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How Independence and Interdependence Moderate the Self-Congruity Effect on Brand Attitude: A Study of East and West

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Abstract

Despite a substantial body of self-congruity (SC) research (cf. Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012) two important questions remain open: First, does the SC effect apply beyond Western countries. Second, does individual level culture moderate the SC effect? This study contributes to SC theory by developing hypotheses on the validity of the four SC effects across East and West and by studying the moderating impact of the individual level cultural variable self-construals on those four effects. This study tests its hypotheses through a survey of over 1,600 consumers in an Eastern (India) and a Western (USA) country. Results show that the overall actual SC effect holds across East and West, while the ideal SC effect holds across contexts yet only for consumers with an independent self-construal. Meanwhile, the social SC effect holds in the Eastern but not in the Western context, while the ideal social SC effect does not hold in either context. Results further show a moderating effect of individual level culture on the SC effect, as the actual SC effect is stronger for interdependent consumers whereas the ideal SC effect is stronger for independent consumers across contexts. Finally, the findings of this study are used to advance managerial implications and to propose a refinement of SC theory.

Keywords: self-congruity, independent and interdependent self-construals, cross-cultural

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1. Introduction

According to self-congruity (SC) theory (Sirgy, 1982), consumers contrast the images evoked by brand cues with the image that they have of themselves in search of congruity between the two. SC has been shown to have a significant impact on key indicators of marketing success such as promotion effectiveness (Close, Krishen, & LaTour, 2009) and consumer affect towards brands (Aaker, 1997; Grohmann, 2009). The SC effect has four facets reflecting the *actual* self (how one sees oneself), *ideal* self (the self one desires to become), *social* self (the self one believes that others perceive), and *ideal-social* self (the self one desires others to perceive). Despite a substantial body of research (cf. Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012) two important questions remain open: First, does the SC effect apply beyond Western contexts? Second, does individual level culture moderate the SC effect?

As empirical tests of SC theory (Sirgy, 1982) have mostly been conducted with Western consumers, it is unclear how generalizable available findings are to consumers beyond the West. Empirical evidence on SC generally delivers strong support for the actual and ideal SC effects (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Hosany & Martin, 2012). Meanwhile, evidence on the social and ideal-social SC effects is scant and less strong (Malhotra, 1988). However, existing empirical evidence may be biased by the Western contexts where it was obtained. That is because consumers in Western countries are primarily focused on increasing their feelings of personal worth by pursuing their own aspirations (Sedikides and Strube 1995), while individuals in the East generally adopt behaviors oriented towards fostering social-conformance (de Mooij, 2010). Hence, it is possible that research in Eastern countries could deliver stronger support for the social and ideal social SC facets.

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While evidence suggests variations in the SC effect in dependence of moderators such as such as product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011), the moderating effect of culture on SC is still to be considered. This is another critical omission, given evidence showing that culture affects consumer preference in general, e.g., as it moderated the effect of customer satisfaction on repurchase intent (Frank, Enkawa, & Schvaneveldt, 2015). Furthermore, considering culture as a moderator of the SC effect is timely and important as it may help clarify inconsistencies in past SC research. For instance, while studies of consumers in the USA support the ideal SC effect (Graeff, 1996; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Hung & Petrick, 2011; Marshall, Na, State, & Deuskar, 2008), the very few available studies outside of the USA in Switzerland (Malär et al., 2011) and China (He & Mukherjee, 2007), do not.

This study contributes to the understanding of whether SC as a multidimensional concept is universal or not as it tests boundary conditions of the SC effect on two levels. First, to counterbalance a focus in previous research on Western consumers, this study tests whether SC as a multidimensional concept applies equally across a Western (USA) and an Eastern (India) context. Second, to shed light onto the role of culture as a boundary condition of SC theory, this study tests whether individual level culture in form of interdependent and independent self-construals moderates the four SC effects. Addressing these questions is also important also from a managerial perspective, as SC types have been linked to authentic versus aspirational brand strategy decisions (Malär et al., 2011). The remainder of the paper then presents hypotheses, methodology, results, discussion, managerial implications, limitations and future research directions.

