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Motives underlying the choice of business majors: A multi-country comparison

Mark A.P. Davies [a], Surinder Tikoo [b,*], Jiali Laura Ding [c], Mohamed Salama [d]

[a] School of Social Science, Business and Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, Tees Valley, TS1 3BA, UK
[b] State University of New York at New Paltz, NY, USA
[c] School of Economics and Management, North China Electric Power University, Bejing, 102206, China
[d] Dubai Campus, Heriot-Watt University, Riccarton, Edinburgh, EH14 4AS, UK

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the motives that affect students' choice of business majors. Based on a literature review, five motives affecting students' choice of business majors were identified. These motives were measured using data collected from undergraduate business students in China, UAE, UK, and USA. Factor analyses of the four datasets revealed a remarkably similar factor structure indicating that the motives underlying the choices of different major in these four countries are similar. Across the four countries, the importance of these motives is the same for two motives and only partially different for the remaining three motives. Overall, the results suggest that there is considerable global convergence in consumer behavior in the business education context.

1. Introduction

Besides engendering economic interdependence among countries, globalization is also engendering cultural convergence by facilitating the sharing of ideas and values across countries. Given the trend toward international cultural convergence, a key international business research stream seeks to identify similarities in culture-specific beliefs and attitudes across different contexts including consumer behavior (Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005; Pudelko, Carr, Fink, & Wentges, 2006). This study contributes to this research stream by examining similarities in the consumption behavior for business education in a four-country setting.

Webber (1969) identified technology, the widespread adoption of pragmatic societal values, and education as the key drivers of cultural convergence. Convergence of education occurs when similar educational content and delivery in different countries fosters similar values and beliefs. There is some evidence of similarities in business education across different countries. The flagship business degree, the MBA is characterized by significant commonalities in content and pedagogical approaches across many countries (Armstrong & Krasnostein, 1995). These commonalities are attributed to the dominating economic and political standing of the United States in the world, especially in the post second world war era (Djelic, 1998; Hofstede, 1980, 2001). The adoption of scientific approaches to management and the creation and dissemination of formal management knowledge has been spearheaded by American institutions, which has contributed to significant convergence in business education all over the world.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: tikoos@newpaltz.edu (S. Tikoo).

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But, is the convergence of business education programs compatible with the needs of consumers in different countries? This study examines if the motives of students for choosing among business majors are similar or dissimilar across countries and whether the relative importance of these motives varies across countries. Considerable research has been reported in the business education literature regarding the motives that drive the choice of business majors but generally extant research has a pedagogical focus and is not cross-cultural (e.g., Kim, Markham, & Cangelosi, 2002; Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005; Moberg & Walton, 2003; Pritchard, Potter, & Saccucci, 2004; Roach, McGaughey, & Downey, 2011). This study examines the motives that drive the choice of business majors in a cross-national context. The study has relevance for university administrators. Over the last two decades, there has been a growing trend among universities of entering foreign markets (Lewin, 2008). Many American, British, Australian, and Indian universities have opened campuses in foreign locations. But, not all these ventures have been successful. For example, a number of American schools have withdrawn from foreign markets (Pope, 2011). International business research that uses an education context can generate findings that are useful to educational administrators who seek to expand their programs in foreign countries.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the motives that affect students' choice of business majors are identified. Next, two research propositions about how these motives would be similar and dissimilar across different cultures are developed. Next, the research method is described, the results examined, and the implications of the study are discussed.

2. Literature review

Institutional theory explains the processes by which norms from the wider cultural environment become rationalized and socially accepted for guiding behavior in organizations and for individuals (Scott, 1995, 2001). Institutionalism reflects regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional processes embedded within culture, including the social networks of individuals or organizations. Overall, these processes contribute to the diffusion of work values between organizations across the world (Peterson & Smith, 2008). These processes act as pressures or forces that enable organizations to acquire legitimacy through conformity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Conformity is facilitated by adherence to professional standards, sanctions and reactions toward environmental uncertainty (Gates, 1997). According to institutional theory, the role of education is prone to institutional forces, and explains why many universities in different localities are more similar than might be expected (Hodson, Connolly, & Younes, 2008).

Applied to higher education, it is posited that normative processes that represent social norms are the most influential of these processes. The kind of training prescribed, educational standards obligated, and accreditation, screening and selection of personnel evaluated can shape cultural values through institutional carriers. These carriers represent a complexity of influences that include the media, the state, the corporation, the professions, and the family (Scott, 2003). Regulation processes can impact on values about the purpose of education, since high state intervention can restrict personal choice, limit freedom of expression and may affect smooth transition into the workplace.

Specifically focusing on business education, students of vocational education are likely to treat their majors as an investment in their future career, with distinct sets of motives. Motives may be shaped by cultural values toward the workplace, and these may be institutionalized within education. For example, the motive of university reputation might be attributed to how faculty present their professionalism through not only academic qualifications, but affiliation to learned bodies, and outside interests.

Motives offer reasons for particular behavior through interests and goals that are closely aligned to values (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Motives can be intrinsic or extrinsic.

Intrinsic motives rest on perceptions of knowledge about the qualities of objects of learning such as interest in the content of an academic major. Intrinsic motives applied to education include learning for its own sake, as an end in itself, as well as to satisfy inner needs such as curiosity. Extrinsic motives rest on the perceived outcomes from such majors (Berlyne, 1966; Vroom, 1964). A student's extrinsic motives rest on rewards external to the studying situation (e.g., ease of achieving grades, and career opportunities).

