



2009

## High-versus Low-Context National Cultures: Preferences for Type of Retailer and for Human Interaction

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### Recommended Citation

Osland, Gregory E. and Florenthal, Bela, "High-versus Low-Context National Cultures: Preferences for Type of Retailer and for Human Interaction" (2009). *Scholarship and Professional Work - Business*. 97.  
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# HIGH-VERSUS LOW-CONTEXT NATIONAL CULTURES: PREFERENCES FOR TYPE OF RETAILER AND FOR HUMAN INTERACTION

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## Abstract

*A purpose of this research is to investigate differences between low- and high- context national cultures in retail settings. In particular, we examined cultural differences in preference for human interaction while shopping, "emotional warmth" characteristics, perception of quality service, and retail channel preferences. As businesses more frequently employ multi-channel strategies in global settings, this topic of national culture gains importance and can shed light on key factors that shape consumers' retail preferences. Our findings indicate that national cultures differ in terms of retail channel preferences, preference for human interaction, and relationships between the two. Managerial implications and future research are addressed, as well as our study's limitations.*

**Keywords:** *high- and low-context, national cultures, retailing, channels, service quality, human interaction, emotions*

## I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

National cultures have been categorized by a conceptualization of high and low context (Hall 1976), especially in relation to interpersonal communication (Chua and Gudykunst 1987; Donghoon et al. 1998). In high-context cultures communication is often not explicit and relies on situational cues, non-verbal behavior, and trust. In low-context cultures the interpretation of people, behavior, and products more often depends upon what is actually said or written (Hall 1976). High-context national cultures are considered more collectivist in nature. The people develop more intimate relationships with each other and engage in more personal communication. Low-context national cultures are more individualistic in nature. The people are more alienated from each other and practice more impersonal communication (Donghoon et al. 1998). As channels differ in terms of opportunities for human interaction and physical touch, we argue that national cultures will differ in terms of channel preferences based on being categorized either as high or low-context. In examining two retail channels, physical stores and web stores, we therefore hypothesize:

$H_1$ : High- and low-context national cultures differ in terms of channel preferences:

- (a) High-context national cultures prefer to shop more in physical stores than low-context national cultures.
- (b) High-context national cultures prefer to shop less in web stores than low-context national cultures.

Marketing researchers have frequently analyzed effects of emotions on purchase decisions (Bagozzi *et al.* 1999). Few have investigated cross-cultural differences of emotional dispositions in social settings (Aune and Aune 1995; Consedine *et al.* 2003; Frymier *et al.* 1990). Frymier *et al.* (1990) suggest that there are emotionally-warm and emotionally-cold cultures. Using a personality-centered inductive approach to delineate warm/cold national cultures (Clark 1990), we propose that national cultures range from emotionally-warm to emotionally-cold in terms of two aspects of emotional disposition: (a) the need for emotional expressiveness, and (b) the need to use emotions to make decisions. As high-context cultures are involved in more intimate relationships and practice more personal communication than low-context cultures, we hypothesize that:

H<sub>2</sub>: High-context cultures express more emotions and use more emotions to make decisions than low-context cultures.

In addition, we argue that high-context national cultures should prefer shopping environments that allow more interaction with people, as personal communication and intimate relationship are more important to them than to low-context national cultures. Also, as "emotional warmth" can be considered a personality trait, we argue that consumers within national cultures who are more "emotionally warm" will prefer more human interaction while shopping. Therefore, we developed the following hypotheses:

H<sub>3</sub> (a): High-context national cultures prefer higher human interaction while shopping than low-context national cultures.

H<sub>3</sub> (b): Within each national culture, consumers considered "emotionally warmer" will prefer higher human interaction while shopping.

Consumers differ in their preferences for human interaction while shopping, regardless of their national culture (Burke 1997; Wolfenbarger and Gilly 2000). These differences may lead consumers to prefer different types of retailers. We propose the following hypotheses:

H<sub>4</sub> (a): Within each national culture, consumers who prefer high human interaction prefer to shop in physical stores more than consumers who prefer low human interaction.

H<sub>4</sub> (b): Within each national culture, consumers who prefer low human interaction prefer to shop in web stores more than consumers who prefer high human interaction.

