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Emerging Research Themes on the Asian Consumer

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The rise of Asia is a well-recognized economic trend. In retail, in particular, demand for consumer products in Asia has seen exponential growth as spending power and desire for a better quality of life continue to escalate (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2013). Today, countries such as China, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines are home to some of the largest malls in the world. As the world watches closely the growth of Asia (Jorgenson, 2013; Studwell, 2013), marketing scholars have been attempting to obtain a deeper understanding of the minds and hearts of Asian consumers, to understand what makes them tick and how marketers can influence their purchase and consumption decisions (Nisbett, 2004; Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2008).

Building upon research on the impact of culture in consumer psychology as well as research in consumer behavior, in this chapter I highlight the emerging research themes that are of particular relevance to the Asian consumer. Two important qualifications in this attempt are noteworthy. First, rather than cultural psychology in general (Chiu and Hong, 2007), this chapter focuses on examining the influence of culture on consumer psychology, in particular that of Asian consumers. Second, this chapter identifies *emerging* research themes germane to Asian consumers, using selected empirical findings from marketing articles published in the past five years to illustrate these themes; it does not provide an exhaustive review of research in cross-cultural consumer psychology (for recent comprehensive reviews of cross-cultural consumer psychology, see Shavitt, Lee, and Johnson, 2008; Shavitt et al., 2008b); rather, it reviews recent work that lies at the intersection of cultural

psychology and a number of important domains in consumer behavior such as emotions, brand attitudes, consumer values, and consumer decision making.

Theme 1: The Impact of Self-Construal on Marketing Responses

Among the various dimensions of culture that Geert Hofstede (1980), a pioneer of cross-cultural psychology, identifies in his seminal work, the distinction between *individualistic* cultures and *collectivistic* cultures is no doubt the dimension that researchers have most pervasively used to compare cultures. Whereas people in individualistic cultures (e.g., North Americans) value independence and attach higher priority to personal goals than to group goals, those in collectivistic cultures (e.g., East Asians) value interdependent connections with others and view group goals as more important than their personal goals. Correspondingly, people in individualistic cultures tend to have an *independent* self-construal, perceiving themselves as autonomous and unique, while those in collectivistic cultures have an *interdependent* self-construal, perceiving themselves as members of a larger social group (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Further, people in more collectivistic (vs. individualistic) cultures (e.g., East Asians) tend to process information more holistically (vs. analytically), pursue more promotion-focused (vs. prevention-focused) goals, expect more changes in tasks and events in their lives, and possess greater tolerance for conflict and contradiction (Cheng et al., 2012; Ji, Nisbett, and Su, 2001; Krishna, Zhou, and Zhang, 2008; Lee, Aaker, and Gardner, 2000; Nisbett and Miyamoto, 2005; Nisbett et al., 2001; Oyserman and Lee, 2008; Peng and Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, and Peng, 2010).

Self-Construal and the Marketing Mix

In accordance with the four pillars of the marketing mix (product, price, promotion, place), there has been considerable work in exploring how consumers with different types of self-construal evaluate brands and products, perceive price information, negotiate marketing channels, and respond to advertising appeals in different ways (Aaker and Lee, 2001; Aaker and Williams, 1998;

Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Shavitt et al., 2008a; Shavitt, Lee, and Torelli, 2008).

With regard to brands and products, for example, recent work has shown that interdependent self-construals are more likely to enhance the perceived fit of a brand extension with its parent brand, leading to greater brand-extension acceptance (Ahluwalia, 2008). This is because these individuals, as more holistic thinkers, are able to perceive or uncover relationships between stimuli and product elements more readily (see Jain, Desai, and Mao, 2007). Conversely, when a typical brand extension fails, there is also greater brand dilution among interdependent self-construals especially when they are less motivated to process the given brand information (Ng, 2010).

Individuals with different self-construals also have different product/brand preferences due to either dispositional or situational factors. For instance, interdependent self-construals tend to prefer identity-linked products when that particular aspect of their social identity is threatened, unlike independent self-construals, who tend to shun such products in the face of identity threats (White, Argo, and Sengupta, 2012). The researchers argue that interdependent self-construals, being more connected with their social groups, can access a range of social identities to compensate for their need to belong. In the same vein, compared with independent self-construals, interdependent self-construals also regard country-of-origin connections in brands as more important than self-concept connections (Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli, 2007).

In terms of price perception, holistic-thinking interdependent self-construals are more inclined to use price information to evaluate the quality of a product, compared to independent self-construals (Lalwani and Shavitt, 2013). This heightened sense of connectedness that interdependent self-construals perceive pertains more generally to a target and its context; based on this logic, when evaluating the price of a product, interdependent self-construals show greater use of external reference prices (e.g., prices of competing products) than internal (self-generated) reference prices (Chen, 2009).

