

Exploration of Collectivism in Contemporary Sweden

Kathy Tian

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Tian Guang

Corresponding Author, Shantou University

According to Hofstede's individualism-collectivism index, Sweden is a highly individualistic culture. However, Swedes' tendencies toward conformity and prioritization of social cohesion over self-expression directly contradicts this notion. This study employs a grounded theory approach to interpret informant narratives on the ostensibly paradoxical relationship between collectivism and individualism in contemporary Sweden. In-depth interviews reveal that Swedish individualism-collectivism is distinguished between the public (e.g., society, community) and private (e.g., individual aspirations, the nuclear family) domains of social life. Specifically, in the public sphere, Swedes exhibit collectivist mentalities. Conversely, in the private sphere of life, Swedes prioritize individualism and autonomy. Further, informant accounts reveal that the collectivist values of self-transcendence and compliance significantly influence consumer behaviors in Sweden. Consequently, advertisers should emphasize sustainability and inclusivity when targeting this demographic of consumers.

Swedish culture is plagued with idiosyncrasies that may strike an observer as contradictory: conformist yet staunchly independent, egalitarian yet competitive, and socialistic yet highly individual (Gustavsson & Elander, 2016). One needs not wander long in the streets of Stockholm before noticing some apparent indications of conformity. *Jantelagen*, a set of tacit social codes pervasive in Scandinavian culture, encourages Swedes to “not believe [they] are something special” (Avant & Knutsen, 1993 pg. 453). Additionally, Swedes never seek to “stick out”, often subordinating individual goals for collective ideologies (Heinö, 2009). If Swedes are steadfastly individualistic, as Hofstede's (1980) individualism index suggests, why do such salient instances of conformity occur with relative frequency in Sweden and how does it influence mainstream Swedish consumers (Shavitt & Cho, 2016)?

Evidence of the influence of cultural orientation on consumption choices are robust (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Liu & McClure, 2001). For example, cultural values of collectivism vs. individualism fundamentally shape ways individuals position themselves in relation to social others within society (Hong et al., 2016; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 2001). Western cultures (e.g., United States, France, Germany) are generally characterized by individualistic behaviors and an independent self-construal (i.e., seek independence from others, emphasizing self-expression), subordinating goals of the collective to individual aspirations (Davenport & Lloyd, 2017; Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Watkins & Liu, 1996). Conversely, East Asians (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea), as generally collectivist cultures, perceive themselves in relation to others – as perpetually and fundamentally interrelated with social others (Singelis, 1994). Thus, collectivists are more inclined to

make consumption choices for the sake of maintaining harmony with in-groups rather than based on individual desires while the opposite rings true for individualists (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Despite being conceptualized as individualistic, Sweden shares several attributes with countries typically considered collectivist. For instance, Swedes tend to be conflict-averse, conformist, and deferential to collective ideologies (Daun, 1991) – characteristics directly countering the notion that Swedes perceive themselves as “separate from others...and unique” (Shavitt et al., 2006, pg. 330). This begs the question: is the Swede collectivistic or individualistic, and how is Swedish collectivism manifested?

Although there exists a robust body of literature examining the intricate relationship between Swedish individualism and collectivism (Daun, 1991; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2004; Realo, Allik & Greenfield, 2008; Heinö, 2009), few scholars have broached the subject from an inductive perspective, allowing for Swedes’ own narratives to guide the research. Specifically, studies examining how Swedes themselves perceive instances of collectivism in Swedish society are lacking. Additionally, research on how the cultural values related to Swedish collectivism influence Swedes’ consumer choices is absent as past scholarship primarily examined these cultural idiosyncrasies through the lens of culture, politics, or education (Duan, 1991; Allik & Realo, 2004; Viberg & Grönlund, 2013). To address this gap in the literature, the authors conducted thirteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Swedish informants, acquired through purposive sampling, in addition to collecting field notes documenting Swedish cultural phenomena. This qualitative method facilitates an understanding of Swedes’ own perceptions of their culture and how collectivism plays an integral role in their everyday life.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Individualism and Collectivism

The influential role of culture on consumer behavior phenomena is well documented. For instance, meaning embedded in consumption symbols (e.g., commercial merchandise) tends to reflect an institutionalization of cultural beliefs (Aaker et al., 2001). In the persuasion domain, a robust body of literature has established that consumer attitudes toward advertisements and culture are inextricably linked (Shavitt, Lalwani, Zhang, & Torelli, 2006). For example, persuasion messages that are culturally matched are significantly more effective than mismatched appeals and a consumer’s cultural orientation impacts the way in which advertising content is processed (Han & Shavitt, 1994; Aaker & Sengupta, 2000). In addition, the extent to which consumers self-regulate goal pursuits differs across cultures (Aaker & Lee, 2001).

Further, studies indicate that East Asians, conceptualized as collectivists, prefer conformist and harmonious items while their European American counterparts, defined as individualists, seek items that represent uniqueness (Kim & Markus, 1999). Although there is substantial evidence corroborating the function of culture on consumer behavior, Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism construct is the most widely applied dimension in research used to understand these cultural influences (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 2001; Liu & McClure, 2001).

Collectivists are inter-dependent with their in-groups, prioritize collective goals over personal ambitions, and shape their behaviors based on in-group norms (Mills & Clark, 1982; Triandis, 2001). Conversely, individualists tend to prioritize personal goals over societal concerns and are conceptualized as autonomous from in-groups (Triandis, 2001). Further, Westerners are associated with possessing an independent self-construal (e.g., separateness from others) while East Asians are characterized as holding an interdependent self-construal (e.g., connectedness with others) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994).

