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

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Received 1 December 2011; received in revised form 27 May 2012; accepted 12 June 2012
Available online 19 June 2012

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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Keywords: Bicultural identity integration; Self-protection; Defensive behavior; Automaticity; Cultural priming

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.
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 experimen-
tal 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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