Express Your Social Self: Cultural Differences in Choice of Brand-Name Versus Generic Products
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Express Your Social Self: Cultural Differences in Choice of Brand-Name Versus Generic Products

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This research examined cultural differences in the patterns of choices that reflect more social characteristics of a chooser (e.g., social status). Four studies examined the cultural difference in individuals’ tendency to choose brand-name products (i.e., high-status options) over generic products (i.e., low-status options) and the underlying reasons for these differences. Compared to European Americans, Asian Americans consistently chose brand-name products. This difference was driven by Asian Americans’ greater social status concerns. Self-consciousness was more strongly associated with the brand-name choices of Asian Americans (vs. European Americans), and experimentally induced social status led Asian Americans (vs. European Americans) to make more choices concordant with self-perception. These findings highlight the importance of considering external and social motivations underlying the choice-making process.

Keywords: culture; choice; self; brand

It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.

J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, 1999

Some of the choices people make have a life-transforming power, such as the choices of whom to marry, what job to take, and which house to buy. These choices reflect one’s life philosophy and values, as well as one’s resources and affiliations. However, most of the choices people make in their lives can be characterized as humdrum at best, such as whether to purchase a box of generic bandages or a box of Band-Aids®. These are choices we make without much thought and that often seem inconsequential. Yet, even the most humdrum and inconsequential choices can be guided by one’s life philosophy, values, resources, and affiliations, and thus can be ways in which a person expresses oneself. Among the many concerns that implicitly and explicitly guide someone’s choices, some concerns tend to exert greater influence than others, and the relative importance of these concerns is influenced by many psychological and social factors, including culture.

Past research on culture and choice has shown that choice generally might matter more to those from more individualistic cultural contexts than to those from more collectivistic cultural contexts (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kim & Drolet, 2003; Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008). Furthermore, in more individualistic cultural contexts, choice is regarded as a self-expression (e.g., Kim & Sherman, 2007; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Tafarodi, Mehranvar, Panton, & Milne, 2002). Past research has focused relatively less on the factors that motivate people from more collectivistic cultural contexts to use specific choice strategies. Most of the studies have focused on choices that implicate internal aspects of the self, such as personality traits, values, and tastes, although choice...
can also be regarded as a reflection of external aspects of the self. More than one's internal attributes, choice of a specific option can often signal specific external attributes, such as one's social status, social roles, and belongingness to a particular group. It may be that people's choices are of equally great importance and are equally self-expressive in a more collectivist context but that the purpose of choice differs: Choice in a collectivist context may be an act of self-expression motivated by a need to express external aspects of the self (e.g., social status, social ties, and connections).

The present research investigated whether the patterns and underlying motivations of choices involving external aspects of the self differed between people with a more collectivistic cultural background (Asian Americans) versus an individualistic cultural background (European Americans). Specifically, do these types of choices matter more to Asian Americans, and if so, what are the underlying reasons for it? We examined these questions using the case of choice between branded and nonbranded (i.e., generic) products because this choice has implications for one's social status insofar as, compared to generic products, branded products are associated with higher status (Bushman, 1993).

**CULTURE, SELF, AND CHOICE**

Cultures differ in how they define and understand the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Triandis, 1989). For example, individualistic cultures such the United States tend to view the self as independent and define a person as a distinct and bounded entity that is fundamentally separable from its social surroundings. Accordingly, the more individual and individualizing aspects of the self, such as thoughts, values, feelings, and traits, tend to be emphasized. In these cultures, people are encouraged to assert their individuality and uniqueness and to stand against external social forces, such as norms and concerns for others’ evaluations (Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). However, there are other ways of defining the self. Collectivistic cultures such as East Asia tend to share the view of the self as interdependent and define a person as a primarily relational entity that is fundamentally connected to its social surroundings. In these cultures, more external aspects and the social positions of the self, such as its social roles, groups, and relationships, define the core self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989), and people are encouraged to foster stronger social ties and maintain social harmony.

These cultural differences often lead to different meanings and patterns of choices (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999; Savani et al., 2008). Studies have shown that European Americans tend to express their individuality by choosing objects that represent uniqueness, whereas East Asians tend to express their connectedness by choosing objects that represent sameness (Kim & Markus, 1999). Past research has also found that European Americans tend to vary their personal choice strategies regularly so as to appear unique (Kim & Drolet, 2003). However, no such tendency has been found among Korean Americans, nor do Korean Americans show the opposite tendency to repeat the same choice strategies (Kim & Drolet, 2003). In addition, the psychological impact of their choices is greater among European Americans than among Asians and Asian Americans. For example, research has found that individual choice is more personally motivating for European Americans than for Asian Americans (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), and European Americans are more likely to increase their liking for a chosen option to reduce postdecisional dissonance (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004), at least when the choice is made without salient social others (Kitayama et al., 2004). Based on these findings, one could draw the conclusion that personal choice is an act that is more important in an individualistic culture and therefore holds relatively greater psychological importance in individualistic cultural contexts than in collectivist cultural contexts.

