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Four studies provide converging evidence that interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal enhances individuals’ lie acceptability across four different cultures, i.e., China, US, India and Singapore. We further demonstrate that causal attribution plays the mediating role in the effect of self-construal on consumers’ acceptance of and attitude toward deceptive advertising.

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On Self-Construal and Lie Acceptability: Culture and Consumer Responses Toward Deceptive Advertising

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In March 2016, Volkswagen was sued by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for deceptive advertising. The FTC alleged that Volkswagen deceived consumers by manipulating the emissions test results and falsely claimed that its cars were low-emission and environmentally friendly. Since the scandal first came to light in 2015, sales of Volkswagen automobile have sharply decreased in United States (7%), United Kingdom (14%), and France (3%). Interestingly, however, the fraud does not seem to have affected Volkswagen’s sales in many Asian countries. In fact, despite the company’s disgrace in other parts of the world, its sales increased in China by 3.6% and chalked up considerable gains in South Korea. Such an ironic turn of events raises an important question: why consumers in some countries reacted very differently to Volkswagen’s deceptive advertising from those in other countries?

Consumers expose to deceptive advertising, or “advertising intended to mislead consumers by falsely making claims, by failure to make full disclosure, or by both (AMA),” almost every day. However, research to understand consumers’ reactions toward it is still limited (e.g., Gaeth and Heath 1987; Tipton, Bharadwaj and Roberson 2009). The current research aims to examine how culture, self-construal in particular, influences consumers’ acceptance of and responses toward deceptive advertising. Specifically, we propose that consumers with independent (vs. interdependent) self-construal are more likely to accept and respond more negatively to deceptive advertising. Prior research on culture and lie in interpersonal relationship has provided relevant evidence for our theorization. For instance, Aune and Waters (1994) showed that people high in individualism are less likely to accept lies. Similarly, van Hemert et al. (2002) revealed a significant negative correlation between individualism and attitude toward lie across 23 countries. In addition, Mazar and Aggarwal (2006) found that individualistic culture showed more negative attitude immoral behavior than collectivistic culture.

One possible explanation for the cross-cultural difference in lie acceptability is variation in people’s attribution tendencies. Prior research has demonstrated that people in independent culture are more likely to attribute human behavior to their dispositions, such as personality, character and capability; whereas people in interdependent culture are more likely to believe that human behavior is regulated by the interaction of dispositional and situational factors (Choi et al. 1999). In other words, compared to interdependents, independents will view deceptive advertising as less acceptable because they tend to believe the falsifying or omitting information in advertisement is triggered solely by the advertisers’ personal traits. In contrast, interdependents tend to believe such behavior is influenced not only by advertiser’s dispositions, but more importantly the external factors (e.g., social norms). To sum up, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1:** Compared to interdependents, independents are less likely to accept deceptive advertising.

**Hypothesis 2:** Internal attribution mediates the impact of self-construal on deceptive advertising acceptability.

Four studies have been conducted to test our theorization. Study 1 aims to test the impact of self-construal on lie acceptability in general. 79 US participants and 80 Indian participants recruited from Mturk attended this study. Participants were invited to answer the lie acceptability scale (Oliveira and Levine 2008) embedded in a personality survey. As expected, results showed that US participants were lower in lie acceptability than Indian ones (M = 4.40, M = 3.59; F(1, 157) = 24.75; p < .01). Regression analysis further revealed a negative impact of nationality (dummy coded; 0 = Indian, 1 = US) on lie acceptability (β = -.81, t = -4.98, p < .01).

The objective of study 2a is to test H1. A total of 237 Chinese participants were recruited for this study. Participants were either told that one of their friends informed buyers the faulty screen (honest ad condition) or did not mention it (deceptive ad condition) when selling his used notebook online. After reporting their attitude toward their acceptance of the deceptive ad, participants completed the Singelis’ (1994) self-construal scale. Regression analysis revealed a significant interaction between self-construal and ad type (β = .78, t = 2.59, p = .01), with independents reported more negative attitude toward the deceptive ad (M = 5.70, M = 4.74; p < .01), while no difference was found in the honest ad condition (M = 2.67, M = 2.71; p > .1). Furthermore, independents reported lower level of deceptive ad acceptability (M = 2.52, M = 3.31; p < .01) in the deceptive ad condition but not in the honest ad condition (M = 4.13, M = 3.96; p > .1). Study 2b (N = 146) replicated the findings of study 2a by manipulating individual level self-construal based on Brewer and Gardner’s (1996) work.

Study 3 aims to provide evidence for H2. A total of 244 participants from a Singaporean university completed this study. Participants first completed the same self-construal priming task used in study 2b. Then, participants read a deceptive ad about a food company that over-reported ingredients of its products. Participants’ attitude toward and acceptance of such deceptive advertising were measured. Next, the extent to which participants internally attributed the deceptive advertising to the company’s traits was measured. As expected, independents perceived the deceptive ad as more negative (M = 4.12, M = 3.76; p = .01) and less acceptable (M = 2.80, M = 3.15; p = .06), and were more likely to attribute the deception to the firm (M = 5.63, M = 5.40; p = .03). Bootstrapping analysis showed the “self-construal → internal attribution → deceptive ad acceptability” mediation was significant (Mediated effect = .10, SE = .05, 95% CI = .01 – .22). Thus, H2 was supported.

To sum up, the current research provides converging evidence that independents (vs. interdependents) were less likely to accept deceptive advertising, which was mediated by their tendency to make internal attribution. This research contributes to the currently limited research on lie acceptability and deceptive advertising. Further, it expands existing cross-cultural research by showing that culture not only impacts individual engagement in deception but also their attitude toward deception and deceptive marketing practices. In addition, as more product frauds have been disclosed nowadays, findings of our current research will also provide valuable insights for marketers.  

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