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## **Refining the Tightness and Looseness Framework with a Consumer Lens**

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## **Abstract**

In their paper, Li, Gordon and Gelfand (this issue) introduced the Tightness-Looseness (T-L) theoretical framework to the consumer domain, and offered a number ideas on how this framework could be applied to various aspects of consumer behavior. In this commentary, we examine the T-L framework from the consumer lens and discuss how the uniqueness of the consumption context can refine and broaden this psychological framework. We identify four questions that aim to enrich our discussion of this framework from the perspective of consumer research, and to motivate future research questions. Specifically, we consider 1) how the interplay between the tightness/looseness of a culture and its effect on consumer behavior can be a bi-directional relationship, 2) how variances in T-L in different consumption subcultures and aspects of society (e.g., economic, political) can impact consumer behavior, 3) how the examination of T-L at different stages in the consumption process is a relevant and important question to consider, and 4) how T-L may contribute to further investigation and understanding of punishment towards business and consumer norm violators.

Consumption phenomena involving social norms have caught the attention of consumer researchers in recent years. For example, research has explored how social norms can influence food consumption and conservation behaviors (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010a, b), and how consumers can be punished by their fellow consumers for violating social norms (Lin, Dahl, & Argo, 2013). At the same time, understanding cross-cultural differences in consumer behavior has continued to garner interest in the field (Maheswaran & Shavitt, 2000). For instance, researchers have examined how cross-cultural differences can contribute to how consumers perceive gift-giving and receiving (e.g., Pusaksrikit & Kang, 2016; Valenzuela, Mellers, & Strebel, 2010), process information due to linguistic differences (e.g., Schmitt, Pan, & Tavassoli, 1994; Tavassoli, 1999), and make decisions related to brand-switching (e.g., Ng, Kim, & Rao, 2015). As social norms are culturally dependent, investigating the convergence of these two areas of research has the potential to lead to fruitful avenues of future research.

In the paper by Li, Gordon and Gelfand (this issue), the authors introduce the theoretical framework of Tightness-Looseness (T-L) of cultures. T-L refers to the strength of social norms and rules that exist within a culture, how norm violations are perceived cross-culturally, and the severity of punishment delivered to norm violators in various cultures. Beyond discussing the T-L framework the authors also propose a number of ways in which it can be applied to consumer behavior research (i.e., messages in advertising, branding, product diffusion/new product adoption, and health-related behavior among consumers). While the application of the T-L framework to consumer behavior is an interesting first step, we propose that the richness of consumption as a research context can assist in broadening and refining the T-L framework. In this commentary, we identify four questions for discussion specific to the interplay between

norms and norm violations that exist within a larger society (i.e., a country), and specific consumption behaviors within that society.

First, we offer our thoughts on the interplay between the cultural T-L of the broader society and specific consumer behaviors inherent in the society. Specifically, we argue that rather than simply looking at how cross-cultural T-L differences may influence or be *applied* to consumer behavior, it would also be interesting for researchers to consider reverse causality wherein consumer behavior can instead be the antecedent (rather than the outcome) of T-L differences observed across cultures. Second, we postulate how different consumption subcultures and key aspects of a society can vary in T-L and what this means for consumer behavior. Indeed, variance in T-L within a country's economic, political and social systems may have unique implications for consumers and consumption behaviors. Third, we discuss how the norms that influence consumers' behaviors likely change depending on where they are in the consumption process (e.g., pre-purchase vs. purchase vs. post-purchase). Stated differently, the level and impact of T-L is not likely to be uniform throughout one's consumption experience. Finally, we offer our insight on the outcomes of norm violations that can occur in the consumption context. To achieve this, we discuss previous research that has explored how businesses and consumers can be punished for committing norm violations and then elaborate on how these findings can contribute to the T-L framework.