Based on an extensive literature review, six motives that affect students' choice of a business major are identified. These motives include: personality match to subject perception, lifestyle perceptions about discipline, relative ease of completion of major, reputational effects, career outputs, and need for developmental skills. The related characteristics of these motives for major choice are listed in Table 1.

The first composite motive reflects interest in the subject as a key determinant of the choice of business major, reflecting personality (Kim et al., 2002; Pappu, 2004; Strasser, Ozgur, & Schroeder, 2002). Closely related to personality is how the major is perceived to match the aspirations of students that will affect their enjoyment (Kumar & Kumar, 2013; Noel, Michaels, & Levas, 2003; Strasser et al., 2002; Zhang, 2007), hereafter referred to as *lifestyle aspirations*. A third motive is the expected difficulty in successfully completing a major (Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Lewis & Norris, 1997; Van Etten, Pressley, McInerney, & Liem, 2008). This is referred to as *relative ease of completion of major*. Students can have tunnel vision on achieving top grades, avoiding majors widely interpreted to require more effort to succeed (Becker, Greer, & Hughes, 1995). Students become more motivated when they believe they have control over their academic work. Ease of major can also be associated with opportunity cost of forgoing alternatives, leading to less certain outcomes.

A fourth motive underlying the choice of major is *reputational effects* (Gabrielsen, 1992). Reputational effects can have a bearing on different levels such as the university, department, and the faculty (Kim et al., 2002; Malgwi et al., 2005; Mazzarol,

Table 1
Determinants of choice of business majors.

(A) Personality match to subject perception
Intrinsic motivation (Kim et al., 2002; Malgwi et al., 2005; Pappu, 2004; Strasser et al., 2002)
(1) Matches ability in subject matter (Malgwi et al., 2005; Roach et al., 2011; Strasser et al., 2002)
(2–3) Affirms my identity and values (Kleine, 2002)
(B) Lifestyle perceptions about discipline
(4) Offers stable employment (Kumar & Kumar, 2013).
(5) Offers rigor/challenge (Noel et al., 2003; Strasser et al., 2002)
(6) Offers enjoyment/fun (Kumar & Kumar, 2013; Strasser et al., 2002; Zhang, 2007).
(7) Need for active social life[a]
(8) Offers structured learning environment
(C) Relative ease of completion of major (Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Lewis & Norris, 1997; Van Etten et al., 2008)
(9) Less commitment required outside classroom[a]
(10) Considered achievable with little effort[b] (inspired by Cohen & Hanno, 1993)
(11) Few academic hurdles to climb[b] (Pritchard et al., 2004; Schlee et al., 2007; Strasser et al., 2002)
(12) Need to earn and learn simultaneously[a]
(13) Likelihood of receiving good grade/(First Class Honors or equivalent), reflecting probability of success
(14) Need to feel comfortable in achievements amongst peers (Noel et al., 2003)
(15) Compatible fit with other majors (Pappu, 2004)
(D) Reputational effects
Academic reputation (Kim et al., 2002; Malgwi et al., 2005; Mazzarol et al., 2000; Pappu, 2004)
(16) Course prestige/quality of major
(17) Reputation of faculty for research in major
(18) Reputation of faculty for teaching major
(19) University rankings associated with major
(20) University is well-known for major
(21) Belief in need for high academic reputation
(E) Career outputs
Utility of knowledge from major (Pappu, 2004), reflecting return on investment.
(22) Job opportunities (Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Lee & Lee, 2006; Skoorka & Condon, 2002; Strasser et al., 2002)
(23) Earnings growth or potential and career advancement (Dudley et al., 1995; Kim et al., 2002; Malgwi et al., 2005; O'Brien & Deans, 1995; LaBarbara & Simonoff, 1999; Roach et al., 2011; Schlee et al., 2007; Strasser et al., 2002)
(F) Developmental skills in preparation for a career (Moberg & Walton, 2003)
(24) Enhanced performance to meet job requirements
Interpersonal skills (Strasser et al., 2002)
Persuading others (Hunt et al., 2004).
(25) Proficiency in using computers to solve business problems (Moberg & Walton, 2003; Strasser et al., 2002)
(26) Strategic thinking and planning (Liu, 2010; Moberg & Walton, 2003)
(27) Helpful to run (own) business (Pappu, 2004)
Likelihood of mastering following skills associated with activities:
(28) Data analysis skills (Debnath et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2004)
(29) Ability to succeed in competitive situations (Lee & Lee, 2006; Lounsbury et al., 2009).
(30) Cultivating problem solving skills (Debnath et al., 2007)
(31) Preparing for leadership roles (Debnath et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2004; Webb et al., 1999).
(32) Varied tasks at work, reflecting course variety (Pappu, 2004) and variety of career prospects (Pappu, 2004; Schlee et al., 2007)
(33) Developing creative roles (*openness, capacity to tolerate change*) (Allen et al., 2014; Hunt et al., 2004; McCorkle et al., 2007).
(34) Managing people (Webb et al., 1999)
(35) Launching career in international markets (Webb et al., 1999)

[a] Additional motives conceptualized by authors not previously used in this research context (with over forty years of collective HE teaching experience).
[b] Inspired by Aggarwal, Vaidyanathan, and Rochford (2007), Cohen and Hanno (1993), Pritchard et al., (2004), Schlee et al., (2007) and Strasser et al., (2002).

Soutar, & Thein, 2000; Pappu, 2004). Reputation can comprise not only market image but resources in terms of staff expertise (Mazzarol et al., 2000).

