

Research Article

Bicultural self-defense in consumer contexts: Self-protection motives are the basis for contrast versus assimilation to cultural cues[☆]

Aurelia Mok^{a,*}, Michael W. Morris^b

^a City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

^b Columbia University, United States

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Abstract

Studies of social judgment found that the way bicultural individuals respond to cultural cues depends on their cultural identity structure. Biculturals differ in the degree to which they represent their two cultural identities as integrated (vs. nonintegrated), which is assessed as high (vs. low) bicultural identity integration (BII), respectively. High BII individuals assimilate to cultural cues, yet low BII individuals contrast to these cues. The current studies reveal that this dynamic extends to consumer behavior and elucidate the underlying psychological mechanism. We found that high (low) BII individuals exhibit assimilation (contrast) responses to cultural cues in consumer information-seeking and choice. Furthermore, the pattern occurs with both subliminal (study 1) and supraliminal (study 2) cultural primes, and is mediated by the experience of identity exclusion threat (study 2). Results suggest that the interactive effect of BII and cultural cues arises from nonconscious defense against the exclusion of a cultural identity. Implications for self-protective processes, automatic behavior, and marketing are discussed.

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Introduction

Consider a Japanese–American heading to a local shopping center for lunch. On her way to the shopping center, she strolls past either an American Apparel or UNIQLO store. The shopping center has two restaurants, one serving hamburgers and another one serving sushi. Would exposure to American Apparel make her more likely to act like an American and choose the burger joint? If she passed by UNIQLO instead, would she then be more inclined to follow her Japanese side and choose the sushi bar?

With globalization, consumers increasingly identify with more than one culture. Biculturalism was originally studied among immigrants who identify strongly with both heritage and

host cultures (Berry, 1990), which occurs when they acculturate to the host culture without abandoning their own heritage culture (Penaloza, 1994; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). Besides immigrants, other types of people develop bicultural identities: denizens of multicultural communities such as Hong Kong and Singapore (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2005; Chen, Ng, & Rao, 2005), devoted consumers of media, products, and practices from another culture (Arnett, 2002; Zhang, 2009), expatriates working abroad for years, and so forth (Friedman, Liu, Chi, Hong, & Sung, 2011; Maertz, Hassan, & Magnusson, 2009). A bicultural's dual cultural legacies present two alternative ways of interpreting or framing a given stimulus or problem. Which frame they apply affects their judgments, decisions and actions (Brumbaugh, 2002; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Cultural legacies can be activated by exposing individuals to cues of their cultural identities, such as images of iconic symbols (Hong et al., 2000), the language spoken in the culture (Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008), or people, whether spokespersons or audiences from that culture

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Management, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chee Avenue, Hong Kong.

E-mail address: mok.aurelia@cityu.edu.hk (A. Mok).

(Forehand & Deshpande, 2001; Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2002). For example, bicultural Singaporeans make different economic choices after exposure to Western images as opposed to Asian images. They become more willing to pay for expedited delivery of a product, reflecting Western norms of impatience as opposed to Chinese norms of patience (Chen et al., 2005). Asian-Americans make different choices after being queried about their American identity rather than their Asian identity. They become more likely to favor an unusually colored car over a traditionally colored one, reflecting American uniqueness values as opposed to Asian conformist values (LeBoeuf, Shafir, & Bayuk, 2010). In these examples, biculturals assimilate to the cultural cue; they adhere to the norms of the cued culture. Cultural cues are thought to raise the accessibility of knowledge structures associated with the cultural identity, such as norms and values, increasing the likelihood that they will be used as interpretive frames (Hong et al., 2000).

