

Kiasu Tendency and Tactics: A Study of their Impact on Task Performance

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ABSTRACT

Kiasu reflects an “obsessive concern with getting the most out of every transaction and a desire to get ahead of others” (Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002: 75). It can have both positive and negative effects. This paper generates three hypotheses about kiasuism and task performance. Using hierarchical regression to analyze the results of a survey of 261 senior-level undergraduate business students in the United States, all three hypotheses are supported. The results indicate that the kiasu construct is generalizable to the United States, and that the key to obtaining competitive advantage through kiasuism lies in selecting and implementing the right tactic for the situation.

Theoretical Development and Hypotheses

The underlying philosophy driving this study is one of interactionism. Interactionism posits that an individual’s behavior is both internally and externally controlled. Individuals both react to their environment and take actions to change their surroundings. In other words, individuals create their environments (Schneider, 1983). As a result, individuals can deliberately change their circumstances, thereby increasing the likelihood of their actions leading to desirable outcomes (Crant, 1995).

Drawing on interactionism, the basis of this study is that, in general, people can take and sustain actions that directly alter their surrounding environment. However, individuals differ in this proclivity, with some being more adept than others. These differences in personality have been found to correspond with one’s general orientation toward external situations (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Examples of such differences include optimism (Papenhausen, 2006), extraversion (Crant 1995), locus of control (Miller et al., 1982), proactivity (Kirby et al., 2002), and competitiveness (Bing, 1999), just to name a few.

A competitive spirit can be a positive factor leading to success. It is an unavoidable part of U.S. culture that is related with success (Bing, 1999). However, when this competitive spirit manifests itself into an extreme desire to win, it can have both positive and negative effects. It drives people to excel, but can also make them overly aggressive (Bing, 1999).

In Asian societies, especially in Singapore, this is given the label “kiasu” (pronounced KEY-ah-sue). Kiasu reflects an “obsessive concern with getting the most out of every transaction and a desire to get ahead of others” (Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002: 75). Kiasuism has both positive and negative outcomes. “The kiasu person is selfish. He takes more than he needs...He is inconsiderate. He is greedy. And he is definitely

obnoxious” (Leo, 1995: 18). However, kiasu also has positive benefits. The kiasu person often excels because they want to win. They scan the environment for opportunities and take quick advantage of them (Leo, 1995). Every action is designed to ensure that the person or their beneficiary gains an advantage.

Kiasuism is a prominent part of the national culture of Singapore. Numerous reports of egregious kiasu behavior have been reported in the local papers, and a local cartoon character called “Mr. Kiasu” was once very popular for his extreme kiasu behaviors (Ho, Ang, & Ng, 1998). For example, piling on food at a buffet table, saving seats for friends on a crowded bus, or waiting until the last moment to merge out of a lane of traffic that is ending are all typical kiasu behaviors. However, this behavior is not unique to Singapore. It has also been observed in Hong Kong (Chua, 1989) and Australia (Ho et al., 1998).

To date, very few scholarly studies have involved the construct of kiasuism. Three key works have examined the concept. Ho et al (1998), Hwang et al. (2002), and Hwang (2003) all utilized kiasuism to understand student behaviors. To develop the nomological net of kiasuism, it is necessary to investigate where it manifests itself and how it relates to other constructs (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

Kiasuism is a form of competitiveness (Hwang, 2003). It is a set of tactics designed to achieve a desired end. If the use of these tactics becomes obsessive and an end-in-itself, kiasuism may become a form of hypercompetitiveness. The exaggerated behaviors of “Mr. Kiasu” are a comical illustration of this effect.

Hypercompetitiveness is a neurotic personality attribute where the desire to win becomes an end in itself (Bing, 1999). A hypercompetitive individual sees everything as a competition in which he or she must win, even if this competitive spirit is destructive or counterproductive (Horney, 1937). Examples of these behaviors include the need to win every argument and “always be right,” and the belief that all of the other cars on the road are trying to race you.