Motives have also been associated with extrinsic utility value, as a means to an end (Ryan & Deci, 2009), and applied to occupational achievement and commercial value in the marketplace (Eccles, 2005). In this regard, two key strands were identified: *career outputs*, reflected as job opportunities or high career earnings (Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Dudley, Dudley, Clark, & Payne, 1995; Kim et al., 2002; Lee & Lee, 2006; Malgwi et al., 2005; O'Brien & Deans, 1995; LaBarbara & Simonoff, 1999; Roach et al., 2011; Schlee, Harich, Kiesler, & Curren, 2007; Skoorka & Condon, 2002; Strasser et al., 2002; Yee, 2012) and *developmental skills* (Moberg & Walton, 2003) as a means of meeting the needs of employers.

Developmental skills can expect to improve business performance associated with the choice of major. These skills include leadership and data analysis (Debnath, Tandon, & Pointer, 2007; Hunt, Falgiani, & Intrieri, 2004; Webb, Mayer, Pioche, & Allen, 1999), problem solving (Debnath et al., 2007), strategic thinking (Liu, 2010; Moberg & Walton, 2003), and competitiveness (Lee & Lee, 2006; Lounsbury, Smith, Levy, Leong, & Gibson, 2009). In the latter case, globalization can intensify competition, opening up fresh challenges to succeed. Other skill sets include creativity for business roles (Allen, Kumar, Tarasi, & Wilson, 2014; Hunt et al., 2004; McCorkle, Payan, Reardon, & Kling, 2007), and task variety (Pappu, 2004; Schlee et al., 2007).

2.1. Proposition development

The six motives identified above were based on a review of research done in western countries. But are these determinants also relevant in culturally different countries such as China and UAE? This is plausible because human needs are innate and do not vary across countries and cultures. The motives identified in this study correspond with the basic human needs of the widely accepted hierarchy of needs by Maslow (1954). Research has shown that individuals across many different countries have similar needs to those described in Maslow's hierarchy (Haire, Ghiselli, & Porter, 1966).

Students of business are less likely to make choices that reflect a pursuit of knowledge reflecting intrinsic subject interest and more likely to make choices that offer a passport to professional advancement in comparison to non-business majors (Bennett, 2004; Buchanan, Kong-Hee, & Basham, 2007). Therefore, from an economic perspective alone, career outputs and developmental skills might be expected to be universally needed by all business majors irrespective of place of study. Further, lifestyle aspirations might reflect universal societal needs once economic motives are achieved.

Globalization and access to global brands provide opportunities for sharing of similar experiences and aspirations that can fuel a convergence of ideological values. Similar motives between cultures would likely emerge via global awareness and information sharing from international exposure to digital marketing and social networking sites, together with transnational experiences. The diffusion of global business communication is facilitated by the lingua franca of the English language through syndicated media that appeal to broad international segments (De Mooij, 2004; Huntington, 1996).

Accordingly, it is posited: *P1. The underlying motives that drive the choice of a business major are similar across countries*.

While similar motives may underlie the choice of business majors across different countries the relative importance of these motives might vary across countries. The relative importance of these motives is likely to be affected by cultural differences that may be embedded in institutional structures (Kostova, 1999; Kostova, Roth, & Dacin, 2008; Scott, 1995). Institutional theory suggests that regulatory aspects (rules, laws, judiciary systems), cognitive aspects (common beliefs about the "rules of the game" in political, social, and economic spheres), and normative aspects (shared values and norms) may result in significant inter-country differences.

Early work on institutional theory focused on how similarity among organizational processes emerged, reflecting convergent values. However, since institutional theory explains merely *guiding* rather than mandatory rules to follow, actors are free to make their own choices regarding their behavior (Scott, 2001). Despite individual discretion, the propensity to conform or resist institutional norms is shaped by one's culture, reflected in how people are mentally programmed to act (Hofstede, 2001). Culture can contribute to a diversity of motives based on students' places of study. Accordingly how motives might vary according to place of study, using place of study as a proxy for culture, are examined.

Two cultural factors believed to reflect institutional forces impacting on motives for choosing particular business majors are examined: power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Cultures associated with high power distance represent the acceptance of unequal distribution of social power and authority. Due to the legitimacy and coercion attached to role models of authority and hierarchy, education in high power status cultures is recognized to be teacher centered (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Uncertainty avoidance reflects an intolerance toward uncertainty, closely associated with institutions that rely on regulations (Hofstede, 1980). Both cultural factors reflect attitudes toward managing the normative and regulatory pressures reflected in institutionalism. Students can assert some control over their future living standards by choosing to invest in higher education but neither success in the majors they choose nor the value of this education in the marketplace can be guaranteed. Reputation and relative ease of completion are identified as two composite motives that can offer comfort to students seeking ways to manage some of this perceived risk. However, attitudes toward risk reduction vary according to institutional pressures depicted below, so it is expected that the importance of relative ease of completion and reputation will vary between cultures.

The institutional profile of a country may differentially impact the normative pressures that students face. A high power distance culture reflects the acceptance of leadership by voices of authority associated with a hierarchical, top-down style of management (Chen & Miller, 2010). At its extreme, this is institutionalized throughout the education system whereupon learning is over-structured, unidirectional, and regimented (Dimmock, 2000). It is suggested that such reliance on others can place enormous institutional pressures on students to succeed. In contrast, European and North American cultures are typically characterized by low power distance, in which decisions are reached more by individual discretion and merit, and this is reflected in a more negotiable, student-centered, educational system.

