



Consumer susceptibility to cross-selling persuasion: The roles of self-construal and interpersonal harmony[☆]



Xuehua Wang^a, Hean Tat Keh^{b,*}

^a School of International Business Administration, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai 200433, China

^b Monash Business School, Monash University, Caulfield East, VIC 3145, Australia

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ABSTRACT

In many sales situations, consumers often encounter cross-selling persuasion, whereby the salesperson will suggest another product to go along with the initial purchase. While some consumers tend to be more susceptible to cross-selling persuasion, others are less so. Why is this the case? The present research proposes that consumers' self-construal can influence their purchase intention for the cross-selling product. The authors conduct three studies to test their hypotheses. Specifically, they show that interdependent (independent) self-construal increases (lowers) consumers' purchase intention toward the cross-selling item (Study 1). This relationship is mediated by interpersonal harmony (Study 2) and moderated by product complementarity (Study 3).

1. Introduction

In many sales situations, salespeople often make additional product suggestions to consumers beyond their initial purchase, a technique known as cross-selling (Hruschka et al., 1999; Kamakura, 2007; Värlander and Yakhlef, 2008). Examples of cross-selling include McDonald's counter staff asking, "Do you want fries with that?" after consumers have placed their order for a burger, and bank clerks suggesting additional financial products while finishing a transaction for a consumer.

From the consumer's perspective, there are two key differences between regular selling and cross-selling. First, there is already a relationship established between the consumer and the salesperson in cross-selling (i.e., the consumer has already purchased a prior item from the salesperson before the attempted cross-sell). Potentially, depending on the consumers' desire to maintain this relationship, it may affect their susceptibility to cross-selling persuasion (i.e., purchase intention for the cross-selling product). Second, there is usually high complementarity between the two products in cross-selling, such as between ice-cream and cake (Phibbs, 2015). That is, the extent to which the cross-selling product complements the initial purchase would influence consumer susceptibility to the cross-selling persuasion. To our knowledge, the existing literature has not addressed these two unique characteristics of cross-selling persuasion.

Specifically, we propose that consumers' self-construal will influence their susceptibility to cross-selling persuasion. Self-construal is an important cultural difference explaining how individuals construe themselves in relation to others. It reflects the extent to which an individual defines him- or herself as unique and autonomous or as embedded in his or her social network (Gardner et al., 1999), known as independent or interdependent self-construal, respectively (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). We posit that consumers with an interdependent self-construal are more susceptible to cross-selling persuasion, while consumers with an independent self-construal are less susceptible to cross-selling persuasion. This is because interdependent self-construal consumers tend to be more accommodating of others, while independent self-construal consumers are more individualistic and emphasize the self (Gardner et al., 1999; Kim and Markus, 1999; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Millan and Reynolds, 2014; Sun et al., 2009). Thus, in cross-selling situations, interdependent self-construal consumers would be more aware of the relationship they have established with the salesperson from the initial transaction, leading them to be more willing to accommodate the salesperson's suggestion to buy the additional product; whereas independent self-construal consumers' emphasis on the self would lead them to downplay their relationship with the salesperson, making them less susceptible to cross-selling persuasion.

We further propose that the relationship between self-construal and

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mkxwang@gmail.com (X. Wang), ht.keh@monash.edu (H.T. Keh).

susceptibility to cross-selling persuasion is mediated by the psychological mechanism of maintaining interpersonal harmony. Prior research documents cultural differences in cognition, whereby individuals with an interdependent self-construal engage more in cooperation, care for harmony, and value maintaining benevolent relationships, while those with an independent self-construal engage in expressing uniqueness, tend to stand out, and be distinct and separate from others (Kim and Markus, 1999; Shavitt et al., 2006). Thus, in a cross-selling situation, consumers with an interdependent self-construal will have greater tendency to maintain interpersonal harmony with the salesperson, making them more susceptible to cross-selling persuasion; whereas consumers with an independent self-construal will be less inclined to have interpersonal harmony with the salesperson, thus lowering their susceptibility.

