bias and consumer ethnocentrism scores should differ depending on whether individuals have high or low tendencies to make socially desirable responses. The basic hypotheses to be examined in this paper is:

- H1: There is no difference in an individual's consumer ethnocentrism score based on social desirability responding.

Utilizing a logical deductive reasoning, there should not be a difference in levels of consumer ethnocentrism scores between males or females. Thus, males identified to show high social desirability bias should not differ from females having a tendency to show this bias, etc. Further, it is appropriate to assume that there is no difference between males classified as low, average, and high on social desirability bias and their level of consumer ethnocentrism. Corresponding hypotheses are made for females as well as for the overall sample.

- H2: Gender has no effect on social desirability bias.
- H3: There is no difference between males classified as low, average, and high on social desirability bias and their level of consumer ethnocentrism.
- H4: There is no difference between females classified as low, average, and high on social desirability bias and their level of consumer ethnocentrism.

Further, for consumer ethnocentrism research which spans national boundaries the relationships between levels of ethnocentrism and social desirability bias should be consistent and non-significant across the sample countries if meaningful comparisons are to be made cross-nationally. This leads to the final hypothesis:

- H5: There is no difference in an individual's consumer ethnocentrism score based on social desirability responding and nationality.

METHOD

In order to assess the above hypotheses cross-national data was collected from two samples (the United States and Sweden. The U.S. data were gathered as part of a larger study from a sample of 164 consumers (84 males and 80 females) in the southern and midwestern United States. Similarly, in conjunction with the same study, data were gathered from 121 Swedish respondents. The Swedish sample was comprised of 52 males and 69 females.

Measures

Consumer ethnocentrism was measured by the popular 17-item CETSCALE developed by Shimp and Sharma (1987). This measurement instrument was specifically designed to measure the tendency of individual respondents to purchase domestically-made products rather than similar foreign-made products. The CETSCALE has been shown to exhibit acceptable levels of reliability and validity both in the U.S. (Shimp and Sharma 1987) as well as in other countries (Netemeyer, Durvasula, and Lichtenstein 1991). Social desirability bias was measured by twenty items selected by Strahan and Gerbasi in 1972 from the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale (Crowne and Marlowe 1960, 1964). Half of these question from the Marlowe-Crowne scale were reverse coded to control for acquiescence bias (Nunnally 1978) and a true/false response format was used.

Validity and Reliability

The 17-item CETSCALE data obtained from both samples was subjected to a combination of factor analysis (Anderson and Gerbing 1988) and reliability evaluation (Churchill 1979) to verify the postulated unidimensionality of the CETSCALE and to assess the overall reliability of the measure across the two nations. The CETSCALE items all loaded above the commonly utilized .5 criterion (Shimp and Sharma 1987) and factor loadings ranged between 0.621 to 0.848 for the U.S. data and .526 to .849 for the Swedish data (see Table 1).

Corrected item-to-total correlations greater than .35 were obtained for both samples (Saxe and Weitz 1982). Further, in each of the samples the average variance extracted for each item included in the CETSCALE factor was greater than the 50% cut-off to avoid a situation where the measurement item accounts for less than half of the explained variance (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The unidimensional CETSCALE factor accounted for 55.8% of the variance extracted with an

TABLE 1
FACTOR ANALYSIS OF THE CETSCALE ITEMS

Variables ¹	U.S. Sample Loadings	Swedish Sample Loadings
1	.734	.705
2	.657	.744
3	.690	.693
4	.731	.802
5	.724	.729
6	.772	.809
7	.799	.849
8	.788	.839
9	.795	.619
10	.790	.782
11	.848	.811
12	.728	.598
13	.621	.526
14	.753	.600
15	.701	.614
16	.813	.716
17	.718	.692
% Variance Extracted	55.8	51.8
Eigenvalue	9.5	8.8

¹The order of the CETSCALE variables corresponds with the items as listed in Shimp and Sharma (1987)

Eigenvalue of 9.5 for the U.S. sample, while the variance extracted for the Swedish sample was 51.8% with an Eigenvalue of 8.8. These results compared favorably to those obtained from a four nation sample by Netemeyer, Durvasula, and Lichtenstein (1991). The reliabilities of both scales in each national sample were also assessed. Results are shown in Table 2.