Service quality has been linked in past research to purchase intentions (Laroche *et al.* 2005). We argue that service quality can also explain channel preferences. When consumers perceive high service quality in a channel, they should be more inclined to shop in that channel. Service quality is a multi-dimensional concept. When evaluating physical stores and web stores, we focus our research on perception of service quality related to interaction with salespeople. Other aspects of service quality, such as cleanliness of the store, operating hours, etc. are not addressed in this paper. We focus on the "salespeople" aspect of service quality, as we are interested in examining the importance of human interaction in the shopping environment. We believe that

consumers will perceive that physical stores have higher service quality related to interaction with salespeople than web stores, as web stores seldom offer interaction with salespeople, while physical stores offer frequent interaction with salespeople. Thus, we hypothesize:

H<sub>5</sub> (a): Within each national culture perception of service quality related to interaction with salespeople is higher for physical stores than for web stores.

H<sub>5</sub> (b): Within each national culture perception of service quality related to interaction with salespeople will impact channel preferences. Perception of higher service quality in a channel will increase preference to shop in that particular channel.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Data were collected with a survey method in three countries, USA, Finland, and Chile. In the USA and Finland, an English version of the survey was used, while in Chile a Spanish version was used. For the Spanish version, one bilingual person translated it from English to Spanish and another bilingual translated it back. A third bilingual person made final corrections. These national cultures were chosen as they differ in terms of high- and low-context. The United States and Finland are considered low-context cultures, while Chile is considered a high-context culture (Chua and Gudykunst 1987; Koeszegi *et al.* 2004). One purpose was to find differences and similarities across the three national cultures in terms of (a) “emotional warmth,” (b) preferences for human interaction while shopping, (c) perception of service quality, and (d) channel preferences (H<sub>1</sub>–H<sub>3</sub> (a)). A second purpose was to examine relationships among the above concepts stated in hypotheses H<sub>3</sub> (b)–H<sub>5</sub>. In particular, we tried to explain channel preferences and preference for human interaction in retail settings with “emotional warmth” and perception of service quality, within the three national cultures.

### Measures

“Emotional warmth” was measured using two existing personality scales: (1) Affective Orientation (AO), which captures the need to use emotions to guide the person’s actions (Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield 1990) and (2) the Affective Communication Test (ACT), which taps into the need to express emotions in social interactions (Friedman *et al.* 1980). Service quality related to interaction with salespeople is measured with two existing scales: (a) empathy dimension of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.* 1991) and (b) interaction orientation of communication style scale (Bass 1960; Williams and Spiro 1985). Preference for human interaction will be measured with our newly-created items, which were tested and found to be reliable in a previous survey. The channel preferences measure is a 7-point scale that asks participants to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the statements: “I prefer to shop in physical stores” and “I prefer to shop in web stores.” They could express also if they prefer to shop somewhere else as a third option.

### Sample

A convenience sample of 254 MBA students completed a pen-and-paper survey in classes in US, Finnish, and Chilean universities. MBA students were chosen because of their age range, their proficiency in using the Internet, and their education level (Table 1).

Thus, we believe that comparing MBA students across nations helps us control for some external factors, such as education, and yet enables us to tap into more diversity of preferences because of a wide age range. The sample was more skewed toward males (69%), and US residents (US-born 38% and lived-in-US 39%). Nationals in the two other countries have smaller representation (Finland-born 17% and lived-in 18%; Chile-born/lived 21%). Though most participants access the internet frequently (94% access it seven or more times a week), in general they shop more off line (77% shop off line three times or more a month) than on-line (24% shop 3 times or more on-line a month).