Self-construal has been found to significantly influence consumer behavior – for example, individuals possessing an independent self-construal are significantly more likely to exhibit impulsive consumption tendencies and are more negatively affected by out-group advertising (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Zhang & Shrum, 2009). Despite the profound impact of individualism-collectivism research, scholars have

called for further refinement of the dimension to address the limitations on insights afforded by such a broad distinction (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995; Nelson & Shavitt, 2002; Shavitt & Cho, 2016).

The Horizontal/Vertical Distinction

Meta-analytic reviews of cross-cultural literature have highlighted the importance of distinguishing between horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). Accordingly, researchers proposed that horizontal (i.e., valuing equality) and vertical (i.e., valuing status and hierarchy) dimensions should be nested within Hofstede's broader framework to provide a more holistic conceptualization of culture (Singelis et al., 1995; Triandis & Gelfand 1998; Nelson & Shavitt 2002). The integration of these two categorizations yields four distinct variations of culture: horizontal-individualism (HI), horizontal-collectivism (HC), vertical-individualism (VI), and vertical-collectivism (VC).

Horizontal-individualist (HI) cultures (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Norway) stress values of equality over competition or power (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Individuals in HI cultures focus on expressions of self-reliance and perceive themselves as equal in status to social others (Shavitt, Johnson, & Zhang, 2011). In contrast, vertical-individualists (VI) (e.g., United States, France, Great Britain) are concerned with improving their status through competition (Shavitt et al., 2006, pg. 326). Conversely, vertical-collectivists (VC) (e.g., Japan, China, South Korea) emphasize fulfillment of duties and obligations, deference to authority figures, and maintenance of social structures (Shavitt & Cho, 2016). Finally, horizontal-collectivists (HC) (e.g., Brazil and the Israeli kibbutz) value sociability and benevolence above hierarchy.

Scandinavians: Egalitarian Individualists or Conformist Collectivists?

Despite being conceptualized as HI nations, anecdotal observations of the social phenomena in Scandinavian countries simultaneously conflicts and affirms this characterization. While individuals hailing from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are purportedly "motivated to view themselves as separate from others, self-reliant, and unique" (Shavitt et al., 2006, pg. 330), anecdotal observations suggest the contrary – at least on the public and societal levels.

The portrayal of Scandinavians as inherently motivated to distinguish themselves from others appears antithetical to the ubiquitous modesty codes governing these societies (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002; Ekström, 2015). Scandinavians abide by a socio-cultural ideology called *Jantelagen*, which dictates a set of principles, largely reminiscent of the Biblical commandments, expressing that people should not perceive themselves as special or more important than others (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). The laws detail injunctive social norms that govern the Scandinavian mentality, including "thou shalt not believe that thou art something special" and "thou shalt not believe that thou are better than us" (Avant & Knutsen, 1993, pg. 453).

Past research suggests that *Jantelagen* ideologies have stifled Scandinavian individuality – people conform to the larger collective to avoid distinction (Avant & Knutsen, 1993; Nelson & Shavitt 2002). Additionally, it is proposed that implicit *Jantelagen* laws mediate how Scandinavians evaluate reflections of national pride – Norwegians ascribe substantially more negative traits to expressions of pride compared to Americans and it is theorized that *Jantelagen* tenants of equality underlie this discrepancy (Bromgard, Trafimow, & Linn, 2014). Similarly, Ahlness (2014) finds that Scandinavian children's literature, particularly the works of Norwegian author Thorbjørn Egner, socializes young children to "direct a negative attitude toward those who stand out against the cultural norm" (Ahlness, 2014, pg. 547).

Individualism and Collectivism in Sweden

The ambiguous relationship between individualism and collectivism is particularly salient within Sweden, where injunctive norms of conformity and the valorization of collective ideologies are more noticeable compared to other Scandinavian neighbors (Knudsen 1997; Jensen, 2011). The duality of Swedish individualism has been attributed to the oppositional tendencies characterizing Swedish

mentality: one toward collectivity and the other toward individuality (Daun, 1991). For example, contrary to the notion that individuals from HI cultures focus on expressing uniqueness and exercising self-expression (Shavitt & Cho, 2016), Swedish culture emphasizes consensus, leading Swedes to seek non-controversial conversation subjects (Daun, 1991). Studies in cross-cultural psychology have also pointed to the duality of Swedish culture: Swedes appear to be individualists within the nuclear family, while demonstrating collectivist mentalities toward established social institutions (Realo et al., 2008). Despite the influential literature on Swedish culture, studies have yet to pursue an inductive approach to understanding how Swedes perceive individualism-collectivism.

The authors aim to address this gap in addition to investigating how Sweden's idiosyncratic culture influences consumer behavior. Considering the diametrical polarities used to characterize Swedes (Triandis, 1995, 2001; Nelson & Shavitt, 2002; Duan, 1991, Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015; Ekström, 2015), this research explores how Swedes interpret the ostensibly paradoxical values in their society. Additionally, I investigate the conditions under which collectivism manifests in Swedish culture, and how this phenomenon may subsequently influence consumer behaviors. As such, I employ the horizontal-vertical and individualism-collectivism frameworks to understand Swedes' sentiments toward Sweden's paradoxical values. We specifically examine how Swedes interpret collectivism as a part of their society and how these collectivist mentalities may influence consumption decisions.

RQ a: How are cultural values of collectivism manifested in Swedish culture and how do Swedes interpret them?