Previous studies have equated hypercompetitiveness to an extreme form of individualism (Ryckman et al., 1997). They found a relationship between hypercompetitiveness and other individual personality traits such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, neuroticism, self esteem, and self-actualization (Ryckman et al., 1990; 1994). Additionally, these results have been found across cultures, with U.S. students exhibiting higher levels of hypercompetitiveness (Ryckman et al., 1991).

Although there are conceptual similarities, kiasuism is distinct from hypercompetitiveness. Hypercompetitiveness is seen as a maladaptive behavior (Kohn, 1992) and a neurotic personality attribute (Horney, 1937). A hypercompetitive individual is competing “as a means of maintaining or enhancing feelings of self-worth, with attendant orientations of manipulation, aggressiveness, exploitation, and derogation of others across a myriad of situations” (Ryckman et al., 1997: 271). Kiasuism, on the other hand, makes no such assumptions of negativity. It is a set of conscious behaviors

designed to achieve a desired goal (Ho et al., 1998). While the obsessive use of these behaviors can become detrimental, kiasuism is a tactic rather than a maladaptive behavior.

Kiasuism can be understood in different manners. It can be examined as an overarching philosophy, or approach to life. It can also be viewed as a context-specific tactic for obtaining goals. Whereas the former is an omnibus approach toward interactions with others, the latter is a deliberate maneuver to obtain a goal. With either understanding of the term, the goal of kiasuism is to gain a competitive advantage over others. The following paragraphs further delineate the distinctions between the two approaches and lay out a series of hypotheses related to task performance.

Overall kiasu tendency is one's inclination towards kiasu behaviors across a variety of every-day contexts, such as eating in restaurants and shopping at stores. The relationship between kiasu tendency and task performance has been observed in many contexts (cf., Chua, 1989). In an education-specific context, Ho et al. (1998) found a positive relationship between kiasu tendency and academic performance for university students in Singapore and Australia.

Given that kiasuism is alive-and-well in Australia, it is likely that this extreme competitive spirit can also be found in similar cultures. As Ho et al. state, kiasuism "could be found in any geographical region, across any time horizon, regardless of cultural and societal backgrounds" (1998: 367). In Hofstede's (1980) seminal study of cultural variables, he classified national cultures along four key dimensions: masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and individualism. Among the 50 nations in his study, the country with the overall closest culture to Australia is the United States. Since Ho et al. (1998) found a positive relationship between kiasu tendencies and task performance among Australian students, it is reasonable to expect that students in the United States will also exhibit kiasu behaviors. Thus,

Hypothesis 1: There will be a positive relationship between kiasu tendency and task performance for students in the United States, *ceterus paribus*.

Kiasu tendency can manifest itself in all sorts of tactics and behaviors. Hwang et al. (2002) identified two distinct kiasu tactics: kiasu-positive and kiasu-negative. While the goal of both tactics is to gain a competitive advantage, they differ in their approach.

Kiasu-positive tactics involve putting in extra effort to increase one's proficiency. In an academic setting, kiasu-positive tactics could include studying longer and more diligently, asking questions in class, and reading materials beyond what is required for the course (Hwang et al., 2002). Kiasu-positive tactics lead students to put extra effort into their classes, a tactic clearly associated with increased academic performance. Additionally, such students are likely to be seen by other students as valuable resources for any group-based class projects. Thus,

Hypothesis 2a: There will be a positive relationship between the use of kiasu-positive tactics and instructor-based assessments of individual task performance, ceterus paribus.

Hypothesis 2b: There will be a positive relationship between the use of kiasu-positive tactics and peer-based assessments of within-group task performance, ceterus paribus.

Kiasu-negative tactics, on the other hand, entail the use of guile, deceit, and selfishness to gain competitive advantage. "In general, the kiasu-negative attitude reflected a desire to keep material and knowledge to oneself so that other students would not benefit from them. In doing so, those with more material or knowledge would have an advantage over others" (Hwang et al., 2002: 78-79). Examples of this tactic in an educational setting could include feigning disinterest in a class to other students, claiming not to have taken good notes when asked to share them, hiding reference materials, and reserving excess time in computer labs to block access by other students (Hwang et al, 2002). While such tactics may make a student unpopular with their peers, they are likely to aid in gaining of competitive advantage over fellow students in terms of exams. Thus,

Hypothesis 3a: There will be a positive relationship between the use of kiasu-negative tactics and instructor-based assessments of individual task performance, ceterus paribus.