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Characteristics of Participants (N = 254)**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Frequency (%) / Mean</i>
Country of birth	
US	38%
Finland	17%
Chile	21%
Other	24%
Country where lived most of his/her life	
US	39%
Finland	18%
Chile	21%
Other	22%
Gender	
Males	69%
Females	31%
Age (in years)	
25 or less	15%
26-30	32%
31-35	28%
36 or more	25%
Ownership of personal computer:	
No	1%
Yes	99%
Internet Access (per week)	
6 or less times	6%
7 or more times	94%
Shopping in physical stores—except groceries (per month):	
2 or less times	23%
3-4 times	30%
5 or more times	47%
Shopping in web stores (per month):	
Not at all	6%
Less than once	31%
1-2 times	39%
3 or more times	24%

### III. RESULTS

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Hypotheses Testing**

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Argument</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Results</i>
Retail preferences	High and low-context national cultures differ in terms of retail preferences:		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-context national cultures prefer to shop more in physical stores than low context national cultures.</li> </ul>	H <sub>1</sub> (a)	Partially supported
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-context national cultures prefer to shop less in web stores than low context national cultures.</li> </ul>	H <sub>1</sub> (b)	Partially supported
“Emotional warmth”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-context cultures express more emotions and use more emotions to make decisions than low-context cultures.</li> </ul>	H <sub>2</sub>	Not supported
Human interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-context national cultures prefer higher human interaction while shopping than low-context national cultures.</li> </ul>	H <sub>3</sub> (a)	Partially supported
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within each national culture, consumers considered “emotionally warmer” will prefer higher human interaction while shopping.</li> </ul>	H <sub>3</sub> (b)	Supported for salespeople and partially supported for consumers
Human interaction and retail preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within each national culture, consumers who prefer high human interaction prefer to shop in physical stores more than consumers who prefer low human interaction.</li> </ul>	H <sub>4</sub> (a)	Partially supported
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within each national culture, consumers who prefer low human interaction prefer to shop in web stores more than consumers who prefer high human interaction.</li> </ul>	H <sub>4</sub> (b)	Partially supported
Service quality and retail preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within each national culture, perception of service quality related to interaction with salespeople is higher for physical stores than for web stores.</li> </ul>	H <sub>5</sub> (a)	Supported
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within each national culture, perception of service quality related to interaction with salespeople will impact retail preferences. Perception of higher service quality in a channel will increase preference to shop in that channel.</li> </ul>	H <sub>5</sub> (b)	Partially supported

#### Channel Preferences

The first hypothesis stated that differences should be detected between high vs. low-context cultures in terms of channel preferences. One-way ANOVA was used to detect differences across the three countries, USA, Finland, and Chile. As the US and Finland

are considered more low-context national cultures and Chile is considered a more high-context national culture, we expected to find that US and Finnish participants would prefer to shop more in web stores than Chileans, and Chilean participants would prefer to shop more in physical stores than those in the other two nations. Our results indicate that US participants ( $M_{US} = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) significantly ( $p < .10$ ) prefer to shop less in physical stores than Chilean participants ( $M_C = 5.2$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ). Also, United State participants ( $M_{US} = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) significantly ( $p < .05$ ) prefer to shop more in web stores than Chilean participants ( $M_C = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ). However, Finnish participants are more similar in their behavior to Chilean than to US participants; thus, behaving more as a high-context culture than a low-context culture. Finnish participants significantly ( $p < .05$ ) differ from US participants in preferring to shop more in physical stores ( $M_F = 5.3$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and less in web stores ( $M_F = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). No significant differences were detected between Finnish and Chilean participants (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Thus, the first hypothesis was partially supported.

### Emotional Warmth

Two measures were used to examine "emotional warmth" - Affective Orientation (AO) and Affective Communication Test (ACT). Reliability analysis encouragingly indicates that the Cronbach alpha is .90 for AO scale and .75 for ATC scale. We averaged the items to form AO and ATC measures. The second hypothesis argued that high-context national cultures would be "emotionally warmer" than low-context national cultures. One-way ANOVA was used to test this hypothesis. The results indicate that no significant differences were found across the three national cultures. Thus, the second hypothesis was not supported.

