Compliments Made Me Bolder: the Role of Self Construal and Brand Status in Brand Attachment and Product Evaluation

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Five studies establish cultural differences in response to brand compliments. The North American interdependent (vs. independents) and Asians (vs. North Americans) tend to bond more strongly with the complimented brand when the brand status is high. Lastly, compliment makes Asians (vs. North Americans) make norm-incongruent evaluations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Compliments are conducive to social interactions and communications. Little research has been done to examine the psychological underpinnings of the observed cultural differences in response to social and brand compliments. Even more scarce attention has been given to extend research on compliments to study the impact of brand compliments on consumers’ evaluations and preferences of the focal brand as well as subsequent product evaluation. Our work set out to study cultural difference in compliment appreciation (Study 1) and further investigate its implications in brand usage contexts (Study 2 and 3). In these three studies, we use self-construal as a proxy to cultural differences in the interdependent and independent culture. In the last two studies, we recruited participants from Asia and North America and studied the cultural difference in the brand attachment associated with brand compliment and in effect of compliment on the subsequent product evaluation.

Self construals are often used as a proxy to uncover cultural differences: how individuals classify or perceive themselves according to the constituted cultural values they follow (Singelis & Brown, 2001). In North American culture, the normative imperative is to become independent from others and to determine and convey one’s unique attributes (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, Asians cultures have interdependent self-concepts stressing on connectedness between themselves and others (Morris & Peng, 1994; Hong et al., 2000).

North Americans, who typically have independent self-construals, are likely to view social compliments as a matter of personal choice, indicative of compliment givers’ genuine liking of self, therefore, are more likely to appreciate social compliments. Individuals with interdependent self construals view compliment givers as more likely to have ulterior motives (Park, 1998). Therefore we propose that individuals with independent self construals are more likely to appreciate social compliments than those with interdependent self construals. We further propose that brand status moderates the relationship of self construal and compliment appreciation. Interdependent individuals will feel less appreciative than self interdependent individuals when receiving a compliment about their usage of a low status brand (Study 2).

We further attempt to study how culture specifies the effect of compliments on high status brand usage. Research on status and power (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003, Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2011) suggest that these extrinsic cues can affect consumers’ motivations of brand and product usage. We argue that the Interdependents (vs. independents) are more sensitive to brand status as it signifies the perceived popularity of the brand among others in the social group. Therefore, compliment of a high status brand usage makes the interdependent (vs. independents) appreciate the brand more (Study 3 and 4). However, we argue that for the interdependent (vs. independents), this brand attachment is driven by other-focused brand perceptions such as perceived popularity of the brand among one’s social group, instead of ego-centric brand perceptions such as the fit between brand and self image (Study 4). And lastly, we propose that once complimented by the usage of high status brand, the need for seeking status and approval is satiated (Galak, Redden and Kruger 2009), Asians (the Interdependents) are less likely to seek social approval and more likely to make norm-inconsistent evaluations and favour products with less dominant status (Study 5).

Study 1 examined the impact of self construal on social compliments appreciation. Participants were asked to read a scenario where their product usage is compliment “I like your sweater.” Then they filled out a survey measuring their appreciation of the compliment with 2 items (appreciation & grateful α = .73), and their cultural orientations with 24 items self-construal scale (Singelis, 1994), self-independent 12 items (α = .76) and self-interdependent 12 items (α = .79). We eliminated participants who score higher (lower) than the average score on both independents and interdependent scale. This procedure enabled us to use data from 79 participants, 41 independent, 38 interdependent. ANOVA test confirmed our expectation that the interdependent were less likely than the independents to feel appreciative of a social compliment appreciated when receiving a compliment (F = 2.915, p = .09).

Study 2 examined the moderator effect of brand status in the relationship between self construal and on compliment appreciation. Self construal was constructed similarly as in Study 1. Brand status was manipulated via varying a scenario where compliment was made about Gucci, high status (vs. Joe, low status) sunglasses (manipulation successful). As expected, ANOVA test on appreciation yielded only the significant interaction effect of brand status and self construal (F=5.85, p<.05), suggesting the interdependents (vs. independents) appreciated compliments on high status brand; the pattern was reversed when brand status was low.

Study 3 adopted the same design as in Study 2 but shifted gear towards examining participants’ attraction with the brand (7-point scales such as feeling connected, loyal and attached, alpha=.89). Regression analysis with brand attachment as dependent variable yielded a significant effect of brand status (b=4.22, t=1.98, p<.05), significant effect of self construal (b=1.40, t=2.13, p<.05) and a significant but negative interaction (b=-.88, t=-1.95, p<.05). To uncover the interaction pattern, we dichotomized self construal and ran an ANOVA test, yielding a significant interaction effect (F=3.23, p<.05). As expected, the Interdependents (vs. independents) were more bonded with the brand when status was high, whereas the reverse was true for low status brand.

Study 4 intended to replicate findings in Study 3 with culture as the independent variable. We focused on high status brand (perception of Gucci is consistent across culture, mean of prestige in Asia=5.79 vs. in North America=5.77 out of 7 point scale, t=1). Study 4 found that when complimented on a high status brand usage, Asians feel more indebted to brand compliments (F=8.51, p<.001) and bonded with the brand more than North Americans (F=7.69, p<.01) as Asians would be more likely to perceive that high status brand is favoured by others in their social group than North Americans (F=3.68, p<.05). On the other hand, North Americans were more likely to attribute compliments of brand usage to ego-centric reasons such as brand and self image fit (F=6.87, p<.01) and tended...
to think users of high status brand were more materialistic (F=13.21, p<.001), explaining their low endorsement of the high status brand.

Study 5 examined the impact of compliment of high status brand usage on motivations and subsequent product evaluation. We found that when given the brand compliments, compared to North Americans, Asians tended to be less likely to seek for social approval (mean=3.46 vs. 3.86, F=3.62, p<.05), less likely to view high status brand users to be materialistic (mean=3.79 vs. 4.57, F=15.66, p<.001). Satiation of status via brand compliments made Asians favour minority-status painting (liked by fewer people), a preference-reversal given that the Interdependents focus on group harmony and endorse less unique options (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

REFERENCES