Other than brands and prices, consumers with different types of

self-construal also respond differently to different types of marketing promotions. For instance, interdependent self-construals tend to prefer donation-based promotions (where purchasing a product benefits a charitable cause) to discount-based promotions, particularly when the charities are congruent with consumers' identity (Winterich and Barone, 2011). Interdependent self-construals also do not distinguish between inclusive price promotions (e.g., deals that are available to the general public) and exclusive price promotions (e.g., invitation-only promotion events), as opposed to independent self-construals, who significantly favor exclusive deals that they associate with greater uniqueness (Barone and Roy, 2010).

Pertaining to marketing channels, when making product judgments, interdependent self-construals are more likely to rely on store reputation (often associated with social image) as a cue given their greater concern with social identity (Lee and Shavitt, 2006).

Self-Construal and Consumer Decision Making

When making consumption decisions, people with an interdependent self-construal are less likely to feel constrained by self-knowledge, are more receptive to external feedback, and are more likely to incorporate such feedback into their choices (Wu, Cutright, and Fitzsimons, 2011; see also Nguyen and Belk, 2013; Torelli, 2006). Accordingly, advertisements targeted at East Asians most commonly emphasize themes of respect for group values and harmony, while those targeted at Americans center on themes of freedom, uniqueness, and rebellion against social norms (Markus and Schwartz, 2010).

However, one potential negative implication of how collectivistic individuals (with a more interdependent self-culture) approach decision making is their disproportionate concern for the avoidance of losses (vs. the achievement of gains) and the opinion of others. Interdependent self-construals (e.g., Indians) are less motivated to express their own preference in their choices and tend to select more cautious and moderate options, compared to independent self-construals, who are inclined to choose more freely according to what they like (Briley, Morris, and Simonson, 2005; Savani,

Markus, and Conner, 2008). This motivational disparity in decision making may explain in part why Americans tend to exhibit (and report themselves to have) more consistent preferences than the Japanese; another potential reason is the lower tolerance for change and conflict among the more individualistic Americans (Wilken, Miyamoto, and Uchida, 2011).

The Role of Biculturalism

Clearly, the substantial number of defining distinctions between independent (vs. interdependent) self-construals has generated a host of implications for marketing, informing the world how Asians might think and behave differently from non-Asians. However, we are witnessing considerable growth in bicultures (i.e., individuals affiliated with two cultures) today, considering the increased number of individuals who reside and work in different countries for a substantial amount of time, people living in multicultural communities such as Hong Kong and Singapore, and increased exposure to media, products, and practices from diverse cultures (Mok and Morris, 2013).

In an influential article published in the *American Psychologist,* Hong and her colleagues (2000) argue convincingly that bicultural individuals can switch between cultural frames, activate different knowledge structures, and behave in disparate ways, depending on the cultural icons to which they are exposed (e.g., Asian Americans rely more on external attributions in a judgment task after being exposed to a picture of Confucius [which primed their Asian identity] than to a picture of the American flag).

Thus, how bicultural individuals respond to cultural cues in the environment should depend on their degree of bicultural identity integration (BII), or how coherently and cohesively they represent their two cultural identities (Mok and Morris, 2013; see also Cheng, Lee, and Benet-Martínez, 2006). Specifically, high BII individuals tend to assimilate cultural cues while low BII individuals tend to behave in contrast to cultural cues. Earlier work in marketing that pertains to bilingual individuals has also shown that activating a particular identity using language manipulation can also change

how they evaluate brand names (Zhang and Schmitt, 2004) and make consumption decisions (Briley et al., 2005).

Beyond Individualism-Collectivism

Because of the popularity of the individualistic-collectivistic dichotomy, cultural psychology research has been somewhat limiting and seems to have neglected other dimensions along which culture may differ. Therefore, consumer psychologists have called for a closer examination of the impact of other Hofstede cultural dimensions in consumer behavior, including horizontal/vertical (Shavitt et al., 2006), power distance (Oyserman, 2006) and masculinity/femininity (Nelson et al., 2006). (For a discussion of these extended cultural dimensions, see Shavitt et al., 2008b.)

Theme 2: Cultural Values, Beliefs and Meanings

In their work on the "neuro-culture" interaction, Shinobu Kitayama—another pioneer of cultural psychology research—and his colleague Ayse Uskul (2011) show that engagement in cultural practices changes one's neural wiring (see also Han et al., 2013). They posit that culture is "a collective process composed of cross-generational transmitted values and associated behavioral patterns (i.e., practices)"; culture is "embrained" and requires no cognitive mediation.