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2. Hypotheses development

This section first outlines four hypotheses testing the four SC effects across East and West, and then a further four hypotheses on the moderating role of self-construals (i.e., independence and interdependence). Figure 1 illustrates the tested relationships.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework and hypotheses
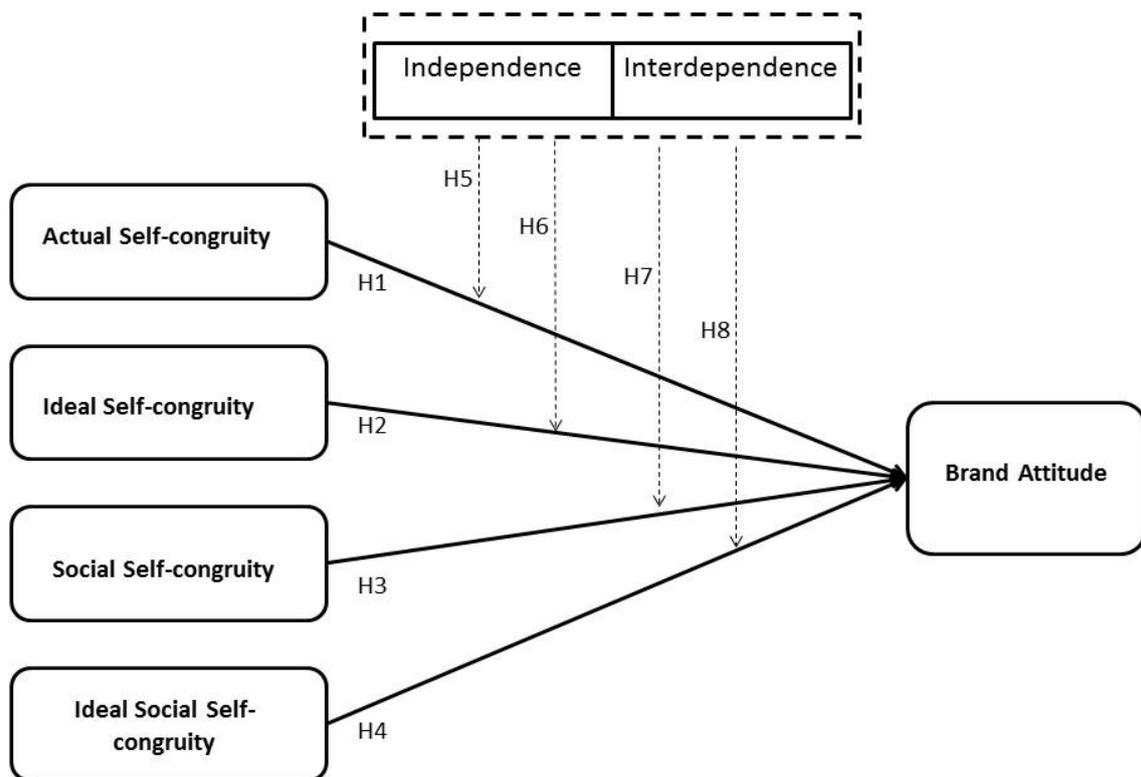
2.1. Testing the four SC effects across East and West

The first four hypotheses seek to establish the validity of the actual, ideal, social, and ideal-social SC effects across both East and West. The actual SC effect is based on the self-verification motive (Swann, Jr., 1983) according to which consumers seek a positive self-view by projecting an image that is consistent with their actual self-concept. Thus, SC will impact on brand preference as consumers develop more positive attitudes towards brands that match the image that they have of themselves. Self-verification is a universal motive of human behavior (Suh, 2002) so that it should drive behavior and attitudes across contexts. Indeed, so far empirical evidence supports the actual SC effect with consumers in Western countries such as the USA, France, and Switzerland (Malär et al., 2011; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008) as well as in China (He & Mukherjee, 2007). Hence:

H1. Actual SC affects brand attitude positively across East and West.

The ideal SC effect is explained by the self-enhancement motive (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), i.e., the drive for people to seek a positive self-view by pursuing the desired or ideal state of their self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979). As a brand's image can be used to express an individual's ideal self-image (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012), SC theory suggests that consumers will have positive attitudes towards such brands. Evidence on the ideal SC effect is mixed, as studies of consumers in the USA support this effect (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013; Graeff, 1996; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012) while findings from Switzerland and China (He & Mukherjee, 2007; Malär et al., 2011) do not. However, given the universality of the self-enhancement motive as a universal driver of human behavior and attitudes (Cai et al., 2010; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), this study proposes that:

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H2. Ideal SC affects brand attitude positively across East and West.

The social SC effect is based on the social-consistency motive, i.e., the tendency for consumers to seek a positive self-view by projecting an image that is consistent with how they believe that others see them (Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000). Such tendency can be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that the groups (e.g., social class, family, etc.) to which individuals belong are an important source of pride and self-esteem. Evidence on the social SC effect is limited yet supportive of it with consumers in the USA (Han & Back, 2008; Hung & Petrick, 2011; Malhotra, 1988) and China (He & Mukherjee, 2007). Given the universality of the social consistency motive (English & Chen, 2011; Suh, 2002) this study proposes that:

H3. Social SC affects brand attitude positively across East and West.