**Q1. What is the T-L framework's relationship with consumption? Is it bi-directional?**

According to Li et al. (this issue), the T-L of a given culture is shaped by various environmental factors, including ecological and historical threats, and socio-political institutions

that exist within the larger society. They also suggest that the T-L of a given society is likely to shape how consumers react to various marketing cues, including the types of messages used in advertising (e.g., prevention vs. promotion-oriented messages), and the way new products are adopted and introduced in the marketplace. In sum, the authors propose that the T-L of a society will have a direct impact on the consumption behavior of individuals within that society. While we agree that the relationship between T-L of a larger society → consumer behavior is an important one to establish, we also believe that it is equally important for researchers to consider how the specific consumption behaviors within a society can influence and impact the norms of the larger society, and in turn, the broader societal environmental factors that exist (i.e., consumer behavior → the T-L of a larger society itself).

In their paper, Li et al. (this issue) discuss how looser cultures are more likely to present images of diversity, whereas tighter cultures are more likely to stick to uniformity. This frames consumers as a passive audience to the influences of the larger society. However, at a time in which consumerism is playing a significant role in shaping the culture of the larger society, helped to a large extent by the presence of social media, it seems quite probable that consumer behavior may influence the T-L of a given society. In other words, we argue that it is just as likely that the strategies and messages being used in marketing campaigns and the activities of consumers themselves are shaping the cultural norms of the larger society. In fact, recent work by Twenge and Kasser (2013) find that generations who grew up during a time in which higher national advertising spending was observed (e.g., Millennials/GenMe), valued materialism more than generations that grew up with less advertising expenditures (e.g., Baby Boomers). As another example, the rise of major global technology and social media brands such as Apple, Facebook, and Google have also shifted the way people communicate and interact with one

another throughout the globe. In doing so, one can also conjecture that the consumption behavior that surrounds these brands has narrowed some of the differences that the T-L framework has sought to identify.

As a final example, there has been a trend to include heavier models in advertising and fashion. In addition to Dove's Real Beauty campaign, major publications such as Vogue and Sports Illustrated have featured "plus-size" actresses and models on their covers in recent years (e.g., Conniff, 2014; Schlossberg, 2016). Even toy brands, such as Mattel, have followed suit, with the recent launch of Barbie dolls with curvier body shapes (Pearson, 2016). Whereas some may argue that these marketing strategies are simply a reflection of the changing trends in society (i.e., people in various Western countries are getting heavier, so marketers are revising their marketing cues accordingly), others have suggested that marketers can use these messages and images to change the beauty norms that exist within a society (e.g., Lin & McFerran, 2016). Admittedly, such causality questions are not always easy to answer, but we believe the potential bi-directionality between T-L in the larger society and specific consumer behavior should, at the very least, be acknowledged and examined further in future work.

**Q2. How does T-L vary across consumption subcultures and different aspects of society, and what are the implications for the consumer?**

As Li et al. (this issue) indicate, different geographical regions within the U.S. vary in T-L. We suggest that this type of differentiation can extend to a host of different consumption subcultures that often underlie consumer behavior. Indeed, we believe that consumption subcultures within a society are likely to be a fertile ground for T-L to provide unique insights

and understanding. An example of a consumption subculture that exists in the consumption context can be found in consumers of health and fitness products and services. Although consumers purchase these products and services with a goal of healthier living, subcultures that can form from the consumption of this product category can vary greatly in their level of T-L. CrossFit, for instance, has strong norms of community, competition, and performance (Dawson, 2015) – it has a tight culture. Indeed, participants of CrossFit oftentimes expand their norm conformity in physical exercise to other behaviors, such as food consumption (e.g., Paleo diet). In contrast, membership at a regular gym may be looser culturally and place less emphasis on the norms of community, as most gym patrons exercise alone. With this example in mind, it would be interesting for researchers to examine how the T-L in these consumption subcultures influences the health and fitness norms of the larger society. Further, examination of the influences of the consumption subculture's T-L on the larger society may also provide insight into why tighter cultures have been found to be healthier than looser cultures.