Hypothesis 3b: There will be a negative relationship between the use of kiasu-negative tactics and peer-based assessments of within-group task performance, ceterus paribus.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

A sample of 326 undergraduate students from a large southwestern university was recruited for participation in this study. All subjects were enrolled in one of the strategic management classes taught by the authors. All data were gathered using questionnaires administered at the end of the semester. The overall response rate was 80 percent. In the end, 261 usable surveys were obtained from the students. The average age of the respondents was 23 years and 60% were male. T-tests on all of the variables revealed no significant differences between the survey results from the two professors' courses. Thus, all surveys were compiled into a single dataset.

Dependent Measures

The criterion measure for this study was task performance. Since the study was administered in an academic setting, this was defined as academic performance. Due to construct validity issues inherent in any single operationalization of academic

performance, two distinct measures of performance were gathered. The first was a measure of individual academic achievement--the student's average score across the course's three exams. The second measure of performance was determined by other students in the class (i.e., peer evaluations). This was the average of several measures of student performance in group situations, with possible scores ranging from 0 (consistently failed to meet expectations) to 100 (consistently exceeded expectations). Both scores were calculated at the end of the semester.

Independent Measures

Due to the two conceptualizations of kiasuism, it is operationalized in two distinct manners. Overall kiasu tendency assesses one's general propensity towards kiasuism, whereas positive and negative kiasu tactics measure one's use of specific kiasu behaviors.

Overall Kiasu Tendency

Kiasu tendency measures the overall tendency towards kiasu behaviors across an array of every-day contexts, such as eating at restaurants and shopping at stores. It assesses one's level of kiasuism. Kiasu tendency was operationalized using the 10-item scale developed by Ho et al. (1998). The items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale and averaged to arrive at a single measure.

Kiasu-Positive Tactics

Kiasu-positive tactics are kiasu behaviors that manifest themselves through diligence and hard work to excel (Chua, 1989). Education-specific kiasu-positive tactics were operationalized using the three items developed by Hwang et al. (2002), with a reported reliability of .85. The items were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale and averaged to arrive at a single measure.

Kiasu-Negative Tactics

Kiasu-negative tactics are kiasu behaviors that manifest themselves through selfish behaviors and guile (Kagda, 1993). Education-specific kiasu-negative tactics were operationalized using the three items developed by Hwang et al. (2002), with a reported reliability of .89. The items were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale and averaged to arrive at a single measure.

Control Measures

To assess the impact of kiasuism on subject performance over-and-above other factors, a number of control variables were measured. These controls are consistent with those of other studies on task performance (cf., Ashford & Black, 1996; Crant, 1995; Kirby, Kirby, & Lewis, 2002; Morrison, 1993; Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). Specifically, they include the following:

Experience

Prior studies examining task performance have found significant correlations with an individual's experience in their role (Crant, 1995; Hunter & Hunter, 1984). Experience was operationalized as the number of credit hours earned by the student prior to the study semester.

Socially Desirable Responses (SDR)

Social desirability should be considered a style of responding that contaminates and distorts measures of personality (Nicholson & Hogan, 1990). Therefore, SDR must be controlled for in any study using personality-based predictor variables (Crant, 1995). SDR was assessed using Reynold's (1982) 13-item social desirability scale, with a reported reliability of .76.

Extraversion

Extraversion has been routinely shown to predict job performance in situations involving social interaction, an important part of being a successful business student (Crant, 1995). Extraversion was operationalized using Eysenck's (1958) 6-item extraversion scale, with reported reliability of .71. The greater the score, the greater a person's extraversion.