The ideal-social SC effect is founded on the social approval motive, i.e., the drive in people to seek a positive self-view through social approval or acceptance (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). Consumers thus seek social approval by projecting an image that expresses a desired version of their self in the eyes of others (Sirgy & Su, 2000), which they can do by choosing brands that reflect such image. Studies of the ideal social SC effect are limited yet supportive of it with consumers in the USA (Back, 2005; Han & Back, 2008; Hung & Petrick, 2011) yet not in China (He & Mukherjee, 2007). Given the limited evidence available on this effect and the universality of the social approval motive (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Yang et al., 2014), this study proposes that:

H4. Ideal-social SC affects brand attitude positively across East and West.

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2.2. Moderating effects of self-construals on SC

This study further proposes four hypotheses on how the individual level cultural characteristics, i.e., independent and interdependent self-construals moderate the four SC effects. Self-construals describe how individuals define and make meaning of the self (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). Independence and interdependence are orthogonal dimensions reflecting an individual's level of individualism and collectivism (Briley, Wyer Jr, & En, 2014). Independent individuals focus on individual advancement, while interdependent individuals focus on stability and maintenance of social relations (Markus and Kitayama 1991). This study choose self-construals as the personal cultural variable of study given the wide attention that it has received in cultural psychological and marketing research (Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, & Coon, 2002).

It is expected that self-construals moderate the actual SC effect to deliver a stronger effect for interdependents (INTs) than independents (INDs). Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983) posits that people maintain a positive self-view by seeking experiences that allow them to sustain their sense of self as well as avoiding those that threaten their sense of self (Swann, 1983; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Thus, SC theory posits that consumers will prefer brands reflecting their actual self-concept to verify their actual self-concept. Markus and Kitayama (1991) propose that the behavior of INTs is guided more strongly by their need to self-verify than that of INDs. INTs are thus more prevention focused in their consumption choices than INDs, as a prevention focus allows them to avoid uncertainties with regard to their actual self-view (Cross et al., 2011). Hence:

H5. Self-construal moderates the actual SC effect on brand attitude such that the effect will be stronger for interdependents than independents across a Western (i.e. USA) and an Eastern context (i.e. India).

This study expects that self-construals moderate the ideal SC effect to deliver a stronger effect for INDs than INTs. Individuals are guided by the self-enhancement motive, i.e., they establish a positive self-view (Sedikides & Strube, 1995) by projecting an image in line with their aspirations, i.e. in line with their ideal self-concept (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). However, the behavior of INDs is guided more strongly by their need for self-enhancement than the behavior of INTs (Kurman, 2001) as INDs strive to develop a positive self-view by demonstrating their uniqueness and showcasing personal attributes to others (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Hence:

H6. Self-construal moderates the ideal SC effect on brand attitude such that the effect will be stronger for independents than interdependents across a Western (i.e. USA) and an Eastern context (i.e. India).

This study further expects that self-construals to moderate the social SC effect to deliver a stronger effect for INTs than INDs. As individuals are guided by the social-consistency motive (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999), they project an image of themselves in line with the image that others have of them (Sirgy et al., 2000; Swann Jr., Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). They do so to develop stable relationship with others, in line with their need for social-consistency (Swann Jr. et al., 2003). Research suggests that INTs subordinate their personal goals to collective goals and seek to achieve a positive self-view by showing commitment and maintaining stable relationships with others such as family, in-groups and society as a whole (e.g., Locke & Christensen, 2007). As standing out in social contexts could potentially

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harm the balance of their relationships, INTs seek to maintain stable relationships by projecting an image consistent with how others view them, i.e., an image in line with their social self-concept (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Hence:

H7. Self-construal moderates the social SC effect on brand attitude such that the effect will be stronger for interdependents than independents across a Western (i.e. USA) and an Eastern context (i.e. India).

Finally, this study expects self-construals to moderate the ideal social SC effect to deliver a stronger effect for INDs than INTs. As individuals are guided by the social approval motive, they seek a positive self-view by acting in ways that will cause others to think highly of them (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Raskin et al., 1991). As INDs are more likely than INTs to seek to stand out in the eyes of others (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), they can be expected to act in ways that will cause others to think highly of them (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Raskin et al., 1991). Thus, INDs will also be more likely than INTs to prefer brands reflecting their ideal-social self-concept (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Hence:

H8. Self-construal moderates the ideal-social SC effect on brand attitude such that the effect will be stronger for independents than interdependents across a Western (i.e. USA) and an Eastern context (i.e. India).

