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Relational Versus Group Collectivism and Optimal Distinctiveness in a Consumption Context

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There has been ample criticism of the individualism – collectivism distinction in both consumer and cross-cultural psychology. Recent research (Brewer & Chen, 2007) for instance has argued that there is a conceptual confusion about the meaning of ingroups that constitute the target of collectivism. Whereas all societies must meet primary needs for both individual and social identity, it is argued that individuals from Easterner societies define their collective identity in form of a depersonalized social category (group collectivism) while Westerners rely on a network of interpersonal relationships (relational collectivism). We tested this new framework in a consumer context. In two experimental studies we provide empirical evidence that Easterners make consumption choices that satisfy belongingness through relational collectivism whereas Westerners prefer aspects of group collectivism.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Across various research in cross-cultural consumer psychology as well as social psychology the probably most widely used framework to study differences how people feel, think and behave in different cultures is the individualism–collectivism distinction. However, the individualism–collectivism distinction has recently been conceptually and methodologically criticized from various researchers (see Brewer & Chen, 2007). In order to reduce these shortcomings Brewer & Chen (2007) have introduced a new theoretical framework conceptualization of individual, relational and collective selves. They protect individualism as a reliable and useful construct for the study of cross-cultural differences of various aspects, however within collectivism they make a distinction between relational (*relational collectivism*), and collective levels (*group collectivism*) of self-definition which embody two distinct forms of self-representation. Relational collectivism refers to aspects where the self is defined in terms of connections and role relationships to significant others whereas group collectivism occurs when the social self is defined as a depersonalized social category.

Although in every society people must be able to satisfy both individual and collective needs, that is, no culture, group or society is per se ‘individualistic’ or ‘collectivistic’. This view is also consistent with optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991) which asserts that individuals desire to attain an optimal balance of connectedness and distinctiveness *within* and *between* social groups and situations. The goal of this article is to demonstrate that consumers from Western cultures use different strategies to satisfy their need for connectedness or belongingness (i.e. the collective need) than consumer from East Asian cultures. The main prediction of ODT is that social identity is driven by two basic social needs, the need for assimilation or connectedness with a group and the need for distinctiveness, that is, perceiving oneself as a unique and independent individual. These two motives are in constant opposition with each other; when there is too much of one motive, the other must increase in order to counterbalance it and vice versa. Whereas distinctiveness or uniqueness is a common element that most companies try to achieve with their brand images and which has also been extensively researched since in consumer science, ODT so far has only received little attention. This is insofar surprising as several of the most successful commercials and brand provide a balanced image between both distinctiveness and belongingness. A well known example would be the Apple brand which on the one hand provides distinctiveness from Microsoft, but on the other hand creates a feeling of being connected to a group of highly creative and freaky consumers.

Extending these thoughts we believe that consumers from different cultures are also likely to choose different strategies to achieve optimal distinctiveness. Consistent with the framework of relational and group collectivism, it seems plausible that when activating the need for belongingness Westerners tend to satisfy this need through group collectivism whereas Easterners rather focus on relational collectivism.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted two experimental studies where subjects from one US and one Chinese university had to evaluate consumption scenarios that asked subjects to personalize products such as cell phones, laptops, back bags etc. Each scenario contained three choice options: With option one, subjects could

personalize the respective product by putting a picture or symbol on the product that expresses their personality. Option two and three offered them to express their personality by putting a picture or symbol on the product that shows either their family or their university. The first study was designed to compare the responses between the different ethnic sample types (European Americans, Asian Americans and Chinese). In the second study we tested how the subjects’ responses might differ when their need for distinctiveness or belongingness is manipulated through a deceived feedback procedure (one group was informed that their personal values would substantially differ from those of their colleagues (to activate need for belongingness), the other group was informed that their personal values were very similar to those of their colleagues (to activate distinctiveness need)).

Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that Chinese subjects preferred the relational over group collectivism choice option, that is, they would rather personalize their products with a picture or symbol from their family than from their university, whereas European American subjects showed the opposite preference. However, in both studies we could not find any significant differences between Asian Americans and other ethnic subject types and we did also not find any significant cross-cultural differences regarding the individualism choice option (i.e. whether they want to personalize the product with their own picture). Here further research is needed in order to get a better understanding of these findings. In study two, we again found evidence for the fact that Chinese show a clear preference towards the relational collectivism option. In addition to that, this study revealed that Chinese consumers change their choice behavior when their need for belongingness is activated. That is, when Chinese subjects have been brought into a situation of overly distinctiveness and therefore into an increased need for belongingness (in accordance with ODT) their preference shifts towards the relational choice option. This manipulation did not have any significant effect on their preference towards the group collectivism choice option (i.e. personalize the product with a University symbol).

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, it provides a first empirical proof of the recently suggested framework (Brewer & Chen, 2007) of relational and group collectivism in a consumption context. This shows that Westerners achieve collectivism rather through group collectivism whereas Easterners prefer to rely on relational collectivism. The second contribution is the extension of this approach towards optimal distinctiveness theory, that is, when their need for belongingness is activated, Easterners achieve an optimal level of distinctiveness through relational collectivism, whereas Westerners tend to be rather ambivalent between the two collectivism choice options. This research therefore contributes to a better understanding of the collectivism concept in cross-cultural consumption.

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