RQ b: To what extent are Swedish consumption choices influenced by collectivist mentalities?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to the research questions with the intention of understanding Swedes' perceptions toward collectivism and individualism within Swedish society. Qualitative methods are appropriate for the purposes of this study as the research question is exploratory and "seeks new insights into phenomena and sheds light on ambiguous situations" (Mayer, 2015, pg. 53). Prior to the primary study (i.e., interviews), we collected preliminary field notes to provide descriptive evidence of collectivism and individualism within Sweden. Field notes were gathered through unobtrusive observations of Swedish daily life in natural settings, as such, we were able witness, first-hand, the day-to-day interactions of Swedes and document them (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This preliminary fieldwork and descriptive data gathering subsequently facilitated the development of my research questions for the primary study.

Considering that the authors seek Swedes' personal perceptions of Swedish culture and its influence on consumption, we chose to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with informants either in their homes or via Skype. The semi-structured interview is ideal for the intentions of this research as it permits data to be analyzed from an interpretive constructionist approach. A constructionist method is suitable in this study as constructionists aim to "elicit the interviewee's views of their worlds, their work, and the events they have experienced or observed" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pg. 28). In pursuing an interpretative approach toward the data, we intend to unravel the details and specifics of how Swedes perceive their culture to build a broader understanding of the observable phenomenon. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview method facilitates the exploration of research questions in a holistic sense; it allows data to organically arise through conversation and does not confine themes to preordained sets (Fylan, 2005). Thus, the semi-structured interview allows researchers to broach broad, macro-level questions and facilitates the illumination of intricate cultural phenomenon.

Informants. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a non-random strategy permitting the selection of a sample population most impacted by an issue (Patton, 2002). This method was employed over convenience or random sampling as the researcher assumes, based on *a-priori* theoretical knowledge of the topic, that those residing in Sweden possess critical knowledge of the phenomenon in question; consequently, this population's presence in the study must be ensured (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling enables researchers to obtain eligible informants based on specific

characteristics; in this case, the criteria are that respondents should identify as Swedish nationals or as long-time Swedish residents. Purposive selection is a fitting framework for recruiting eligible participants as the sampling frame is based on specific study driven variables and characteristics (Patton, 2002). This method process yielded a total of a total of 13 interviews with Swedish citizens (N= 13; 11 males, 2 females; average age = 26, see Appendix A) and the sample population ranged in terms of ethnicity, age, and occupation. Interviews were conducted between December 2016 to March 2017, all informants signed IRB consent forms acknowledging their agreement to participate in the study. All interviews were performed either in the informant's home or over Skype.

Procedure. Prior to beginning each interview, we went through the guidelines of the study and explained the consent form to participants. Upon receiving the participant's consent and signature affirming their engagement in the study, we invited the participant to converse with us in a quiet room, either in-person or via Skype. Interviews generally commenced in an informal manner to facilitate the development of rapport between the informant and the interviewer (Turner III, 2010). The semi-structured interviews began with broad inquiries about Swedish culture, for example "What does it mean to you to be Swedish?" and "What are your general perceptions of Swedish culture?".

As interviews progressed, open-ended questions related to the research questions were asked, such as "do you perceive Swedes to be conformist or non-conformist" and "do you tend to engage in more unique activities when in public settings?". An interview guide was employed to gently lead discussions and narratives, but was not strictly adhered to; organic conversations were welcomed and informants were encouraged to drive to discussions. Interviews, lasting from 30 to 70 minutes, were audio-recorded and notes were taken to supplement the recordings. Post-interview, participants were thanked for their involvement in the study and could ask questions regarding the nature of this research. The collected interview narratives resulted in a rich corpus of data describing the relationship between conformity, amongst other elements, and collectivism in Sweden, as well as how these collectivist attributes influence consumer behavior.

Data Analysis. The interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes and all interviews were audio recorded contingent on the participant's approval. In total, 619 interview minutes were recorded, which yielded 201 single-spaced pages of transcripts. Interview transcripts were approached from a Grounded Theory perspective as this framework allows for the construction of theory, either inductively or deductively, through meticulous analysis of emergent themes in qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In analyzing the data set, we employed a simultaneous coding scheme to the text: both descriptive coding schemes (codes summarizing the topic of an excerpt) and In Vivo coding schemes (codes using the participant's original language) were applied to identify recurrent elements that could consequently be grouped into related concepts and categories (Saldaña, 2013).

During data interpretation, we referred to the dominant literature on individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) as well as to literature concerning the horizontal-vertical distinction of these dimensions (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Nelson & Shavitt, 2002; Shavitt & Cho, 2016). Also, we referenced prevailing research on Scandinavian culture to further corroborate my data analysis (Daun, 1991; Realo et al., 2008). The results delineate how Swedes interpret instances of collectivism in Swedish society, and how collectivism materializes in Swedes' consumption choices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Collectivism in Sweden

Although Sweden is typically characterized as an individualistic nation according to Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension (Hofstede 1980; Triandis, 1995), informants in this study allude to the integral function of collectivism in contemporary Swedish culture. For instance, while conventional literature on Swedish culture suggests that Swedes are horizontal-individualists who valorize self-expression and aspire to uniqueness (Shavitt & Cho, 2016), participants suggest that self-expression and

individuality in Sweden are curtailed due to shared desires to be “agreeable” and not stand out against dominant cultural values.

Such socially-endorsed cultural tendencies indicate that a collectivist mentality does exist amongst Swedish nationals (Duan, 1991; Telhaug et al., 2004; Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015); collectivists tend to subordinate personal goals to the goals of their in-groups (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shavitt et al., 2006), and since Swedes generally avoid stating controversial opinions for the sake of maintaining social harmony, Swedes appear to engage in some collectivistic rituals. During the coding process, several key themes regarding collectivism in Swedish society emerged; these themes were further combined into categories that encompass multiple concepts (Saldaña, 2013). Although informants alluded to several instances of collectivist mentality in Swedish culture, the data analysis process reveals four salient elements of collectivism: conformity, awareness, truncated freedom of speech, and rules (see Table 2 in Appendix B).