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3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection procedures

This study provides a stringent test on the generalizability of the hypotheses by using a cross-national research design (Reynolds, A. Simintiras, & A. Diamantopoulos, 2003). Data was collected from consumers from a Western culture (USA) and an Eastern culture (India) to provide cultural, economic, and geographic diversity. This study used an online questionnaire in English to collect data from non-student consumers recruited via Amazon's MTurk online platform (MTurk). While not free of criticism (e.g., Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012), MTurk data has been found to be a reliable data source is widely used in survey research (e.g, Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Steelman, Hammer, & Limayem, 2014). This study used two preliminary studies to select brands from four product categories with similar perceptions of familiarity, product involvement and prestige in the two countries of study. The selected brands Sony (televisions), Levi's (apparel), Coca Cola (soft drinks) and Nike (sport footwear) were used as stimuli in the main study. After eliminating respondents on the basis of attention checks (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009), this study retained 828 respondents (of 860) from the USA and 824 (of 1053) from India for the main study. Both the median for respondent age (USA=33 years; India=30 years) and distribution by gender (Male/female responses: USA = 46%/54%; India 40%/60%) were comparable across the two samples. Meanwhile, the Indian respondents were superior in education while receiving a lower income than the US respondents. Respondents in the US sample reflect young adults of working and low middle class (Ipeirotis, 2010; Thompson & Hickey, 2005), while the Indian respondents are rather representative of young adults with high socioeconomic status (MRSI, 2011). These differences make the two samples heterogeneous

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in terms of income and education, yet these differences also make the samples comparable for the purposes of interpreting the results of the analyses appropriately as they are most likely to consume the product categories studies in this research (Reynolds, A. C. Simintiras, & A. Diamantopoulos, 2003). Following procedures outlined by Armstrong and Colleagues (Armstrong & Overton, 1977), this study ruled out non-response bias as a major cause for concern in this study.

3.2. Measures

The four SC types were measured using Sirgy et al.'s (1997) two-item direct score formula, which was adapted for ideal, social and ideal social SC. This study adopted Sung and Choi's (2012) four-item brand attitude scale as well as Singelis' (1994) 12-item independent and 12-item interdependent self-construal scales. Finally, this study also used Jung and Kellaris' (2006) seven-item power distance scale and Bearden et al.'s (2006) eight-item long-term orientation scale as control variables. These variables were chosen because, besides individualism and collectivism, the USA and India differ distinctly alongside them (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Moreover, both dimensions are seen as determining individual self-motivations (Bearden et al., 2006; Jung & Kellaris, 2006), thus potentially affecting the SC effects.

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3.3. Analyses

The study adopted partial least squares (PLS) structural equation model analysis using SmartPLS 2.0 (Chin, 1998; Ringle, 2005). Following previous research, a boot strap was performed with 500 samples to test the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships (Chin, 1998). All models were tested based on the summated scores of all four brands for brand attitude. To test for moderation in H5-H8 each of the national samples was split into two subsamples for individuals with dominant independent and interdependent orientation. Following previous research (Hong & Chang, 2015) this study computed a self-construal index by subtracting each respondent's interdependent self-construal from their independent self-construal score. Respondents with a positive index were assigned to the subsample of INDs (USA n = 513; India n = 238) and those with a negative index to the subsample of INTs (USA n= 278; India n = 493). This study dropped respondents with scores of 0 from further consideration (USA n=37; India n = 93).

4. Results

4.1. Measurement and structural models

Tests of reliability, convergent and discriminant validity (Tables 1, 2, and 3) of the measurement models (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) delivered overall satisfactory results (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Common method bias (CMB) was deemed not to be a cause for concern using procedural and statistical methods (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Partial metric invariance was established, thus validating the cross-cultural applicability of the model (Byrne, Shavelson, & Muthén, 1989). Following Hair et al.'s (2014) criteria, the R^2 and Q^2 values demonstrate that the two full sample models (USA and

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India) and all four subsample models (INTs and INDs in India and the USA respectively) show good explanatory power and predictive relevance of brand attitude (R^2 = 0.28 to 0.34; Q^2 = 0.21 to 0.30; Table 4). Furthermore, the change in variance reflected in the R^2 scores in the respective models with and without control variables (PD and LTO) was only between 0.4% and 2.6%, thus suggesting that the impact of PD and LTO on the key relationships is only minor (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009).

Insert Table 1, 2, 3 and 4 here

4.2. Hypothesis testing

Table 5 shows the standardized path coefficients for the full sample models in the USA and India. Results support H1 as actual SC has a positive effect on brand attitude across East and West (USA: ASC $\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$; India: ASC $\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). Results do not support H2, as they show a positive effect of ideal SC on brand attitude in the USA (USA: ISC $\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) yet a non-significant one in India (India: ISC $\beta = 0.09$, n.s.). Results do not support H3, as social SC has a positive effect on brand attitude in India (India: SSC $\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$) but a negative effect in the USA (USA: SSC $\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.001$). Results do not support H4, as the ideal social SC effect on brand attitude is non-significant in both countries (USA: ISSC $\beta = 0.07$, n.s.; India: ISSC $\beta = 0.06$, n.s.).