**Figure 1: Cultural Differences in Preference to Shop in Physical Stores**

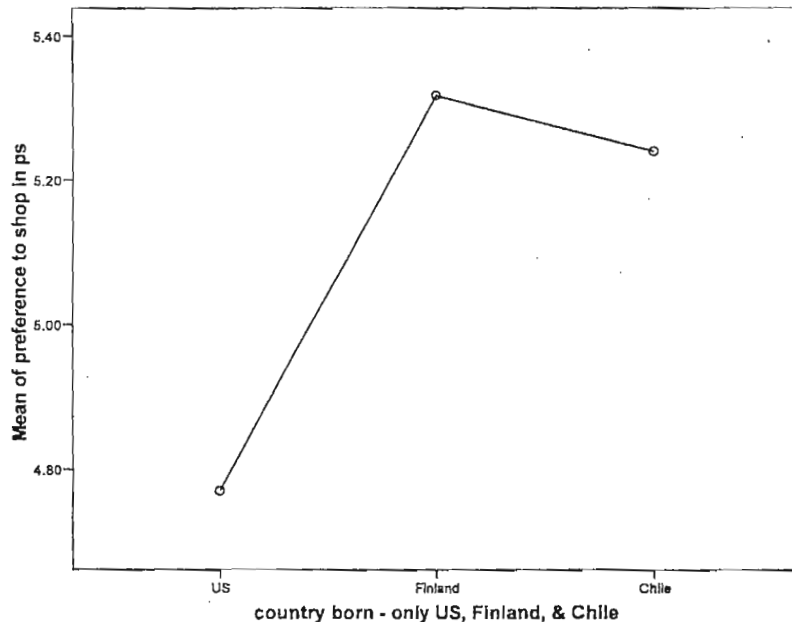
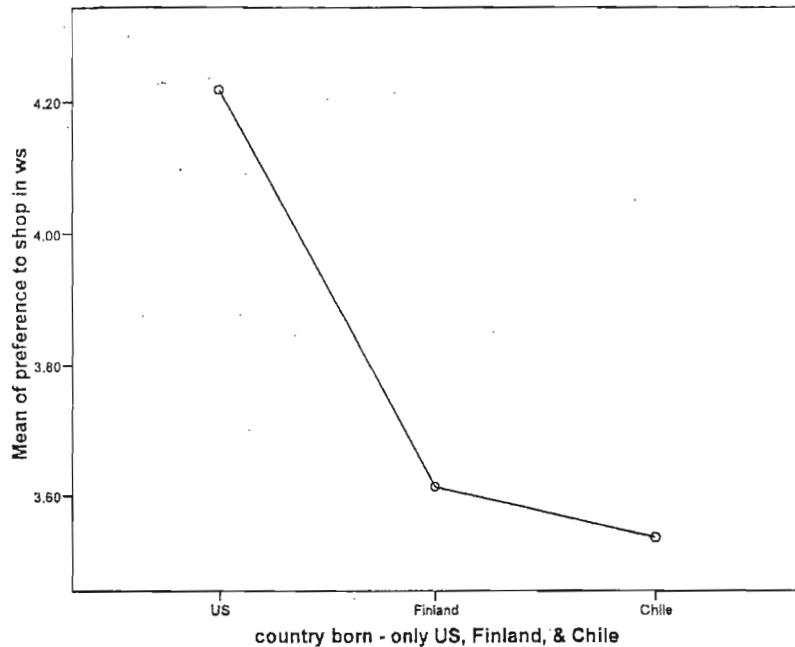


