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Cognitive Load, Need For Closure, and Socially Desirable Responding: Cognitively Constrained Versus Motivated Response Biases in Cross-Cultural Consumer Research

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Recent research reveals cultural differences in consumers' tendency to engage in socially desirable responding. Specifically, individualist consumers are shown to be prone to self-deceptive enhancement (SDE), the tendency to hold exaggerated views of one's skills and abilities, whereas collectivist consumers are shown to be prone to impression management (IM), the tendency to distort responses to appear normatively appropriate. We examine the divergent moderating effects of cognitive and motivational factors on these relationships. Across six studies, we find that depleting collectivists' cognitive resources impairs their ability to engage in IM but does not influence individualists' tendency to engage in SDE. In contrast, collectivists' tendency to engage in IM and individualists' tendency to engage in SDE are both seen to increase with high (vs. low) need for cognitive closure (NFC). Implications of these findings on theoretical and methodological research on SDR are highlighted.

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Cognitive Load, Need for Closure, and Socially Desirable Responding: Cognitively Constrained versus Motivated Response Biases in Cross-Cultural Consumer Research

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With globalization, survey researchers have increasingly studied cross-cultural differences in various consumer behaviors, including determinants of decisions under uncertainty (Fong and Wyer 2003), effects of emotional appeals on persuasion (Aaker and Williams 1998), country of origin effects on product perception (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000), and salespeople's ethical sensitivity to stakeholder interests (Blodgett, Lu, Rose, and Vitell 2001). Given the plethora of cross-cultural studies conducted in recent years, it is important to understand how socially desirable responding (SDR) differentially influences participant responses across cultures. Prior research distinguishes between two types of socially desirable responding—*self-deceptive enhancement* (SDE) and *impression management* (IM). SDE is a spontaneous tendency to present an internalized, unrealistically positive view of the self, whereas IM is the deliberate, strategic presentation of a socially approved image of the self (Paulhus 1991).

Recent research suggests that consumers with an individualist cultural orientation differ from those with a collectivist orientation not only in the degree of SDR, but also in the relative prevalence of different SDR styles. Specifically, because individualists are especially motivated to view themselves as independent, self-reliant, and unique, they have a propensity to engage in SDE (Heine and Lehman 1999; Lalwani et al. 2006). Such responses help to establish a view of oneself as capable of being successfully self-reliant, skillful, and competent. Conversely, because collectivists are driven to seek social approval and avoid social disapproval, they are especially likely to provide normatively desirable and socially appropriate responses and, hence, to engage in IM (Heine and Lehman 1999). Consistent with these ideas, considerable evidence supports a positive association between individualism and SDE and between collectivism and IM. In contrast, no relationship has been observed between individualism and IM and between collectivism and SDE (Lalwani et al. 2006). The presence of culture-specific SDR styles renders direct comparison of cross-cultural survey data difficult and less meaningful.

An understanding of how motivational and cognitive factors in the survey context influence cultural differences in SDR styles is important for survey researchers. In a survey setting, participants are expected to give responses that reflect their true perceptions and beliefs. However, some cognitive and motivational demands in the survey setting may increase the respondents' reliance on culture-specific SDR styles as a way to cope with the demands. Therefore, one major research challenge is to identify the cognitive and motivational demands that accentuate cultural differences in SDR styles, so that with knowledge gained from addressing this issue, survey researchers can anticipate how the survey settings could elicit different levels of culture-specific SDR styles. Two such demands examined in the current investigation are cognitive busyness and need for closure.

Because SDE is a spontaneous and automatic process, we hypothesized that cognitive load would not influence individualists' tendency to engage in SDE. In contrast, depletion of cognitive resources would interfere with the execution of an effortful process (Gilbert and Osborne 1989) like IM. Hence, the tendency to engage in IM will be significantly reduced when the introduction of additional cognitive load renders collectivists cognitively busy.

Since individualists do not engage in IM to begin with (see Lalwani et al. 2006), a cognitive load manipulation would not have a discernible effect on individualists' tendency to engage in IM. In short, cognitive load is expected to reduce IM (but not SDE) among collectivists only: cultural differences in IM are hypothesized to be *less* pronounced when consumers are cognitively busy (vs. non-busy). Thus, making consumers cognitively busy would *reduce* the influence of cultural orientation on IM.

Need for closure (NFC) is a personal desire for firm answers that provide epistemic closure (Kruglanski and Webster 1996). An important source of epistemic closure is cultural consensus; individuals feel epistemically secure when their beliefs are widely accepted in their reference groups or cultural groups (Fu et al. 2007; Kruglanski et al. 2006). Considerable evidence suggests that high (vs. low) NFC individuals have a greater tendency to follow cultural norms (Chiu et al. 2000; Fu et al. 2007). Since NFC increases adherence to normative cultural practices, we hypothesized that cultural differences in SDR styles would be more pronounced among high versus low NFC consumers. Specifically, the association between individualism and SDE and that between collectivism and IM should be stronger among high (vs. low) NFC consumers. Six studies supported these hypotheses.

The findings have important theoretical and methodological implications. By examining the moderating role of cognitive load and NFC in the culture-SDR relationship, the paper sheds light on the cognitive and motivational processes that underlie culture-characteristic SDR styles. The studies also advance our understanding of the distinct impact of cognitive load and NFC—two variables that have been believed to act similarly by several researchers (e.g., De Dreu, Koole, & Oldersma 1999; Kardes, Cronley, Kellaris, & Posavac 2004; Webster & Kruglanski 1994). Methodologically, the findings may aid researchers in modifying the cognitive and motivational environment in survey settings to reduce cultural responses biased by distinct SDR styles.

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