To Seek Variety Or Conformity?: the Role of Culture in Individual’S Choice in a Group Setting

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One stream of research suggests that individuals in collectivistic culture will tend to follow others’ choices in a group choice setting (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991). Other research, however, suggests that others’ choices will have little impact on individuals’ choices in this cultural context (e.g., Kim and Drolet 2002). Current research attempts to test these competing hypotheses by examining individuals’ choices in interpersonal choice contexts (Ariely and Levav 2000). First, comparisons of 517 meal order slips from two local restaurants in Korea with simulated outcomes indicate a profound conformity-seeking tendency in dish selections among collectivist cultural individuals. Second, our field experiment reveals that members of collectivist culture tend to follow group members’ choices only when group influence is visible. We show that this conformity-seeking behavior is influenced by individuals’ individualism-collectivism self-concepts (Singelis 1994). Finally, unlike previous findings of studies conducted with individuals from Western cultures, selections made in accordance with social norms did not result in the reduction of emotional well-beings for collectivist cultural members.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Past research has indicated that people tend to seek variety in their choices. This effect has been demonstrated in both intrapersonal and interpersonal choices, although variety-seeking has been shown to result in lower overall satisfaction with their choices (Ratner, Khan, and Kahneman 1999). Many of these findings are explained by people’s desire to portray a positive self-image by appearing unique (Ariely and Levav 2000; Ratner and Khan 2002). However, the findings of some cross-cultural studies have challenged the generalization of such assessments (Kim and Markus 1999; Kim and Drolet 2003; Kramer, Spalter-Weisfeld, and Thakkar 2007). According to these studies, variety-seeking is less pronounced in Eastern versus Western cultural members, as they share different assumptions regarding uniqueness and individuality. Specifically, in contrast to the more individualistic Western culture, where uniqueness and being different from others are considered positive traits, negative associations are attached to uniqueness and individuality in the more collectivistic Eastern culture.

While past research has provided insights into cultural influences on variety-seeking behavior and the underlying motivations, its implications with regard to consumer’s interpersonal decision have yet to be clearly understood. This is mainly because past cross-cultural studies in this area have focused on individual choice situations (Kim and Markus 1999; Kim and Sherman 2007). In particular, it is still ambiguous as to whether the negative meanings associated with uniqueness in Eastern culture will result in a mere lack of conscious attempts to vary their choice from those of others (i.e., lack of variety-seeking) or it will result in greater efforts to conform to others’ choices in interpersonal decision situations. One line of research (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991) suggests that individuals from collectivistic cultures are expected to follow others’ choices when the choice is made in a group setting, since being similar to others and conformity to group is an important cultural value in this context. However, another research finding (e.g., Kim and Drolet 2002) suggests that other’s choices would exert minimal effects on the individual’s choice, because choice is not an act of self-expression for collectivistic cultural members. Accordingly, members of collectivist cultures will not necessarily make similar choices with those of others, while the amount of variety-seeking behavior is less, compared to individualistic cultural members.

Therefore, the primary purpose of current research is to test these two competing predictions. In particular, we focus on the impact of others’ choices on conformity-seeking tendency among individuals from collectivist cultures. We also attempt to examine the conditions under which such cultural orientations have particularly profound impacts on individual’s choice. In line with previous research highlighting that culture is not a constant meaning but often dissipates or activated depending on situational demands (Briely and Aaker 2006), we show that culture has greater implications for choice only when individual’s choice is made based on cultural, rather than personal, knowledge. Finally, we investigate the potential differences between Eastern and Western cultural members in the emotional consequences of aligning one’s behavior (e.g., choice) with cultural norms. Unlike the members of Western culture, whose emotional well-being has been shown to be lowered after complying with cultural norms (e.g., variety-seeking), Individuals in Eastern culture are not expected to experience such reductions in emotional well-being, as aligning oneself with cultural norms (e.g., conformity) is more consistent with their definition of personal happiness.

We test our predictions in two studies, involving real restaurant order data and a field study. In the first study, the analysis of 517 meal order slips, representing 1,475 diners from two local restaurants in Korea, showed that real tables dining in a group tended to choose less varied dishes as compared to what would be expected from a random sampling of population of all individual choices across tables (i.e., simulated data representing menu selections in the absence of any group influence). Similar findings are observed in restaurants that differ in terms of cuisine, average dish price, and familiarity to participants. Next, we replicate our findings in a setting that allows more experimental control. In our field experiment, we manipulate the conditions in which individuals choose their options, such that in one condition they select less varied dishes while in the other condition, group is dissolved and thus the choice becomes a strictly individual one (i.e., individual choice condition). We found that Koreans tended to select options identical to those of their group members when they make selections collectively as opposed to individually. We further show that, unlike previous findings based on individuals from Western cultures, adherence to the cultural norm, that is, conformity to others’ choices, did not result in lower overall satisfaction with their chosen options for Koreans. Lastly, we show support for the hypothesized mechanism underlying the above effects, by demonstrating that the tendency to seek variety or conformity is associated significantly with decision maker’s individualistic-collectivistic dispositions.

REFERENCES