Similarly, since work ethics are socially constructed and legitimized by standards imposed by institutions, work ethics will be differentially embedded between cultures, affecting prioritization of motives. It is suggested that the importance of relative ease of completion heightens where educational responsibility for learning is subservient to authoritative role models (reflecting high social power) and weakens where learning is the responsibility of the individual (low social power). When students have more control over their own learning, perceived risk is reduced.

These institutional pressures might increase the importance of reputation, with standards intensified in cultures high in uncertainty avoidance (i.e. where uncertainty is not easily tolerated, see Hofstede, 2001). Since education is a service offering deferred future benefits, cultures high in uncertainty avoidance such as China are likely to seek indicators of assurances of quality about their service, such as reputational cues. The tradition of faculty reputation can reduce perceived uncertainty insofar as reputation assures minimal standards. Overall, reputation might be more important in cultures with low tolerance for uncertainty. On the other hand, the high degree of informality associated with less industrialized nations could encourage

more risk taking (Stenhouse, Campbell, Hamill, & Purdie, 2004), leading to higher acceptance of uncertainty and less need for reputational effects.

The institutional structure of a country from an economic and political framework can also affect the relevance of reputational effects within a country. In countries where the legacy of educational choice has been constrained, reputational effects might be especially relevant for students who might have a strong motive to ensure themselves of a suitable job upon graduation. Consequently students or their parents from countries where education is less well provided for may react toward institutionalized pressures by setting individually high standards, and impose austere self-discipline in students' studies. It is noteworthy that following educational reforms, university tuition fees for Chinese universities (required since 1997) represent an unusually high proportion of family income (Ding, 2004) that might raise the importance of reputation. However, the importance of reputational effects may be dampened where educational provision has remained uniform for ages. For example, the historical legacy of central government influence in China that controlled educational governance, curricular and assessment for many years led to the call for marketization (encouraging finance from foreign investors) and decentralization (granting more autonomy to the provinces). According to Zhao and Qiu (2012), the key driver of these reforms was educational quality. Despite marketization, administrative control remains with the state (Ngok, 2008). Accordingly, variations in institutional constraints might lead to differences in reputation between countries. Based on the preceding discussion it is posited:

P2. The importance of different motives for major choice will differ across countries.

3. Materials and methods

Based on a literature review (Table 1), a list of items were developed that represented the six motives that affect students' choice of a business major. Data collection involved surveying undergraduate students at one business school each in China, UAE, UK, and USA.

The relative status of business schools can be determined in a number of ways, including university entry criteria, since this indicates quality of student profiles. Personal communication with academics representing each school confirmed that each shared a reassuringly respectable and complementary level of academic status, adding credence to any comparisons made. Each school required broadly similar entry criteria upon admissions. The American sample were taken from the largest public university system in the United States, projected by college guides as a selective school with an acceptance rate in the mid 30s, with undergraduate business students requiring a minimum GPA across their studies. The Chinese sample represented a top 100 university in China earmarked for progressive research and teaching by the Ministry of Education. Successful applicants performed above the first-tier cut off scores under China's National College Entrance Exams. The UAE school replicated the admissions criteria of the UK school, in which its website boasted a research profile within the top third of all UK universities. Each university is located in a popular city.

There are significant cultural similarities and differences among these countries that have been widely discussed in the international business literature. For example, the UK and USA are low context cultures (Treven, 2003) whereas China and UAE are high context cultures (Hollensen, 2007). These countries also represent the source and destination countries in the worldwide market for business education. Many universities from the UK and USA are exploring foreign markets. The Middle East and China are two prominent markets that educational institutions from UK/USA have entered or are seeking to enter. In the survey, students were asked to rate the importance of each item representing the different motives on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = unimportant, to 5 = indispensable.

Most measures for the questionnaire were adapted from existing research. For the benefit of additional items that were conceptualized by the authors (indicated in Table 1), the questionnaire was piloted on a subsample of students in a classroom environment at the UK and UAE universities (n = 42). Analysis of the samples revealed no systematic cause for concern in completing the questionnaire, supported by no systematic pattern of missing answers to particular questions, no significant halo effects from response profiles (suggesting cognitive burden was not an issue) and reasonable variation shown in using the full range of response options (Brace, 2008). The questions were then distributed to respective academics representing each country sample for formative comments. Minor modifications were agreed before launching the survey in the respective countries.

Survey questionnaires were administered in English in UAE, UK, and USA. In China, however, the questionnaires were administered in Chinese. The Chinese translation of the original English questionnaire was developed through back translation. Course instructors administered the questionnaires in one or more of the classes they were teaching during semesters. The instructors informed students that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Students were asked to report their names and email addresses only if they wished to receive a summary of the results. The use of student subjects does not suffer from the problems associated with studies that are based on convenience samples of students because business students were the population of interest (Malholtra, 2010).

4. Data analysis and results

Response rates ranged between 55 and 75%. Exit polls taken randomly from a selection of classes suggested non-respondents behaved similarly to participants. A total of 999 usable questionnaires were collected. These include 295 from

the UK, 181 from China, 281 from UAE, and 242 from the USA. The sampling profiles showed a roughly even split in gender and comprised predominantly of second year undergraduates for each country.[1]

The combined country samples revealed a split of 49.9% males to 50.1% females. There were 51.9% males to 48.1% females in the UK sample, 48.9% males to 51.1% females in the China sample, 40.0% males to 60.0% females in the UAE sample and 52.7% males to 47.3% females in the American sample. Gender ratios were therefore comparable for each country and representative of the general populations from which they came from.

