

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO IDENTITY AND CONSUMPTION

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CULTURE AND SELF-REGULATION

The influence of self-construal on impulsive consumption

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Culture and identity are fundamentally intertwined. Shared cultural values – those integrated systems of attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors – dictate the norms for interactions among group members. They also provide a blueprint for acceptable means of expressing identity.

The expression of cultural values and cultural identity takes many forms. One of those forms, which is the focus of this volume, is consumption. As several other chapters in this volume suggest, cultural differences in self and identity can be seen across a large spectrum of consumer behaviors. In this chapter, we focus on the relation between cultural orientation and impulsive consumption, and the underlying processes of self-regulation. More specifically, we discuss the cultural identity of self-construal – how members of a culture view themselves in relation to other members – and how it influences self-expression and self-regulation, and the corresponding effects these constructs have on impulsive consumption.

Cultural orientation and self-construal

Culture is a complex construct that represents ways of engaging with the world. Although often thought of in terms of people and their values and traditions, it also comprises those things that people of a culture make, such as structures and institutions (Oyserman and Lee 2007). Cross-cultural researchers have noted the systematic ways in which cultures differ on how their people interact with each other and the environment. Numerous dichotomies have been noted that capture some of these differences, such as masculine/feminine (Hofstede 1980), loose/tight (Triandis 1995), and short/long-term orientations (Chinese Culture Connection 1987). The most prominent distinction, and the one on which we focus in this chapter, is individualism/collectivism (Hofstede 2005; Oyserman and Lee 2007). Individualistic cultures view the individual as independent and autonomous, put emphasis on individual initiative, value emotional independence, self-reliance, and freedom of choice, and stress rights over duties. In contrast, collectivistic cultures give priority to group goals over personal goals, define the self in relation to the group, value conformity and in-group harmony, and stress sharing, duties, and obligations over personal rights (Hofstede 1980; Triandis 1995; see also McCarty and Shrum 2001).

Although individualism and collectivism are viewed as cultural level constructs that represent opposite ends of a continuum, more contemporary models suggest that the concepts can be both operationalized and measured at the individual level (Singelis 1994; Triandis 2009; Triandis *et al.* 1988; Zhang 2004; Zhang *et al.* 2006; Zhang and Mittal 2007). Moreover, the constructs can be viewed as orthogonal ones that coexist within the same culture and within each person. The internalization of these cultural values influences how the self is viewed. In their seminal paper on self-construal, Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguished between independent and interdependent self-construals (for a more in-depth discussion, see Chapter 1, this volume). People with an independent self-construal (independents) view themselves as autonomous, self-contained, and distinct from the group, and tend to place high value on uniqueness, achievement, and individual accomplishments. In contrast, people with an interdependent self-construal (interdependents) see themselves in terms of their connectedness to the larger group, stress conformity and group harmony, and place high value on safety and security. These differences in self-construal in turn manifest themselves in attitudes and behaviors. The behavior of independents tends to be guided more by attitudes and internal dispositions, whereas the behavior of interdependents is guided more by subjective norms (Abrams *et al.* 1998; Ybarra and Trafimow 1998). Independents take more social risks but interdependents take more financial risks (Mandel 2003; Hsee and Weber 1999), and independents tend to be more promotion-focused and seek to maximize gains, whereas interdependents tend to be more prevention-focused and seek to minimize losses (Aaker and Lee 2011).

Markus and Kitayama (1991) note the link between the cultural level constructs of individualism and collectivism, and self-construal. It is well established that individuals have multiple selves (Kihlstrom and Cantor 1984), and this is true of self-construals. Individuals typically hold both self-construals simultaneously, and cultures differ in the extent to which their members have a particular self-construal that is chronically accessible, activated most often, and the predominant guide to behavior. People in individualistic cultures (e.g. Western cultures such as American and European) tend to hold predominantly independent self-construals, whereas people in collectivistic cultures (e.g. Eastern cultures such as Asian) tend to hold predominantly interdependent self-construals. However, contextual cues can also make a particular self-construal temporarily accessible (Oyserman and Lee 2007). Thus, self-construals can be manipulated so that even those with chronically independent or interdependent selves can be situationally primed to take the opposite perspective (Trafimow *et al.* 1991; for a review, see Oyserman and Lee 2008).

Self-construal and self-regulation

The attributes associated with independent and interdependent self-construals have clear implications for self-regulation. For independents, one of their primary motivations is self-expression. Independents strive to be unique and stand out from others. They give priority to personal goal pursuit, tend to “do what is fun” (Triandis 2009: 190), and are relatively unconcerned about how such behaviors affect others, compared to interdependents. The case for interdependents is quite different. Interdependents strive for group cohesion and harmony, and work to fit in with (rather than stand out from) the group. They are particularly vigilant about how their actions and expressions affect others, and less concerned about pursuing personal goals that are distinct from group goals.