Prior Performance

In almost any situation, one of the best predictors of future performance is past performance (Myers, 1993). Individuals who have been successful in the past are more likely to be successful in the future than those who were less successful in the past. Given the context of this particular study, prior performance was operationalized as the student's overall grade point average (GPA) up to the study semester. Student GPAs were obtained from the university registrar.

Results

Descriptives

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for the variables under study. Multiple indicators of different facets of the same phenomenon are necessary for improved construct validity, however they are often intercorrelated with one another (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). However, an examination of the correlation matrix indicates that all of the correlation coefficients are less than 0.8 in absolute value, a threshold commonly used for the detection of multicollinearity (Kennedy, 1998).

Table 1.
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations
(n = 261)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>s.d.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Exam Scores	65.54	12.05								
2. Peer Evals	96.40	5.94	.27							
3. Experience	119.21	10.29	-.22	-.17						
4. SDR	4.89	2.87	-.23	-.08	.21					
5. Extraversion	4.29	1.54	-.07	.15	-.09	-.08				
6. GPA	3.04	.44	.22	.13	.01	-.05	-.13			
7. Kiasu Tend.	3.21	.81	.46	.40	-.28	-.31	.21	.12		
8. Kiasu-Pos.	2.75	1.54	.30	.21	.16	.12	-.02	.25	.10	
9. Kiasu-Neg.	3.31	1.56	.28	-.09	.06	-.21	-.17	.01	.17	.03

|r| ≥ .12 significant at p<.05 (2-tailed), |r| ≥ .16 significant at p<.01 (2-tailed)

Hierarchical Regression Models

To first assess the impact of kiasuism on one's performance, hierarchical regression analysis was employed. This technique was used to assess the impact of kiasu tendency and tactics on performance over-and-above the effects of the control variables, and is consistent with the methodology applied in other academic performance studies (cf., Kirby et al., 2002). Following the recommendations of Cohen and Cohen (1983), the control variables were entered into the equation prior to the appropriate kiasu variable. The control variables were entered in the following order: experience, social desirability, extraversion, and prior performance. Next, the appropriate predictor measure of kiasuism was entered into the equation. This process was repeated for both of the dependent measures of academic performance: exam scores and peer evaluations.

A critical issue of hierarchical regression analysis is the issue of practical significance. While a measure can be statistically significant, questions arise over whether it is practically significant. In other words, does the measure improve decision making and task prediction? In behavioral research, to the extent that a measure is relatively easy and cost-free to administer, it can be said to have practical significance if it aids in the prediction of the outcome under study (Yates & Taub, 2003).

Practical significance can be informed through an assessment of incremental validity (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003). Incremental validity is defined as "the extent to which a measure adds to the prediction of a criterion beyond what can be predicted with other data" (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003: 443). Sechrest (1963) argued that for a measure to have practical significance it should demonstrate incremental validity. Using hierarchical regression, incremental validity can be assessed by calculating a measure's semi-partial r (Cohen, 1992). This is computed as the square root of the $R^2 \Delta$ value reported for the regression equation (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003). In behavioral research, most relationships fall within $r = .10$ to $.30$ (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003), what Cohen (1992) identifies as the small to medium range. Because variables in behavioral research are frequently interrelated, as variables are added to an equation, R increments generally

decrease (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Hunley and Meyer (2003) propose that by the time a third (or more) variable is added into a regression analysis, a semi-partial r of .15 or greater is indicative of a reasonable contribution to the equation.

The results of the hierarchical regression equations testing Hypothesis 1 are shown in Table 2. They indicate that overall kiasu tendency accounts for a significant positive change in variance in both measures of academic performance when controlling for the effects of the other variables. For this sample of students in the United States, overall kiasu tendency had a significant positive relationship with academic performance. The semi-partial r value for both models indicates power in the medium range and well above Hunsley and Meyer's (2003) .15 threshold, thus supporting the incremental validity of overall kiasu tendency. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 2.
Regression Analysis Predicting Performance with Overall Kiasu Tendency
(n=261)