The description of each of these elements is formulated based on a combination of extant literature and informants’ narratives. Thus, the definitions corresponding to each identified component were predominantly extrapolated from In Vivo codes (Chenail, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). Conformity, in this study, embodies the suppression of one’s individuality for the sake of maintaining social harmony and consensus (Torelli, Özsoy, Carvalho, & Maehle, 2012). Awareness indicates consciousness of one’s environment and an emphasis on the larger social implications of individual behaviors (Schwartz, 1992). Freedom designates a truncation of the freedom of speech in Swedish society. The final element, rules, describes the tendency to uphold policies, organization, and authority, in addition to a general penchant for predictability. It is imperative to bear in mind, however, that although these four emergent elements are distinct features of Swedish culture, they are not orthogonal entities as each element influences the others.

Conformity

When probed about how they generally perceive Swedes in terms of outward social behaviors, all thirteen respondents indicated that they consider Swedes to be highly conformist, but only in terms of their relationship to the larger social collective, or their “public” relationships, rather than to the “private” nuclear family. These informant narratives correspond to previous research on Swedish culture and social behavior – namely, that Swedes tend to avoid “sticking out” from the crowd (Duan, 1991), have low needs to overtly express their distinctiveness (Eriksson, Becker & Vignoles, 2011), and prefer being *lagom* (not too much and not too little) due to *Jantelagen* laws that discourage deviation from the norm (Knutsen, 1993; Nelson & Shavitt, 2002)

However, informants’ accounts of the complex relationship between uniqueness aspirations and the inability to outwardly express it diverges from past literature. Prior studies stipulate that Swedes have a high need for uniqueness and self-expression (Triandis, 1995; Shavitt et al., 2011; Shavitt & Cho, 2016), but these studies do not examine how individuality is negotiated and manifested within the confines of a highly conformist culture. The excerpts below offer accounts of how Swedish citizens interpret conformism as an element of collectivism within their culture.

Mitchell, an American who currently works as a Chaplain and has lived in Sweden for nearly a decade, was immediately introduced to Swedish conformity upon his entry into the local work force. His first-hand account of the pressures to blend in within Swedish society provides an insightful entry point into the phenomenon:

When I moved here and started working in Stockholm, I felt pressured to conform to the dress code. As an American and being from the South-East United States, pants that fit a certain way on your legs was very common and you didn’t have to have them tighter than that...And then I started working in Stockholm and my pants looked completely different from everyone else’s pants...And I conformed. [Mitchell, 37]

Elin, a nurse and mother of two, elucidates the multifaceted relationship between individualism and collectivism in Sweden through the lens of conformity. She explains that Swedes exhibit conformist and

collectivist tendencies in the context of “society as a whole”, but not toward the localized family unit. Her account parallels other informant narratives as well as previous literature on the duplicity of Swedish culture (Duan, 1991; Stromberg, 1991; Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015). On one level, the “private sphere”, Swedes are individualistic as they are independent from the nuclear family; on another level, the “public sphere”, Swedes are collectivistic as they abide strictly to societal rules and avoid activities that could disrupt social harmony:

I think that we do conform, but not so much to the core family, but more to society as a whole. We don't necessarily carry out our parents hopes and dreams for us of what we want to be when we grow up - in some culture's it's common to follow in your father's footsteps, whereas in Sweden you do whatever you want and there's very little pressure from your family on carrying on some kind of legacy or whatever. But I think we conform a lot to the larger family, society as a whole. We do conform a lot to rules that are set in place. [Elin, 28]

Björn, a Swede who has recently immigrated to the United States and is currently writing a book documenting the cultural differences between Sweden and America, also reflects on the duality of Swedish individualism and collectivism, distinguishing the two between the public and private spheres of social life. Reiterating Elin's sentiments, Björn suggests collectivism and individualism are both salient features of Swedish culture. He perceives Swedes to be conformist collectivists in the public sphere, but independent individualists within the private realm. Ultimately, Björn remarks that conformism takes precedent over other cultural features:

In the public sphere, you really have to be pretty conformist and you have to be humble. It's a conformity that's a lot about humility and not taking your individualism into a sphere where it's claiming that it's somehow superior to someone else's individualism, in the public sphere. In Sweden, we are allowed to be individualistic and stuff in the private sphere. And there are a lot of things creating, like I'm saying myself, the way you get these things from the government instead from your parents, it's a beginning that feeds individualism. But in the end...the conformism takes precedent a little bit. [Björn, 30]

Finally, Jousef, a refugee to Sweden who has resided in Malmo for over twenty years, bluntly summarizes Swedish aversion toward “sticking out”. His interpretation of Swedes as being staunchly afraid of displaying their uniqueness directly questions the academic notion that Swedes are individualists aspiring to uniqueness (Triandis, 2001):

It's really rare that you find Swedish people, you know, stretching so far to stick out and be seen as unique. The risks of doing that would be not fitting in, and that's the last the last thing that Swedish kids want to do. [Jousef, 30]

These combined insights illustrate the salient feature of conformity in Swedish culture. Although attitudes of conformity do not necessarily imply collectivism, conformist behaviors have traditionally been linked to collectivist cultures. For example, a meta-analysis of studies using Asch's (1956) line compliance task revealed that, across studies, collectivists tended to exhibit higher levels of conformity than individualists (Bond & Smith, 1996). Similarly, past research indicates that collectivists prefer non-distinct products while individualists prefer unique products (Kim & Markus, 1991) and that collectivists are less likely than individualists to deviate from average ratings in online reviews (Hong et al., 2016). Further, conformity is situated under “conservation” as a collective concern in Schwartz & Boehnke's (2004) model of cultural values. Considering the relationship between conformism and collectivity, cross-cultural researchers should reexamine the positioning of Swedes as independent individualists. Perhaps, as informants suggest, individualism and collectivism are simultaneously manifested in Swedish society, but are distinguished through the private and public spheres of life.

