Examining the Effects of Culture, Education, and Corruption on Freedom of Expression: A Multinational Study

Christopher Hecht
Quinnipiac University Department of International Business

Abstract

Held as a fundamental right across most of the planet, freedom of expression is essential for both guaranteeing governmental responsibility and maintaining the democratic process. The objective of this study is to explore the effect of several variables upon the level of freedom of expression across different countries. A review of the literature suggests that several variables have the potential to impact freedom of expression, including education, corruption, and Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions. A sample of 72 countries which had available data for all model variables was used. Using Excel and SPSS, hierarchical regression was utilized to examine the statistically significant influence of various models. As well as examining the variance inflationary factor (VIF), which was used to measure the degree of multicollinearity between variables which found that the results could be interpreted without concern for multicollinearity. The results of this study suggest that corruption and culture, specifically Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance and indulgence vs. restraint dimensions, are factors that significantly affect the level of freedom of expression in a country. The final model explaining 43.6% (p<.000) of the variance in freedom of expression. Of these three significant model variables, corruption explained the greatest part of the variance and is also the model variable most able to be directly influenced by government policy designing at an increase in the level of freedom of expression. Limitations and implications for future research are also discussed.

Introduction

The freedom of speech and expression is considered a fundamental right by the United Nations and is vastly valued in many countries. They are correlated with high levels of development and economic growth, and countries with free expression are more likely to have other human rights guaranteed. However, these rights are not universal, and there are lacking or absent in several countries. While past research has suggested connections between different variables and freedom of expression, most have been tangential and not the focus of the research. Thus, it is necessary to further investigate the relationships between these variables and freedom of expression, which is the objective of this paper. Given the suggested importance of freedom of expression, it is of importance to examine its antecedents to guide governments in strategies to encourage its growth and protection. Previous research has suggested that culture (Balkin 2004), corruption (Sun et al., 2012), and education (Bobo et al. 1989) all influence the level of free expression in a society. However, for all three variables, there is still much we do not know. While research has shown that culture affects free expression, there has been little investigation into what aspects of a culture have the greatest impact. Corruption is also known to shape freedom of expression, but there is still a need to research the degree of impact relative to other variables. Education has thus far had the weakest link to free expression in existing literature, and further investigation is required to determine its role.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R-square</th>
<th>Adj. R-square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>7.068</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>0.271</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>1.345</td>
<td>0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>0.337</td>
<td>0.324</td>
<td>1.706</td>
<td>0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>0.436</td>
<td>0.421</td>
<td>2.245</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variance inflationary factor (VIF) was used with the regression models to measure the degree of multicollinearity between variables which might result in difficulty accurately interpreting the regression results. VIF scores ranged in all four models between 1.1 and 2.1 which are well below the conservative score of 5. Scores above 5 might suggest a multicollinearity problem. VIF scores in this study suggest interpretation problems due to multicollinearity should not be a problem (Hair et al. 2006).

Method

The results of this study suggest that there is a significant link between culture, specifically uncertainty avoidance and indulgence, and freedom of expression, which is a strong link as a variance inflationary factor (VIF) was by far the most significant variable, and the most easily affected by government policy, it can be recommended that governments seeking to improve freedom of expression look primarily to their control over corruption. While indulgence being significant to freedom of expression has been explored before by Khalighi and Khazaneh (2017), this paper takes the next step. Uncertainty Avoidance being positively correlated with the dependent variable is interesting in that it has not been specifically mentioned in relation to freedom of expression in existing research outside of being grouped in with Hofstede’s other cultural variables. While years of education was found to be not significant, education should be investigated in a future research model.

While this study establishes a link between uncertainty avoidance, indulgence, and corruption and freedom of expression, the current model must be further expanded upon. Future research should focus on investigating the possibility of a more complex model, as some of the current variables may be affected by mediators or moderators. The effect of these factors over time and the amount of time needed for significant change to freedom of expression should also be explored. Finally, the causes of these links, especially between uncertainty avoidance and freedom of expression, should be explored to provide a more holistic model of these relationships.

Conclusions

The variance of the data used in this paper indicates how well a country controls corruption, so higher scores indicate lower levels of corruption.

Data for all six of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions was collected for 72 countries, sourced from Hofstede Insights (2019). Years of education data was collected from the UN Human Development Report (2019), and corruption data from Transparency International (2019) was used. For the dependent variable, data was used from The Varieties of Democracy Project’s (2019) Freedom of Expression variable. For each model, a linear regression analysis was run at a 95% confidence interval. Hierarchical model regression was used for four models. Model 1 includes the dependent variable and all six cultural variables. Model 2 includes the cultural variables, individualism uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence vs. restraint, and years of education. Model 3 includes the same cultural variables as Model 2 and corruption. Model 4 removes individualism, leaving uncertainty avoidance, indulgence vs. restraint, and corruption as the included variables.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power distance</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity vs femininity</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long distance vs short distance</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of education</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption Score*</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.581</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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References