Regarding nationality, 89.5% of the UK sample was European, with 66% of the sample British. 90% of the UAE sample were either Indian or Asian (Pakistani), many of whom had been born and raised in UAE or had stayed for many years, with Africans representing the minority of overseas students. 90% of the US sample was American, with just 10% on the business program being international students. The general pattern of distribution of domestic to overseas students compares favorably for each country profile, with the exception of China, in which there were no overseas students. Overall, the distributions suggest there is reasonable homogeneity within the country samples for making useful cross-cultural comparisons. Further, according to personal communication with a local UAE academic, the UAE and Chinese samples complement the predominantly Indian or Chinese student mix who represent the many international campuses opening in China, Malaysia or the Middle East. Also, a popular growth strategy of many UK and US universities is expansion of branch campuses internationally. These overall considerations complement the choice of countries sampled.

Since much of the extant literature is based on research in the UK and USA, the set of items developed is grounded in the UK and USA context. To determine if the underlying motives for the choice of business majors were similar across the four countries, the data was factor analyzed for each of the four countries. Specifically, principal components analysis was conducted using varimax rotation. The criterion for identifying factors was eigenvalues equal to or greater than one. All factors were subjected to a standardized process of screening for adequate coefficient weights requiring at least .5 (Malholtra, 2010), sphericity (requiring a significant chi-square test), anti-image diagonal correlations (>.5), and a reasonable level of explanatory relevance with communalities of ≥.5 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Where items loaded substantively on more than one factor in the rotated component matrix, the factor analysis was reiterated by removing items, one-by-one, until a satisfactory result was achieved that did not violate any of the aforementioned criteria.

Items representing personality matches cross-loaded across factors, reflecting structure instability, so were deleted from further analysis. Explanations for this instability reflect the overlap between personality and lifestyle perceptions insofar as ability may be reflected in rigor and challenge, whilst value and identity can be reflected in the quality of the learning environment, including pleasure. It can also be argued that personality encapsulates different dimensions to motives. Interestingly, research by Bennett (2004) did not find personality traits to influence the behavior of business undergraduates. These technical and conceptual arguments led to the removal of personality as a determinant of student majors. Finally, the factor loadings were checked to ensure they reached at least their recommended minimum values for their sample size (Janssens, Wijnen, DePelsmacker, & Van Kenhove, 2008).

The factor loadings for individual country samples are shown in the Appendix. Each factor structure reflects similar theoretical structures derived from the literature review. They also reveal a remarkably similar factor structure for the fifteen motive items. The variance explained for China, UAE, UK, and USA is 73.97%, 63.10%, 69.53%, and 75.06% respectively. Each factor variable was also tested for reliability, in which Cronbach alpha scores >.60 show acceptable internal consistency for scale development (Janssens et al., 2008). With the exception of moderately acceptable alpha scores for hedonic *lifestyle aspirations* (for the UAE and the UK of .60 and .62 respectively) and for *relative ease of completion* (for UAE of .63), the alpha scores for all remaining factors are strong (≥.70). Consistent with Proposition 1, the factor analysis results indicate that a similar set of motives underlie the choice of business major in the four countries studied.

The variance explained for each composite factor motive is reported in the Appendix. For each place of study, *reputational effects* explained the most, ranging from 32 to 25% variance explained; then the next greatest variance explained ranged from 16 to −13% for *development skills*; then *career outputs* of 13–10% variance explained, then *relative ease of completion* between 10 and −7% variance explained and finally *lifestyle aspirations* revealed between 9 and −7% variance explained. Overall, the relative order of the motives remained similar between the four places of study.

4.1. Evidence of divergence

It was postulated that while the underlying motives for the choice of a business major might be similar, the relative importance of these motives is likely to vary across places of study. To test this proposition, a MANOVA was performed followed by several univariate ANOVAs. The means for each country sample are reported in Table 2. A lower error rate for testing is maintained with an initial MANOVA should the four country samples differ with respect to a composite of the motives because there is the possibility that no differences for the different variables might be found with a series of univariate ANOVAs. The MANOVA results report the Pillai's Trace ($F = 16.319$, $p = .000$) and Wilks' Lambda ($F = 17.303$, $p = .000$) that indicate that the four countries significantly differ with respect to the composite of the five motives. Next, a one-way

[1] Second year students were chosen to retain consistency across samples, since one school only offered business courses after successful completion of their first year.

Table 2
Composite motive importance by country based on means[a] (with standard deviations shown in parentheses).

Composite motive	UK n = 279	China n = 180	UAE n = 275	USA n = 226
Reputational effects (NR)	3.15 (.830)	2.93 (.977)	3.68 (.743)	3.00 (.933)
Developmental skills (DS)	3.67 (.768)	3.69 (.791)	3.76 (.743)	3.73 (.933)
Career outputs (CO)	4.19 (.851)	4.04 (.879)	4.25 (.797)	4.37 (.739)
Relative ease of completion, (REC)	2.03 (.882)	1.95 (.894)	2.84 (.904)	2.21 (.990)
Lifestyle aspirations (LA)	3.29 (.987)	3.39 (1.11)	3.40 (.911)	3.30 (1.03)

[a] Reported as M in text.

