



Self-construal and creativity: The moderator effect of self-esteem[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The study examined the effects of self-esteem and self-construal on creativity in a collectivist culture. Junior school students ($n = 316$) completed the Self-Construal Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Test of Divergent Feeling. Correlation and regression analyses showed that both interdependent and independent self-construals are beneficial to creativity, although independent self-construal is more conducive to creativity than interdependent self-construal; self-esteem is also beneficial to creativity; and, moreover, self-esteem has a moderator role between self-construal and creativity and can strengthen the positive impact of interdependent self-construal on creativity.

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1. Introduction

Creativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original) and appropriate (i.e., meets task constraints; [Stemberg & Lubart, 1996](#)). Individuals who are highly creative have common personality traits. For example, they have higher self-acceptance, little concern for others' opinions ([Barron & Harrington, 1981](#); [Kelly, 2006](#)), and high autonomy ([Liu et al., 2013](#); [Xiao, Wang, Chen, Zheng, & Chen, 2015](#)). The relationship between self-esteem, which is a core personal-ity variable, and creativity has also been examined.

Much research has demonstrated the positive correlation between self-esteem and creativity ([Cantero, Alfonso-Benlliure, & Melero, 2016](#); [Deng & Zhang, 2011](#); [Kemple, David, & Wang, 1996](#)). The reason why self-esteem is beneficial to creativity may lie in the positive functions of self-esteem. High self-esteem individuals tend to believe themselves to be capable and worthy, so they are more likely to express ideas that differ from others, and are more willing to share creative ideas ([Thatcher & Brown, 2010](#)). Moreover, high self-esteem could maintain high internal motivation and reduce external motivation, which have been proposed to be crucial to creativity ([Amabile & Pillemer, 2012](#); [Eisenberger & Aselage, 2009](#)). Since self-esteem is an important psychological resource that acts as a buffer against a stressful environment ([Cast & Burke, 2002](#)), high self-esteem reduces the possibility of creativity decreasing as a result of evaluation stress ([Amabile, 1996](#); [Amabile, Goldfarb, & Brackfield, 1990](#); [Silvia & Phillips, 2004](#)).

Creativity is also sensitive to environmental variables ([Hennessey & Amabile, 1998](#)). Culture is an important environmental variable, and its relationship with creativity has been of interest to researchers. For example, [Chiu and Kwan \(2010\)](#) argued that culture could affect the outcomes of creative processing through its effects on social and psychological processes. Self-construal, which is a variable that is correlated with culture and self, refers to an individual's awareness of the relationship between the self and the surrounding environment ([Markus & Kitayama, 1991](#)). [Markus and Kitayama \(1991\)](#) argued that self-construal can be divided into independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal. More specifically, in an individualistic society, people are more likely to accept individualistic cultural values, place emphasis on their inner thoughts and feelings, and portray themselves in terms of their inherent characteristics and goals, which is known as independent self-construal. By the same token, people living in a collectivist society always accept group cultural values, and attach importance to others' opinions or the relationship between the self and others, which is known as interdependent self-construal. Recent research studies into the relationship between self-esteem and self-construal show that low self-esteem may encourage behaviors that increase interdependence ([Baker & McNulty, 2013](#); [Nakashima, Yanagisawa, & Ura, 2013](#)). Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to conform to social norms and less likely to express disagreement with others ([Murray et al., 2009](#)).

The previous literature has shown that independent self-construal has a positive impact on creativity while interdependent self-construal is negatively linked with creativity. For example, in [Ng's \(2003\)](#) study, the self-construal and creativity of 158 white undergraduates from Australia (an individualistic culture) and 186 Chinese undergraduates from Singapore (a collectivist culture) were measured, and structural equation modeling showed that independent self-construal had a positive impact on creative behavior, while interdependent self-construal

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had a positive impact on conforming behavior. [Wiekens and Stapel \(2008\)](#) investigated the impact of situational self-construal on creativity. In their study, 61 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of three self-construal priming conditions (I-priming, we-priming, and a control condition) during a word search task, and then completed divergent thinking tasks. The results showed that participants in the I-priming condition produced more creative and unusual answers, whereas those in the we-priming condition produced more standard answers. In summary, regardless of dispositional self-construal or situational self-construal, interdependent self-construal impedes creativity, whereas independent self-construal enhances creativity.