To test for moderation, this study looked for significant differences in the path coefficients linking SC types to brand attitude across the respective subsamples of INDs and INTs for the US and Indian samples (table 5). Results support H5, as the actual SC effect on brand attitude is significantly stronger for INTs than INDs across East (India: ASC INTSC > INDSC; t= 2.04; $p < 0.05$) and West (USA: ASC INTSC > INDSC; t= 1.95; $p < 0.05$). Results also support H6, as the ideal SC effect on brand attitude is significantly stronger for INDs than INTs across East (India: ISC INDSC > INTSC; t= 3.14; $p < 0.01$) and West (USA: ISC INDSC > INTSC; t= 4.62; $p < 0.001$). Results do not support H7, as the social SC effect on brand attitude is stronger for INTs than INDs in India (India: SSC INTSC > INDSC; t= 2.02; $p < 0.05$) but not in the USA (USA: SSC INTSC > INDSC; (t= 0.84; $p > 0.05$). Moreover, in the USA sample the social SC effect on brand attitude was negative rather than positive (USA: SSC INTSC $\beta = -0.43$, $p < 0.001$ vs SSC INDSC $\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$) for both subsamples. Results do not support H8 either, because the ideal-social SC effect is non-

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significant in both countries and for each of the two subsamples (USA: ISSC INDSC β = -0.20, n.s. vs. ISSC INTSC β = -0.14, n.s.; India: ISSC INDSC β = 0.03, n.s. vs ISSC INTSC β = 0.00, n.s.).

Insert Table 5 here

5. Discussion

5.1. The four SC effects and their cross-national validity

Overall, the findings contrasting the four SC effects in East and West paint a complex picture and raise questions on the validity of SC theory across these contexts. Specifically, the study shows that only the actual SC effect holds across East and West irrespective of individual level cultural variations. Meanwhile, the ideal SC effect holds across contexts yet only for individuals with an independent orientation. Finally, the social SC effect holds in the Eastern yet not in the Western context, while the ideal-social SC effect does not hold in either context. The section below discusses each of these findings and implications for SC theory in detail.

The findings in support of the actual SC effect in the USA and India (H1) are in line with SC theory and previous evidence from Western countries (Malär et al., 2011; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Sirgy et al., 2008) and China (He & Mukherjee, 2007). Taken together, the evidence suggests that the actual SC effect works across Eastern and Western countries. The findings support the ideal SC effect with consumers in the USA but not in India (H2). The findings from the US sample lend further support to previous research conducted in that

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country (e.g., Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Hung & Petrick, 2011). Similarly, the findings failing to support the ideal SC effect with consumers in India are also in line with research of this effect outside of the USA, in China and Switzerland (He & Mukherjee, 2007; Malär et al., 2011). Malär et al. (2011) saw the lack of support for the ideal SC effect in their Swiss sample as indicative of a recent trend toward authentic branding (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Gillmore & Pine II, 2007), reflected in campaigns such as Dove's 'Real Beauty'. However, taken together with previous research outside of the USA, the findings of this study suggest that the ideal SC effect may not be universal but moderated by contextual or individual factors. One such factor is individual culture, as the findings presented here also show that the ideal SC effect *does* hold in India yet only for individuals with an independent cultural orientation (Table 5). A potential additional moderator in this respect might be long term orientation (LTO), as China, Switzerland and India score high alongside this cultural dimension, while the USA scores low (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hence, ideal SC may be particularly relevant in cultures such as the USA, as low levels of LTO may determine a greater importance placed on the values of self-esteem and self-enhancement (Minkov, 2011).

The findings on the *social* SC effect also suggest that the effect may not be universal but rather moderated by contextual factors, as social SC has a positive impact on brand attitude in India but not in the USA – where social SC even exerts a negative effect on brand attitude (H3). The findings on the social SC effect in India are in line with SC theory (Sirgy et al., 2000) and a previous study conducted in China (He & Mukherjee, 2007). Thus, consumers in the Indian sample respond positively towards brands that allow them to project an image of themselves that is consistent with how significant others view them (Swann, Jr., Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). However, the findings from the USA do not support this

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expectation, as social SC has a negative effect on brand attitude. The negative effect of social SC with the current US sample could be explained by the notion that individuals experience reactance (i.e., opposing feelings) when there is a threat to their freedom of individuality. Research shows that consumers who are forced to see pop-up ads on the internet perceive such forced exposure as a threat to their freedom and thus develop negative perceptions towards the advertised brand (Edwards, Li, & Lee, 2002). As reactance is greater in individualistic over collectivistic cultures (Graupmann, Jonas, Meier, Hawelka, & Aichhorn, 2012; Jonas et al., 2009), individuals from the USA may perceive the compliance with social norms implicit in social-self congruity as a threat to their individual freedom, thus reacting negatively to brands reflecting their social self.