Figure 2: Cultural Differences in Preference to Shop in Web Stores

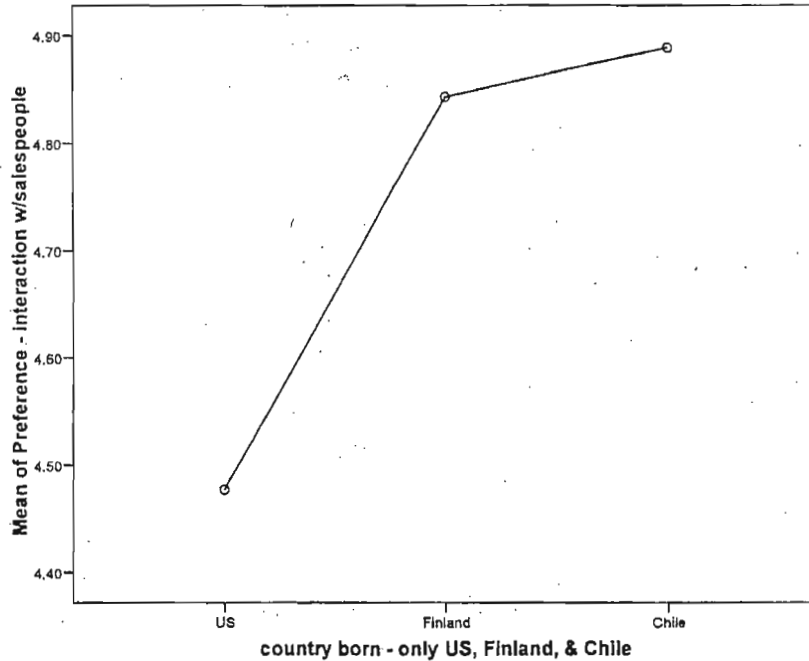


### Human Interaction

The third hypothesis argued that low-context national cultures (USA and Finland) will prefer lower human interaction while shopping than high context national cultures (Chile). Also, we argued that within each national culture, "emotionally warmer" consumers will prefer higher human interaction while shopping. We developed two measures of human interaction in retail settings: (i) interaction with salespeople and (ii) interaction with other consumers. Reliability analysis indicates that Cronbach alpha is .75 for (i) and .83 for (ii). One-way ANOVA was used to test the first part of the hypothesis ( $H_3$  (a)). The results indicate that the USA ( $M_{US} = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) differs significantly ( $p < .05$ ) from Chile ( $M_C = 4.9$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) in terms of preference to interact with salespeople while shopping (human interaction). However, Finland did not differ significantly ( $p > .10$ ) from Chile, and surprisingly differed significantly ( $p < .05$ ) from the USA in terms of this human interaction ( $MF = 4.8$ ,  $SD = .85$ ). Thus, Finnish and Chilean participants prefer significantly higher interaction with salespeople than US participants (Figure 3). In terms of preference to interact with consumers, no significant differences were found. These results partially support  $H_3$  (a).

With respect to  $H_3$  (b) backward regression analysis was used for each national culture to examine the effect of "emotional warmth" on preference to interact with salespeople and consumers while shopping. The independent variables were AO, ACT, gender and age. We added the demographic variables as these variables might explain preferences for human interaction in retail settings. To limit the scope of this research we do not investigate the impact of demographics on preferences for human interaction. We include them in the regression models to make sure that "emotional warmth" can,



**Figure 3: Cultural Differences in Preference for Human Interaction**

beyond demographic characteristics, explain preferences for human interaction in retail settings. Table 3 summarizes the regression analysis results. We found that in all three national cultures one of the “emotional warmth” measures could explain preference to interact with salespeople. In the USA and Chile ACT had significant positive beta coefficients, while in Finland AO had a significant positive coefficient. Thus, in the USA and Chile consumers’ need to express emotions in social settings impacts their preference for interaction with salespeople while shopping. In Finland consumers’ need to use emotions for making decision drives their preferences to interact with salespeople while shopping. In the US only age was also a significant factor in explaining this type of human interaction. Older people were more inclined to prefer interaction with salespeople while shopping. For preference to interact with consumers, for US participants only, the beta coefficient of ACT was significantly positive. Thus, the hypothesis  $H_3$  (b) was supported for preference to interact with salespeople, but only partially supported for preference to interact with consumers.

#### **Human Interaction and Channel Preferences**

The fourth hypothesis argues that within each national culture, consumers who prefer high human interaction prefer to shop in physical stores ( $H_4$  (a)) and consumers who prefer low human interaction prefer to shop in web stores ( $H_4$  (b)). Backward regression analysis was conducted to find significant relationships between human interaction and channel preferences. Table 4 summarizes the regression analysis results. In terms of preference to shop in physical stores, the hypothesis  $H_4$  (a) was supported only for US participants. In the two other national cultures, Finland and Chile, this relationship

**Table 3**  
**Regression Analysis: The Impact of "Emotional Warmth" on Preference for Human Interaction while Shopping**

A. Dependent Variable: Preference for interaction with salespeople

<i>Model</i>	<i>Fit</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Beta Coefficients</i>
USA	F (2, 88) = 8.99, p < .001	.17	
ACT			.44 (p < .001)
Age			.52 (p < .05)
Finland	F (1, 42) = 4.90, p < .05	.10	
AO			.35 (p < .05)
Chile	F (1, 49) = 3.09, p < .10	.06	
ACT			.33 (p < .10)

