

Examining the Use of Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance Construct as a Definition or Brief Comparison in Ethics Research

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Abstract

This research focuses on studies in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (hereafter *JoBE*) that used Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance construct. The *JoBE* is the foremost outlet for ethics research for most academic disciplines. We included research from the *International Journal of Value Based Management* (hereafter *IJoVBM*) and *Teaching Business Ethics* (hereafter *TBE*), which merged with the *JoBE* in 2004. There were 84 studies that used Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance construct as a definition or brief comparison. Understanding how uncertainty avoidance has already been used could provide opportunities for future research to further increase our understanding of differences in international behavior and/or perceptions.

Keywords: Hofstede, ethics, uncertainty avoidance

1. Introduction

This research examines the use of Hofstede's cultural construct of uncertainty avoidance (hereafter UA) in international ethics research; however, while we only report on Hofstede's UA construct, the majority of the research we examined in this study included all of Hofstede's constructs. UA is a surrogate for a society's relative willingness to tolerate ambiguous outcomes. Hofstede's (1991, 150) UA construct was calculated as the combined score for a series of three questions dealing with: rules orientation, employment stability, and nervousness or stress at work. Rules orientation examines the rigidity of an individual's beliefs about following rules: "Company rules should not be broken – even if the employee thinks it is in the company's best interests" (150). The employment stability factor reflects the anticipated tenure for the individual's current job: "How long do you think you will continue working for this company?" (150). The stress-at-work factor reflects individuals' responses to the statement: "How often do you feel nervous or tense at work?" (150). Hofstede (150) defined culture as a "set of likely reactions of citizens with a common mental programming. . . . reactions need not be found within the same persons, but only statistically more often in the same society". Consequently, Hofstede's UA construct is the average of the combined scores (Formula 1) of all individuals from each country.

$$UA = 300 - 30 (\text{rule orientation}) - (\% \text{ intending to stay less than 5 yrs}) - 40 (\text{stress score}) \quad (1)$$

The uses of Hofstede's cultural dimension of UA vary in the *JoBE* as well as in the *IJoVBM* and *TBE*. In this paper those varied uses are identified by distinct categories, which allows readers to quickly search and understand what information is available in these journals. In the process of our review, we grouped articles into two categories that differentially use UA – definitional and brief comparisons. With respect to the association between these articles and ethics research, those in our definition category briefly mention UA as part of Hofstede's (1980) original research and do not link to ethics research. Brief comparison articles attempt to describe differences between countries and some of these address ethics topics.