The findings on the social SC effect with the sample in the USA also need to be considered alongside previous evidence. Evidence on the social SC effect in marketing journals is limited, as early studies concluded that this effect tended to be moderate to weak (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Meanwhile, studies in tourism journals find a significant and positive social SC effect on consumer preferences (Back, 2005; Han & Back, 2008; Hung & Petrick, 2011). The reasons for differing findings may relate to the products and brands under consideration, i.e., middle class hotels and cruising intentions (Back, 2005; Han & Back, 2008; Hung & Petrick, 2011) vs fast-moving-consumer-goods. It may be that results on the social SC effect are influenced by the stronger hedonic value surrounding the decision to embark on a cruise or visiting a hotel vs. preference FMCG brands, as "cruising offers [consumers] the opportunity to be the person … they would most like other people to perceive them as." (Hung & Petrick, 2011, p. 109)

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Finally, the findings show no impact of ideal-social SC on brand attitude in either the USA or India (H4). Results on the ideal social SC effect from India are in line with those of the only previous study of SC in an Asian country that the authors are aware of, by He and Mukherjee (2007). Meanwhile, as with social SC, the findings from the USA support early evidence from marketing journals on this effect being moderate to weak (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982) while contradicting recent tourism studies in support of the ideal-social SC effect (Back, 2005; Han & Back, 2008; Hung & Petrick, 2011). Again, the reasons for the differing findings may relate to differing levels of hedonism involved in the products and brands considered in marketing vs. tourism studies.

5.2. Moderated SC effects

The findings suggest that individual level culture moderates the SC effect in two of its four facets, as the actual SC effect is stronger for INTs whereas the ideal SC effect is stronger for INDs in both the Eastern and the Western sample. This study does not find similar moderating effects in the cases of social and ideal-social SC.

The results lend support for the moderating impact of self-construals on actual SC across East and West, as the actual SC effect is stronger for INTs (H5) while the ideal SC effect is stronger for INDs (H6). These findings suggest that the behavior of INTs is guided mainly by the self-verification motive, while the behavior of INDs is guided by the self-enhancement motive. Overall, these findings refine SC theory by introducing individual level culture as a further moderator of the actual and ideal SC effects.

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The findings on a moderating impact of self-construals on the ideal SC effect (H6) are also interesting when seen in combination with the current findings on a lack of support for an ideal SC effect across contexts (H2). The findings on ideal SC share similarities with those advanced by Malär et al. (2011). First, both studies fail to deliver evidence for an ideal SC effect with consumers outside of the US. However, while Malär et al. (2011) interpreted this finding as reflective of an overall trend away from aspirational branding (Malär et al., 2011), the findings from H2 in this study lend support to the notion that the ideal SC effect may instead be context specific. Second, both the findings on H6 and the study by Malär et al. (2011) find that the ideal SC effect is indeed significant for consumers of specific characteristics, i.e., low product involvement, low self-esteem, and low public self-consciousness in the case of Malär et al. (2011) and independence in the case of the current study. Taken together the two studies highlight the need to consider moderators to better understand the boundary conditions of SC theory.

The findings on the moderating effect of self-construals on the social SC effect are supported in India only (H7), where the social SC effect is stronger for INTs than INDs. This study expected the social SC effect to be stronger for INTs than INDs based on research showing that INTs subordinate their personal goals to collective goals (Locke & Christensen, 2007; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988) thus leading them to project an image in line with how they are seen by others, i.e., with their social self-concept. Theory suggests a weaker focus of INTs over INDs on their own individuality (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, recent work shows that if the threat to INTs freedom comes from out-group members rather than in-group members, this threat likely leads to strong feelings of reactance (Graupmann et al., 2012). Thus, it is possible that US INTs consider their out-group rather

than their in-group when choosing brands so that their need to express their individuality due to reactance supersedes their need for social-conformance.

Finally, the findings find no support for a moderating effect of self-construals on the ideal-social SC effect in either the USA or India (H8). This study expected the ideal-social SC effect to be stronger for INDs than INTs on the basis that INDs are more strongly guided by the social approval motive, i.e., the need for individuals to act in ways that will cause others to think highly of them (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). However, findings do not support this expectation. Overall, the limited pool of evidence on the ideal-social SC effect, coupled with contradictory results emerging from marketing versus tourism studies highlight the need for more research to better understand this effect.