Consistent with this basic philosophy, there has been increasing research devoted to examining the values, beliefs, and meanings that specific cultures embrace and the powerful influences that these fundamental cultural elements exert on consumer behavior. Rather than segmenting cultures broadly into binary categories, such work represents a more refined approach by looking at the DNA of each culture. In this section, I briefly discuss three recent projects that illustrate this research focus.

The Asian Consumer Psychology of Saving Face and Belief in Fate

"Saving face," or the desire to avoid humiliation or embarrassment in front of others, is arguably one of the core social values in Asia

(Brill, 2010). Many Asians also share the belief in fate, or fatalistic thinking, a reflection of their conviction that many outcomes in life are beyond their direct control (Heine, 2001). Recent work has shown that these cultural elements can influence how Asian consumers respond to different types of service failures, which is diametrically opposed to the response of Western consumers (Chan, Wan, and Sin, 2009). Specifically, compared to Westerners, Asians, who have a greater "concern for face" and who are more likely to engage in fatalistic thinking, express greater dissatisfaction with a social failure (e.g., a rude clerk at the front desk of a hotel) than with a nonsocial failure (e.g., an untidy room in the hotel).

The greater "concern for face" among Asians also affects how they perceive price fairness. In particular, collectivistic Chinese consumers tend to perceive a stronger sense of unfairness when they discover that the price they have paid for a product at a store is higher than the price paid by a friend (in-group) than if the lower price was paid by a stranger (out-group) (Bolton, Keh, and Alba, 2010). Consequently, such negative in-group comparisons lead Chinese consumers to experience greater shame and anger and make them less likely to repurchase at the same store. In comparison, individualistic American consumers do not differ in their price-fairness perceptions between in-group and out-group references.

The Influence of Lay Beliefs

As illustrated by the impact of fatalistic beliefs in service satisfaction discussed earlier, the different lay beliefs that different cultures possess can also lead to differences in consumer preference. For instance, Asian consumers (Chinese and Indian) primed with different cultural cues (i.e., Chinese and Indian consumers were exposed to symbols of the lotus and yin-yang, respectively), which in turn increases the accessibility of different lay theories of medicine, express greater preference for traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurvedic medicine, respectively, over Western medicine. This tendency is more pronounced when there is high (vs. low) uncertainty in the diagnosis, when the time frame for treatment is long (vs. short), and when the goal for the treatment is to find an underlying cure (vs. to

alleviate symptoms) (Wang, Keh, and Bolton, 2010). Interestingly, Asian consumers perceive that, compared to these traditional medicines, Western medicine places less importance on, and creates less motivation to lead, a healthy lifestyle (e.g., eating a low-fat diet and exercising regularly)—a "boomerang effect" of Western medicine.

The Meaning of Western Brands Among Chinese Consumers

While consumers may associate different meanings and personalities with different brands, possibly as a direct response to marketers' brand positioning efforts (Aaker, 1997), specific cultures may attach their own set of symbolic meanings to foreign brands. For instance, Chinese consumers tend to conceive of Western brands in several different ways based upon historical national narratives of East–West relations: Western brands as instruments of democratization, domination, or economic progress (Dong and Tian, 2009). This rich set of depictions could be used to predict situations in which Chinese consumers would purchase Western brands rather than their own national brands.

Theme 3: How Do Asian Consumers Feel?

To date, a substantial proportion of the work in cultural consumer psychology has focused on examining the cognitive underpinnings of consumer behavior. However, there has been increasing research that delves into consumers' affective experience, in line with the broad recognition today that feelings and emotions play crucial roles in influencing consumers' judgment and decision making (Cohen, Pham, and Andrade, 2008; Lee, Amir, and Ariely, 2009; Pham, 2007). Accordingly, several recent research programs on culture and emotions have added to our understanding of not only how Asian consumers think and what they think about but also how they feel.

The Experience of Mixed Emotions Among Asian Consumers

The topic of mixed emotions has been a subject of much interest among psychologists (for a comprehensive summary, see Cohen

et al., 2008). Interestingly, work that lies at the intersection of culture, marketing, and mixed emotions has elucidated the factors that determine individuals' responsiveness toward stimuli that generate mixed emotions. In particular, these researchers examine consumers' degree of comfort when exposed to mixed emotional ad appeals and how much consumers are persuaded by these advertisements.