1.1. The present study

Previous research has shown that independent self-construal has a positive impact on creative behavior while interdependent self-construal is negatively linked with creative behavior ([Ng, 2003](#); [Wiekens & Stapel, 2008](#)). However, based on the person–environment model ([Phillips, Cheng, Yeh, & Siu, 2010](#)), the effect of self-construal might depend on other variables, such as self-esteem. The literature shows that self-esteem is an important psychological resource that acts as a buffer against a stressful environment ([Cast & Burke, 2002](#)) and is beneficial to creativity ([Cantero et al., 2016](#); [Deng & Zhang, 2011](#); [Kemple et al., 1996](#)). Thus, we proposed that self-esteem might be a moderator between self-construal and creativity.

In addition, to the best of our knowledge, no research has been conducted among Chinese participants regarding the relationship between self-construal and creativity. The previous research ([Ng, 2003](#)) was conducted in Singapore. Although Singapore is an Eastern collectivist country, there are still differences between China and Singapore ([Zhang, Soh, & Wong, 2011](#)). Thus, it is unclear whether the findings based on Singapore participants can be generalized to Chinese participants.

In summary, the present study attempted to examine the effect of self-construal on creativity, in combination with self-esteem, among Chinese participants. Our hypotheses were as follows: independent self-construal is more beneficial to creativity than interdependent self-construal (H1); self-esteem is beneficial to creativity (H2); and self-esteem plays a moderator role between self-construal and creativity, strengthening the positive effect of independent self-construal on creativity, and decreasing the possible negative effect of interdependent self-construal on creativity (H3).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three hundred and sixteen junior high school students in Beijing, China, took part in this study (53% male; range_{age} = 12–14 years). Of the participants, 49% were in Grade 7 ($n = 155$), and 51% were in Grade 8 ($n = 161$). All students were given the option to not participate in the study.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the Self-Construal Scale ([Singelis, 1994](#)), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ([Rosenberg, 1965](#)), and Test of Divergent Feeling ([Williams, 1980](#)). After completing the questionnaires, each of the participants was thanked and given a gift valued at about ¥10.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Self-Construal Scale

The Self-Construal Scale ([Singelis, 1994](#)) consists of an independent subscale (12 items; e.g., “I am the same person at home as I am at school”) and interdependent subscale (12 items; e.g., “My happiness

depends on the happiness of those around me”). Participants indicated their agreement or disagreement on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The self-construal measure had a total alpha of .80 in this study.

2.3.2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ([Rosenberg, 1965](#)) consists of 10 items (e.g., “I take a positive view of myself”). Participants indicated their agreement or disagreement on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*). The alpha was .78 in this study.

2.3.3. Test of Divergent Feeling

The Test of Divergent Feeling ([Williams, 1980](#)) was used to measure participants' creativity. It includes four subscales: risk-taking (12 items; e.g., “Trying a new game or activity is an interesting thing”), curiosity (13 items; e.g., “I would like to know what other people think”), imagination (13 items; e.g., “If the final page of a storybook is missing, I will make up the story's ending myself”), and complexity (12 items; e.g., “I like unusual things”). The items are scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). The total alpha was .86 in this study.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the research variables are presented in [Table 1](#). Both independent and interdependent self-construals were positively correlated with all of the five creativity indexes, including risk-taking, curiosity, imagination, complexity, and total creativity (independent self-construal: r from 0.22 to 0.41, $p < .01$; interdependent self-construal: r from 0.14 to 0.28, $p < .05$). Self-esteem was positively correlated with all of the creativity indexes (r from 0.19 to 0.22, $p < .01$), except imagination ($r = -.002$, ns). Independent self-construal was positively correlated with interdependent self-construal ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), and a paired sample t -test showed that there was no difference between independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal ($t = .542$, $p = .588$).

3.2. The influence of self-construal and self-esteem on creativity

Hierarchical regression analyses were used to analyze the effects of self-construal and self-esteem on the five creativity indexes, especially the moderating role of self-esteem between self-construal and creativity. Before the regression analysis, the independent variables (independent self-construal, interdependent self-construal, and self-esteem) were centered, and the interactions between self-construal and self-esteem were then calculated. The regression involved two steps: all of the independent variables were introduced into the regression equation to test the main effects (step 1), and the interaction terms were introduced into the regression equation to test the moderating effects (step 2).

First, as shown in [Table 2](#), the main effects of independent self-construal were significant for all of the five creativity indexes in both the first and second steps. However, the main effects of interdependent self-construal were significant only for risk-taking in both steps and significant only for curiosity in the second step. In addition, in every model, the β of independent self-construal was higher than the β of interdependent self-construal. Second, the main effects of self-esteem were significant or marginally significant for almost all of the creativity indexes, except imagination. All of the aforementioned significant main effects were positive. Furthermore, the interactions between interdependent self-construal and self-esteem were significant for all of the creativity indexes, except risk-taking (marginally significant for complexity). Simple slope analyses were conducted to further examine the two-way interactions for the four creativity indexes.

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