The findings of this study refine SC theory in the following ways. First, this study complements previous evidence to suggests that only the actual SC effect may be "universal". Second, the ideal SC effect seems not to be universal but instead moderated by consumer characteristics. This study specifically uncovers individual level culture (in form of self-construals) as such one, as it shows that the ideal SC effect holds for individuals with an independent orientation across East and West. The social SC effect also seem not to be universal, as it holds in the East but not the West, thus pointing at a moderating effect of country context in this respect. However, given the limited number of countries where this effect has been tested – and contradictory evidence arising from marketing vs. tourism studies, more research will be necessary to further strengthen the evidence on this tenet of the theory. More research is also needed on the ideal social SC given that this study did not find support for this effect in either sample while existing evidence from tourism studies in the USA find positive ones (Back, 2005; Han & Back, 2008; Hung & Petrick, 2011).

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6. Managerial implications

This study provides insights for marketing practitioners facing decisions related to advertising design, international segmentation, and brand strategy standardization. First, the findings of this study show that, across consumer types, the actual SC effect holds across the USA and India while the ideal SC effect does not. In doing so, the findings suggest that global advertising campaigns are likely to be more successful if they portray models reflecting "average" consumers (such as those used in the Dove real beauty campaign) when compared to very attractive models representing an "ideal" consumer. Moreover, numerous scholars have raised the importance of identifying and serving consumer groups with similar needs and behaviors irrespective of country boundaries as interactions between people and markets have intensified with globalization (Douglas & Craig, 2011; Wedel & Kamakura, 1999). The findings of this study show that, even though aspirational branding strategies (based on ideal SC) are unlikely to work across markets in the East and West, such strategies can be successful when targeting consumer segments characterized by an independent self-construal. Segmentation on the basis of self-construals is a viable option given that self-construals have been found to correlate with several demographic characteristics such as country, age, income levels (Ahluwalia, 2008; Winterich, Carter, Barone, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2015). Finally, the findings of this study have implications for standardization-adaptation decisions related to brand strategy, as they show that brands appealing to the social self are likely to lead to positive brand attitudes in India and perhaps other Eastern countries yet to negative attitudes in the USA. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that brands appealing to the social self may lend themselves to strategy standardization at the regional rather than broader international level.

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7. Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations. First, this study followed the literature to assume that the four SC facets are orthogonal constructs. The tests of discriminant validity were overall satisfactory, yet the correlation between ideal SC and ideal-social SC in the USA sample was .858 and thus slightly above the threshold. Given the unexpected findings on these two effects, and on previous studies of consumers in the USA finding correlations between these two constructs of .77, i.e., below the threshold (Han and Back 2008), and .86, i.e., slightly above it, future research should seek to validate the findings of this study using different scales for measuring SC (see, for example, Sirgy & Johar, 1999). Second, the four brands used in this study (Nike, Sony, Coca Cola and Levi's) are global brands (Interbrand, 2015). To reduce biases, this study made us of preliminary studies to select brands eliciting similar perceptions of familiarity and prestige across the two countries. Incidentally, the four chosen brands were global. As global brands from developed countries are likely to have a higher social signaling value than local Indian brands (Guo, 2013), it is possible that, for instance, the significant social SC effects that were found in the Indian sample were biased by the global nature of the brand stimuli employed. Future research should therefore replicate the current findings using more balanced combinations of local and global brands.

The findings of this study show interesting avenues for future research. Overall, more research on the four SC effect in further countries of East and West – especially outside of the USA – is necessary to continue to determine the boundary conditions of SC theory. Firstly, further research should validate the findings of this study suggesting that the only SC effect that works across East and West is the one focused on consumers' actual self, whereas the ideal SC effect is only positive in countries of the West while the social SC effect is only

positive in countries of the East. Secondly, future research should explore the negative social SC effect on brand attitude measured in this study with US consumers by considering the role of reactance as a moderator on the social SC effect. As reactance is greater in individualistic than collectivistic cultures (Graupmann et al., 2012; Jonas et al., 2009) individuals from the USA may perceive the compliance with social norms implicit in social-self congruity as a threat to their individual freedom and therefore react negatively to it. Thirdly, future research should also test for potential moderating effects of product type on the ideal social SC effect. This is an interesting question, as previous research in the tourism domain brought forward evidence of a positive ideal SC effect on, for instance, cruising intentions (Hung & Petrick, 2011), while this study - focusing on fast-moving-consumer goods brands - showed no such effect.