However, not all biculturals assimilate to cultural cues. Some biculturals contrast to the cultural cue; they act counter to the norms of the cued culture (e.g., Kibria, 2002; Yang & Bond, 1980). The direction of responses to cultural cues – assimilation or contrast – appears to be moderated by individual differences in bicultural identity structure. Biculturals differ on how they organize their dual cultural identifications (LaFrombroise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Lau-Gesk, 2003; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, and Morris (2002) developed the Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) scale, which assesses whether biculturals represent their two cultural identities as coherent and cohesive (high BII) as opposed to conflicting and noncompatible (low BII). Individuals with high BII tend to assimilate to cultural cues, whereas those with low BII tend to contrast to cultural cues (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). For example, when primed with images of American versus Asian culture, Asian-Americans with high BII judge themselves to be more extraverted and unique, whereas those with low BII judge themselves to be more introverted and conforming (Mok & Morris, 2009). These findings suggest that the responses of bicultural consumers cannot be simply predicted from their strength of cultural identifications (e.g., LeBoeuf et al., 2010); the structure of their cultural identities is critical to understanding their behavior. Biculturals with nonintegrated Western and Asian identities may choose unique products and avoid traditional products in Asian cultural contexts. The sight of American Apparel on the way to lunch might provoke a low BII Japanese-American consumer to choose sushi over burgers.

Past accounts for the contrastive process

Low BII individuals identify strongly with their two cultures and moreover endorse the values and practices from their two cultures (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Why then do low BII individuals contrast to situations of their own cultural identities? Previous work proposed that perceived self-dissimilarity to cultural cues explains their contrastive responses (Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Studies from the priming literature suggest that people contrast to primes that are perceived as self-dissimilar (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998; Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007). Cheng et al. (2006) posited

that the cultural primes in studies that documented the BII moderation effect (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002) were self-discrepant to low BII individuals in terms of valence. Research on the antecedents of BII (including acculturation stressors and personality dispositions) found that low BII individuals have more negative acculturation experiences, such as discrimination (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). Thus, cultural primes that are positively valenced (e.g., image of Mickey Mouse in the American prime condition, or the Summer Palace in the Asian prime condition, Benet-Martinez et al., 2002) may appear self-discrepant to low BII individuals and evoke contrastive responses. Cheng et al. (2006) found evidence for this proposal by showing that low BII individuals contrast to cultural cues of positive valence, yet assimilate to cultural cues of negative valence (presumably more self-similar). However, recent findings suggest that the perceived valence of cultural cues is not critical to the moderating effect of BII. Mok and Morris (2009) documented that low BII individuals contrast to cultural primes without any salient valence (e.g., “J. Harris” in the American prime condition, or “J. Chang” in the Asian prime condition).

A recent view is that the contrastive process reflects identity motives. A study by Zou, Morris, and Benet-Martinez (2008) found that low BII individuals have strong positive identification with their two cultures, yet they also exhibit cultural disidentification. Disidentification is not synonymous with a lack of positive identification, but identification and disidentification can be relatively distinct dimensions (Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean Parks, 1998; Elsbach, 1999). Disidentification involves a motive to defy a group’s norms or avoid being associated by others with the group (Goffman, 1963). Zou et al. (2008) observed that cultural disidentification associated with low BII could evoke contrastive responses to cultural cues. However, cultural disidentification did not mediate (explain) the moderating effect of BII. This suggests motivation to defy cultural norms is causally less proximal to contrastive responses to cultural cues than is BII.

An alternative account for the contrastive process is awareness of a priming influence. Prior research suggests that conscious awareness of the priming manipulation or experimental hypothesis could evoke contrastive responses (Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987; Strack, Schwarz, Bless, Kübler, & Wänke, 1993; Wheeler et al., 2007). Past demonstrations of the moderating effect of BII relied on supraliminal cultural primes and dependent measures that seemingly make cultural differences salient. For example, in studies tapping attributional biases (e.g., Benet-Martinez et al., 2002; Zou et al., 2008), Asian-Americans first view a series of images from Asian or American culture and then form judgments on whether an actor’s behavior is caused by pressure from the group versus individual initiative. Participants are likely to be aware of the greater emphasis on group harmony and conformity in East Asian culture and on independence in American culture, even if the culture’s respective biases in attribution are not known. Low BII individuals, who tend to have personalities higher in neuroticism and vigilance (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005) may be particularly resistant to situational demands to exhibit culturally typical behavior (noted in Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). It remains

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