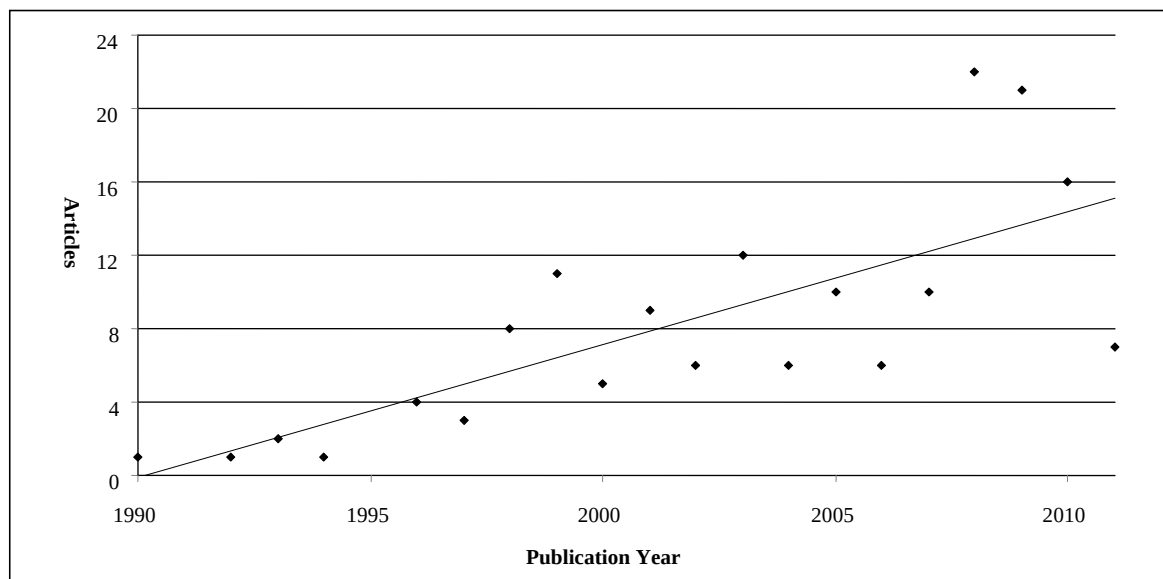
2. Methodology

The first step in the data gathering process was to identify articles to examine from the *JoBE*, which has been published since 1982. We began by using the journal's online search function for 'UA'. To ensure that we identified all articles, we also used Google's *Advanced Scholar* searching for 'UA' in the *JoBE*. We included only original journal articles; book reviews, comments, discussions and rejoinders were not included in our analysis. While this journal has been published since 1982, the first use of Hofstede's UA construct was in 1990; so our study actually includes articles from 1990 through 2011 (e.g., a 22-year period). While we searched all

volumes of the journal between 1982 and 2011, we found our first article using UA in 1990; consequently, we refer to this research as a 22-year study.

While our primary aim was to include articles from the *JoBE*, the publisher of this journal also published the *IJoVBM* from 1988 through 2003 and *TBE* from 1997 through 2003. These journals were ‘merged into the *JoBE*’ at the beginning of 2004. We submit that article counts in the *JoBE* between 1988 and 2003 (i.e., when these journals were independently published) would be understated compared to other years if these journals were not considered in the article count. Consequently, our total article count and classifications include publications from the *IJoVBM* and *TBE*. After identifying the articles that included Hofstede’s UA, the second step in the data gathering process was to determine how UA was used in each article. We classified the 84 articles as either definition or brief comparisons. After classifying the articles, we subsequently reviewed the classifications for validation purposes and resolved any classification differences.

Panel A: Growth in the use of UA in international ethics research



Panel B: Growth in the use of UA as a definition (diamonds and dashed trend line) and comparison (squares and dotted trend line)

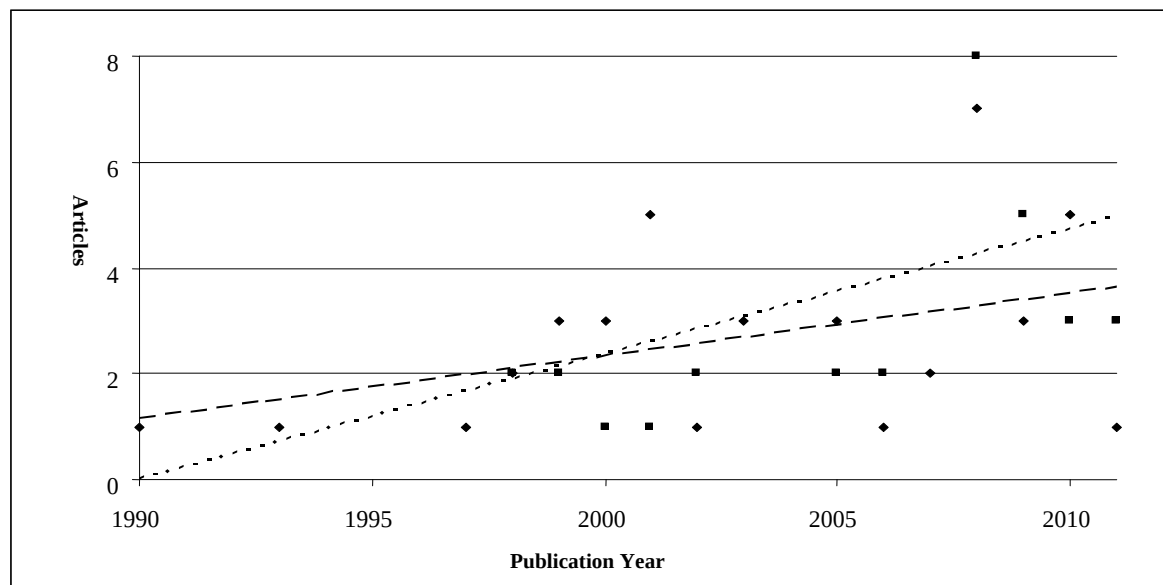


Figure 1. Number of articles using Hofstede’s UA in the *Journal of Business Ethics* by year

