The Effect of Self-Construal on Impulsive Consumption

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Five studies are reported that investigate the impact of activated self-construal (interdependent vs. independent) on impulsive consumption tendencies. A cross-country comparison of per capita beer consumption data (study 1a) and a cross-state comparison within the U.S. on problem alcohol consumption (study 1b) indicated that an independent self-construal was associated with greater beer and alcohol consumption. Three additional experiments that manipulated self-construal confirmed this relation and also demonstrated that the effect of self-construal on beer consumption attitudes was mediated by state impulsiveness (studies 2 and 3), moderated by peer presence (studies 3 and 4), and can be extended from beer and alcohol consumption to preferences for vice vs. virtue foods (study 4).

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13382/volumes/v35/NA-35

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Impulsive behaviors, and impulsive consumption in particular, are generally considered negative constructs that are associated with a variety of other negative traits (e.g., lower intelligence, immaturity, poor value system) and outcomes (e.g., financial problems, lower self-esteem and post-purchase satisfaction; Rook 1987; Rook and Fisher 1995). Yet, impulsive consumption is also very common, with some estimates attributing impulse buying to over four billion dollars of annual sales in the U.S. (Kacen and Lee 2002).

Impulsive consumption has been linked to a variety of psychological “markers” (e.g., lack of reflectiveness, spontaneity, lack of persistence) and general correlates (e.g., thrill-seeking, need for stimulation, low self-esteem; Gerbing, Ahadi, and Patton 1987; O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Weun, Jones, and Beatty 1998). More recently, research has explored the relation between culture orientation and impulsive consumption. Kacen and Lee (2002) provided correlational evidence of an interrelation between individualism–collectivism (and independent–interdependent self-construal), trait buying impulsiveness, and impulse buying behavior. They reasoned that consumers from individualistic societies may exhibit more impulsive consumption than those from collectivistic societies, not because of less impulse, but because collectivistic members suppress the impulse more than do individualistic members. Consistent with this hypothesis, they found that measures of trait impulsiveness were more predictive of actual impulse buying behavior for individualistic than for collectivistic societies.

Although the results are correlational, and thus vulnerable to alternative explanations, they are also interesting and provocative, and have a number of implications. For one, they suggest that to the extent that the self is malleable (Mandel 2003; Markus and Kunda 1986) and subject to situational changes (Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto 1991), then such situational changes in self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) should have corresponding influences on impulsiveness. This possibility has the potential to reconcile conflicting findings on the relation between conformity (a value that correlates with self-construal) and certain impulsive behaviors (cf. O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Rose, Bearden, and Teel 1992). A second implication is that, given cultural differences in self-construal (the chronically accessible self-contrasts of individuals from individualistic cultures tend to be independent, whereas the chronically accessible self-contrasts of individuals from collectivistic cultures tend to be interdependent), cultures should differ on the extent to which they engage in particular impulsive consumption behaviors.

Four studies are presented that test these possibilities. In two of the studies we manipulated self-construal to determine its effects on state impulsiveness and attitudes toward engaging in a behavior often linked to impulsive consumption (beer drinking). The focus on the particular behavior of beer drinking allowed us to then test our hypotheses of the link between self-construal and impulsive consumption at the societal level, using secondary data linking cultural orientation and beer consumption. From the two experiments, we show that manipulations of self-construal influence intention to engage in an impulsive behavior in predictable ways, and this influence is mediated by state impulsiveness. From the two secondary data sources we show that cultural-level (country) measures of self-construal influence beer consumption (Study 3) and subcultural-level (U.S. states) measures of self-construal correlate with problem beer consumption, such as teen drinking and adult binge drinking (Study 4). The convergence between individual level and cultural level of self-construal on beer consumption indicates the robustness of our theoretical framework.

Study 1

In Study 1, undergraduate business students were primed with either an independent or interdependent self-construal, after which, as ostensibly part of a second study, their attitudes toward drinking beer at that moment and their state level of impulsivity was measured. As expected, those primed with an independent self-construal had more positive beer-drinking attitudes than did those primed with an interdependent self-construal, and this relation was mediated by state impulsivity.

Study 2

In this study, we tested the extent to which the presence of peers influenced the self-construal—impulsiveness relation. Public versus private conditions has been shown to moderate the relation in a number of contexts, and the presence of peers has been shown to increase the urge to purchase under certain conditions. We expected that peer presence would increase the tendency toward impulsive consumption behavior for those with an independent self-construal (because it shows apparent condoning of the behavior). However, because those with an interdependent self-construal consider peer approval as a part of any behavioral judgment, we did not expect that peer presence would affect impulsive consumption tendencies for them.

Undergraduate business students were primed with either an independent or interdependent self-construal, and then as ostensibly part of a second study, their attitudes toward beer consumption at that moment and their state level of impulsiveness were measured. However, prior to providing their beer-drinking attitudes, half of the participants were told to imagine that they were going out with close friends to celebrate a friend’s new job (peer presence) and half received no such instructions (no peer presence). As expected, independents expressed more positive beer-drinking attitudes than interdependents. However, this effect was qualified by an interaction with peer presence: The effect of self-construal was observed only for independents. In addition, mediation and moderated moderation analyses confirmed the mediating role of state impulsiveness.

Study 3

In Study 3, we sought to provide ecological validity for our findings by linking cultural level self-construal with impulsive consumption tendencies. Country-level data on per capita beer consumption was linked with scores on the Hofstede Cultural Dimensions of individualism/collectivism. The scores on the other cultural dimensions (power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance) along with per capita income, life satisfaction, and religious orientation, were used as statistical controls. As expected, level of individualism was positively correlated with country-level beer consumption, even after controlling for the other possible influences.

Study 4

Study 4 sought to extend the findings of Study 3 by looking at the relation between sub-cultural self-construal levels (individualism/collectivism) and problem alcohol consumption (teen alcohol...