Awareness

The category code, “awareness” is a derivation of informants’ narratives – during the In Vivo coding process, several participants employed the term awareness to refer to social concerns beyond the individual self and concerns about the environment. Both elements, awareness about social and environmental issues, are nested under “self-transcendence”, a higher-order dimension conventionally aligned with collectivism (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). The characterization of such a salient feature within Swedish culture as collectivist again highlights the question: are Swedes individualists, collectivists, or both? According to informant accounts, Swedes are, in general, more aware about societal and environmental issues than “almost any other country in the world” (Erik), and these issues are communicated top-down, through the government. As such, it can be extrapolated that these values stem from the public sphere of life as the messages are initially introduced through a public institution.

When asked the broad question, “what does it mean to you to be Swedish?” Mitchell immediately refers to the dominant values of self-transcendence pervasive in Swedish society: “care for the environment and care for those around you”. Additionally, he contrasts these Swedish values to those of his home country, the United States, where self-enhancement is valorized (Schwartz, 1992, 1994). It is not surprising that Mitchell perceives Swedes to be “a step further along” regarding concerns about the larger society in comparison to Americans – according to Schwartz & Boehnke’s (2004) model of cultural values, tenets of self-transcendence (prevalent in Sweden) are incompatible with tenants of self-enhancement (prevalent in the United States) (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004; Torelli et al., 2012). Mitchell identifies the significant collective concern for self-transcendence in Sweden as “morality”:

Being Swedish, it's like there is a general sense of care for the environment and those around you. You know, I'm comparing it to being American. Just in general, the average [Swede] seems to really care about taking care of the world around them. Also, [Swedes] seem to really care, on average, about being mindful of the way they drive, the laws, driving...it just seems the basic average level of what I call "morality" seems to be higher. So, when I think of what it means to be Swedish, it's like they are a step further along in the morally-good direction than the average in America. [Mitchell, 37]

Like Mitchell, Viktor and Erik both underscore the importance of environmental care as an aspect of everyday life in Sweden. For Viktor, Swedish consumers generally make more responsible decisions when it comes to consumption. This observation is corroborated by Erik who states that Swedes are highly aware about ecological foods, waste, and nature. Both informants mention that these values are communicated top-down, through the government, as a collective social value. Again, since these self-transcendent concerns are formulated via public institutions, these tenants are derived from the public sphere of social life in Sweden. Viktor and Erik’s excerpts are provided below:

I think the absolute majority are more aware in Sweden. They often times make more responsible decisions when it comes to consumption than a lot of other countries in the world. That’s also because we have had a government saying for a long time that it's important with environmental thinking stuff. So, I think that we have sort of learned that it's important to think about those stuff. [Viktor, 27]

You must know how Swedish society has a huge awareness about the environment and ecological food. How we treat our waste and how we recycle more than any other country in the world, probably. And lots of it comes from the top of the government. The government communicates all of this during the election and the election campaigns. You know, we have the environmentalist party, the green party, in the government right now. They try to influence patterns of consumption toward less consumption. [Erik, 22]

Axel, the CEO of an e-commerce retail company based in Uppsala, further emphasizes the importance of self-transcendence, generally characterized as a collectivist trait (Torelli et al., 2012), in

Sweden. Like Viktor and Erik, Axel also believes that Swedes value environmental initiatives and are highly concerned about their surroundings. These ideals are also exemplified in the current literature regarding Sweden's sustainability initiatives (Gustavsson & Elander, 2016). Although Axel believes that these principles are instilled in Swedish culture through public institutions, he deviates from previous respondents in that he stresses school education as the primary component fostering these social canons:

I recycle because I'm Swedish and it's important for me to recycle. I think about the environment. I know what it does to the environment because this is what we got taught in school, like, "why it's good to recycle." If we don't recycle, we'll screw up our immediate surroundings, that's what will happen. The last few years, all Swedes have just agreed on the fact, "okay, let's recycle". I'm Swedish, so I recycle because I was raised to recycle and to take care of my immediate surroundings. That's how most people in Sweden were raised because that's a very Swedish thing to do - to recycle. [Axel, 26]

Truncated Freedom of Speech

Freedom of speech is taken for granted as an individualistic right in the United States. In fact, it is so sacred that it has permanently been etched into the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The idea of free speech appears to be an individualistic principle as it facilitates sovereign self-expression, a value commonly associated with individualism (Welzel, 2010). Indeed, the notion of self-expression is typically taken for granted as a civil liberty in a functioning democracy (Barendt, 2005); however, even though exercising free speech is a liberty protected by Sweden's social-democratic government, the informants in this study perceive Swedish culture to be inhospitable toward a multiplicity of divergent and controversial viewpoints. Informants suggest that vocalizing "wrong" views that run counter to normative societal beliefs in Sweden are discouraged to the extent that individuals are either unwilling or incapable of articulating them. Rather than the government inhibiting freedom of speech, some informants perceive the truncation of free speech to be a function of salient injunctive norms that prevent individuals from expressing any opinion that could rupture collective social harmony. Specifically, interviewees identify extreme tolerance, political correctness, and cultural norms, such as *Jantelagen*, as features of Swedish culture that discourage self-expression.

