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## Healthy food and cultural holism

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## ABSTRACT

Adopting Nisbett's theory of analytic and holistic thinking, the current study examines cultural influence on perceptions about the health benefits of holistic foods and nutritional elements. Consistent with the theory, Korean older adults ( $n=84$ ) tended to believe that consuming whole, natural foods (e.g., honey, aloe vera, green tea) is more helpful for health than taking individual nutrition elements (e.g., vitamins, calcium, iron). A reverse pattern prevailed for American older adults ( $n=61$ ). Results from a follow-up study ( $n=284$ ) indicate the same pattern of cultural difference in perception of food nutrition can be replicated with individual measurements of analytic–holistic thinking. Holistic thinking tended to predict the valuation of food functions ('*what it does as a whole*') and the devaluation of food elements ('*what is in it*'). The current findings extend the validity of Nisbett's theory and provide practical implications for medical doctors and food marketers intending to persuade Asian patients/clients.

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## 1. Introduction

Individuals with different cultural backgrounds often develop different explanatory or personal models of health and illness (Hampson, Glausgrow, & Toobert, 1990; Kleinman, 1988). These differing models frame a person's beliefs about the causes of illness, degree of personal control over health, and best ways to manage health problems. However, a robust theoretical explanation for cultural differences has yet to emerge in health contexts such as doctor–patient communication, identifying communication measures to promote healthy behaviors for the public, or strategizing advertisements of health products. In particular, this study considers the manner in which doctors and international marketers can customize the messages (i.e., regimen, advertisement strategy) to induce compliance from patients/potential buyers more effectively.

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Past research in this domain has proven largely unsuccessful because existing cultural theories tend to conflict with empirical findings (see for *meta*-analytic review Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). The current investigation advocates an alternative but maturing theoretical framework (e.g., Nisbett, 2003), untested in the health domain, to explain and predict East-West cultural differences in conceptualizing healthy food and nutritional elements. The goal is to understand how culture influences the level of valuation of food elements and functions in promoting health and preventing illness. Current findings offer theory-based strategies for health practitioners to use to customize dietary recommendations for patients of different cultures. International marketers may also benefit from the present study noting the cultural impact on consumer behaviors (e.g., Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; McCort & Malhotra, 1993; Yau, 1988). Particularly, the current evidence suggests that food marketers can better attract the attention of potential buyers by adapting the advertisement messages to the cultural traits of the target population.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Cross-cultural researchers have invested significant scholarly effort to understand the causes and consequences of cultural differences. To date, the Individualism-Collectivism distinction (IND-COL; Hofstede, 1980) has served as the major theoretical framework to explain cultural differences between the West, identified as primarily IND, and the East, identified as primarily COL. A *meta*-analysis involving 83 IND-COL studies (Oyserman et al., 2002), however, demonstrate empirical findings often contradict Hofstede's theory. In fact, Americans, the prototypical individualists, appeared to be just as collectivistic as those typically considered collectivists like Japanese and Koreans, who were *no* less individualistic than North Americans. Several effects indicate Latinos to be more individualistic than people from the U.S. (see for a more detailed critique, Lim, Kim, & Kim, 2011). Markus and Kitayama (1991) attribute East-West cultural differences to individual construals of the self in relation to others, positing that most people in COL societies maintain interdependent self-construals while persons in IND societies hold more independent self-construals. The utility of this scheme, however, remains limited with the measurement invalidity (see for *meta*-analytic critique Levine et al., 2003).

Outside these popular theories exists a large body of evidence indicating context-dependency as the primary cause of cultural differences between the East and the West (e.g., Hall, 1976). Culture remains a broad concept, with distinctions within culture theorized as derived from and representative of; language, (Hamaguchi, 1977; Kashima & Kashima, 1998; Lebra, 1976), history of philosophy (King, 1985; Munro, 1985), the perception of self (Kashima et al., 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1998), worldviews (Nisbett, 2003), or the structure of society (Lim, 2002; Lim, Allen, Burrell, & Kim, 2007). One intriguing observation suggests that behind these diverse frames of reference lies a common assumption about the existence of substantial cultural differences in context-dependency, particularly between Europeans and East Asians. Kashima and Kashima (1998) documented context-dependency in the Japanese language, demonstrating references to self (i.e., first person singular pronoun) to take different forms according to varying relational contexts. Hall (1976) pointed out that Easterners' communication depends more on contextual cues whereas Westerners tend to focus more on the actual message as the primary source of meaning. Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1998), Kashima et al. (2004), and Lim et al. (2007) proposed that East Asians' perception of self tends to vary depending upon a conversational partner while Europeans' identity remains relatively constant.

Nisbett (2003) employed a similar approach to explain cultural differences in cognition, perception, and worldview. Specifically, Nisbett (2003) proposed that Europeans tend to possess an analytic worldview reminiscent of Ancient Greek culture whereas East Asians, the offspring of Chinese tradition, manifest a holistic tendency. The analytic-holistic cultural distinction posits individuals raised in more analytic societies tend to see the world as an aggregate of objects separable from one another and from the context to which they belong. In analytic cultures, objects dissociated from context receive a cognitive attention due to the belief that knowing an individual objects' internal attributes provides a reliable means of understanding physical and social phenomena. The analytic cultural assumption implies fundamental characteristics of an individual object to remain relatively independent of other objects and varying contexts. In contrast, Nisbett postulates East Asians with a holistic worldview tend to see things in context or are less apt to distinguish individual objects from a pertinent background. To holists, everything is interrelated: the attributes of an object change depending upon the situation. Hence, knowledge about a single object without information about the surrounding environment remains of little use in understanding the world. Instead, knowing how things relate to one another by observing relational dynamics in context is regarded as important in holistic cultures.

Existing data corroborate that analysts tend to perceive things independent of context whereas holists' perception of the world remains more context-sensitive. For example, Japanese subjects tended to recall a visual stimulus holistically (e.g., 'there is an aquarium') whereas American participants were more likely to report on the individual objects in the foreground (e.g., 'there is a big fish,' Masuda & Nisbett, 2001). The retention rate among Japanese of a previously shown object declined significantly when the same stimulus was presented again against a different background than when the visual context remained unchanged. American participants, in contrast, maintained relatively equal retention rate across conditions (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001). In Morris and Peng (1994) study, Chinese participants tended to find situational factors as important causes of a fictitious murder case whereas American participants were more likely to find the murderer's internal personality traits as the primary cause of the murder (see Nisbett, 2003 for comprehensive review of other related findings).

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