

An empirical investigation into the effect of collectivism on ethical consumption

Altani Panagiotopoulou

Athens University of Economics and Business

Paraskevas Argouslidis

Athens University of Economics & Business, School of Business, Department of Marketing & Communication

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Abstract

Although cultural values, emotions, and emotional intelligence (henceforth EI) may independently shape ethical decision-making, there is a paucity of research on their interplay in the prediction of ethical consumption. The present paper investigates this gap and finds that a) collectivism positively affects ethical consumption b) EI mediates the above association and c) emotional affect moderates the effects of collectivism on EI and ethical consumption. The findings contribute to the consumer ethics literature and have useful implications for managerial practice.

Keywords: Collectivism, Emotional Affect, Ethical Consumption

1. Introduction

Marketing domain scholarship has directed substantial effort toward understanding the key drivers of ethical consumption. Academic researchers who have analyzed the antecedents of ethical decision-making, suggest that cultural forces, emotional affect, and EI may determine ethical consumption. In particular, Chiou and Pan (2008) investigate the effects of individualism and collectivism on consumers' ethical beliefs and underline the importance of collectivism in the formation of ethical buying behaviors. Zollo (2021) notes that individuals' emotional state also plays a key role in their morality. Finally, Chowdhury (2017) centers on the impact of EI on certain prosocial actions and posits that EI fosters charitable behaviors and helping others. Despite the increasing research interest, the interrelationships between collectivism, emotional affect, EI, and ethical consumption remain largely unstudied. The present paper attempts to address these issues by investigating a) the direct effect of collectivism on ethical consumption, b) the mediating role of EI in the above association and c) the synergistic effect of collectivism and emotional affect on EI and ethical consumption. In the ensuing sections, we provide an overview of the literature on our focal conceptualization, develop research hypotheses, present the methodology and the results and conclude with implications, limitations and future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Research on culture has a long tradition of investigating the influence of cultural values on individuals' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors (Gregory, Munch, and Peterson, 2002; Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier, 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). It is commonly suggested that individualism and collectivism are more predictive than other cultural forces of how people feel, think, behave, and define themselves and their relationships with others (Gregory et al., 2002; Brewer & Chen, 2007; Husted & Allen, 2008; Lu, Chang, and Chang, 2015). Individualism stimulates a person to become independent, autonomous, and give weight on his/her personal goals. Collectivism bolsters his/her interdependence, cooperation and focus on in-group goals (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Simpson, White, and Laran, 2018). As such, relative to their individualist counterparts, collectivists are more likely to value helplines and create and nurture long-term relationships of mutual support (Oyserman et al., 2002; Kim & Choi, 2005; Simpson et al., 2018). Many scholars conclude that collectivism boosts ethical behaviors (Kim & Choi, 2005; Chiou & Pan, 2008; Mooijman et al., 2018) while individualism leaves people intact (Chiou & Pan, 2008; Lu et al., 2015; Mooijman et al., 2018). Building on those understandings, we focus on the effect of collectivism on ethical buying behaviors because collectivism may motivate the highest prosocial action tendencies (Kim & Choi, 2005; Chiou & Pan, 2008; Mooijman et al., 2018). Most importantly, we argue that collectivism drives ethical consumption. Formally:

H1. Collectivism has a positive impact on ethical consumption.

Apart from the direct impact of collectivism on ethical consumption, we consider the mediating role of EI. EI refers to one's ability to recognize, express, and regulate emotions in the self and others (Day, Therrien, and Carroll, 2005; Mayer, Roberts, and Barsade, 2008; Kidwell, Hasford, and Hardesty, 2015). Researchers agree that collectivism may serve as an antecedent of emotion regulation. The most prevalent explanation is that collectivism increases individuals' need to maintain social order and take control of their emotions when negotiating with others (Tsai, Knutson, and Fung, 2006; Matsumoto, Yoo, and Nakagawa, 2008; Mooijman et al., 2018). Emotion regulation may also result in ethical behavior. It is

well documented that as an aspect of EI, emotion regulation enables individuals to exhibit a heightened self-control, perform prosocial behaviors and inhibit dishonest and deviant actions (Rua, Lawter, and Andreassi, 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2019; Zollo, 2021). Consistent with this argument, Chowdhury (2017) proposes that EI fosters behaviors such as charitable giving and protecting rights. Despite these important studies, Hasford, Kidwell, Hardesty, and Farmer (2022) state that emotionally intelligent individuals are more likely to adversely use their cognitive abilities (i.e. the ability to regulate emotions), exhibit selfishness, and engage in several forms of consumer fraud. Taken together, existing research has produced inconsistent evidence regarding whether EI motivates or pulls individuals away from ethical behaviors. In addition, to date, marketing theorists have not considered the mediating role of EI on the association between collectivism and ethical consumption. Drawing on Chowdhury (2017) perspective, we propose that EI provides individuals with empathy and encourages them to enact virtuous behaviors. More precisely, we suggest that the effect of collectivism on ethical consumption is filtered through one's EI. Formally:

H2. The total positive effect of collectivism on ethical consumption is positively mediated by EI.

