Four studies investigated the relations between culture and socially desirable responding and the processes that underlie them. Results indicated that individualists tend to engage in self-deceptive enhancement but not impression management, whereas collectivists tend to engage in impression management but not self-deceptive enhancement. Regulatory focus was shown to mediate these relations: a promotion focus mediated the relation between individualism and self-deceptive enhancement, whereas a prevention focus mediated the relation between collectivism and impression management. This general mediation pattern was found to be moderated by type of self-consciousness: the promotion focus mediation was stronger for participants low (vs. high) in private self-consciousness, whereas the prevention focus mediation was stronger for participants high (vs. low) in public self-consciousness. Implications for cross-cultural marketing research are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Whether and how people engage in socially desirable responding—the tendency of people to portray themselves in more favorable light on survey questionnaires than their thoughts or actions may actually warrant—is a topic of considerable interest to scholars of marketing and consumer behavior both from theoretical and methodological standpoints (Fisher 1993; Mick 1996). Recent research suggests that these tendencies span cultures (Lalwani et al. 2006; 2009; Shavitt et al. 2006).

Although research has examined the effects of culture on consumer goals and their tendency to engage in socially desirable responding, the system of relations between culture, goals, and socially desirable responding is not well understood. In fact, although factors that influence responses on surveys have received considerable attention, little research has addressed the underlying processes (see Lalwani 2009, for an exception). The purpose of the current research is to fill this gap by exploring in more detail the possible connections between culture and types of socially desirable responding, the underlying processes, and factors that impact the strength of the relations. We posit that culture would be differentially related to socially desirable responding. Individualists would tend to engage in self-deceptive enhancement, the tendency to report exaggerated beliefs of one’s competence, skills, and abilities, but not impression management, the tendency to provide normatively appropriate responses to look good. In contrast, collectivists would tend to engage in impression management, but not self-deceptive enhancement.

Beyond this general set of hypotheses, however, there are still important unanswered questions regarding the processes that may underlie these links. In particular, little is known about the motivational links between cultural values and socially desirable responding. The inconsistent findings on the relation between cultural values and socially desirable responding allude to the existence of variables that may mediate or moderate these relationships. For instance, it is possible that these relationships are stronger for certain kinds of people than for others. Hence, another objective of this paper is to propose and test such mediating and moderating variables. One possibility, which we investigate in the studies to be presented, is that regulatory focus underlies these effects, and that consumers’ self-consciousness (public or private) influences the strength of these relationships.

Regulatory focus theory is a theory of self-regulation that proposes two distinct foci: a promotion focus that is primarily concerned with maximizing positive outcomes and a prevention focus that is primarily concerned with minimizing negative outcomes (Aaker and Lee 2001; Higgins 1997). People who are promotion focused eagerly pursue gains or successes. Focusing on accomplishments, achievements, and the pursuit of ideals, they are oriented towards fulfilling their hopes and aspirations and they scrutinize their social world for information that bears on the pursuit of success. In contrast, people with a prevention focus strive to avoid negative outcomes. Driven by the need to feel secure and to meet their obligations, these individuals are primarily concerned with preventing failures or losses, and their information processing and interpersonal tactics are geared towards avoiding undesirable outcomes (Higgins 1997). Lee, Aaker, and Gardner (2000) provided evidence that people with an independent self-construal tend to be promotion focused, whereas people with an interdependent self-construal tend to be prevention focused.

In the following studies, we explore the possible interrelations between culture, regulatory focus, and socially desirable responding. Our overarching hypothesis is that regulatory focus mediates the relation between cultural orientation and socially desirable responding. More specifically, we hypothesize that a promotion focus mediates the relation between individualism and self-deceptive enhancement, and a prevention focus mediates the relation between collectivism and impression management.

To further explicate the mediating role of regulatory focus in the relation between culture and socially desirable responding, we were interested in exploring possible boundary conditions of this pattern of effects. Specifically, we were interested in determining whether the relations just proposed are stronger for some types of people than for others. One possible variable that we investigated is self-consciousness. Research suggests that self-consciousness can be conceived of along two orthogonal dimensions: public and private (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975). Those who are high (vs. low) in private self-consciousness are more likely to attend to their own inner thoughts and feelings. As such, their focus is on cognitions that deal primarily with the self, they tend to reflect about themselves, and they are attentive to the workings of their mind. In contrast, those who are high (vs. low) in public self-consciousness are especially attuned to other people’s perspectives. They view themselves as social objects, and are sensitive to others’ reactions to their behavior. As such, they regulate their conduct by taking into account the desires and expectations of others (Carver and Scheier 1998) and are interested in getting along by going along (Schlenker and Weigold 1990).

Because people who are high (vs. low) in private self-consciousness are attentive to their inner feelings, they may be more realistic about their capabilities and skills, even when they are from individualistic cultures which tend toward self-deceptive enhancement. As a result, they may be less likely to engage in self-deceptive enhancement, a response style in which people hold exaggerated, unrealistic, and glorified notions of their skills and abilities. If so, the mediating relationship between individualism, promotion focus, and self-deceptive enhancement proposed earlier should be weaker for people who are high (vs. low) in private self-consciousness. In other words, private self-consciousness should moderate the mediating relationship between individualism, promotion focus, and self-deceptive enhancement.

In contrast, people high in public self-consciousness are the epitome of the social animal (Schlenker and Weigold 1990). They not only take the role of others to imagine their reactions, but also actively mold their behavior to appeal to others (Buss 1980; Carver and Scheier 1998). Because people who are high (vs. low) in public self-consciousness are more concerned about managing others’ impressions of themselves, and are also more affected by possible rejection from others (Fenigstein 1987), they may be highly motivated to engage in impression management, even if they come from collectivist cultures that already tend toward impression management. If so, then the mediating relationship between collectivism, prevention focus, and impression management should be stronger.
for people who are high (vs. low) in public self-consciousness. In other words, public self-consciousness should moderate the mediating relationship between collectivism, prevention focus, and impression management.

Four studies provide robust support for the framework we have proposed. Across the four studies, the operationalizations of the major variables (individualism—collectivism, regulatory focus, and socially desirable responding) were varied in order to maximize generalizability. In Study 1, we compared the socially desirable responding and regulatory focus of Hong Kong Chinese and European Americans, and examined whether cultural variations in socially desirable responding were mediated by regulatory focus. In Studies 2-4, we measured participants’ chronic individualism and collectivism in a U.S. sample. The research makes a number of theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

REFERENCES