The T-L of societies may also depend on the aspect of society (e.g., political, economic, etc.) to which one is referring. One relevant example arises in the context of emerging markets, such as China, India, Brazil and Russia. Based on T-L research, China, India, and Russia would likely be classified as tight nations whereas Brazil would be a loose nation (Gelfand et al., 2011). However, we propose that whereas China may have a politically and socially tight culture, their economic policies have become looser over the years (Fannin, 2010; Zhu & Hong, 2014). Economic policies have a direct impact on consumerism and consumer behavior. Thus, one could argue that China's increasing openness to foreign brands and products has altered the behaviors and beliefs of its citizens. This may in turn influence other aspects of their society (e.g., political, social), which may have remained tighter in comparison due to long-standing

traditions and norms. It would be interesting for consumer researchers to examine how changes in T-L for one aspect of society may have downstream implications on the T-L of other areas of a country's overall culture. Indeed, rather than paint the larger society with a broad brush as a "tight" or "loose" culture, researchers should 1) consider T-L differences that may exist in various aspects within a society, 2) decipher why these differences occur, and 3) examine whether these differences have implications for people's reactions toward norm violations and conformity.

### **Q3. How does the influence of T-L vary throughout the consumption process?**

In addition to considering how T-L is important and is likely to vary across a variety of consumption subcultures, another question worth pursuing relates to the influence of T-L at different stages of the consumption process. In their paper, Li et al. (this issue), discuss how T-L may influence consumer behavior in the domains of persuasion (e.g., advertising message and spokespersons) and new product adoption. Although these are viable examples, they only represent a partial picture of the full consumption cycle. Specifically, these domains are most relevant in the earlier (i.e., pre-purchase) stages of the consumer buying process. However, as well-documented in previous work (e.g., Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005; Xu, Shen, & Wyer, 2012; Joireman, Gregoire, Devezer, & Tripp, 2013; Kim & Wansink, 2012), it is also essential to consider the purchase and post-purchase stages of consumption in order to provide a more complete picture of how consumers behave, and why they behave in certain ways.

Research has shown that although the pre-purchase stage of the consumption process can influence the choices consumers make, the experiences and cues that consumers encounter in the



consumption environment during the purchasing stage can also be critical. Indeed, research has shown that the presence and the (perceived or real) actions of other consumers can often have an influence on consumers and their overall evaluation of their purchase experience (e.g., Argo et al., 2005; Dahl, Argo, & Morales, 2012; Martin, 2012; Pozharliev et al., 2015; Xu, Zhou, Ye, & Zhou, 2015; Xu et al., 2012).

For instance, due to consumers' tendency to use social information (e.g., other shoppers) in the consumption environment as sources of social comparison, it was found that consumers with low body esteem evaluated the shirt they were asked to try on more negatively than consumers with high body esteem when they observed an attractive referent other (i.e., a fellow consumer who was attractive) wearing the same shirt. It was also found that this effect was mitigated when the salesperson, rather than a fellow consumer was wearing the target product, as the salesperson's social identity was not aligned with the consumer's own identity (Dahl et al., 2012). As another example, interesting work examining the effects of accidental interpersonal touch (AIT) on consumer behavior found that consumers provided more negative brand evaluations, expressed a lower willingness to pay, and left the store sooner when they were accidentally touched by a stranger (i.e., light touch on the shoulder blade) in a shopping environment (Martin, 2012). As these examples illustrate, various factors and cues that are present within the consumption environment during the purchasing stage can become important determinants for whether a consumption experience will be positive or negative.

