Lost in Translation: the Consequences of Culturally Mismatched Thinking Styles on Familiarity Seeking

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Two studies examine the consequences of experiences that require one to think in a way that is inconsistent with one’s culturally dominant thinking style. Our findings suggest that these cross-cultural experiences lead to increased preference for familiar (vs. new) consumer options across multiple categories.

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The Consequences of Culturally Mismatched Thinking Styles on Familiarity Seeking
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Westerners in general hold an analytic world view that emphasizes the independence of individual objects, whereas East Asians tend to adopt a holistic view, emphasizing that the world is composed of interrelated elements (Nisbett et al. 2001). Although research has revealed important antecedents and consequences of cultural differences in thinking styles, little attention has been paid to the consequences of engaging in culturally mismatched thinking styles. This is our focus. Rather than examining the impact of one or another thinking style, we examine the impact of having to perform a task that mismatches (versus matches) one’s dominant style.

When a given task calls for processing that is not in line with one’s culturally dominant thinking style, self-regulation is required. That is, in order to complete the task successfully, one needs to override the inclination to process information in the usual way and force oneself to process it differently. This inhibition of one’s dominant processing style is depleting in that it consumes self-regulatory resources that could have been used in subsequent tasks. Indeed, recent research has shown that these cross-cultural experiences come with self-regulatory costs and consequences: a reduced ability to control one’s intentions and a greater likelihood of giving in to temptations (Koo et al. 2010).

The present research builds upon this to examine a broader implication of the impact of engaging in culturally mismatched thinking styles—familiarity seeking. If engaging in a mismatched (versus matched) thinking style leads to reduced self-control and increased indulgence, it may also be expected to lead consumers to make other choices that reflect depletion. Making choices and decisions is known to be depleting and thus to impair subsequent efforts at self-control because decision making and self-control draw upon common resources (Vohs et al. 2008). We thus propose that, in turn, feeling depleted may lead people to be less willing to take on additional effort when making choices. People who experience a mismatch (vs. match) in thinking styles, and who consequently feel depleted may opt instead for old familiar consumption experiences.

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that engaging in culturally mismatched thinking styles lead people to make choices that require less effort, increasing the preference for familiar versus novel options. Participants of Asian and European American ethnicities were recruited to represent holistic and analytic thinkers, respectively. Half of the participants in each cultural background were assigned to an analytic task condition: They were shown a picture in which 11 embedded objects were to be found (Monga and John 2008). The rest of the participants were assigned to the holistic task condition, in which they were shown the same picture but with an instruction to focus on the background. Subsequently, participants were shown a scenario in which they had to make choices regarding an upcoming vacation. Participants were then asked to indicate for the categories of hotel, bar/nightclub, and spa, which option they would be more likely to choose, either a familiar favorite location or a new place.

As predicted, a significant interaction was found between participant ethnicity (Asian vs. European American) and their primed thinking style (analytic vs. holistic) on the mean likelihood of selecting familiar (vs. unfamiliar) choices. European American participants were more likely to favor one of the familiar choices in the holistic than in the analytic thinking condition. In contrast, Asian participants were more likely to favor one of the familiar choices in the analytic than in the holistic thinking condition.

Study 2 further examined the impact of culturally mismatched thinking styles on familiarity-seeking tendency in another domain, namely decision making in a restaurant. Specifically, this study tested whether culturally mismatched experiences would lead consumers to prefer familiar to unfamiliar dishes at a restaurant. In addition, this study examined dominant thinking styles via measured chronic thinking style. The study employed a 2 (measured chronic thinking style: analytic vs. holistic) X 2 (induced thinking style: analytic vs. holistic) between subjects factorial design.

Participants were induced to think either analytically or holistically using the same procedure as in Study 1 (Monga & John, 2008). After the thinking-style manipulation, participants were shown a hypothetical scenario in which they had to make choices in a restaurant. They were then asked to indicate whether they would like to choose one of their familiar favorites or a selection from a new menu for each course: an appetizer, a main dish, and a dessert. Then, participants’ chronic thinking styles were measured using the 7 point Analysis-Holism Scale (AHS; Choi et al. 2007).

As expected chi-square tests showed that the percentage of participants who selected an old favorite was significantly greater than those who selected a new choice, especially among those who experienced a culturally mismatched thinking style in the case of the appetizer and the dessert (though not the main dish). Overall, we replicated the significant effects of mismatch on the choice of familiar options at a restaurant. This suggests that the effects observed here are not limited to important and consequential choices, or ones that involve significant risk, such as a hotel. They impact smaller decisions, as well, such as the tendency to order items from a familiar menu rather than from a new set of options.

Taken together, the two studies showed converging evidence that people who engage in a task that mismatches (versus matches) their culturally dominant thinking style are more likely to visit places or select consumer options that they already know well. Our findings have novel implications for the understanding of culture, especially the potential consequences of intercultural interactions in subsequent decision making, and for understanding the impact of depletion on familiarity seeking. Exposure to experiences that require a culturally mismatched thinking style is a commonplace situation. Our research suggests for the first time that, paradoxically, these enriching cross-cultural experiences reduce one’s interest in novel (vs. familiar) experiences.

REFERENCES