B. Dependent Variable: Preference for interaction with consumers

<i>Model</i>	<i>Fit</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Beta Coefficients</i>
USA	F (1, 89) = 14.52, p < .001	.14	
ACT			.53 (p < .001)

was not detected. With respect to preference to shop in web stores, the hypothesis H<sub>4</sub> (b) was supported only for Finnish participants and only in terms of preference to interact with salespeople. Thus, the relationship between preference for human interaction and channel preferences seems to be nationally specific.

**Table 4**  
**Regression Analysis**

A. Dependent Variable: Preference to Shop in Physical Stores

<i>Model</i>	<i>Fit</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Beta Coefficients</i>
USA	F (2, 92) = 5.22, p < .05	.10	
Preference to interact with salespeople			.27 (p < .05)
Gender			.72 (p < .05)
Finland	F (1, 42) = 5.18, p < .05	.11	
Gender			.86 (p < .05)

B. Dependent Variable: Preference to Shop in Web Stores

<i>Model</i>	<i>Fit</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Beta Coefficients</i>
Finland	F (3, 40) = 3.01, p < .05	.18	
Preference to interact with salespeople			-.44 (p < .05)
Preference to interact with consumers			.41 (p < .05)
Age			-.90 (p < .10)
Chile	F (1, 51) = 3.36, p < .10	.06	
Gender			-1.06 (p < .10)

### Service Quality Perception and Channel Preferences

The fifth hypothesis states that (a) in each national culture, service quality perception related to salespeople is higher for physical stores than for web stores and (b) higher service quality perception of a channel will increase preference to shop in that channel.

Two measures were used to assess perception of service quality: (a) the SERVQUAL empathy dimension and (b) service quality based on the interaction orientation of communication style scale. We assessed each channel with the two measures. The reliability analysis indicates that Cronbach alpha is .81 and .79 for (a) in physical stores and web stores, respectively, when eliminating one item that did not fit well with other items. The Cronbach alpha for (b) in physical stores and web stores is .90 and .89 respectively. We averaged the items to form the two service quality scales. Paired T-test was employed to assess the differences across channels. The results show that consumers do perceive service quality related to interaction with salespeople to be significantly higher in physical stores than in web stores (Table 5) in all three national cultures. Thus, hypothesis H<sub>5</sub> (a) was supported.

**Table 5**  
**Mean Differences of Service Quality Perception of Channels:**  
**Cross Cultural Comparison**

<i>Measures of Perception of Service Quality</i>	<i>Physical Stores</i>	<i>Web Stores</i>	<i>Significance</i>
USA	Mean (s.d.)	Mean (s.d.)	(p<)
SERVQUAL Empathy dimension	4.26 (.90)	3.01 (1.21)	.001
Service quality based on interaction with salespeople	4.02 (.97)	3.02 (1.13)	.001
Finland			
SERVQUAL Empathy dimension	4.24 (1.01)	2.52 (.99)	.001
Service quality based on interaction with salespeople	4.12 (.94)	2.71 (1.09)	.001
Chile			
SERVQUAL Empathy dimension	4.47 (1.18)	3.57 (1.33)	.001
Service quality based on interaction with salespeople	3.80 (1.27)	3.02 (1.17)	.001

Backward regression analysis was used to test the second part of hypothesis five. Table 6 summarizes the results. The results indicate that higher perception of service quality related to interaction with salespeople increases the chance of shopping in physical stores in the USA and Chile, but not in Finland. In Finland only gender has an impact on preference to shop in physical stores, where women prefer more than men to shop there. In web stores higher perception of quality related to interaction with salespeople does not increase the chance to prefer web stores in all three national cultures. In the USA this service quality perception actually decreases the chance to prefer web stores. In Finland and Chile there is no relationship between this service quality perception and preference to shop in web stores. Thus, hypothesis H<sub>5</sub> (b) is partially supported.