Kristoffer, a kindergarten teacher, introduces the idea of how cultural values in Sweden influence expressions of opinions. When asked "how do you behave in public settings?", Kristoffer mentions issues of free speech, albeit implicitly. He believes that extreme views are against "social etiquette" as one should always try to maintain neutral positions when engaged in public behaviors:

There's a strong social etiquette, I would say so. Not asking too personal questions. Trying to stay as neutral as possible. Not offending people. Not assuming strong opinionated positions toward different things. [Kristoffer, 21]

Likewise, when presented with the broad question "what values are important in Swedish culture?", Aron, an X-ray technician working in the suburbs of Stockholm, did not hesitate to identify tolerance and political correctness as dominant cultural values. For Aron, however, the tolerance embedded in Swedish society is "false" as he considers Swedish tolerance one sided: there is an accepted spectrum of opinions in Sweden, and any deviation from that spectrum leads to intolerance of that outlying belief. As Aron states:

I would say tolerance is probably one of the highest rated values in Sweden. Or kind of a false tolerance, really. We are politically correct to an absurd degree, almost. In Sweden, you can't say anything that is not politically correct without being labeled racist or sexist or something. And we value that as Swedes very highly. But we are very intolerant towards people who are not agreeing with our ideas. So, it's kind of duplicity...it's very okay to slander someone who is not following the political norm. [Aron, 26]

Additionally, when prompted to talk about situations in which it is acceptable to deviate from socially approved opinions, Aron indirectly makes a distinction between the public and private spheres of life. He

suggests that in public channels of communication, such as the media or politics, individuals do not have the latitude to voice divergent opinions. However, when speaking to a “select group” there is more freedom to speak one’s mind. Additionally, he sees these values as historically stemming from *Jantelagen* codes:

A politician who does not speak according to the political correctness will likely not be allowed to remain in politics. If you speak in the media, I would say the same there. In society, you could do it if you’re talking to a select group of friends, but not if you’re talking to a larger group of people you don’t know...I guess that plays into the law of *Jante*... Don’t think you know more than anyone else. [Aron, 26]

Ludvig, who formerly lived in the United States on an exchange program, corroborates these accounts of political correctness in Sweden. He takes the argument further by contrasting his experience with freedom of opinions in Sweden to the United States. For Ludvig, Americans have substantially greater liberty in expressing controversial ideas. His statement “[in Sweden], you just choose to say that you have the same opinions as everyone else” suggests that Swedes are indeed collectivists, at least in certain respects. It is evident that pressure to withhold controversial opinions from public conversation is an integral factor of societal cohesiveness, an important value in collectivist cultures (Zhou et al., 2009). As Ludvig states:

I’d say that in the US, I was more free to have different opinions and ideas. Politically, religiously, or whatever. Here in Sweden, if you say something that isn’t politically correct, people will not like you, generally. And I guess that stops individuality. There’s conversations that you don’t have with other people. Instead, you just choose to say that you have the same opinions as everybody else. [Ludvig, 20]

Elin and Mitchell, who both frequently fly between the United States and Sweden, make the same observations as Ludvig regarding the cultural differences between tolerance and political correctness in these two respective countries:

In the States, it’s more accepted to be “wrong” and to have the “wrong” views, politically, in fashion, or whatever. In Sweden, it’s very important to be somehow politically correct. You can’t be too outspoken. If you think or believe something that is against what society stands for as a general thing - I don’t know; it’s not well looked upon if you hold those extreme views. It’s so much more accepted in the States. [Elin, 28]

There is cultural pressure to not stand against the cultural norms... It’s accepted [in Sweden] that women have the right to abortion. So, if you have an opinion or belief that is dissimilar to that, there is pressure to not share it so that you don’t stand out. In America, it’s kind of looked at as a virtue to voice a dissimilar opinion. It’s almost respected in some way. Even if it’s a minority opinion, it’s almost celebrated. Even if people don’t hold it, this second amendment right to speak your mind and your opinion - you have the right to hold it. [Mitchell, 37]

Henrik, a 22-year-old immigrant to Sweden from Russia and Syria, summarizes the phenomenon simply as, “there is no freedom of speech here in Sweden”. Although informant narratives on the curtailed freedom of speech in Swedish culture are robust, and the topic is commonly featured in debates in Danish and Swedish media (e.g., Strøjer, 2016), academic literature on the phenomenon is lacking. The question of whether Sweden can simply be classified as an individualistic is further accentuated by the dearth of free expression within Swedish society. Self-expression is a privilege predominantly associated with individualism (Triandis, 1991; Schwartz, 1992). For example, studies indicate European Americans place greater emphasis on self-expression than East Asian Americans when making decisions (Kim & Sherman, 2007) and that individualists tend to use brands to self-express more than their collectivist counterparts (Phau & Lau, 2001). Considering that several interviewees reference a curtailing of self-expression due to

Sweden's cultural stance on political correctness and tolerance, the notion of collectivism as an aspect of Swedish culture should be examined to further shed light on the phenomenon.

Rules

The American cultural ideal of “rugged individualism” is exemplified by the classic American cowboy image – an independent explorer willing to bend rules, trample on traditional boundaries, and discard conventional codes of conduct (Hsu, 1998; Hirschman, 2003). Although there are debates on whether the rugged individualism of America's past is “dead or alive” (Davenport & Lloyd, 2017), the positive connotations linked to the image of a sovereign maverick remains very much alive in contemporary American culture. Although both classified as individualistic nations, Sweden and the United States appear to foster vastly divergent sentiments toward the concept of rules and rule breaking. While Americans value the idea of one who plays by his own rules, Swedes seem to prefer one who simply plays by the rules.

