

Chapter 71

Using the Internet to Study Human Universals

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Many human preferences, choices, emotions, and actions occur in universally similar manners because they are rooted in our common biological heritage. As such, irrespective of whether individuals are Peruvian, French, or Togolese, they are likely to share commonalities as a result of their shared Darwinian histories. In the current article, I provide a brief overview of how the Internet is a powerful tool for investigating such human universals. Given my work at the nexus of evolutionary theory and consumption, I begin with an example from marketing.

Few marketing scholars are versed in evolutionary theory and related biological formalisms (Saad, 2007a; Saad, 2008a). As such, they generally view the environment as the key driver in shaping consumption patterns. This is part and parcel of

the blank slate view of the human mind (Pinker, 2002), which purports that humans are born with empty minds that are subsequently filled via a wide range of socialization forces (e.g., parents, advertising content, or movies). Given that marketing scholars rely heavily on the expansive shoulders of socialization in explaining consumption, they are strong proponents of cultural relativism namely the notion that cultures need to be investigated from an emic perspective. Hence, marketers spend much of their efforts cataloging endless cross-cultural differences, seldom recognizing that there are numerous commonalities shared by consumers around the world.

A long-standing and yet to be resolved debate in international marketing is whether it is best to standardize one's advertising message across cultural settings or tailor-make it to each local culture (Agrawal, 1995; Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003). Saad (2007a, chapter 4) proposed that the key reason

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that this matter has yet to be satisfactorily resolved is that marketers have not used the appropriate meta-framework for deciding which phenomena are culture-specific versus those that are human universals. Evolutionary psychology is exactly such a framework as it permits scholars to catalog marketing phenomena into three distinct categories (see Saad, 2007b, for additional details): (1) Emic-based consumption patterns that are outside the purview of evolutionary psychology as they are rooted in historical and cultural specificity. For example, that the French consume more wine than Saudis (religious edict against drinking alcohol) has nothing to do with evolutionary theory; (2) Cross-cultural differences that are rooted in adaptive processes. For example, some culinary traditions utilize a greater amount of spices than others, as a means of protecting against food-borne pathogens. It turns out that a country's latitude (which correlates with its ambient temperature) is a predictor of the extent to which spices will be used (Sherman & Billing, 1999), and this effect is greater for meat dishes as compared to vegetable dishes, since the former are more likely to contain food pathogens (Sherman & Hash, 2001). In other words, these culinary cross-cultural differences are adaptations to local environments; and (3) Human universals that are manifestations of the common biological heritage that are shared by all humans. Examples here include the universal recognition that facially symmetric individuals are beautiful, and the universal penchant for highly caloric foods.

Given its global reach, the Internet affords scholars with the capacity to explore a wide range of evolutionary-based human universals, a topic that I address in the remainder of this article. Incidentally, not only can the Internet be used to study human universals but also the Internet's own evolution can be modeled as a Darwinian process (Dovrolis, 2008).

UNCOVERING HUMAN UNIVERSALS AND FOSSILS OF THE HUMAN MIND IN THE ONLINE MEDIUM

In their quest to understand the evolution of the human mind, evolutionary behavioral scientists including behavioral ecologists, Darwinian anthropologists, and evolutionary psychologists have cataloged a wide range of human universals (Brown, 1991; Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). The premise is that some universal phenomena transcend time and space and hence are manifestations of our evolved biology. As an example, Dr. David P. Schmitt founded the International Sexuality Description Project, which seeks to explore human universals dealing with sexuality. Surveys have been administered in 56 different nations spanning six continents, and 28 languages (cf. Schmitt et al., 2003). Such an extraordinarily laborious endeavor is greatly facilitated by the ability to use the Internet to collect cross-cultural data using online surveys. It is important to note that the reliability and validity of data collected via web-based surveys have been found to be no lesser than their offline counterparts (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Interested readers can refer to Birnbaum (2004) who provides a detailed discussion of the pros and cons of conducting Internet-based behavioral research, and Ilieva, Baron, and Healey (2002) who contrast several methods for collecting survey data, including the Web, when carrying out marketing research across national boundaries.

Saad (2007a) argued that since the human mind does not fossilize, one of the ways to understand its evolution is to explore cultural products that have been created by it, throughout vastly different time periods and cultural settings. Take songs as an example. Humans have been singing songs (or uttering poems) for thousands of years in wildly varying cultural traditions. Are there any universal similarities when it comes to this form of human expression? What, if any, are the similarities between King Solomon's Song of Songs,

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