For the 22 years of this study, we initially identified 161. Panel A of Figure 1 shows the increasing use of Hofstede's cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance in research shown in the *JoBE*. Even though Hofstede's book first appeared in 1980 and cited four cultural dimensions including UA, the first article found in the *JoBE* that referred to Hofstede's cultural dimension of UA did not appear until 1990. There are multiple reasons for the time lag between Hofstede's first article and the first article referring to his cultural dimensions in this journal. One reason is that research at that time was not as readily accessible as it is today. In addition, there is the concern that articles before 1990 were scanned into online databases which disallow users to search articles for keywords. Since 1992, however, the average use of UA in the *JoBE* has increased by one article every year. A univariate regression model used the number of years since Hofstede's cultural dimension of UA was first cited in the *JoBE* and the number of articles every year to calculate an adjusted r^2 of .56 (Figure 1).

In this research, we examined the 42 articles that used UA as a definition and the 42 articles that used UA as a brief comparison. Of the 84 articles that included Hofstede's UA, 70 were in the *JoBE*; seven were in the *IJoVBM*; and, seven were in *TBE*. The trend-line data in Panel B of Figure 1 portray the growth in the use of Hofstede's UA in ethics research as a definition (dashed trend line) and as a comparison (dotted trend line).

3. Research Findings

3.1 Overview

For the 22 years of this study, we found 84 articles. Figure 1 shows the increasing use of Hofstede's cultural dimension of UA in research shown in the *JoBE*, *IJoVBM* and *TBE*. Even though Hofstede's book first appeared in 1980 and cited four cultural dimensions including UA, the first article found in the *JoBE* that referred to Hofstede's cultural dimension of UA did not appear until 1990. There are multiple reasons for the time lag between Hofstede's first article and the first article referring to his cultural dimensions in this journal. One reason is that research at that time was not as readily accessible as it is today. In addition, there is the concern that articles before 1990 were scanned into online databases which disallow users to search articles for keywords. Due to the varied uses of UA, the 84 articles that included UA were categorized into two groups - each with subcategories. The first group of 42 articles includes only definitional use of UA as background information. In the second group, 42 articles use UA as a brief comparison.

3.2 Definition Articles

Table 1 organizes 42 articles, spanning the years 1990 through 2011 that utilize a definition of UA. The number of times UA was cited briefly remained constant except for 2008, 2010 and 2011. The four panels in Table 1 show the subcategories of uses of UA. Four articles in Panel A define UA. The definitions of UA were used to explain corruption (Beets, 2005; Collins et al., 2009), management (Parnell & Hatem, 1997) and ethics (Rawwa et al., 1998).

In Panel B, UA is defined along with other cultural dimensions. The information provided about UA, and more so, Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide a basis for understanding differences in cultures. These differences in cultural values were used to explain varied beliefs related to advertising (Lin, 2008), corruption (Chandler & Graham, 2010), earnings management (Clikeman et al., 2001), ethics (Dunn & Shome, 2009; Hay et al., 2001; Robertson & Schlegelmilch, 1993), flexible work arrangements (Cohen & Single, 2001) and justice (Primeaux et al., 2003; Sama & Papamarcos, 2000).

Of the articles in Panel C, two articles also list Hofstede's cultural dimensions along with UA. Tang (2008) explains how UA affects people's contribution to the public well-being and Singhapakdi et al. (2001) uses UA to explain its potential effects on marketing ethics. Both articles define and list Hofstede's cultural dimensions to explain individuals' behavior within certain cultures.

Panel D contains 27 articles that list UA with Hofstede's other cultural dimensions. Thirteen articles included in Panel D listed UA with Hofstede's other cultural dimensions; the uses of UA in these articles varied. The 13 articles used the list of cultural dimensions to explain how culture can affect behaviors in several areas. Four articles (Davis et al., 1998; Nebenzahl et al., 2001; Peterson et al., 2010; Zgheib, 2005) observed the association between UA and ethics. Nine articles found relationships between UA and advertising (Fam & Waller, 2003), business education (Lämsä et al., 2000), corruption (Schwartz, 2009), deception within the workplace (Sims, 2002), leadership (Cheung & Chan, 2005), paternalism (Erben & Güneşer, 2008), peer group relations (Sotto & Kohls, 1990), regulation policy (Jing & Graham, 2008) and whistle-blowing (MacNab & Worthley, 2008).