ANOVA was performed for each of the five factors. The results reveal that Developmental Skills ($F = .814$, $p = .486$) and *lifestyle aspirations* ($F = .759$, $p = .517$) do not differ across the four countries whereas *reputation effects* ($F = 37.736$, $p = .000$), *career outputs*, ($F = 5.796$, $p = .001$), and *relative ease of completion* ($F = 49.855$, $p = .000$) differ.

For the three factors with significant overall ANOVA results, the six possible pairwise comparisons were examined for each factor using Duncan's post-hoc test. Results are reported from the highest overall mean scores representing the most important composite motives to the lowest scores representing the least important composite motives. For the *career outputs* factor, the UK–China, UK–UAE, and UAE–USA country pairs are not significantly different ($p = .06$, .38 and .09 respectively) whereas the China–UAE, China–USA, and UK–USA country pairs are significantly different ($p < .05$). Despite these country differences, *career outputs* were deemed universally the most important composite motive, ranging from 4.4 (US) to 4.0 (China).

For the *reputational effects* factor, all country pairwise comparisons are significantly different except for the China–USA and USA–UK pairs (with $p = .42$ and .06 respectively). For the *relative ease of completion* factor all other country pairs are significantly different ($p < .05$) expect for the UK–China country pair (with $p = .38$). However the general pattern of means revealed that this composite major was less important, ranging between 2.0 (China) to 2.8 (UAE), with UAE significantly higher from all other country majors.

4.2. Differences between students based on demographics

To compare differences in results between gender, MANCOVA was conducted, reporting both Pillai's Trace and Wilks' Lambda ($F = 3.465$, $p = .004$). This shows that gender was significantly different for the composite of the five motives. In conducting one-way ANCOVAs for each of the five factors and reporting by exception, *reputational effects* ($F = 6.387$, $p = .012$) and *career outputs* ($F = 10.966$, $p = .001$) showed female students were significantly more ambitious ($M = 3.324$) than their male counterparts ($M = 3.137$) in seeking high reputation, and more career orientated, with females scoring higher on *career outputs* ($M = 4.304$) than males ($M = 4.146$) when choosing their business major.

The specific aspects of *reputational effects* and *career outputs* on gender using independent t-tests were then investigated. In terms of reputation for the entire datasets combined, only teaching reputation and research reputation were significantly higher for females. Female scores for teaching reputation (with $M = 3.384$, $n = 497$) were compared to males (with $M = 3.172$, $n = 476$), with $t = -2.912$, $p = .004$. Female scores for research reputation ($M = 3.16$, $n = 498$) were compared to males ($M = 2.903$, $n = 476$), with $t = -3.326$, $p = .001$. In terms of *career outputs*, females reported significantly higher scores ($M = 4.348$, $n = 500$) than males ($M = 4.193$, $n = 477$) on excellent job opportunities, with $t = -2.798$, $p = .005$. In terms of excellent earnings, females also scored higher ($M = 4.261$, $n = 498$) than their male counterparts ($M = 4.097$, $n = 475$), with $t = -2.836$, $p = .005$.

When examining specific country effects for *reputational effects* and *career outputs*, the greatest differences lie within UAE. Comparing the country data show a prevalent pattern in which females register these criteria as more important than males, with the exception of China (not significant). For the US sample, excellent job opportunities are significantly higher for females ($M = 4.522$) than males ($M = 4.312$, $t = -2.189$, $p = .030$) whereas for UAE, females score higher than males for both teaching reputation ($M = 3.726$ versus 3.426, $t = -2.337$, $p = .020$) and for excellent earnings ($M = 4.312$ versus 4.017, $t = -2.674$, $p = .008$).

In examining nationality, only UAE and the UK samples reported sufficient discrimination to statistically compare by nationality. The remaining countries reported $\leq$10% of students from overseas, so further comparative analysis was impractical. In the UAE sample, Asians ($n = 41$) were compared to Indians ($n = 202$), in which marginal differences were found. Indians reported significantly higher *career outputs* ($M = 4.309$) than their Asian counterparts, ($M = 3.951$), with $t = -2.613$, $df = 241$, $p = .010$. The remaining four factors revealed no significance between the groups.

Although there were more overseas students in the UK sample comprising of Other Europeans, there were few significant differences between the British and Other Europeans. *Developmental skills* were significantly higher for Other Europeans ($M = 3.891$) compared to the British ($M = 3.568$), with $t = -3.114$, and $p = .002$. *Lifestyle aspirations* were also significantly higher for Other Europeans ($M = 3.561$) compared to the British ($M = 3.240$), with $t = -2.478$, and $p = .014$. The remaining factors were not significantly different between these groups. In terms of specific developmental skills, strategic thinking and

problem solving were significantly higher for Other Europeans compared to the British, with M = 3.971 versus 3.602, t = −2.756, df = 274, p = .006 for strategic thinking; and M = 4.071 versus 3.505, t = −4.665, df = 137.950, p = .000 for problem solving.

5. Conclusions and discussion

Five composite motives were identified that underlie the choice of a business major. These motives were compared for undergraduate business students from China, UAE, UK, and USA. The results indicate similar relative levels of importance for lifestyle aspirations and developmental skills in determining the choice of business major in all four countries. These are replicable between gender and nationality where comparisons were conducted. The only gender differences, reported by exception, show females scoring higher on career outputs and reputational effects but, perhaps revealingly, not for the Chinese sample. These results contrast with classical cultural studies of gender that would expect females to show more feminine traits. For example, Malgwi et al., (2005) found males to have greater needs for career advancement in their studies, equivalent to career outputs. It is possible that, with the glass ceiling more fragile than it once was, that female aspirations are beginning to filter through in the workplace (Wirth, 2000). Perhaps there is more scope for autonomy in countries that are transitioning towards the capitalism of the West.