In addition, we conjecture that complementarity of the cross-selling product serves as a moderator on these effects. That is, a cross-selling product that complements the initial purchase (e.g., a pair of socks to accompany a pair of shoes) will strengthen the purchase intention of interdependent self-construal consumers, and may even increase the receptiveness of independent self-construal consumers toward the cross-selling product. This effect, however, would be attenuated for a non-complementary cross-selling product (e.g., a book to go along with a pair of shoes), as consumers would see little fit between the two products, regardless of their self-construal, which lowers their purchase intention for the second item.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. We first develop the theoretical arguments and hypotheses for the main effects of self-construal on purchase intention for the cross-selling item, followed by the mediating role of interpersonal harmony underlying this relationship, as well as the moderating effect of product complementarity on this relationship. We conduct three studies to test the hypotheses, discuss the implications of our findings, and conclude with future research directions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Self-construal and consumer susceptibility to cross-selling persuasion

Prior research indicates that people in Western countries tend to have independent self-construal, whereby they value uniqueness, distinction, and independence, while people in Eastern cultures tend to have interdependent self-construal, in that they emphasize connectedness, conformity, and harmony (Agrawal and Maheswaran, 2005; Bolton et al., 2010; Monga and John, 2007).

Consumers with an interdependent self-construal tend to see themselves as inextricably linked to others within a larger social network and thus are more willing to compromise and be more accommodating of others (Shavitt et al., 2006; Sun et al., 2009; Triandis, 1995). In sales situations, due to the incentive structure, salespeople are often motivated to engage in cross-selling. Even with this knowledge in mind, when interdependent self-construal consumers are propositioned with a cross-selling product, their tendency for connectedness with others would lead them to listen to the sales persuasion (Jiang et al., 2010), which may subsequently increase their purchase intention. In contrast, independent self-construal consumers emphasize the self and are less connected to others; having purchased what they wanted, they are less likely to continue listening to the additional product pitch from the salesperson, which would lower their susceptibility to cross-selling persuasion. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H1: Consumers with an interdependent self-construal tend to have higher purchase intention for the cross-selling product than do consumers with an independent self-construal.

2.2. The mediating role of interpersonal harmony

Interpersonal harmony refers to a balance achieved in relationships (Kwan et al., 1997). It leads to conflict avoidance, greater cooperation, and tolerance of interpersonal disagreement and transgression (Gabrenya and Hwang, 1996; Morris et al., 1998). Prior research suggests that people with an interdependent self-construal tend to put greater emphasis on developing and maintaining harmony in interpersonal interactions (Kim and Markus, 1999; Markus and Kitayama, 1991), while people with an independent self-construal are more likely to emphasize their self-esteem and personal worth, rather than interpersonal harmony (Kwan et al., 1997).

In this vein, we propose that consumers with an interdependent self-construal will have greater motivation to establish and maintain interpersonal harmony with the salesperson, which will lead them to listen to the cross-selling persuasion and develop higher purchase intention for the additional product. In contrast, consumers with an independent self-construal will have little inclination to establish interpersonal harmony with the salesperson, thus are less likely to listen to the cross-selling persuasion or develop purchase intention for the additional product. By extension, the implication is that if independent self-construal consumers are primed with a high level of interpersonal harmony, they would develop greater purchase intention for the cross-selling product. Conversely, if interdependent self-construal consumers are primed with a low level of interpersonal harmony, they would have lower purchase intention for the cross-selling product. More formally, we hypothesize that:

H2: The relationship between self-construal and purchase intention for the cross-selling product is mediated by interpersonal harmony.

2.3. The moderating role of product complementarity

Complementary products such as shoes and socks go well together, and would facilitate cross-selling persuasion (Phibbs, 2015). Thus, the sales persuasion of a complementary cross-selling item would enhance the purchase intention of the interdependent self-construal consumer and may even make the independent self-construal consumer become more receptive toward the additional product. In contrast, non-complementary products such as shoes and a book would be viewed as highly unrelated products, and the lack of fit between the products would dampen consumers' interest in the cross-selling item, regardless of their self-construal. In addition, as interdependent consumers are more likely to see relationships between inconsistent products (Ahluwalia, 2008), they should be more favorable toward the non-complementary product compared to independent consumers. More formally:

H3: The effect of self-construal on purchase intention for the cross-selling product is moderated by product complementarity (complementary vs. non-complementary).

3. Study 1: Primed self-construal and purchase intention

The objective of Study 1 is to examine the main effect of self-construal on susceptibility to cross-selling persuasion (H1).

3.1. Method

We recruited 158 participants from Amazon's M-Turk (37.3% female, Mage=37.0 years). Prior research indicates that M-Turk can be used to obtain inexpensive yet high-quality data (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Mason and Suri, 2012). We primed independent and interdependent self-construals by adopting the procedure from Trafimow et al. (1991), which has been found to be effective in other studies (Lalwani and Shavitt, 2009, 2013). All participants read a story about an ancient warrior, Tiglath, who was asked to lead an army for a difficult mission

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