Panel D includes the other uses of the UA construct. Three articles (Aygün et al., 2008; Ng & Burke, 2010; Robertson & Fadil, 1999) listed UA because another cultural dimension (not UA) played an integral role in the

research and the authors found it necessary to mention the other cultural dimensions. Five articles (Chiu et al., 2008; Jin et al., 2007; Lin, 2010; Phau & Kea, 2007; Godos-Díez et al., 2011) did not use Hofstede's cultural dimensions in the research, but included the cultural dimensions within the limitations section of the paper. Another four articles (Jones, 1999; Kim, 2003; Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1999; Sison, 2000) related the ability to understand countries' values to observing cultural dimensions and listed the available dimensions by which one could judge a country. UA was used differently in the final two articles. One used UA to cluster similar countries (Resick et al., 2006) and the other to reflect on previous research (Jin & Drozdenko, 2010). The listing of UA with the other Hofstede cultural dimensions allowed researchers to explain potential differences, reflect on research limitations, understand how to evaluate countries and illustrate uses of other cultural dimensions.

Table 1. Articles Mentioning UA

Author(s)	Year	Author(s)	Year
Panel A: Defines UA			
Beets	2005	<i>Parnell & Hatem</i>	1997
Collins et al.	2009	Rawwa et al.	1998
Panel B: Defines UA along with other cultural dimensions			
Chandler & Graham	2010	Lin	2008
<i>Clikeman et al.</i>	2001	Primeaux et al.	2003
Cohen & Single	2001	Robertson & Schlegelmilch	1993
Dunn & Shome	2009	<i>Sama & Papamarcos</i>	2000
<i>Hay et al.</i>	2001		
Panel C: Defines UA and lists other cultural dimensions			
Singhapakdi et al.	2001		
Tang	2008		
Panel D: Lists UA along with other cultural dimensions			
Aygün et al.	2008	MacNab & Worthley	2008
Cheung & Chan	2005	<i>Nebenzahl et al.</i>	2001
Chiu et al.	2008	Ng & Burke	2010
Davis et al.	1998	Peterson et al.	2010
Erben & Güneer	2008	Phau & Kea	2007
Fam & Waller	2003	Resick et al.	2006
Godos-Díez et al.	2011	Robertson & Fadil	1999
Jin & Drozdenko	2010	Schwartz	2009
Jin et al.	2007	Sims	2002
Jing & Graham	2008	Singhapakdi & Vitell	1999
Jones	1999	Sison	2000
Kim	2003	<i>Sotto & Kohls</i>	1990
<i>Lämsä et al.</i>	2000	Zgheib	2005
Lin	2010		

Italicized data indicate publications in the *IJoVBM* and *TBE*.

3.3 Brief Comparison Articles

The articles in this group provided only a brief mention of UA in a comparative study. These comparisons are separated into four subcategories in Table 2: single or multiple country studies (Panels A and B), action or belief articles (Panel C), and miscellaneous uses (Panel D). A breakdown of the number of articles in each of these three categories includes: uses of UA to compare single countries (12 articles), multiple countries (12 articles), the association of UA to another behavior (14 articles), and miscellaneous uses (four articles).

For 24 articles, UA was applied at a country level to explain actions or beliefs. The countries included in these articles vary. Panel A contains articles that focused on single country research. These included Arab societies (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010), Arab-Gulf culture (Al-Khatib et al., 2004), China (Lowe, 1996; Tan, 2008), Egypt (Sidani & Jamali, 2010), Iceland (Vaiman et al., 2011), India (Monga, 2007), Norway (Brinkmann, 2002), Turkey (Atakan et al., 2008), Thailand (Leung et al., 2009) and the United States (Jose & Thibodeaux, 1999; Simga-Mugan et al., 2005). In Panel B, the articles that reviewed two countries compared Fiji to India

(Wimalasiri, 2004), France to Russia (Chhokar et al., 2001), Germany to Turkey (Schneider et al., 2011) and Hong Kong to Taiwan (Wan et al., 2009; Whitcomb et al., 1998). In addition to those countries, the United States was compared to Egypt (Marta et al., 2003), Hong Kong (Burton et al., 2000), Mexico (Marta et al., 2008), the Netherlands (Smith & Hume, 2005), Taiwan (Brody et al., 1999), Thailand (Singhapakdi et al., 2008) and United Kingdom (Leong et al., 2004). The articles in this section used UA to show cultural differences or to provide background information or reasoning for future discussions.