If the purchase stage was considered in the context of T-L, we propose that the strength of the norms that exist within a consumption environment would influence the extent to which consumers, 1) follow these norms, and 2) react when these norms are not followed by other consumers or by the business. Specifically, we predict that although consumption environments

such as fine dining establishments and luxury stores would be tighter culturally (i.e., have more established norms and would be more mindful of those who violate those norms; e.g., Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014), environments such as self-serve dining or large department stores would be looser culturally. Based on these differences, consumers may adjust their behaviors during the purchasing stage, and in some circumstances, conform to the norms of the business establishment. The extent to which consumers conform to the norms of the business establishment may also depend on the perceived cultural tightness and looseness of the establishment, as the costs of non-conformity may be higher in a culturally tighter establishment. Expectations for norm conformity on the part of businesses are also likely to vary. Hence, one's overall consumption experience is also likely to suffer when faced with businesses that violate established norms (e.g., Luo, 2007; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). That is, when businesses fail to deliver on expected performance and service, this can damage their perceived reliability and the trust they had established with the consumer (Tax et al, 1998). These types of business norm violations can mitigate consumer loyalty and ultimately result in negative long term consequences, such as a decrease in stock returns (Luo, 2007).

Therefore, when considering the role T-L might play in consumption we believe it is also important for researchers to consider the norms that are present in the post-purchase stage of consumption. As previous work suggests (e.g., Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011; Wang, Liang, & Peracchio, 2011), consumers' experiences after a purchase has been made can be just as important as the purchasing stage itself. Specifically, businesses that are poor at dealing with consumer dissatisfaction and post-purchase regret run the risk of losing these consumers in the future (e.g., Choi & Mattila, 2008; Chu, Song, & Choi, 2013; Kim & Wansink, 2012). One could speculate that the strength of the norms related to how consumers

are treated during the post-purchase stage may be heavily dependent on the type of organization or business in which the purchase took place. For instance, service and hospitality industries tend to place a heavy emphasis on managing the post-purchase experience; strong organizational norms are likely to be present when following up with consumers such that post-purchase experience can be effectively assessed and dissatisfaction can be addressed when possible (e.g., Bonifield & Cole, 2007; Joireman et al., 2013; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011). Indeed, consumers' consumption experience may also be influenced by their treatment after the purchase. It would be interesting to assess how variance in T-L through the stages of the consumption process varies both across and within organizations.

#### **Q4. Dealing with culprits in consumption: Are businesses and consumers punished for their violations?**

Our final question relates to the consequences of norm violations that can occur during consumption. As mentioned by Li et al. (this issue), a culture's T-L can determine the extent to which individuals are punished for their violations. Although not fully discussed by the authors, we believe this serves as another rich area of research for consumer behavior, when considering the different types of violations and punishment that can take place in the consumption environment. Specifically, violations and punishment in this context can involve relationships between businesses (i.e., B2B), businesses and consumers (i.e., B2C) and consumers (i.e., C2C). Previous work has shown that violations that occur in B2B relationships (e.g., violations of contracts) can result in punishment behaviors such as lawsuits (Antia & Frazier, 2001; Samaha et al., 2011). A wealth of work has also examined violations that can occur in B2C relationships, such as product and service failures by businesses (Holloway & Beatty, 2003; Luo, 2007; Tax et

al., 1998). Work in this domain has shown that consumers can retaliate in various ways, such as spreading negative word of mouth (Luo, 2007), and complaining (Dunn & Dahl, 2012; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003). It was found by Dunn and Dahl (2012) that giving consumers the opportunity to complain after they experienced a product failure (e.g., food processor that failed to blend properly) only improved product evaluations when the product failure was perceived as the product's fault (e.g., problem with the food processor). When consumers perceived themselves to be at fault for the product failure (e.g., not being able to use the food processor properly), giving them the opportunity to complain actually hurt product evaluations. Recently, work by Lin et al. (2013) showed that punishment can also be observed in C2C relationships, as consumers have the tendency to punish their fellow consumers for violating norms that can occur in consumption contexts. Here, the authors found that consumers who observed a norm violation by a fellow consumer (e.g., creating a mess at the display table, lateness) punished these consumers for their transgressions by refusing to assist the norm violator, or by giving them a more difficult physical task to complete. This work also found that a number of factors influenced the likelihood of C2C punishment, such as actions from a third party in the consumption environment (e.g., store employee), and whether the norm violator had faced an unjustified adversity (e.g., computer failure at a check-in counter) prior to the norm violation.

