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When One Culture Meets Another: the Impact of Culturally (Mis)Matched Thinking Styles on Self-Regulation

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Effective self-regulation is often required for making optimal decisions. The present research demonstrates that culturally mismatched experiences, such as reading advertisements that require a thinking style inconsistent with one's culturally dominant thinking style, impair self-regulation and enhance evaluation and consumption of tempting food more than culturally matched experiences do.

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When one culture meets another: The impact of culturally (mis)matched thinking styles on self-regulation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It is well documented that Westerners tend to engage in analytic thinking whereas Asians tend to engage in holistic thinking (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Although a great deal of research has revealed various antecedents and consequences of cultural differences in thinking styles, little attention has been paid to the consequences of engaging in culturally mismatched thinking styles. We hypothesized that culturally mismatched thinking styles impact the self, particularly one's regulatory resources. Self-regulation refers to "the self's capacity to alter its own states and responses" or limited resources similar to strength or energy (Baumeister, 2002). In three studies, we provide evidence that culturally mismatched thinking styles can be an important source of self-regulatory depletion and thus can impair subsequent evaluation and further actual consumption behaviors. Our findings indicate the effects are generalizable to real-life settings and therefore have significant implications for creating advertisements and forecasting their effects on audiences of differing ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that a mismatch between one's culturally dominant thinking style and a situationally induced thinking style can impair self-control. Participants from both individualistic (e.g., Caucasian) and collectivistic (e.g., Asian, Hispanic) cultural backgrounds were recruited. Half of the participants in each cultural background were assigned to an analytic task condition: they were shown a picture in which 11 embedded objects were to be found (Monga & John, 2007). The rest of the participants were assigned to the holistic task condition, in which they were shown the same picture but with an instruction to focus on the background. Subsequently, participants' self-regulation was measured using a self-control scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

As hypothesized, a significant interaction emerged between the participants' cultural background (individualists vs. collectivists) and their primed thinking styles (analytic vs. holistic). In the analytic condition, individualists scored significantly higher on self-control than did collectivists. In contrast, in the holistic condition, collectivists scored higher on the self-control scale than individualists.

These findings suggest that a culturally mismatched thinking style can deplete self-regulatory resources. However, it can be argued that those participants in the matched condition may have experienced a greater degree of fluency while doing the task and that this led to more favorable judgments about themselves compared to those in the mismatched condition. In other words, the disfluency experiences associated with culturally mismatched thinking styles may have affected participants' perceived ability to engage in self-control.

Study 2 was designed to pit these two explanations (depletion vs. disfluency) against each other. Participants were induced to think either analytically or holistically using the same procedures as in Study 1. They were then given a description of one of two cereal bars (a delicious but unhealthy chocolate cereal bar vs. a healthy but less delicious multi-grain bar) and were asked to rate their evaluation and likelihood of buying the described food item. Finally, participants' chronic thinking styles were measured using the Analysis-Holism Scale (Choi, Koo, & Choi, 2007).

Processing fluency is known to increase the perceived familiarity with and fondness for a stimulus (e.g., Reber, Winkielman, and Schwarz, 1998). Therefore, if a mismatched task creates a sense of disfluency, participants' evaluation of the tempting food and evaluation of the less tempting one should not differ. Instead, those in the matched (vs. mismatched) condition should evaluate whichever food they were shown more positively. In contrast, if a culturally mismatched task leads to depletion, participants in the mismatched condition should evaluate the tempting option more positively than the less tempting option.

Supporting the depletion explanation, a significant interaction was found between the type of experience (matched vs. mismatched with one's chronic thinking style) and the type of food (chocolate bar vs. multi-grain bar) both in evaluation and purchase likelihood. Participants in the mismatched condition evaluated the chocolate bar more positively than the multi-grain bar and also reported a greater purchase likelihood for the chocolate bar than for the multi-grain bar. Those in the matched condition did not differ in their evaluation or purchase likelihood as a function of the type of food.

Study 3 examined the managerial implications of the effect of culturally mismatched experiences using a real-world situation and measuring participants' actual consumption behavior. In a field study, which was introduced to the participants as a consumer study, participants were given a set of mock ads and asked to evaluate them. Each ad included a picture of individual chocolates or candies of different colors and shapes arranged in the shape of different objects such as a house and a tree. Participants in the analytic condition were asked to describe what made each piece distinct, and those in the holistic condition were asked to describe what shape the individual pieces make as a whole. Analytic thinkers were expected to have a harder time finding the figure than holistic thinkers because analytic thinkers in general tend to focus on details whereas holistic thinkers tend to focus on the big picture (Nisbett et al., 2001). Subsequently, participants were guided to a popcorn tasting study in which they were given an opportunity to sample as much popcorn as they wanted. The amount of popcorn they served themselves was our measure of self-regulation.

Consistent with the previous two studies, a significant interaction between culture (individualistic vs. collectivistic) and the type of task (analytic vs. holistic) emerged. Individualists took more popcorn when they had to find an overall figure than when they had to focus on individual chocolates in the ads. The opposite was the case for collectivists.

Overall, the three studies showed converging evidence that engaging a culturally mismatched thinking style is depleting and can impair a person's self-regulatory performance. This was evidenced on a self-control scale, on food evaluation, and on actual snack consumption. The findings suggest that (mis)matches to one's cultural thinking styles are an important set of experiences impacting one's self-regulatory resources. Indeed, people of certain ethnicities, nationalities, and backgrounds can experience self-regulatory depletion (and increased temptation) merely through exposure to ads or activities that require them to think in an unfamiliar way.

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