The reliability for the overall measure of consumer ethnocentrism in both the U.S. and the Swedish samples, measured by Cronbach's alpha, was $\alpha = .95$ which were consistent with the findings of Netemeyer, Durvasula, and Lichtenstein (1991). The item variances were comparable for both samples (i.e. U.S. = 2.32 vs. Sweden = 2.60). Coefficient alpha for the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale also compared favorably across the two national samples being 0.74 for the U.S. data and 0.72 for the Swedish data.

Procedure

In order to consider consumer ethnocentrism related to levels of social desirability bias, each sample was classified into low, average, and high subgroups on

social desirability bias. This classification allowed direct tests of the hypothesized effects of social desirability bias by comparing consumer ethnocentrism scores for individuals classified low, average, and high on tendencies to show this bias. The "average" subgroups were included for comparison purposes. The different subgroups were established by dividing the summated scores on the social desirability measure into three groups. The bottom third of the scale represents "low," the middle third represents "average," and the top third represents "high" levels of social desirability bias. Because of the differences in the Social Desirability Scale scores between the U.S. and Swedish sample, different criteria were applied in terms of what constituted "low", "average", and "high" for each sample. The summated ethnocentrism measure ranged from 68.5 to 58.8 for the U.S. sample and from 45.4 to 29.1 for the Swedish sample.

RESULTS

The results obtained partially support our hypotheses concerning the effects of social desirability bias on the perceptual level of consumer ethnocentrism. The item

TABLE 2
RELIABILITY STATISTICS

	United States		Sweden	
	CETSCALE	SDS	CETSCALE	SDS
Alpha	.95	.74	.95	.72
Item Mean	3.62	NA	2.35	NA
Item Variance	2.32	NA	2.60	NA

mean for the U.S. sample (3.62) was substantially larger than the item mean for the Swedish sample (2.35). A subsequent t-test revealed that this difference was significant at the $p < .01$ level causing us to reject H_5 . Clearly one of the explanations for this is that the Swedish respondents tend to be less ethnocentric than U.S. respondents. However, this paper has postulated that a social desirability bias may confound the levels of ethnocentrism, as measured by the CETSCALE, in the sample data. Thus, the relationship between levels of ethnocentrism and social desirability bias was investigated. Table 3 illustrated these results for the U.S. sample.

The overall mean score on the consumer ethnocentrism scale (CETSCALE) in the U.S. sample was 61.5 (males 61.9; females 60.6). Mean scores for individuals classified as having low, average, and high social desirability bias was 64.3 (males 68.5; females 59.6), 60.7 (males 59.7; females 61.2), and 59.3 (males 58.8; females 60.0), respectively. There is no difference between males classified as average and those classified as high in terms of their social desirability bias. However, for the male U.S. sample, there is a significant difference in level of consumer ethnocentrism for individuals classified as low compared with the average and high bias groups ($p < .05$); thus H_3 is rejected.

For the female U.S. sample, there are no differences between any of the social desirability bias groups and levels of consumer ethnocentrism providing support for H_4 . However, when both females and males are classified as having low social desirability bias, males register a significantly higher score on the consumer ethnocentrism scale than do females ($p < .05$); thus H_2 is, at least partially, rejected. For the overall sample, there are no differences in level of consumer ethnocentrism based on social desirability bias providing support for H_1 . Lastly, there is some evidence of discriminant

validity of the CETSCALE based on the U.S. sample data since there is a low and insignificant correlation ($r = -.13$) between the summated measures of the CETSCALE and the Social Desirability Scale.