While numerous studies on marketing have examined how collectivism and situational affective experiences influence one's ability to regulate his/her emotions (Tsai et al., 2006; Matsumoto et al., 2008; Mooijman et al., 2018), little attention has been given to their synergistic effect on EI. Vitell, King, and Singh (2013) propose that positive emotional experiences allow individuals to effectively process the available emotional information and take control of their behaviors. In support of this view, Kidwell, Hasford, Turner, Hardesty, and Zablah (2021) document that calmness is a pronounced emotional experience among individuals who monitor their emotions. Especially, emotionally intelligent individuals who are characterized by their ability to regulate their emotions, report more calmness and less anxiety and depression in their everyday life (Mayer et al., 2008; Kidwell et al., 2021). On the flip side, neuroticism and anxiety may undermine one's capacity to take control of his/her emotions and actions (Day et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2008). Grounded on the above background, we suggest that positive affect (henceforth PA) increases, and negative affect (henceforth NA) decreases one's ability to regulate his/her emotions. Stated differently, PA may strengthen, and NA may weaken the positive association between collectivism and EI. Formally:

H3a. PA moderates the association between collectivism and EI such that at higher level of PA the association between collectivism and EI is strengthened.

H3b. NA moderates the association between collectivism and EI such that at higher level of NA the association between collectivism and EI is weakened.

The consumer ethics literature indicates that emotional experiences are inherently linked to ethical behaviors (Septianto & Soegianto, 2017; Yacout & Vitell, 2018; Feinberg, Kovacheff, Teper, and Inbar, 2019). In particular, Feinberg et al. (2019) suggest that one's emotional state constitutes the foundation of ethical choices, aligning with previous reports in which emotional affect is conceptualized as precursor of ethical decision making (Trevino, Weaver, and Reynolds, 2006; Vitell et al., 2013; Yacout & Vitell, 2018). Zollo (2021) moves beyond the mere observation that one's emotional state influences ethical behavior to consider the effects of positively valenced other-oriented moral emotions and negative valenced self-oriented moral emotions in ethical decision making. It is argued that happiness, empathy, elevation, and compassion are positively valenced affective states that drive individuals to enact virtuous behaviors (Feinberg et al., 2019; Zollo, 2021). Conversely, fear, anger, and

embarrassment are negatively valenced affective states that boost consumer fraud (Hasford et al., 2022). Integrating and building on this existing literature on morality we suggest that PA may have a positive impact whereas NA may have a negative impact on ethical consumption. Most importantly, we argue that PA (NA) has a positive (negative) moderating role on the collectivism-to-ethical consumption association. Formally:

H4a. PA moderates the association between collectivism and ethical consumption such that at higher level of PA the association between collectivism and ethical consumption is strengthened.

H4b. NA moderates the association between collectivism and ethical consumption such that at higher level of NA the association between collectivism and ethical consumption is weakened.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the hypothesized associations. We control for the effects of age, gender, and income.

Figure 1. The moderated mediation role of PA on the collectivism-to-ethical consumption association