It is the differences between interdependents and independents in vigilance, monitoring, and concern about the impact of one's actions on others that translate into differences in self-regulation. Because independents are more concerned about self-fulfillment and acting on their own thoughts and feelings, their behavior tends to follow the pleasure principle, they choose actions

based on benefits versus costs, and they are less concerned about the impact of their actions on others (Triandis 1995). Consequently, they are less likely to regulate their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. In contrast, because interdependents are concerned about how their actions affect others, they are more likely to suppress expressions and behaviors that would be considered disruptive. This act of suppression suggests a high level of self-regulation. In fact, self-regulation and impulse control are fundamental to Confucian philosophy. When asked how to live a good life, Confucius replied that it is important to subdue one's impulses and desires, then return to ritual, and all will ascribe the goodness to a man who can control himself (Tu 1978).

Research in a number of domains supports this cultural difference in self-regulation. For example, interdependent cultures tend to regulate emotions more so than do independent cultures (Eisenberg and Zhou 2000; Morelli and Rothbaum 2007). Emotions that may be disruptive, such as pride, anger, or frustration, are viewed more negatively in Eastern than Western cultures (Kitayama *et al.* 2004). Based on scores on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Chinese people are more emotionally reserved and practice more self-restraint than do people from a Western culture (Song 1985). These differences have also been documented in the workplace, with Chinese managers endorsing the concept of emotional moderation and conflict avoidance more so than British managers (Westwood *et al.* 1992). In a study that examined cultural differences in emotional regulation in the context of interpersonal conflict, Tsai and Levenson (1997) measured physiological response and self-reported affect of European-American and Chinese-American dating couples while the couples discussed the main source of conflict in their relationships. Their results showed that the European-American couples exhibited greater variability and positivity in reported affect and more variable cardiac interbeat intervals than the Chinese-American couples, suggesting less self-regulation for those with more independent self-construals.

Other research on self-regulation, particularly with children, has shown similar cultural differences. For example, in a study of preschoolers, North American children responded to hypotheticals of interpersonal conflict with more indicators of anger and aggression than did Japanese children (Zahn-Waxler *et al.* 1996). In another study of adolescents, Western children showed more aggression and less guilt and shame than did Japanese children (Kornadt *et al.* 1992).

Philosophical writings, ethnographic studies, and experimental research have all produced consistent evidence for cultural differences in self-regulation across a variety of situations. In the next section, we discuss the implications of this research for impulsive consumption, and discuss several studies, including work in progress, that have directly assessed the relation between cultural orientation (self-construal) and impulsive consumption.

Self-construal and impulsive consumption

Thus far we have presented evidence of cultural differences in self-regulation. In particular, we have discussed research indicating that individuals with a predominantly interdependent self-construal tend to self-regulate to a greater degree than do individuals with a predominantly independent self-construal. We now consider the proposition in the context of what is generally considered to be a self-regulatory failure: impulsive consumption. Impulsive consumption (or time-inconsistent preferences) can be thought of as a self-control problem that results from a conflict between desires to consume (e.g. a product or an experience) and the willpower to resist (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). Willpower is the strength of will or self-control to resist an impulse, and is a function of both the ability and motivation to exert this willpower (Zhang and Shrum 2009).

Impulsive consumption often poses serious problems for both individuals and societies. Some have estimated that about 62% of supermarket sales and 80% of luxury-goods sales in the US are

attributed to impulsive buying and consumption (Agins 2004). New technologies that promote instant gratification through immediate access to goods and services (e.g. ATM machines, online and home television shopping, etc.) are thought to be one source of the problem (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Rook 1987; Vohs and Faber 2007). Impulsive behavior is often associated with negative traits such as lower intelligence, immaturity, and poor value systems, and can lead to problematic outcomes (e.g. financial problems, lower self-esteem, post-purchase dissatisfaction) (Rook 1987; Rook and Fisher 1995). It has also been linked to high debt-to-income ratios in the US (Vohs and Faber 2007).

Underlying mechanisms

When given the choice of consuming a hedonic product or experience, consumers often experience a conflict between two competing goals: pleasure seeking and self-regulation (Zhang and Shrum 2009). Individuals may differ on the relative accessibility of those goals in memory (Ramanathan and Menon 2006), such that those who are considered chronically high in impulsivity are ones whose pleasure-seeking goals tend to be more accessible than self-regulation goals. Situational factors can also impact the activation of these goals. For example, when self-regulatory resources are in ample supply, both high and low impulsives may be able successfully to resist a strong impulse to consume. However, if those self-regulatory resources become depleted, high impulsives are more likely to succumb to the impulse than low impulsives (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999).