As Table 4 illustrates, somewhat similar results were obtained from the Swedish data in comparison to the U.S.

As in the case of males falling into the "low" social desirability category, a significant difference ($p < .10$) was found between Swedish males falling into the "low" and "high" social desirability categories. Thus, as in the case of the U.S. sample, H_3 is rejected. However, in the case of females, the Swedish sample showed significant differences between "low" and "high" females ($p < .01$) and "average" and "high" females ($p < .03$) causing H_4 to be rejected. An overall comparison between males and females revealed no significant difference leading to a failure to reject H_2 . In the overall sample (i.e. combining males and females), a significant difference was found between "average" and "high" ($p < .10$) leading to a rejection of H_1 .

DISCUSSION

Overall the study lends some support to the reliability and validity of the CETSCALE instrument. However, there are a number of problems that have to be considered when employing the measure. First, the individual's level of social desirability bias must be considered as a potential moderator between consumer ethnocentrism and the explored variable (Ganster, Hennessey, and Luthans 1983). For instance, the "strong" wording of the CETSCALE may make those individuals who exhibit higher levels of social desirability bias to be less comfortable with displaying high levels of agreement to what they perceive to be extreme statements.

TABLE 3
CLASSIFICATIONS OF SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS
(U.S. SAMPLE)

	Low	Average	High	Overall
Males	68.5 (n=23)	59.7 (n=33)	58.8 (n=28)	61.9 (n=84)
Females	59.6 (n=25)	61.2 (n=35)	60.0 (n=20)	60.6 (n=80)
Overall	64.3 (n=49)	60.7 (n=69)	59.3 (n=49)	61.5 (n=167)

TABLE 4
CLASSIFICATIONS OF SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS
(SWEDISH SAMPLE)

	Low	Average	High	Overall
Males	35.4 (n=9)	41.9 (n=38)	45.4 (n=5)	40.9 (n=52)
Females	41.7 (n=23)	40.4 (n=35)	29.1 (n=11)	37.1 (n=69)
Overall	39.9 (n=32)	41.2 (n=73)	34.2 (n=16)	38.4 (n=121)

Statements used in the CETSCALE such as "purchasing foreign products is un-American" and "A real American should always buy American-made products" may be construed by respondents as "going too far". This may be particularly true in nations such as the U.S. and Sweden where imported products tend to be highly visible and therefore seen by respondents to be more socially acceptable. In such a situation, even if the respondents have a strong personal aversion to foreign-made products a high level of social desirability bias may cause them to mitigate their response to queries which focus on issues of ethnocentrism.

Second, in this study, males in both nations tended to be more influenced by social desirability bias than females. This may mean that a sample dominated by male respondents may be biased in terms of ethnocentrism scores depending on the degree of social desirability bias of these individuals. Too many respondents with a "low" social desirability bias may result in inflated ethnocentrism levels being reported while an excess of respondents in the "high" social desirability bias category may produce ethnocentrism scores which are biased downward. Such an eventuality is supported by the Swedish data which overall exhibited higher levels of social desirability bias and which also showed a significant difference in the degree of ethnocentrism

as the social desirability bias increased. This issue needs to be explored further.

The results also raised issues regarding how researchers might go about dealing with the problems generated by social desirability bias. Unquestionably, the first implication is a need for researchers to include measures of social desirability bias in data collection instruments that utilize self-reports. Including such measures would permit analyses of the existence and degrees of effects of social desirability bias in a variety of research settings. Also, it will be possible to control for social desirability effects; in most cases the researcher will be able to partial out the effects of social desirability bias from hypothesized relationships (see DeMaio 1984 for a review of methods for controlling social desirability response bias). Further, in situations where effects of social desirability bias are found distinct, there may be a need to develop alternative measurement instruments that are less influenced by social desirability bias. In contrast to the composition of the CETSCALE, it is proposed that such instruments should include a variety of items incorporating extremes from each end of the spectrum as well as items that represent so-called "average" responses.

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