

**NATIONALITY AS A DETERMINANT OF LEARNING STYLES:
COMPARING MARKETING STUDENTS FROM BULGARIA AND THE USA**

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While learning is one of the most universal of human activities, the ways in which knowledge is gained can differ across cultures (Hofstede 1997; Joy and Kolb 2009). The learning styles of higher education students differ as a consequence of the constraints different cultures place on human behavior (Katz 1988; Pratt 1992; Abramson, Keating, and Lane, 1996, DeVita 2001, Holtbrügge and Mohr, 2010, Hays and Allinson, 1988). Previous research recommends the investigation of the effect of culture on learning styles as dictated by globalization and the expansion of the multicultural classroom (e.g., Auyeung and Sands, 1996; Holtbrügge and Mohr, 2010). With this study we will attempt to explain how marketing students from different countries adopt certain learning styles using two samples of undergraduate students from the USA and Bulgaria. We will examine and look for differences in separate aspects of learning style preferences based on Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI), which involves four stages of experiential learning: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). Kolb (1984) formulates four distinct learning styles. *Diverging style* is a combination of CE and RO. The *assimilating* learning style combines RO and AC. The *converging* learning style combines AC and AE. Finally, the *accommodating* learning style is based on CE and AE.

Methodology

In 2011, Kolb's LSI was administered to undergraduate marketing students in two universities, one in the North-East of the United States and the other in Bulgaria. A total of 187 Bulgarian marketing students and a sample of 109 US marketing students participated on a voluntary basis in the research. We use several nonparametric tests to examine the difference between the two samples

in terms of all four LSI dimensions –CE, AC, AE, RO, two composite scores- AE-RO and AC-CE, as well as the four learning styles- accommodation, divergence, convergence, and assimilation.

Results

There are some differences and similarities that we can observe at this point with major divergences in terms of AC and RO dimension along with the AE_RO score. There are differences in terms of preferences for a specific learning style- accommodation, divergence, assimilation, and convergence. The most preferred learning style among marketing students in Bulgaria is the convergence (47.6%), followed by assimilation (38.4%), accommodation (8.1%) and finally, divergence (5.9%). American marketing students show highest preference for assimilation (46.3%), followed by convergence (30.5%), divergence (12.6%), and accommodation (10.5%) learning style. A chi-square test for the difference in preference for learning style based on the nationality of the respondent is significant (Chi-square= 9.15, $p < .027$).

Significant differences between the two samples are found in two cases- RO ($Z = -4.07$, $p < .000$) and AE_RO ($Z = -2.78$, $p < .005$) differ for Bulgarian and US marketing students. US students are more likely to engage in watching than their Bulgarian counterparts. However, both groups are equally likely to rely on feeling in their learning process. In terms of grasping (AC-CE) or how individuals prefer to acquire information- through abstract conceptualization or concrete experience, according to our results Bulgarian and US students have similar preferences for general theorizing. Transformation (AE-RO) or how individuals handle information- through active experimentation or reflective observation. Bulgarian students place more emphasis on doing as opposed to observing relatively to their American counterparts.

The most important result comes probably from the fact that even though we selected respondents from two countries that seem quite different culturally, we found fewer differences than expected.

Implications

An important implication relates to the international exchange programs or recruiting students from different countries, which lead to growing cultural diversity in our classrooms.

Our results apply specifically to marketing students and compared to previous research they demonstrate that these students are different from other business students (e.g. accounting students). Thus, we will encourage marketing professors who find themselves with a big proportion of their students that prefer the convergence and/or assimilation learning styles, as was the case with the students in our sample to try to encourage them to be more open to communication and interaction instead of avoiding contacts. This will require implementation of team projects and exercises in and outside of the classroom. We also recommend that such students are engaged in more creative and hands-on exercises that will open them to experiences and practical applications of the material. However, these should be balanced with teaching styles such as lectures, using theories and models to match the preferred learning style of the students and make them feel more comfortable.