Variable	Std B	R^2	ΔR^2	F	F Δ	Partial r
Model 1: Exam Scores as DV						
Step 1: Controls						
Experience	.09	.01	.01	1.92	1.92	.08
Social Desirability	-.23**	.06	.05	8.42**	14.82**	.23
Extraversion	-.08	.07	.01	6.27**	1.91	.08
Prior Performance	.21**	.11	.04	8.05**	12.54**	.21
Step 2: Kiasuism						
Kiasu Tendency	.46**	.29	.18	20.80**	63.95**	.42
Model 2: Peer Evals as DV						
Step 1: Controls						
Experience	.09	.01	.01	2.20	2.20	.09
Social Desirability	-.11	.02	.01	2.58	2.94	.10
Extraversion	.10	.03	.01	2.59	2.58	.10
Prior Performance	.12	.043	.01	2.89*	3.73	.12
Step 2: Kiasuism						
Kiasu Tendency	.35**	.15	.10	8.78**	31.00**	.32

* significant at $p < .05$ (2-tailed), ** significant at $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

The results of the hierarchical regression equations testing Hypotheses 2a and 2b are shown in Table 3. They indicate that kiasu-positive tactics account for a significant change in variance in both measures of academic performance when controlling for the effects of the other variables. Kiasu-positive tactics had a significant positive relationship with both measures of academic performance. The semi-partial r value for both models indicates power near the medium range and above Hunsley and Meyer's (2003) .15 threshold, thus supporting the incremental validity of kiasu positive tactics. Therefore, Hypothesis 2a and 2b were supported.

Table 3.
Regression Analysis Predicting Performance with Kiasu-Positive Tactics
 (n=261)

Variable	Std <i>B</i>	R ²	ΔR ²	F	F Δ	Partial <i>r</i>
Model 3: Exam Scores as DV						
Step 1: Controls						
Experience	.09	.01	.01	1.92	1.92	.08
Social Desirability	-.23**	.06	.05	8.42**	14.82**	.23
Extraversion	-.08	.07	.01	6.27**	1.91	.08
Prior Performance	.21**	.11	.04	8.05**	12.54**	.21
Step 2: Kiasuism						
Kiasu-Positive	.42**	.28	.17	19.93**	60.10**	.41
Model 4: Peer Evals as DV						
Step 1: Controls						
Experience	.09	.01	.01	2.20	2.20	.09
Social Desirability	-.11	.02	.01	2.58	2.94	.10
Extraversion	.10	.03	.01	2.59	2.58	.10
Prior Performance	.12	.04	.01	2.89*	3.73	.12
Step 2: Kiasuism						
Kiasu-Positive	.21**	.09	.04	4.78**	11.85**	.20

* significant at p<.05 (2-tailed), ** significant at p<.01 (2-tailed)

The results of the hierarchical regression equations testing Hypotheses 3a and 3b are shown in Table 4. They indicate that kiasu-negative tactics account for a significant change in variance in both measures of academic performance when controlling for the effects of the other variables. Kiasu-negative tactics had a significant negative relationship with peer-based assessments of within-group performance (i.e., peer evaluations). They also had a significant positive relationship with instructor-based assessments of individual academic performance (i.e., test scores). The semi-partial *r* value for both models indicates power well within in the small range and above Hunsley and Meyer's (2003) .15 threshold, thus supporting the incremental validity of kiasu negative tactics. Therefore, Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b were supported.

Table 4.
Regression Analysis Predicting Performance with Kiasu-Negative Tactics
(n=261)

Variable	Std <i>B</i>	R ²	ΔR ²	F	F Δ	Partial <i>r</i>
Model 5: Exam Scores as DV						
Step 1: Controls						
Experience	.09	.01	.01	1.92	1.92	.08
Social Desirability	-.23**	.06	.05	8.42**	14.82**	.23
Extraversion	-.08	.07	.01	6.27**	1.91	.08
Prior Performance	.21**	.11	.04	8.05**	12.54**	.21
Step 2: Kiasuism						
Kiasu-Negative	.23**	.16	.05	9.68**	14.53**	.22
Model 6: Peer Evals as DV						
Step 1: Controls						
Experience	.09	.01	.01	2.20	2.20	.09
Social Desirability	-.11	.02	.01	2.58	2.94	.10
Extraversion	.10	.03	.01	2.59	2.58	.10
Prior Performance	.12	.04	.01	2.89*	3.73	.12
Step 2: Kiasuism						
Kiasu-Negative	-.24**	.09	.05	5.35**	14.58**	.23