In comparing results between different nationalities within the same country set, only marginal differences were found between Indians compared to their Asian counterparts in UAE, and Other Europeans compared to the British for the UK sample.

The overall pattern of results indicate there is much greater convergence in consumer behavior than might be expected. The extent to which the remaining three motives (career outputs, reputational effects, and relative ease of completion) shape the choice of business major varies across countries but not for all of the six country pairs. For the career outputs motive, three out of six country pairs differ and three are the same, for the reputational effects four country pairs differ, and for the relative ease of completion five country pairs differ.

The values for the five sets of motives revealed markedly similar values, especially for the UK and US that support a convergence of motives between majors studying in geographically distinct physical places. Evidence of cultural fusion more generically post- Hofstede has been attributed to immersion in international cultures from wider social and geographical mobility, greater access and opportunity to education, and Internet exposure (Mason, 2007; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2002; Sousa & Bradley, 2008). The universally high mean scores for developmental skills and lifestyle aspirations suggest high expectations are required for both vocational training and standard of living respectively. The low spread of values for developmental skills in particular (indicated by the low standard deviations) vindicates their importance, especially in strategic thinking.

The level of convergence of motives across cultures, especially pointing to the universally high scores for career outputs and developmental skills, would suggest this conforms to the needs of how people share more commonalities than differences. It was expected that business education would be more affected by culture, since customer satisfaction, a key philosophy of marketing, rests on continually meeting expectations between buyers and suppliers, which are shaped by social norms and roles. However, an alternative perspective argues that Business Schools aspire to the needs of people who want, believe that they want, or appear to believe that they want, mainstream, managerialist and uncritical education (Grey, 2007; Worrall, 2010). These authors argue that business students are remarkably instrumental in their attitudes toward their own education and development, encouraging a kind of bland menu of implementation techniques. According to institutional theory, this can support homogeneity in structure, culture and output of universities expected from uncertain environments (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The level of convergence reflected in the findings adds support for the latter perspective. This convergence would suggest that university administrators' intent on expansion should ensure that business programs are accredited by relevant professional bodies for maximum exemption, and remain proactive in cultivating the range of skills required in the market. Complementary to this, offering qualifications that are valued by major employers where the bulk of graduates expect to work has been deemed a critical student factor in deciding university choice (Mazzarol et al., 2000). But universities should be wary of becoming too close to commercial interests that can affect their level of independence and control over selection of course content.

Further support for convergence is offered by *lifestyle aspirations* that are highest for China and UAE, followed by slightly lower, virtually identical values for the USA and UK. Since each nation offers similar values, the expectation of distinction between high and low context based on places of study is marginal at best. The US and UK scores, representing low context countries, might reflect prevalence toward masculine values adopted for these majors.

Despite the general level of convergence observed across cultures, some differences are noteworthy. The pattern of UAE mean scores were appreciably higher compared to China for three generic motives: career outputs, relative ease of completion, and reputation. Although *career outputs* score higher for USA and UAE, the UK is not far behind, with China scoring lowest. Rather than extrinsic motives acquiring greater salience for less economically advanced nations, the results may reflect the salience for careers is higher for more economically advanced nations, with UAE reflecting additional momentum from flourishing capitalism and competitive intensity. If ambitions are shaped by the relative achievements of one's

peers, then more economically advanced nations can galvanize this tendency, since this should lead to greater awareness of opportunities. Results for UAE point to evidence of *crossvergence* of national culture and economic ideology (Ralston, Gustafson, Chung, & Terpstra, 1993) representing a capitalist mind-set similar to the UK and US.

Relative ease of completion is considered the least important motive for all countries, with means around 2.0 for each of UK, USA and China, with the exception of UAE with a significantly higher mean. Despite the risk of generalizing cultural values to nations, Sidani and Thornberry (2009) point to particular outcomes of institutional values within Arab societies, especially related to family and education. Specifically, it is argued that societal norms encourage rote-style learning and subservience to authoritative figures such as teachers, which when combined with anxiety over uncertainty of outcomes (Hofstede, 2001), discourage creative effort, deter self-initiative, and hamper the need to stretch critically and intellectually (Sidani & Thornberry, 2009). It is suggested that the perception of failure magnifies under these conditions, elevating the salience of completion rates. Further, since exam failure might be construed as a reflection on the entire extended family, *the cost of failure* has severe repercussions (Sidani & Thornberry, 2009). With both the perception of failure and associated cost increasing under these institutional forces, choosing majors that are perceptibly easy to complete without significant effort appears to be an attractive coping strategy for UAE majors. The effects of a rote-style teaching experience that discourages self-directed learning can also be explained neurobiologically. Such experiences can guide one's sense of risk and limit the dopamine from the brain that can suppress the need for new challenges (Gwin, 2013). Despite many of the UAE sample comprising of ethnic Indians and Asians, 90% of the sample were expatriates who were born and raised in UAE or have remained for many years and are intent on remaining to work after graduation. Therefore these groups will probably have become immersed in, and therefore adapted to, much of Arabian culture.

In contrast, the relatively low mean scores for institutional reputation ($M = 2.93$) and relative ease of completion ($M = 1.95$) for the Chinese sample suggest these students want to succeed in the workplace on their own terms without shirking, but with dignity and honor. This may reflect the high value devoted to education in Chinese culture as an investment toward social mobility – not just for the individual but for their entire family (Cheng, 1986; Shek, 2006). As Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) observe, Chinese families invest a significant proportion of their income in their children's education.