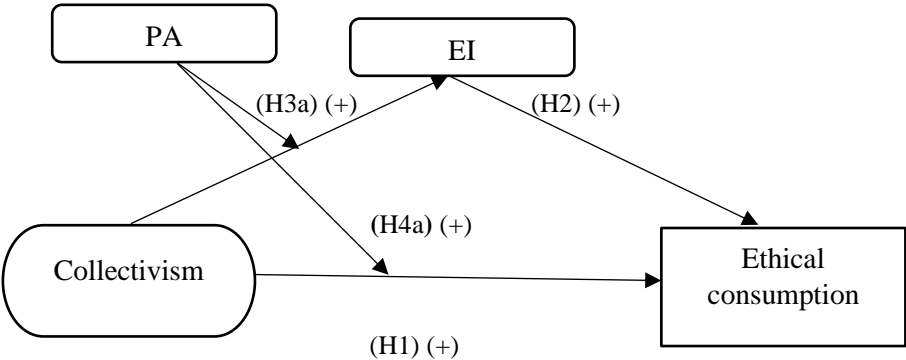
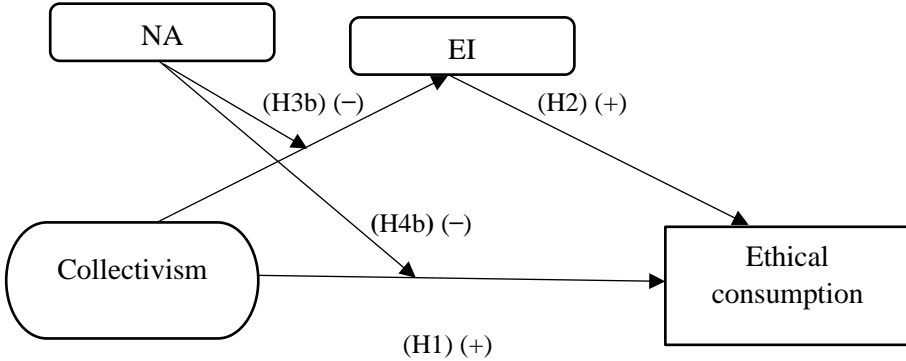


Figure 2. The moderated mediation role of NA on the collectivism-to-ethical consumption association



3. Methods and results

A survey was conducted to test our hypotheses. Two hundred undergraduate and postgraduate students of an European University participated in the survey. The mean age was 25.8 ($SD = 5.20$).

A self-administrated questionnaire was designed by using scale-items adapted from established validated measures. Collectivism was measured with eight statements adopted by Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, and Gelfand (1995) ($\alpha = 0.91$). EI was assessed with the 19-item Self-Related EI Scale (SREIS) (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, and Salovey, 2006) ($\alpha = 0.87$). Given the better conceptual fit of trait-based EI models with our focal variables, we employ a trait-based account of EI (Brackett et al., 2006). PA and NA were operationalized using the 20-item Positive and Negative Affective Scale (PANAS) which is developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) ($\alpha = 0.84$). Ethical consumption was assessed using the 31-item Self-Related Consumer Ethics Scale (CES) (Vitell & Muncy, 2005) ($\alpha = 0.89$). All items were responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

We first estimated a regression model with collectivism as the independent variable and ethical consumption as the dependent variable. In line with H1, collectivism has a positive and significant effect on ethical consumption ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 4.14$, $p < 0.001$). The association persisted after controlling for age, gender, and income. Results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Regression analysis for collectivism and ethical consumption

Hypothesis	Independent variable	Dependent variable: ethical consumption		
		Unstandardized Coefficients		<i>t-value</i>
		B	S.E.	
		3.87	0.43	9.07***
H1	Collectivism	0.28	0.06	4.14***
Controls	Gender	0.02	0.08	0.30
	Age	0.00	0.00	1.08
	Income	0.01	0.02	0.48

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$

We then examined the effect of collectivism on ethical consumption through EI using the PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes, 2017). Our model included collectivism, PA and their interaction as predictors of ethical consumption and EI as the mediating variable. We first analyzed whether collectivism interacts with PA to predict EI. Consistent with H3a, a significant interaction between collectivism and PA was observed ($\beta = 0.37$, $t = 2.86$, $p < 0.01$). More specifically, we found that collectivism interacts with PA to predict EI at high values of PA ($\beta = 0.60$, 95% CI [0.40, 0.79]), and at moderate values of PA ($\beta = 0.38$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.51]). The index for the moderated mediation model was also significant ($\beta = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.22]) (H4a). However, the main effect of collectivism ($\beta = 0.08$, $t = 1.05$, $p > 0.05$) and collectivism \times PA interaction ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 1.91$, $p > 0.05$) become non-significant in predicting ethical consumption when EI was included in the model. In support of H2, EI fully mediates the association between collectivism and ethical consumption. More precisely, an indirect effect through EI was observed for participants in a high level of PA ($\beta = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.34]) and for participants in a medium level of PA ($\beta = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.23]). Together, these findings reveal that collectivist individuals who experience positive emotions are more likely to engage in ethical consumption because of their heightened EI.

The significance of the effects remained after controlling for age, gender, and income. The results are depicted in Table 2.