Tables

Table 1

Scales, reliability and convergent validity test results

Self-congruity – direct score formula (Sirgy et al.'s 1997, p.232)**:** *"Take a moment to think about "brand/product X". Think about the kind of person who typically uses "brand/product X". Imagine this person in your mind and then describe this person using one or more personal adjectives such as stylish, classy, masculine, sexy, old, athletic, or whatever personal adjectives you can use to describe the typical use of "brand/product X". Once you have done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement."*

Actual SC (7-point Likert type scale)
USA: α=0.94; CR=0.97; AVE=0.93; FL > 0.707 / India: α=0.88.; CR=0.94; AVE=0.90; FL > 0.707
Ideal SC
USA: α=0.96; CR=0.98; AVE=0.96; FL > 0.707 / India: α=0.93; CR=0.97; AVE=0.94 FL > 0.707
Social SC
USA: α=0.97; CR=0.98; AVE=0.97; FL > 0.707 / India: α=0.94; CR=0.97; AVE=0.95; FL > 0.707
Ideal social SC
USA: α=0.97; CR=0.98; AVE=0.97; FL > 0.707 / India: α=0.94; CR=0.97; AVE=0.94; FL > 0.707
Brand attitude (Sung and Choi 2012; 7-point Likert type scale)
USA: α=0.96; CR=0.97; AVE=0.90; FL > 0.707 / India: α=0.94; CR=0.96; AVE=0.85; FL > 0.707
Singelis' (1994) Interdependent Self-construal Items (7-point Likert type scale)
USA α = 0.76; CR = 0.78; AVE= 0.75; FL > 0.707 /India α = 0.85; CR = 0.86; AVE = 0.82; FL > 0.707
Singelis' (1994) Independent Self-construal Items (7-point Likert type scale)
USA α = 0.77; CR = 0.77; AVE = 0.76; FL > 0.707 /India α = .79; CR = 0.81; AVE = 0.79; FL > 0.707

Notes: All factor loadings are significant at the $p < 0.001$ level; α= Cronbach's alpha; CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; FL = Factor loadings

Table 2

USA Full sample latent variables correlations

	ASC	BA	ISC	ISSC	SSC
ASC	0.9695	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
BA	0.5159	0.9487	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
ISC	0.8218	0.5279	0.9798	0.0000	0.0000
ISSC	0.8034	0.5010	0.8579	0.9899	0.0000
SSC	0.8214	0.4427	0.7999	0.8101	0.9849

Acronyms: ASC = Actual SC; ISC = Ideal SC; SSC = Social SC;
ISSC = Ideal social SC; BA = Brand attitude

Table 3

India full sample latent variables correlations

	ASC	BA	ISC	ISSC	SSC
ASC	0.9487	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
BA	0.5121	0.9220	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
ISC	0.7716	0.5057	0.9798	0.0000	0.0000
ISSC	0.7970	0.4985	0.7982	0.9644	0.0000
SSC	0.7944	0.5075	0.8092	0.8196	0.9747

Acronyms: ASC = Actual SC; ISC = Ideal SC; SSC = Social SC; ISSC = Ideal social SC; BA = Brand attitude

Table 4

R^2 and Q^2 Values for the structural models full and sub-samples

	USA	India
	R^2/Q^2 4SCT ->BA	R^2/Q^2 4SCT ->BA
Full sample	0.30/0.27	0.28/0.24
Subsample INDSC	0.34/0.30	0.30/0.26
Subsample INTSC	0.33/0.29	0.29/0.21

Acronyms: INDSC = Independent self-construal; INTSC = Interdependent self-construal; BA = Brand attitude; 4SCT = four SC types

Table 5

Path coefficient results USA and India full and sub-samples

	USA							
	ASC →BA	t-stat	ISC →BA	t-stat	SSC →BA	t-stat	ISSC →BA	t-stat
USA full sample	0.43	5.27***	0.42	3.57**	-0.39	5.39***	0.07	0.63ns
USA subsample INDSC	0.37	2.89**	0.74	4.40***	-0.38	2.94**	-0.20	1.21ns
USA subsample INTSC	0.51	4.39***	0.33	1.89*	-0.43	4.34***	-0.14	0.86ns

	India							
	ASC →BA	t-stat	ISC →BA	t-stat	SSC →BA	t-stat	ISSC →BA	t-stat
India full sample	0.25	3.43**	0.09	0.95ns	0.17	1.86*	0.06	0.64ns
India subsample INDSC	0.24	2.85**	0.25	2.23*	0.05	0.35ns	0.03	0.24ns
India subsample INTSC	0.40	2.84**	-0.07	0.39ns	0.22	1.80*	0.00	0.01ns

Notes: *$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$; ns= not significant.
Acronyms: ASC = Actual SC; ISC = Ideal SC; SSC = Social SC; ISSC = Ideal social SC; BA = Brand attitude; INTSC = Interdependent self-construal; INDSC = Independent self-construal

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