The notion of individual differences in goal activation (pleasure seeking vs. self-regulation) has implications for the possible relation between self-construal and impulsive consumption. We have reviewed research showing that independents and interdependents differ on which goals are chronically accessible. Independents are oriented toward goals of expressing individuality and acting on their attitudes and emotions (Trafimow *et al.* 1991), whereas interdependents are oriented toward goals of conformity to social norms and group cohesion. Given that impulsive consumption is generally considered a vice that reflects immaturity, then individuals who have more accessible interdependent self-construals should be inclined to activate the goal of suppressing behaviors that are considered normatively inappropriate and may disrupt social cohesion, which should reduce impulsive consumption. In contrast, those with independent self-construals should be inclined to act on their attitudes and emotions and worry less about the normative inappropriateness of the behavior, and thus should be more likely than interdependents to give into the impulse.

In the next section, we review both survey and experimental research that has addressed this proposition. We also discuss research in progress that is aimed at better understanding some of these processes.

Kacen and Lee (2002): culture and impulsive buying

In one of the first studies to investigate the relation between culture and impulsive consumption, Kacen and Lee tested the hypothesis that collectivists would be more successful than individualists at resisting impulsive consumption tendencies. They reasoned that humans are for the most part similar in their preferences for pleasure over pain. When they see something that gives them pleasure, they will likely want it. Thus, Kacen and Lee surmised that there would be few cultural differences in trait impulsiveness; those feelings are more innate and uncontrollable. They also expected that trait impulsiveness would be predictive of impulsive buying. However, where they did expect to see cultural differences was in suppressing those impulsive urges. That is, they expected that collectivists would be less likely than individualists to act on their impulses.

To test this proposition, they conducted surveys in five different countries that differed on whether they scored high on Hofstede's (2005) ranking of individualism (Australia, US) or collectivism (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong). The surveys asked respondents to complete measures of buying impulsiveness tendencies (trait measure) and indicate how often they actually did end up buying things on impulse (behavioral measure). The surveys also measured respondents' level of self-construal (independent and interdependent). As expected, they found virtually no differences between the individualistic and collectivistic countries on their scores on the trait buying impulsiveness. They also found that although trait buying impulsiveness was indeed predictive of impulsive buying behavior for both cultures, individualists showed a significantly stronger correlation than collectivists between the trait measure of buying impulsiveness and their actual impulsive buying. The same was true when measured levels of self-construal were considered. This pattern of results suggests that independents and interdependents have similar levels of impulsive tendencies, but interdependents are less likely to act on those impulses, and thus suppress their impulsive urge to buy.

These results support the hypothesis of cultural differences in impulsive consumption. However, there are two important questions left unanswered. The first pertains to causality. It may be that other variables that are correlated with both the cultural orientations and the impulsive measures are driving the results (e.g. other cultural values, such as power distance or horizontality-verticality; Oyserman and Lee 2008; or impression management and socially desirable responding; Lalwani *et al.* 2009). The second question pertains to the underlying processes. Why are interdependents more successful than independents at resisting their impulsive tendencies? Are they more motivated to do so, simply better at it, or both? These possibilities were addressed by Zhang and Shrum (2009).

Zhang and Shrum (2009): self-construal and impulsive alcohol consumption

Alcohol use and abuse has been consistently linked to impulsivity. Impulsivity has been found to be positively correlated with drinking behavior (Acton 2003) and negatively correlated with serotonin levels in people with alcohol disorders (Soloff *et al.* 2000). Other traits related to impulsivity, such as lack of willpower (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), sensation-seeking (Grau and Ortet 1999), and need for stimulation (Gerbing *et al.* 1987), have also been linked to alcohol consumption.

Based on these findings, Zhang and Shrum (2009) conducted a series of studies to test the hypothesis that self-construal is related to impulsive consumption. In the first two studies they used secondary data to examine the relation between individualism and alcohol consumption. In the first study, they obtained data indicating the per capita beer consumption of 42 countries, and then correlated these data with each country's individualism scores (Hofstede 2005). In the second study they obtained data pertaining to problem alcohol consumption, published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2004), which provides the data broken out by US states. They then correlated each state's measured level of individualism (Vandello and Cohen 1999) with three separate problem alcohol consumption measures: percentage of teens reporting drinking alcohol in the last month; percentage of teens reporting heavy drinking in the last month; and percentage of adults reporting binge drinking (five or more drinks) in the last month.