Table 2. Articles Using UA in Brief Comparisons

Author(s)	Year	Theoretical Premise
Panel A: One-country studies		
Sidani & Thornberry	2010	Arab Societies - Mentions previous research that stated had high UA ratings
Al-Khatib et al.	2004	Arab-Gulf Culture – Mentions UA rating
Lowe	1996	China - Mentions UA rating
Tan	2008	China - Mentions UA rating
Sidani & Jamali	2010	Egypt – Mentions UA rating
Vaiman et al.	2011	Iceland – Mentions UA rating
Monga	2007	India - Uses UA to explain behaviors of Indian Managers
Brinkmann	2002	Norway – Listed UA Score with other Hofstede cultural dimensions ranks
Atakan et al.	2008	Turkey – Mention UA rating
Leung et al.	2009	Thailand - Mentions UA rating
Jose & Thibodeaux	1999	US - Used UA to explain behaviors of American Managers
Simga-Mugan et al.	2005	US - Uses UA to explain behaviors of Americans
Panel B: Two-country studies		
Wimalasiri	2004	Fiji and India - used UA to explain why they avoid risk and have measures doing so
Chhokar et al.	2001	France and Russia –used UA to compare
Schneider et al.	2011	Germany and Turkey – used UA to compare
Whitcomb et al.	1998	Hong Kong and Taiwan - defines UA and uses UA to compare
Wan et al.	2009	Hong Kong and Taiwan - suggests UA was the only major cultural difference
Marta et al.	2003	US and Egypt – uses UA to compare
Burton et al.	2000	US and Hong Kong – used UA to compare
Marta et al.	2008	US and Mexico - mentions the UA differences
Smith & Hume	2005	US and the Netherlands - uses UA to briefly state a difference
Brody et al.	1999	US and Taiwan –uses UA to compare whistle-blowing differences
Singhapakdi, et al.	2008	US and Thailand - used UA to compare
Leong et al.	2004	US and UK - used UA to compare
Panel C: Uses UA as it associates with an action or belief		
Cherry	2006	A positive association between UA and ethics
Haswell et al.	1999	A positive association between UA and more rule specific control systems
Li et al.	2009	A positive association between UA and technology uncertainty
O'Higgins & Kelleher	2005	A positive association between UA and ethics
Preble & Hoffman	1999	A positive association between UA and a rules orientation
Wang & Lin	2009	A positive association between UA and high brand loyalty
Vitell et al.	1993	A positive association between UA and intolerance of deviations from group norms
Moore	2008	A negative association between UA and software piracy - listed all cultural dimensions
Patel & Schaefer	2009	A negative association between UA and ethical decision making
Sood	1998	A negative association between UA and religious factors
Zhang et al.	2009	A negative association between UA and whistle-blowing in China
Fleming et al.	2010	A possible association between UA and moral reasoning - listed all cultural dimensions
Mills et al.	2009	A possible association between UA and Conformity.
Sanchez et al.	2008	A possible association between UA and corruption
Panel D: Miscellaneous uses of UA		
Bowen	2007	Mentions UA use in comparing firms
Insch et al.	2008	Uses UA & Masculinity to relate to female expatriates
Khatri & Tsang	2003	Suggests using UA in future research
Resick et al.	2011	Uses UA to compare six countries briefly

Italicized data indicate publications in the *IJoVBM* and *TBE*.