* significant at $p < .05$ (2-tailed), ** significant at $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Discussion

As previously mentioned, to develop the nomological net of kiasuism, it is necessary to investigate how it relates to other constructs and where it manifests itself. Previous studies have found similar results in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia (Ho et al., 1998; Hwang et al., 2002). They have also theorized that it is probable that similar behaviors exist elsewhere (Ho et al., 1998). The results of this study demonstrate evidence of kiasuism in the United States, thus increasing the generalizability of the kiasu construct. None of the questionnaire items use the words “kiasu” or “kiasuism,” and it is interesting to note that none of the subjects were familiar with the terms. While American students may not know the word kiasu, they appear to be familiar with the behaviors. In an overall sense, kiasu behavior does lead to improved task performance in the United States, similar to the effect it has elsewhere. The extreme desire to win in an attempt to gain competitive advantage appears to be a multicultural phenomenon.

In an education-specific context, the tactics through which kiasu behavior manifests itself have significantly different effects. This study found that kiasu-positive tactics lead to improved test scores and peer evaluations. This seems to conform to the general notion that success follows from hard work and diligence. All else being equal, students that go above-and-beyond to ensure they have mastered class material outperform less motivated students.

It is interesting to observe that kiasu-negative tactics can be damaging to task performance. As hypothesized, actions characterized by deceit and guile are generally viewed in unfavorable terms by peers. It could be that kiasu-negative tactics lead to the impression that one is not trustworthy and is only self-interested. Clearly, these are not characteristics one would desire in a fellow group member. While kiasu-negative tactics

seem to align with some of the seminal works on strategy (cf., Sun Tzu, 1971; Mintzberg, 1992), it appears that the choice of kiasu-negative tactics is not a wise one when group-based tasks are required.

Limitations and Future Research

While efforts were taken to design and execute a robust study, this project does have limitations. One limitation of the study is the subject pool. All subjects are undergraduate business students at a large public university in the southwestern United States. The generalizability of this study would be enhanced with a larger and more diverse sample. Perhaps future research can address this issue.

Additionally, ideally the statistical analysis would have revealed greater incremental significance of the effects of kiasu tendency and tactics on task performance. This is especially true when performance is operationalized with peer evaluations, since collectivist students tend to rate all group members similarly regardless of this behaviors (Bowes-Sperry et al., 2005). Future researchers may want to control for collectivist orientation. However, as previously addressed, the results are statistically significant, incrementally valid, and practically significant.

An interesting follow-up study would be to explore the relationship between kiasuism and hypercompetition. When does the use of kiasu tactics become dysfunctional and maladaptive? Additional research into this area is necessary to develop an understanding of the relationship between the two constructs.

This study has furthered our knowledge of kiasuism. Learning about a construct is a key part of building the nomological net (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). It is necessary to investigate how variables interrelate with each other. By examining kiasuism's effect on task performance in light of the control variables, we have endeavored to contribute to the nomological net surrounding kiasuism. Additional future research, such as the relationship with hypercompetition, will help to empirically establish the construct.

In sum, it appears that kiasuism is a behavior that is not unique to Asia. Ho et al. (1998) demonstrated its existence in Australia. American students also exhibit similar tendencies in their pursuit of task performance, and their task performance can be enhanced by the appropriate choice of tactics. As has been observed, kiasuism is not all bad (Chua, 1989). Positive benefits can accrue from the manifestation of a highly competitive spirit. As this study demonstrates, the key to obtaining competitive advantage through kiasuism lies in selecting and implementing the right tactic for the situation.

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