

Impression management in survey responding: Easier for collectivists or individualists?

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Abstract

Three experiments indicate that collectivistic people (or those who come from Eastern cultures) have an easier time giving appropriate answers on surveys than do individualists (or those who come from Western cultures). This means that it is easier to disrupt the efforts of individualists to give appropriate responses. The research highlights how cultural factors influence survey response processes, and that individualists and collectivists engage in impression management through different psychological mechanisms. This has implications for marketing, advertising, and consumer choice. © 2010 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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“Would you be willing to pay more in order to save the earth?”

To what extent would people’s responses to such a question reflect normative considerations? Research suggests that impression management is effortful and requires cognitive resources (Gravdal & Sandal, 2006; Lalwani, 2009; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Mick, 1996; Paulhus, Graf, & Van Selst, 1989; Pauls & Crost, 2004; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Researchers assumed that such normative responding involves deliberate editing of one’s responses for social desirability considerations (Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988), and therefore, it can only take place when cognitive resources are available. When people are distracted, they are more likely to provide unfiltered responses.

Although this conclusion about the cognitive resources required for impression management has been well supported, previous research was primarily conducted in Western, individualistic cultural contexts. We propose that cultural variables will influence the process through which people

express socially normative responses. This is because there is a cross-cultural variation in the tendency to engage in impression management in the first place. As a result, people from collectivistic cultures acquire extensive experience in expressing normative responses, influencing the process by which they can do so.

Research on socially desirable responding suggests that the motivation to be normatively appropriate triggers the desire to impression manage (e.g., Gur & Sackeim, 1979; Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006; Paulhus, 1984, 1991, 1998; Sackeim & Gur, 1979). Thus, impression management in survey responding refers to the expression of normative responses that help to maintain a desired social image or identity (Paulhus, 1998; Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Britt, 1999; Schlenker, Britt, & Pennington, 1996; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). These normative responses cater to a social consensus, whereby the definition of what is considered “good” is based on socially shared norms and expectations. However, there are cultural differences in the motivation and tendency to present a normative image.

People from collectivistic cultures (e.g., East Asians) are conformity-oriented, interdependent, and care about their ingroup and its norms. Thus, they are prone to engage in impression management. By comparison, people from

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individualistic cultures (e.g., North Americans) are uniqueness-oriented, independent, less focused on satisfying their ingroups, and thus are less prone to engage in impression management (e.g., Lalwani et al., 2006; Triandis & Suh, 2002; van Hemert, van de Vijver, Poortinga, & Georgas, 2002). Based on research on automaticity (Bargh, 1994, 1997; Smith & Lerner, 1986), we suggest that because collectivists acquire frequent practice in expressing normative positions, this process becomes relatively automated and fluent. Therefore, it does not require significant cognitive resources. Hence, we propose that whereas in individualists, impression management takes place through an effortful process, in collectivists it is relatively effortless and automatic.

This proposition highlights the conditions under which collectivists and individualists, when motivated to respond normatively, will actually be able to do so. The implication is that cultural differences in impression management, as might be reflected in self-reports to sensitive questions on surveys, may be more significant under conditions that constrain respondents' cognitive resources.

Despite extensive research on survey responding, the mechanisms through which people impression manage in their self-reports are the subject of ongoing discussion (Johnson & van de Vijver, 2002). Two main perspectives exist in the literature, one that views normatively desirable responding as a situational response style and another that views it as a stable individual disposition. According to Johnson and van de Vijver, "these two views, at times, seem compatible and refer to seemingly unrelated research traditions" (p. 193). Baumgartner and Steenkamp (2001) maintain that both situational and dispositional factors interact to influence people's response styles. Our research adopts this perspective by examining the degree to which one's cultural orientation or background interacts with contextual conditions (cognitive load) to influence normatively desirable responding.

It is important to note that our analysis pertains to *chronic* differences in cultural orientation, and the attendant practice people build up in expressing normative positions through socialization experiences. Thus, we examine the role of culture via national group differences and via stable individual differences in cultural orientation, not through contextual salience (priming) of one's self-construal. Although both independent (individualistic) and interdependent (collectivistic) self-definitions can exist within each individual and vary by context (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009; Mandel, 2003), our conceptualization focuses on differences in mechanisms that emerge through socialization experiences that vary across individuals.

Our hypothesis emerges from a broader conceptual framework that considers the attitude construct through a cross-cultural lens. The traditional view posits that an attitude is an enduring disposition toward an object that is stable, internally consistent, has self-expressive functions, and guides behavior (Fazio, 2000). We suggest that this perspective may not generalize across cultures. Specifically, because in collectivist societies one's personal views and preferences are less likely

to occupy a central role in the self-system, inconsistency and instability of personal attitudes may be more likely for collectivists than individualists. In addition, because in collectivist societies one's personal preferences are expected to be overridden in deference to normative considerations, attitudes toward specific objects may be less likely to be used to guide behavior/choices involving those objects (e.g., Kacen & Lee, 2002; Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). In line with this, Trafimow and colleagues (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998) show that compared to people with independent self-construal, those with interdependent self-construal put more weight on subjective norms rather than on their own attitudes when forming their behavioral intentions. Triandis (1989) suggests that not only are collectivists more attentive to norms, they also internalize them such that conforming with the norms becomes enjoyable. Zhang and Shrum (2009) show that people with interdependent (versus independent) self-construal are more motivated to suppress impulsive tendencies, and thus are less prone to impulsive behaviors, which presumably reflect personal attitudes, particularly when peers are present (see also Kacen & Lee, 2002). Savani et al. (2008) showed that personal preference ratings are better predictors of choices for U.S. participants than for participants in India (see also Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2010). Such possible cross-cultural variations in the construct, structure, and functions of attitude are further described in the *General Discussion*. The case of impression management in attitude self-reports, addressed in the current research, can be viewed as a specific example of these variations.

In this paper, we look at situations in which both individualists and collectivists tend to impression manage, and examine whether they can do so equally easily. Instead of assessing how culture influences the goals that people spontaneously pursue (e.g., pursuit of social approval), a cultural difference that is already well established (e.g., Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997; Briley & Aaker, 2006; Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2005; Craig & Douglas, 2000; Lalwani et al., 2006; Triandis & Suh, 2002; van Hemert et al., 2002), we look at the *ease* with which those goals are pursued. Addressing this process issue requires examining situations in which the same goal will be pursued regardless of culture. Thus, in three studies, we induce the motivation to respond in line with perceived social norms, and examine how readily participants of different cultures or cultural orientations are able to do so.

Experiment 1 shows that collectivists engage in impression management in reporting their attitudes just as much when they are cognitively busy, but individualistic participants are less able to do so when cognitively busy. Culture in this study was operationalized using a validated measure of cultural orientation. *Experiment 2* extends these findings using East Asian participants (collectivists) and U.S. participants (individualists). These first two experiments examine impression management in self-reports by adapting the Impression Management subscale of the Paulhus Deception Scales, a well established measure of socially desirable responding (Paulhus, 1984, 1988). *Experiment 3* shows that, when reporting the evaluations of a

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