

Research Article

# Who said what: The effects of cultural mindsets on perceptions of endorser–message relatedness ☆

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## Abstract

The cultural lens through which an ad is viewed can affect the extent to which an endorser of the product in an ad and the message s(he) communicates are thought about in relation to one another. Consumers with a collectivist mindset tend to think about information relationally. Consequently, they consider the endorsement in relation to the endorser and this affects their memory for both. It also affects recipients' concern with the fit between the endorser's message and the endorser and consequently influences their judgments of both the ad and the product being advertised. When people have an individualist mindset, on the other hand, they appear to treat the endorser and the endorsement as independent pieces of information and are less sensitive to their fit. Four studies support these conclusions and provide insights into how endorser–message relatedness impacts persuasion under different cultural mindset conditions.

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## Introduction

Consumers are often exposed to endorsements of a product by celebrities and well-known public figures (Shimp, 2000). Sometimes these endorsers can be other consumers like themselves. Although the use of endorsers in mainstream advertising is commonplace, the construction of persuasive messages that are effective across cultures has proved to be inordinately difficult. Companies have often failed to understand

fully what resonates with foreign audiences. The cultural lens through which consumers view an ad often influences their attention to different aspects of the ad and the interpretation they give to it. This can occur because the information that they have accessible and consequently bring to bear on their judgments of the ad and the product being advertised might be culturally determined (for a review, see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). More relevant to the current discussion, however, is the possibility that cultural frames affect how people process information and their sensitivity to the way in which different elements in a persuasive communication go together.

Although it is often not explicitly recognized, advertisements can be very complex communications. An ad can be composed of many diverse features, which include not only a picture of the product but also a description of its attributes, its price and brand name, a testimonial or endorsement by a celebrity or another consumer, and a picture of the endorser. Consumers who are confronted with such an ad might use several different strategies in construing its implications. On one hand, they could focus their attention on a small subset of the features available, evaluate the

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implications of each piece of information *independently*, and then combine these implications mechanistically to form a judgment in the manner implied by theories of information integration (Anderson, 1971; Fishbein, 1963; for applications in consumer research, see Adaval, 2001, 2003; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Alternatively, they could consider the features of the ad *interdependently*. That is, they might consider the features in relation to one another and their situational or informational context and attempt to form an overall impression of the product that incorporates their implications as a whole (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Adaval, Isbell, & Wyer, 2007). Cultural differences might affect the disposition to employ these different processing strategies and consequently the extent to which a particular ad component is deemed important and how the different components go together. The influence of cultural differences on how various components of an ad fit or go together has rarely, if ever, been considered.

Theories of cultural cognition (Chiu & Hong, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, 2003; Oyserman & Lee, 2008b) postulate how cultural differences in (a) the value placed on fitting in with social institutions and (b) the value attached to individual striving affect the disposition to think about stimulus features independently or in relation to one another. Oyserman (2011) (see also Oyserman & Lee, 2008a) suggests that these dispositions (called cultural mindsets) can spill over from human relationships to affect cognitive processes more generally (Mourey, Oyserman, & Yoon, 2013). Moreover, these different dispositions, which characterize individualist and collectivist cultures, can be situationally primed. (This can be done using a variety of methods such as reading a paragraph or clicking on first person pronouns in a paragraph, Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009.) When these cultural mindsets are primed, participants who have received an individualist prime are better at extracting the main point of a message whereas those who have received a collectivist prime are better at connecting and integrating across message elements (Oyserman & Lee, 2008a).

These differences could potentially have implications for many of the specific issues noted earlier, concerning the way in which the different types of information contained in an ad are combined to form a judgment. In the present research, we focused on a particular issue that has rarely been examined either in consumer research or in communication and persuasion more generally: namely, the relationship of information contained in an endorsement to characteristics of the endorser him(her)self. We predicted that culture-related dispositions to process information can induce more general differences in the tendency to consider the endorser in an ad in relation to the message content. This differential sensitivity to the fit between the endorser and the message can influence participants' interpretation of the message and their judgments of both the ad and the product being advertised.

## Theoretical background

### Cultural mindsets

One of the most pervasive cultural differences to be identified in cross-cultural research surrounds the tendency to think about features of a stimulus situation independently or in relation to

one another (for reviews, see Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Wyer, Chiu, & Hong, 2009). This difference is reflected in individuals' self-construals (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; see also Triandis, 1995). That is, Westerners typically have a disposition to think of themselves independently of others, whereas East Asians are disposed to think of themselves in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, 1995). Although this difference may be rooted in early childhood socialization (Miller, Fung, & Koven, 2007), it generalizes to the processing of information in nonsocial domains as well.

A more general conceptualization of these cultural differences and their effects was proposed by Oyserman and Lee (2008a,b) and Oyserman and Sorensen (2009). They postulate the existence of cultural mindsets analogous to those that influence behavior in other types of domains (for reviews, see Wyer & Xu, 2010; Wyer, Xu, & Shen, 2012). More generally, a behavioral mindset is characterized by a tendency for general behavior-related concepts, activated in one domain of experience, to guide behavior in an unrelated domain to which these concepts are applicable (Wyer & Xu, 2010). Moreover, the behavior-related concepts that give rise to these mindsets can be either situationally induced or chronically accessible.

The cultural mindsets postulated by Oyserman and her colleagues are exemplars. As noted earlier, members of East Asian cultures are characterized by a disposition to think about themselves in relation to others and to the group in which they belong. This disposition can give rise to a chronic *collectivist* mindset that leads individuals to process pieces of information in relation to one another in quite different situations. In contrast, representatives of Western cultures are characterized by independence, individualism and personal autonomy. These can give rise to a chronic *individualist* mindset that leads individuals to process pieces of information independently of one another more generally. Thus, for example, East Asians are more likely than Westerners to think of features of information in relation to their context (Park, Nisbett, & Hedden, 1999; Krishna, Zhou, & Zhang, 2008; see also Masuda & Nisbett, 2001 and Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001) and to organize information in terms of their thematic relationship rather than in terms of abstract categories (Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004).

As Oyserman and Lee (2008a) and Oyserman and Sorensen (2009) point out, however, mindsets are not only chronic but can be induced by transitory situational factors. For example, individuals can be primed to have an individualist mindset by asking them to construct sentences that require the use of first-person singular pronouns (such as "I" and "me"). Alternately, they can be primed to have a collectivist mindset by asking them to construct sentences containing first-person plurals (e.g., "we", "us"). Although these concepts are associated with social interaction, they may activate more general dispositional concepts that govern information processing in other, unrelated domains. Thus, for example, priming a collectivist mindset increases individuals' ability to remember the positions of objects in a picture in relation to one another and to think about an array of small letters in relation to a more global figure that they compose (Kuhnen & Oyserman, 2002). These effects parallel those observed more generally in Western and

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