Associating UA with particular behaviors has become an increasingly popular research area. The associations investigated in Panel C mainly focused on ethical behaviors; however, there were several other associations between UA and behavior. Of the 14 articles in Panel C, seven of them were written in the past three years. Three of these articles focused on ethics (Cherry, 2006; O'Higgins & Kelleher, 2005; Patel & Schaefer, 2009), while four other articles researched similar topics such as corruption (Sanchez et al., 2008), software piracy (Moore, 2008), moral reasoning (Fleming et al., 2010) and whistle-blowing (Zhang et al., 2009). The remaining articles examined associations between UA and topics unrelated to ethics such as: brand loyalty (Wang & Lin, 2009), conformity (Mills et al., 2009), intolerance of deviations from group norms (Vitell et al., 1993), religious factors (Sood, 1998), rules orientation (Preble & Hoffman, 1999), rule specific control systems (Haswell et al., 1999) and technology skepticism (Li et al., 2009). In addition to sorting the Panel C articles based on topics, there are also differences in the suggested associations between UA and other variables. Of the 14 articles that associate UA with a behavior, seven suggested positive relationships. In these studies UA had a positive association with ethics (Cherry, 2006; O'Higgins & Kellenher, 2005), rules specific control systems (Haswell et al., 1999), technology uncertainty (Li et al., 2009), rules orientation (Preble & Hoffman, 1999), high brand loyalty (Wang & Lin, 2009) and intolerance of deviations from group norms (Vitell et al., 1993). In four articles, a negative association was suggested between UA and software piracy (Moore, 2008), ethical decision making (Patel & Schaefer, 2009), religious factors (Sood, 1998) and whistle-blowing in China (Zhang et al., 2009). The authors of the last three articles in Panel C suggested an association involving UA; however, these articles did not indicate whether the associations were positive or negative. These articles discuss an association between UA and moral reasoning (Fleming et al., 2010), conformity (Mills et al., 2009) and corruption (Sanchez et al., 2008).

The four articles in Panel D are categorized as miscellaneous because they did not fit into any of the prior groups. One article suggests UA as a tool to compare firms (Bowen, 2007). Another discussed UA as it relates to female expatriates (Insch et al., 2008), the next article recommended using UA in future research (Khatri & Tsang, 2003) and (Resick et al., 2011) briefly compared six countries including the United States, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland and Taiwan.

Within Table 2, there were uses of UA in ethics research; these findings (Panel C) used UA to help create hypotheses and support beliefs within ethics research. However, none of the connections with UA and ethics research in Table 2 mirrored Hofstede's suggested relationships (Table 1). Instead, there were some articles that demonstrated an association between UA and ethics that was not mentioned by Hofstede. These authors found that high UA related to decreased perception of ethical problems (Cherry, 2006; Vitell et al., 1993), a strong emphasis on enforcement of ethical codes (Preble & Hoffman, 1999), increased consideration of other formal codes of ethics when forming one's own code (Vitell et al., 1993), increased bribery (Moore, 2008), increased corruption (Sanchez et al., 2008) and decreased whistle-blowing (Zhang et al., 2009). In the later tables, the scope, detail and utilization of the association between UA and ethics are greater and more significant.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Our research examined the extent and nature of the use of Hofstede's UA in articles published in the *JoBE*, the *IJoVBM* and *TBE* for a period of 22 years from 1990 through 2011. The beginning of this timeframe (1982) with the first issue of the *JoBE* is two years after Hofstede's (1980) initial publication of his four cultural dimensions. While these dimensions were introduced in 1980, our data indicate that the first article to use UA in each of these three journals was: 1992 for the *JoBE*, 1990 for the *IJoVBM* and 1998 for *TBE*. The data in this study along with the data in Rapp et al. (2011) can be used by future researchers as a template for how Hofstede's UA construct has been used in international research both generally in a variety of business areas and specifically in various areas of business ethics research.

Our data also indicate that 42 of the 84 (50.0%) of the articles citing Hofstede's work used the UA construct as a definition and the remaining 42 (50.0%) articles used UA as a comparison when discussing cultures. This is significantly higher than the 18 articles noted by Rapp et al. (2011) in the *Journal of International Business Studies*. The increased use of UA in *JoBE* in these two categories (4.7 times higher than Rapp et al. noted) and the fact that 52.1% of the 161 articles we initially identified were in these two categories compared to only 15.7% of Rapp et al.'s articles in these categories suggests that use of UA has not developed in international ethics research to the extent it has in other areas of international research. This point offers opportunities for new research streams in international ethics research.

A limitation of our research is that it considered only articles in three ethics journals: the *JoBE*, the *IJoVBM* and *TBE*; of these journals, the last two have not been published since 2003. This limitation also provides the

opportunity for future research which could examine the use of Hofstede's UA construct in other fields and topical areas to determine whether the results of this research are supported.

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