#### IV. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Our study of consumers in three countries provides evidence of national variation in retail preferences and in preferences for interaction with salespeople while shopping. U.S. consumers prefer to shop on-line more than consumers in Finland and Chile. One

**Table 6**  
**Regression Analysis**

A. Dependent Variable: Preference to Shop in Physical Stores

<i>Model</i>	<i>Fit</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Beta Coefficients</i>
USA	F (2, 90) = 12.67, p < .001	.22	
Service quality based on interaction with salespeople			.60 (p < .001)
Gender			.75 (p < .05)
Finland	F (1, 42) = 5.18, p < .05	.11	
Gender			.86 (p < .05)
Chile	F (1, 49) = 3.88, p < .10	.07	
SERVQUAL			.40 (p < .10)
Empathy dimension			
B. Dependent Variable: Preference to Shop in Web Stores			
Model	Fit	R <sup>2</sup>	Beta Coefficients
USA	F (1, 91) = 6.78, p < .05	.07	
Service quality based on interaction with salespeople			-.34 (p < .05)
Finland	F (1, 42) = 3.19, p < .10	.07	
Age			-.89 (p < .10)

explanation for this difference is the finding that Finns and Chileans prefer more interaction with salespeople while shopping, than do consumers in the US. Further, consumers in the US who prefer low human interaction prefer to shop on-line more than U.S. consumers who prefer high human interaction. This within-nation difference was not found for Chile and Finland.

Thus, we found that consumers in the United States behave in a manner that is consistent with what would be expected for a low-context nation where non-written communication and interpersonal relationships are not as highly valued as in high-context nations. In low-context nations the transaction takes precedence over interpersonal relationships. However, we were surprised to find that Finnish consumers' preference for physical stores and interaction with salespeople was more similar to Chileans' preferences than to North Americans'. This suggests the possibility that previous research that classified Finland with Scandinavian nations as a low context nation may not be completely accurate, a finding we also recently found mentioned by Koeszegi et al., 2004. The Finnish language is quite unlike that of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Moreover, throughout the post-World War Two period until 1990, Finland was more closely-linked economically with the Soviet Union than with Scandinavia. The respondents in our study, who were born and raised during this period of heavy Soviet influence on Finland, may have some qualities of Russians, who have been classified as high-context (Dumetz 2006). Alternatively, consumers in Finland may prefer on-line shopping less than those in the U.S. for a variety of non-contextual reasons, including greater accessibility and ease of shopping at physical stores than for North Americans. Finnish retail stores' service levels appear to be higher, generally, than those in the United States, making the physical store experience with salespeople more positive and pleasant in Finland.

The results in this study suggest several conceptual and managerial implications. Despite the perception that urban consumers with similar levels of education and wealth (e.g. MBAs) are becoming more homogeneous, we found national differences in buying behaviors and preferences among this "Yuppie" segment. Thus, managers designing channels of distribution in several national cultures should consider adapting their methods. There is some evidence that low-context nations are more willing and desirous of shopping online without interaction with salespeople. Whereas informational retail websites may be sufficient in some high-context nations, designing websites that enable on-line commercial transactions is important in low-context nations. In addition, retail managers faced with competition from web stores should consider how to capitalize on human interaction. Specifically, managers should seek to enhance the amount and type of interactions between salespeople and consumers, and among consumers. There appears to be a group of consumers who prefer physical stores because of the opportunity for human interaction, which affects their purchasing behaviors.

## V. FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a number of factors to research that may correlate with, or cause national differences in retail channel choice, including the accessibility of on-line technology and of online payment options. Consumers in developing nations do not use banks and credit as much as those in developed nations. Thus, level of economic development and wealth may have a significant effect on channel choices. These and other factors should be tested cross-nationally.

One characteristic of high-context cultures is the extensive use of non-written communication, including non-verbal behaviors. Recently, consumers have been found to differ in their need for and use of touch, both to acquire information about products, and to receive hedonic pleasure, e.g. feeling a cashmere sweater (Peck and Wiggins 2006). Future research could study national differences in the need for touch, and analyze how this affects shopping preferences in various cultures. It appears likely that consumers in high-context cultures would prefer shopping in physical stores over on-line shopping, due to a high need for touching products, both to evaluate the item and to derive pleasure from the tactile impressions.

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