For instance, Filip, an engineering student in Stockholm, states that Swedes abide strictly to pre-set social procedures when in public settings. To him, Swedes generally avoid being too expressive in public places and are non-confrontational. Filip, who previously lived in China, contrasts the social structures in Sweden against those he witnessed during his stay in China:

[Swedes] adhere to some pre-set social rules and stuff. I remember in China I happened to see some conflicts between people. Just very passionate arguments in China. And that I have never seen that in Sweden. I think public social convention rules that people are expected to adhere to is the cause of that. [Swedes] are less expressive. [Filip, 26]

Like Filip, Ludvig states that rules are a key component of Swedish culture. He implies that rule breakers will always be perceived as problematic:

We really like things to be in order, and rules to be followed. And if you break rules people will view you as a problem, basically. Even if it's just small rules. People want you to follow them. [Ludvig, 20]

Finally, Björn, who currently lives with his wife in Seattle, explains that, compared to Americans, Swedes believe more in the “social contract”. He suggests that because Americans are inclined to break the rules for their “own personal gain”, the American work place fosters a hyper-competitive environment. On the other hand, Swedes believe that people must abide by the rules to maintain the desired status quo:

If you compare [Sweden] to America, I think people believe much more in the social contract, which is like a version of this thing about homogenous societies...like, in Sweden in the work place, top-to-bottom, everyone believes that you have to follow the rules because if you start breaking the rules, it's bad for everyone. Like, if you skirt the rules and don't take the time off that you're entitled to, then everyone will have to break the rules and then you mess it up for everyone. I'm saying that as a reaction to not seeing that in America. Like in America, everyone just breaks the rules for their own personal gain and that messes things up for everyone. So, America's a terrible place to work in. It's like you have one vacation day per year. [Björn, 30]

These narratives indicate that Swedish individualism is distinct from American individualism. Abiding by the rules is a principle tenant in Swedish culture and rule breakers are generally interpreted as problems in society. In the United States, however, there are some positive connotations toward the idea of an independent maverick (Davenport & Lloyd, 2017). In light of this, it would be interesting to consider why these two ostensibly individualistic countries diverge so prominently in terms of cultural affiliations toward rules and order. The Swedish aversion toward sticking out and breaking the “social-contract”, however, suggests that Swedes may display some collectivist mentalities. As Björn suggests,

Swedes seem to think about the potential societal consequences of bending the rules more than their American counterparts.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study significantly contributes to current theoretical knowledge on Swedish collectivism and individualism as it advances a more nuanced understanding of Sweden's idiosyncratic values. Although cross-cultural literature conventionally situates Sweden as an individualistic nation (Singelis et al., 1995; Triandis, 2001; Shavitt et al., 2011), the informant narratives in this study suggests that collectivism is an equally salient feature of Swedish society. Particularly, informants suggest that Swedish collectivism primarily manifests in the public spheres of life (e.g., society at large, public institutions, acquaintances, and colleagues). In communal settings, Swedes exhibit behaviors characteristically associated with collectivist societies; these elements include: conformity (Duan, 1991; Eriksson et al., 2011), awareness (Schwartz & Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004; Torelli et al., 2012), truncated freedom of speech (Strøjer, 2016), and abiding by the rules.

Several participants in this study, either explicitly or implicitly, alluded to the private-public distinction that divides Swedish individualism-collectivism (see appendices B and C). Participants explain that Swedes are individualistic and express high needs for independence, self-direction, privacy, and self-reliance when engaged with the private sphere of life (e.g., personal aspirations, the nuclear family, and close in-groups), but the liberty to prioritize oneself over the collective declines in the public domain of daily life in Sweden. In settings that involve society at large, Swedes tend to prioritize collective concerns and take precautions to avoid rupturing social cohesion (Duan, 1991; Realo et al., 2008).

Informants also describe how the Swedish mentality significantly impacts consumers' behaviors in Swedish society. Several respondents mention that responsible consumerism and awareness about one's surroundings, or self-transcendence (Schwartz, 1994; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004), are critical components of Swedes' consumption choices. In consideration of the focus on sustainability in Swedish culture, advertisers should highlight environmental initiatives when targeting the Swedish market – specifically, the informants in this study indicate that quality, durability, and eco-friendly construction are sought after features in products for Swedish consumers.

Further, all thirteen informants imply that they find Swedish culture to be highly conformist, at least in the public domain of life – this finding corroborates past studies which indicate that Swedes avoid “sticking out” in crowds (Duan, 1991; Eriksson et al., 2011) and are discouraged from distinguishing themselves from others due to *Jantelagen* laws (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). Owing to this aversion toward being unique or “a splinter in someone's eye” (Elin) in public settings, several informants suggest that it is important to be compliant and avoid standing out in terms of apparel. For instance, Erik states that he prefers Tiger of Sweden, a Swedish luxury brand, over foreign luxury brands, like Louis Vuitton, because Swedish fashion design is subtler and more inclusive. Given the Swedish penchant for muted styles and their distaste toward status appeals, advertisers targeting Swedish consumers should emphasize inclusivity rather than distinction in their advertising appeals.