As expected, individualism was positively correlated with per capita beer consumption in the first study ($\beta = 0.38$), and this relation was significant even when other potential confounding variables were controlled (e.g. masculinity, power distance, uncertain avoidance, income, climate, religiosity). The results for the second study were even more dramatic. Individualism was

positively correlated with teen drinking ($\beta = 0.83$), teen heavy drinking ($\beta = 0.44$), and adult binge drinking ($\beta = 0.42$), and the results again held when control variables (income, temperature) were included in the analysis.

Although consistent with hypotheses, these studies were also correlational and cannot speak confidently to the issue of causality, and also say nothing about the underlying processes.

To address these issues, Zhang and Shrum conducted two experiments that manipulated participants' self-construal. To accomplish this, in one of the experiments Zhang and Shrum had participants write about either enjoying themselves (independent self-construal) or enjoying relationships (interdependent self-construal). This procedure has been shown to prime the respective concepts (Hamilton and Biehal 2005). Following that, participants were asked to provide their attitudes toward drinking beer at that moment. In addition, to address the question of why the effect occurred, the researchers also manipulated the context of the drinking, either with peers (friends) present or not. Having peers present was expected to increase motivations for beer consumption among independents, but decrease the motivations for interdependents.

The results were as predicted, and suggest that greater motivation to suppress impulsive consumption tendencies on the part of interdependents can explain the previous findings. These findings were further confirmed in a second experiment. The design of this experiment was identical to the previous one except for one change: some of the participants were given a task that reduced their self-regulatory resources (and hence their ability to resist tempting impulses). Thus, under these circumstances, even those who were motivated to resist impulsive feelings (interdependent) would be unable to do so. As expected, this manipulation eliminated the effect of peer presence on alcohol consumption preferences.

The findings of Zhang and Shrum (2009) indicate that interdependents do in fact exert more self-control, and resist impulsive tendencies more than independents. In addition, consistent with Kacen and Lee (2002), these differences can be traced to a greater motivation to suppress impulsive tendencies on the part of interdependents. Combined, the two sets of studies provide consistent results using multiple research methods across different impulsive consumption domains. Moreover, not only do both laboratory experiments and field surveys provide convergent findings, but similar relations can be noted in aggregate consumption data.

Future research

Although the research just reviewed provides compelling evidence of cultural differences in impulsive consumption, there are still some additional unanswered questions. One that we are in the process of investigating is the extent to which these cultural differences can be attributed to motivation versus ability. The studies by Zhang and Shrum provide clear evidence that motivation is at least one component. However, it may be that ability to resist temptation also plays a role. Some models of self-regulation consider it analogous to a muscle (Muraven and Baumeister 2000). Self-regulatory resources are limited, and thus self-regulatory strength can be depleted when self-regulation is engaged (exercised). When self-regulatory strength is depleted, the ability to self-regulate is decreased. This explains why in Zhang and Shrum (2009: study 3), independents and interdependents behaved similarly after a self-regulatory resource-depletion manipulation, even though interdependents were more motivated to self-regulate when peers were present.

However, there is also some evidence that, like human muscles, the self-regulatory muscle can be strengthened through exercise (Muraven *et al.* 1999). That is, practice at self-regulation can increase the ability to self-regulate. If so, then people who regularly engage in self-regulation and impulse control (e.g. people who are chronically interdependent) should show a greater ability to resist temptation than those who would habitually self-regulate relatively less. There is

some evidence to support this proposition. In an experiment that manipulated self-regulatory resources, chronic interdependents exhibited more self-control (took fewer chocolates) than independents, even after their self-regulatory resources were depleted (Arsena *et al.* 2010). Seeley and Gardner (2003) also found that chronic interdependents do not get as depleted as independents following a self-regulation task (see also Seeley and Gardner 2006). Zhang *et al.* (2010) reported similar self-regulation effects as a function of power distance. We are currently conducting experiments in the US and China to further untangle the effects of motivation and ability to self-regulate and resist impulsive consumption tendencies.

In sum, although research on cultural differences in impulsive consumption is in its infancy, the results to date compellingly argue for these differences, at least in terms of Eastern versus Western cultures. However, there are many cultures, and many cultural variables, other than the ones that have been a focus of research thus far. Future research would benefit from an exploration of these other types of cultural differences, particularly ones that take a more nuanced view of cultural differences. For example, most research on cultural values looks at the effects of one or more cultural value, either in isolation or simultaneously. However, relatively little research investigates how cultural values interact and places these effects within a theoretical framework (for an exception, see Triandis and colleagues' research on vertical and horizontal dimensions of individualism and collectivism; Triandis 1995; Triandis and Gelfand 1998; for a review, see Shavitt *et al.* 2006). Understanding cultural differences beyond the main effects of cultural values should contribute to a deeper understanding of the effects of culture and identity on consumer behavior.

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