The UAE sample showed the highest scores for both reputation and relative ease of completion motives. These results combined with alignment to the US and UK for career outputs would suggest that the UAE market cannot be linked together with China for holding similar values that impact on educational motives. Therefore contrasting low context with high context countries is an oversimplification of reality. The collective results across the three composite motives suggest a pressurized environment for UAE where students are expected to succeed, and may reflect the impact of parental pressure. This pressure might also be exacerbated in how student places are funded. Whilst the UAE university has non-profit status it has no government intervention, with all students paying fees similar to overseas students studying in, say, the UK. Aside, the lower importance attributed to career outputs for Chinese majors might reflect lower career expectations than for UAE, with the institutional structures of state intervention and limit on social mobility playing an influential role on culture, supporting institutional theory. Despite China's transition toward global competitiveness supported by foreign direct investment, the state's continued control over the economy, including bureaucratic regulations, can restrict enterprise (Kshetri, 2009). However, since Chinese university students have had to pay their own tuition fees since 1997 (See Ngok, 2008), the variation in motives between UAE and China might reflect more on *how* pressure is manifested between the two countries.

Overall it would seem that motives cannot be explained in terms of a simple low context high context dichotomy. Although majors in the UK and US mirror each other on several motives, majors in UAE don't fit the paradigm of majors from a high context country such as China. It is suggested that any significant variations between high context and low context countries might reflect a variation in how educational communities have adapted toward convergences associated with more advanced economic cultures. Although high reputation required by UAE majors might reflect the need for uncertainty avoidance, the importance of reputation from majors in China may be mitigated due to conditioning from state intervention leading to greater uniformity in provision of education, despite its recent leaning toward a mixed market economy.

The complexity of motives, across cultures would suggest that educational administrators embarking on expansion programs abroad should thoroughly research their markets prior to investment. Domestic programs will have to be modified in some aspects. However, presenting programs that precisely fit a target's set of motives would be futile. For example, a programmer that screens out rigor for ease of achievement, say in UAE, might satisfy students in the short-term but will hardly be palatable to employers seeking to improve their business competitiveness in a global market.

The generalizability of the results should be tempered by the sampling process, and the solitary period in which the data was collected (representing cross-cultural data) that could be supplemented with longitudinal data. Future research might build on this study and recruit students from a more diverse range of business schools, including their impact on cultural and institutional experiences. Further, comparisons between types of business majors would be of interest, bearing in mind distinctive professional differences have shored up in extant research (e.g. Gleaves, Burton, Kitshoff, Bates, & Whittington, 2008).

Appendix. Factor structure of motives for each country sample (constituting a fifteen-variable model extracted from original list of 35 from Table 1).

Variable	Component					Variance explained
	1	2	3	4	5	
(a) China						
Teaching reputation	.849					30.05%
Research reputation	.824					
University rank	.752					
Well known university	.724					
Need for high achievement	.686					
Competitive success		.830				16.10%
Problem solving		.814				
Strategic thinking		.772				
Develop analytical skills		.692				
Excellent earnings			.893			11.56%
Excellent job opportunities			.882			
Little effort required				.878		9.66%
Limited academic hurdles				.887		
Enjoyment					.935	6.60%[a]
Cronbach alpha scores	.86	.79	.84	.75	N/A	
Cumulative variance explained 73.97%						
(b) UAE						
Teaching reputation	.820					25.43
Research reputation	.735					
University rank	.759					
Well known university	.640					
Need for high achievement	.425[b]					
Competitive success		.544				13.30
Problem solving		.751				
Strategic thinking		.768				
Develop analytical skills		.657				
Excellent earnings			.805			10.39
Excellent job opportunities			.832			
Little effort required				.783		7.21
Limited academic hurdles				.876		
Enjoyment					.787	6.77
Social life					.807	
Cronbach alpha scores	78	68	.76	.63	.60	
Cumulative variance explained 63.10%.						
(c) UK						
Teaching reputation	.758					25.09
Research reputation	.658					
University rank	.851					
Well known university	.828					
Need for high achievement	.631					
Competitive success		.737				13.87
Problem solving		.790				
Strategic thinking		.782				
Develop analytical skills		.755				
Excellent earnings			.898			11.53
Excellent job opportunities			.910			
Little effort required				.896		10.45
Limited academic hurdles				.897		
Enjoyment					.827	8.58
Social life					.821	
Cronbach alpha scores	.82	.78	.84	.79	.62	
Cumulative variance explained 69.53%						
(d) US						
Teaching reputation	.839					31.95
Research reputation	.783					
University rank	.780					
Well known university	.755					
Need for high achievement	.647					
Competitive success		.823				13.97
Problem solving		.818				
Strategic thinking		.803				
Develop analytical skills		.761				

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

Variable	Component					Variance explained
	1	2	3	4	5	
Excellent earnings			.927			12.53
Excellent job opportunities			.910			
Little effort required				.905		8.94
Limited academic hurdles				.864		
Enjoyment					.889	7.67
Social life					.843	
Cronbach alpha scores	.86	.84	.90	.81	.75	
Cumulative variance explained 75.06%.						

[a] Since social life exhibited significant cross-loadings, it was removed, using a five factor solution (with eigenvalue of .92 representing the fifth factor) Cumulative variance explained 73.97%.

[b] Although this value is less than 0.50, it is retained for completeness.

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