Next, we evaluated whether collectivism \times NA interaction provides an alternative explanation to our results. The index of the moderated mediation was non-significant when NA was specified as the moderating variable. The corresponding 95% confidence interval included zero ($\beta = -0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.01, 0.40]$). H3b and H4b were not supported.

Table 2. Moderated mediation analysis for collectivism and ethical consumption

Dependent variable: Ethical consumption							
Hypothesis	Independent variable	Step 1: Dependent variable = EI			Step 2: Dependent variable = Ethical consumption		
		Unstandardized Coefficients			Unstandardized Coefficients		
		B	S.E.	<i>t-value</i>	B	S.E.	<i>t-value</i>
		5.53	0.23	24.04***			
H3a	Collectivism	0.38	0.08	4.85***			
	PA	-0.06	0.05	-1.23			
	Collectivism \times PA	0.37	0.13	2.86**			
					3.67	0.61	6.02***
H4a	Collectivism				0.08	0.08	1.05
	EI				0.31	0.09	3.23**
	PA				0.08	0.05	1.48
	Collectivism \times PA				0.26	0.13	1.91
Controls	Gender	-0.02	0.07	-0.24	0.04	0.07	0.53
	Age	0.01	0.00	1.6	0.00	0.00	0.61
	Income	-0.01	0.02	-0.05	-0.00	0.01	-0.03
Model Summary	R^2 (ΔR^2)	0.26 (0.03)			0.21 (0.01)		
	Model F	6.83*			3.67		
Index of moderated mediation							
Index	BootSE	L95%CI	U95%CI				
0.12	0.05	0.01	0.22				
Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$							

4. Discussion

The present paper investigates a moderated mediation model that views collectivism as an antecedent of ethical consumption, emotional affect as a moderator and EI as a mediator. The results empirically confirm that collectivism boosts ethical consumption. This finding is consistent with the empirical work of Chiou and Pan (2008) who have found that collectivism increases consumer ethical beliefs and fosters ethical decisions. As we also hypothesized, the effect of collectivism on ethical consumption is driven by one's EI. While the mediating role of EI on the collectivism-to-ethical consumption association has an intuitive appeal, the most important finding of the present survey is the moderating role of PA on the above associations. Instead of merely illustrating the direct and indirect effect of collectivism on ethical consumption, the present work goes a step further to empirically test and find that collectivism interacts with PA to predict EI and ethical consumption.

5. Theoretical and managerial implications

Whereas previous studies on consumer ethics literature have centered on the impact of collectivism on ethical buying behavior, little attention has been given to the other forces that may underlie this effect. In line with previous empirical work (Chiou & Pan, 2008; Mooijman et al. 2018), the present survey establishes that collectivism leads to ethical consumption. The current work also adds to consumer ethics literature by showing that EI fully mediates the collectivism-to-ethical consumption association. Consequently, we propose that collectivist individuals embrace prosocial behaviors because of the ability to use, regulate, and understand their emotions. We also differentiate our findings from previous studies since our suggested mediator (i.e. EI) is conceptually distinct from emotion regulation. Given that emotion regulation is a key element of EI (Chowdhury, 2017; Zollo, 2021), we argue that EI is a quietly relevant construct to consider. Finally, the most important contribution of the present work is the identification of PA as a moderated mediator in the association between collectivism and ethical consumption. This finding reveals that EI drives collectivist individuals who are in a positive emotional state to perform ethical buying behaviors. Our research may also become of prime importance for practitioners in international campaigns. The present survey indicates that cultural values have a strong impact on consumer ethical beliefs and may affect consumer habits such as buying fair trade products. Learning more about values related to interdependence and collectivism may help marketing managers to identify the type of ad appeals that fit to their potential consumers. As such, they could be able to capture the attention of such consumers, influence their thoughts and engage on ethical add consumption. Practitioners may also consider additional factors such as emotional affect and EI that may play an important role in designing and using certain types of ad appeals.

6. Limitations and future research

Whereas our findings offer new insides into consumer ethics literature, some limitations should be noted. More precisely, we use a sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students that may limit the external validity of the results. Future work might define a sample able to better represent the general population. Furthermore, since the present study is among the first to investigate the interplay between collectivism, EI, and PA on ethical consumption, additional research is necessary in other cultural settings to validate such an extent. Finally, future studies could examine the relationships we investigated in this work in laboratory and

field settings. Taken together, manipulating variables such as collectivism, emotional affect and EI in a cross-cultural context may allow future researchers to better identify the cultural differences and the influential role of cultural values in shaping ethical behaviors.

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