Although the data was found to reach a rich saturation point, given the robust saturation of themes supported by the data, and we are confident that this study provides significant evidence for the duality of Swedish culture, a larger informant corpus would further bolster the findings delineated in this study; in addition, future research should examine perceptions of Swedish culture with a more representative sample population. Moreover, we would suggest that the investigators may consider examining how collectivism manifests in neighboring Scandinavian countries; researchers may consider probing the qualitative cultural differences regarding individualism-collectivism between Nordic countries – for example, several informants (e.g., Björn, Jousef, and Axel) indicate that they find Denmark to be markedly more individualistic than their Swedish complements. In consideration of this salient cultural distinction, it would be interesting to investigate how individualism-collectivism manifests differently between Nordic nations.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE 1
Informant Demographics

| Name | Age | Sex | Nationality/Ethnicity | Occupation |
|-------------|------------|------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Björn | 30 | M | Swedish-American | Restaurant worker |
| Viktor | 27 | M | Swedish | Artist |
| Axel | 26 | M | Swedish | Entrepreneur |
| Ludvig | 20 | M | Swedish-British | Student |
| Elin | 28 | F | Swedish-American | Nurse |
| Mitchell | 37 | M | Swedish-American | Chaplin |
| Aron | 26 | M | Swedish-Norwegian | X-ray technician |
| Jousef | 30 | M | Swedish-Iraqi | Photographer |
| Kristoffer | 21 | M | Swedish | Kindergarten teacher |
| Filip | 26 | M | Swedish | Student |
| Henrik | 22 | M | Swedish-Russian | Student |
| Märta | 26 | F | Swedish-Chinese | Quality controller |
| Erik | 22 | M | Swedish | Student |

APPENDIX B

TABLE 2
ELEMENTS OF COLLECTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY SWEDEN

| Element | Informant Exemplars |
|-------------------|---|
| Conformity | <p>"You're not supposed to stand out. Like, you're not supposed to think that you are better than anyone else or that you can do more. Or that you can or should aspire to do more than anyone else, or like anything else you don't already have, kind of. Just be happy with what you have, basically. And, yeah, don't stand out." (Märta, 26)</p> <p>"It's really rare that you find Swedish people stretching so far as to stick out and be unique. The risks of doing that would be not fitting in, and that's the last thing Swedish kids want to do." (Jousef, 30)</p> |
| Awareness | <p>"I think we're definitely more aware in Sweden than almost every other country. The absolute majority are more aware in Sweden. They often times make more responsible decisions when it comes to consumption... we have had a government saying for a long time that it's important with environmental thinking and stuff." (Viktor, 27)</p> <p>"You must know how Swedish society has a huge awareness about the environment and ecological food. How we treat our waste and how we recycle more than any other country in the world, probably. And lots of it comes from the top of the government. The government communicates all of this during the election." (Erik, 22)</p> |
| Freedom of speech | <p>"There is cultural pressure not to stand against the cultural norms. [...] It's accepted [in Sweden] that women have the right to abortion. If you have an opinion or belief that is dissimilar to that, there is pressure not to share it so that you don't stand out. In America, it's almost looked at as a virtue to voice a dissimilar opinion." (Mitchell, 37)</p> <p>"In the States, it's more accepted to be "wrong" and have the "wrong" views, politically, in fashion, or whatever. In Sweden, it's very important to be somehow politically correct. You can't be too outspoken. If you think or believe something that is against what society stands for as a general thing - I don't know; it's not well looked upon if you hold those extreme views." (Elin, 28)</p> |
| Rules | <p>"We really like things to be in order and rules to be followed. If you break rules, people will view you as a problem, basically. Even if it's just small rules, people want you to follow them." (Ludvig, 20)</p> <p>"Everyone believes that you have to follow the rules because if you start breaking the rules, it's bad for everyone. [...] Then everyone will have to break the rules and you mess it up for everyone. In America, people just break the rules for their own personal gain." (Björn, 30)</p> |

*Excerpts may be modified to account for table length

APPENDIX C

TABLE 3
ELEMENTS OF INDIVIDUALISM IN CONTEMPORARY SWEDEN

| Element | Informant Exemplars |
|-------------------|--|
| Independence | "Independence! We don't want to be dependent on anyone else. We want to be able to take care of ourselves and I guess it's very individualistic. Like, I think Sweden has the most single households in the world. People like living alone. In other countries, I think people stay with their families for longer. Here, we just want to live alone." (Märta, 26) |
| Self-reliance | "You're supposed to make yourself happy and fix your own happiness." (Viktor, 27) "..free thinking is encouraged from a young age. Decision making, um, even with our children, you know, we want to raise them to make decisions for themselves." (Mitchell, 37) |
| Space and privacy | "We've got this common agreement in Sweden that personal space is sacred. It's very important that everyone gets to be their own way. It's also very important that everyone gets their own space because how are you supposed to be who you are if you don't have your own space? It's very important to Swedes to have their own space and give other people their own space." (Axel, 26) "We don't want our culture, especially religion, to interfere with the government or the country at all. You could learn about culture in school, but the school could never celebrate Swedish culture. It's not their purpose. To us, it's very important to get people to understand that culture and religion and stuff like that is like a private thing. It's not something that you should have [in public]. We're not having that in schools or hospitals." (Viktor, 27) |
| Self-Direction | "We don't necessarily carry out our parents' hopes and dreams for us of what we want to be when we grow up. In some cultures, it's common to follow in your father's footsteps, whereas in Sweden you can do whatever you want and there is very little pressure from your family." (Elin, 28) "Because [of socialism] you're more disconnected [financially] from your parents, there is less clan thinking and much more individualistic thinking at that specific life stage. Like, picking what you want to study and stuff. No Swedish parent would ever expect to have a say in deciding what their kid would study, but it's an implicit thing everywhere else. It's this strange little thing that feeds individualism." (Björn, 30) |

*Excerpts may be modified to account for table length