For instance, given their greater acceptance of duality and contradictions, Asian Americans are more receptive to these mixed-emotions ads than are Anglo Americans (Williams and Aaker, 2002). More recently, Hong and Lee (2010) offer a different explanation by comparing the attitudes of European-American consumers living in the United States versus Chinese consumers living in Hong Kong toward such mixed-emotional appeals in advertising. They found that the Chinese consumers in Hong Kong responded more favorably to these ad appeals and expressed a greater intention to purchase the advertised products due to their proclivity to process information at a higher construal level and focus on the positives and pro arguments (rather than the negatives and con arguments) in the ads.

How Asian Consumers Respond to Surprise Gifts

While pleasant surprises are often welcomed and can produce joy and other positive feelings, it appears that the degree of positivity in these emotional responses may not be the same across consumers. In particular, in a cross-cultural study of consumer responses to unexpected incentives, East Asian consumers tend to express less surprise and correspondingly less pleasure when receiving an unexpected gift or incentive than Caucasians in the United States (Valenzuela, Mellers, and Strebel, 2010). Such an emotional dampening could be explained by East Asians' greater desire to maintain balance and emotional control, leading them to reassess the perceived likelihood of the outcome in order to downplay the unexpectedness of the gift or incentive. However, given that East Asians also tend to view good luck favorably, they respond more positively to the unexpected gift or incentive when it is attributed

to good luck, reflecting how a persistent cultural value can change their perception and emotional response.

Asian Consumers and Impulsive Behavior

The desire for harmony, balance, and connectedness can also affect Asian consumers' propensity to engage in impulsive behavior. For example, demonstrate that compared to individuals with an independent self-construal (e.g., American Caucasians), those with an interdependent self-construal (e.g., East Asians) tend to exhibit less impulsive consumption behavior, based on data pertaining to country-level beer consumption and state-level problem alcohol consumption, as well as laboratory studies in which participants' self-construal was experimentally manipulated (Zhang and Shrum, 2009). This behavioral pattern seems to arise from the greater motivation to suppress impulsive tendencies among interdependent (vs. independent) self-construals. In addition, the presence of peer pressure increases the degree of impulsive behavior among independent self-construals (but reduces such tendencies among interdependent self-construals), because of an even stronger motivation to exercise restraint and behavioral moderation in front of others.

From Understanding Asian Consumers to Understanding Consumer Psychology

Decades of research in cultural psychology have shed light on how culture affects how individuals think, feel, and behave (Nisbett, 2004). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, we have also begun to explore how cultural factors can affect consumer behavior. Beyond examining the various roles that culture plays in determining how consumers think and behave, by viewing culture as comprising a rich and elaborate set of elements and psychological mechanisms, these cultural components also present researchers with valuable avenues for testing new theories and reevaluating existing assumptions in consumer psychology. Through focusing on the psychology of the Asian consumer in particular, the research themes that have been discussed in this chapter not only underscore the many

ways to approaching the vital subject of culture in consumer psychology but also contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the influence of culture in consumer behavior. While the growing interest in Asia has certainly spurred research in consumer psychology research, it is our firm belief that this surge presents exciting possibilities in our endeavor to better understand the hearts and minds of the Asian consumer.

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Part I

Conceptual Models and Theories

The research projects in this section examine a range of conceptual models and theories of consumer psychology. Although the topics in these projects are not related to Asian consumers per se and do not directly examine Asian consumers (although the participants in the studies may be Asian), the models and frameworks provided are nonetheless highly relevant to the issues covered in this book.

In Chapter 3, Amy Dalton and Li Huang offer a theoretical framework of motivated forgetting. They examine the phenomenon in the context of social-identity–linked promotions. Social identities, based on gender, race, nationality, or even university affiliation (as in this chapter), are highly salient—and ever-changing—in the culturally diverse societies in Asia. The framework that the authors employed can help predict how Asian consumers might cope with such identity-threatening situations.

Haiyang Yang, Ziv Carmon, and Ravi Dhar, in Chapter 4, examine the paradox that owning less may be more satisfying than owning more. They contribute to theory by explaining the impact of contrasting possessions on comparison standards to assess satisfaction. As Asia is growing, and as the Asian middle class acquires more and more possessions, the theoretical model in this chapter proposes that these middle-class Asians will not necessarily be more satisfied and happier.

Leona Tam, Jelena Spanjol, and José Antonio Rosa use "regulatory fit theory" in Chapter 5 to examine the start of goal striving (e.g., not to eat unhealthy snacks). They show that planning can either delay or amplify goal-directed behavior, depending on whether individuals operate under promotion or prevention focus. The study sheds light on what policy makers and governments could do to