Given the different dynamics that can occur in B2B, B2C and C2C relationships, we believe the consideration of T-L is highly relevant here, as different forms of punishment and behavioral outcomes may emerge depending on the extent to which a consumption context is "tight" or "loose". On the one hand, perhaps contexts with tighter norms that project images of exclusivity and privacy (e.g., luxury retailers, private clubs) would be more prone to engage in private forms of punishment (e.g., removal of membership) because public displays of

punishment (e.g., calling the violator out) may be perceived as a form of norm violation itself. Because products and services can be strongly tied to consumers' sense of identity (Amaral & Loken, 2016; Berger & Ward, 2010), individuals who fail to conform to established norms in such contexts may also be categorized as outgroup members by the ingroup; thus, only private actions need to be taken to dissociate these members from the group. Public forms of punishment are less necessary in these contexts as the restoration of order can be accomplished within the ingroup.

On the other hand, consumption contexts that feature looser cultural norms (e.g., casual dining establishments, malls) still need to manage violations and punishment carefully. In such contexts, inaction on the part of businesses that witness violations by consumers may run the risk of losing patrons in the future and, as such, public forms of punishment may be more effective as consumers may want to witness the actions of the businesses or their fellow consumers against the norm violator. Recent work by Lin, Dahl and Argo (2017) showed that while consumers rated their consumption experience more negatively when they were in the presence of a C2C violation (e.g., line-cutting), their evaluations of their consumption experience improved when the store employee punished the norm violating consumer (e.g., scolded the norm violator). This work also found that consumption experience suffered the most when the consumer (either as a witness or a direct victim of the C2C norm violation) had to take on the role of the punisher.

Another research area that would benefit from the integration of the T-L framework is work exploring punishment against global brands. In their paper, Li et al. (this issue) note that T-L can dictate the likelihood that consumers will accept and adopt foreign products. We believe this can also be extended to examining consumer reactions toward brands that have had product or service failures. It would be particularly interesting to consider whether consumers in tight

(vs. loose) cultures would punish brands differently depending on whether the brands are based in their own country versus a foreign country. A number of major global brands have had heavily publicized failures and norm violations in recent years. Samsung, Toyota, and General Motors, for example, have all had well-documented product failures that have hurt their brand name and reputation (Korosec, 2015; Mozur & Lee, 2016; Vlastic & Bunkley, 2009). An even more extreme example is Volkswagen, as their emission scandal was not simply due to a faulty product, but involved fraud at the highest level of management (Hotten, 2015). Although it makes sense to speculate that consumers in tighter cultures would want to see more severe punishment against brands and companies that make such mistakes, the question remains whether the accorded punishment would depend on the country-of-origin of the brand in question. If norms are generally stronger in tighter cultures, it then follows that people's identity may also be more strongly tied to brands that represent the country with which they identify. Indeed, it was reported that South Koreans felt a strong sense of shame and embarrassment when Asiana Airlines was involved in a 2013 plane crash that resulted in multiple injuries and fatalities (Fisher, 2013). The same negative feelings have also been identified in light of the recent failures of the Samsung Note 7 smartphone, as the Samsung brand has provided strong national pride given its successes in recent years (Sang-Hun, 2016). In these cases, perhaps consumers would feel conflict between the desire to deliver punishment to brands that behaved poorly, and the desire to protect brands that are important to their society and self-identities. We believe it would be quite interesting to explore this domain further in future work.

In our commentary, we identify four unique areas in which further investigation would benefit both consumer behavior research and the T-L framework. In particular, we suggest that researchers could consider the bi-directional relationship between T-L and consumer behavior,

the role of consumption subcultures and different aspects of the larger society, the importance of all focal stages in the consumption process, and the impact of T-L on consumer punishment. We hope that this commentary serves as a springboard for researchers to consider merging the T-L framework and questions that surround consumer behavior.

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