However, many of the studies on culture and choice have focused on choices that reflect something personal and internal about people, either one’s uniqueness and individuality or simply one’s personal taste. The question then is: What would the nature of the cultural difference be, if any, if a choice clearly implicated a person's more external and social attributes, such as social status or social roles, as tends to be the case in the choice between brand-name and generic products?

**CHOICE OF BRANDED VERSUS GENERIC PRODUCTS**

The choice of either a brand-name or a generic product can signal the socioeconomic status of the person who purchases it. In particular, choice of brand-name products communicates that the chooser can afford a higher-priced product and, by inference, belongs to a higher social status group, whereas choices of generic products may mean membership in a lower social status group (Bushman, 1993). To the extent that the choice between brand-name and generic products implicates external aspects of the self such as social status, it differs from the kinds of choices studied previously that mainly convey information about internal aspects of the self (e.g., taste and personality traits). The choice involving brand-name products, branded products are associated with higher status (Bushman, 1993).
and generic products represents a case in which a choice implicates external and social attributes. Indeed, studies have linked the tendency to prefer brand-name to generic products to people’s need to communicate positive social-self attributes. For example, a public taste test (i.e., audience present) by Bushman (1993) found that people who were high in public self-consciousness (SC; Fenigstein, 1979; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) rated a national brand-name peanut butter higher than a generic peanut butter. In Bushman’s view, people high in public SC prefer brand-name products over generic products because they seek to avoid social censure. Bushman suggested that brand-name products are generally viewed as having more favorable public images compared to generic products, which are viewed as inferior by comparison. Accordingly, one might expect that the effect of the superior impressions of brand name on individuals’ choices would vary as a function of culture.

The psychological functions and effects of choice involving such social attributes are little known. For people from collectivistic cultures who are concerned more about external aspects of their selves, such as their social status or social relationship, a choice implicating such attributes should be more psychologically impactful than a choice implicating their individual and internal attributes. One of the few studies on the topic (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005) demonstrated that a choice that implicates a social relationship (e.g., a choice on behalf of a close friend) indeed led to greater dissonance among Asians. In addition, when the act of choice becomes a more social affair, for instance, by having to make choices in a context where social others were made salient, Asians were likely to experience greater postdecision dissonance, whereas European Americans were unaffected by the salience of social others (Kitayama et al., 2004).

Our theorizing is based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that external attributes of the self, namely, social status, would be more important for Asian Americans than for European Americans. Thus, choices that implicate social status would have a relatively greater psychological impact among Asian Americans than European Americans. The second assumption is that brand-name products would be primarily associated with the image of higher social status than generic products. Given that, Asian Americans who are more motivated to convey an impression of having positive social attributes (e.g., higher social status) should choose brand-name products over generic products more frequently than European Americans. Thus, we predicted that Asian Americans would choose brand-name products more frequently than European Americans motivated by greater social status concerns. Moreover, we predicted that Asian Americans’ preference for brand-name products would be more deeply and chronically tied to the self than in the case of European Americans’ preferences.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

In four studies, we investigated cultural differences in the choice of brand-name versus generic products and the underlying reasons for such differences. In Study 1, we had participants make a series of choices between brand-name and generic products to test whether those with an Asian cultural background would choose brand-name products more compared to those with a European American cultural background. In Studies 2-4, we sought evidence for the psychological reasons underlying this cross-cultural difference. In Study 2, we examined the mediating role of social status concerns in the observed cultural difference in brand-name versus generic product choices. In Study 3, we examined whether cultural groups differ in how brand-product choices are viewed to be relevant to the self. We did so by examining how culture moderates the relationship between SC and the tendency to choose brand-name products. In Study 4, we experimentally manipulated the feeling of relative social status of the self and examined how the psychological state of either higher or lower social status affected the tendency to favor brand-name products.

STUDY 1

Study 1 tested the idea that culture influences the degree to which people choose brand-name versus generic products. To examine the effect of exposure to Asian versus American culture on the relative choice of brand-name versus generic products, we distinguished between Asian Americans who were immigrants (i.e., born in an Asian country) and second- or later-generation Asian Americans (i.e., born in the United States). We assumed that, as a whole, later-generation Asian Americans would have had greater exposure to mainstream American cultural norms and values compared to immigrant Asian Americans and thus would be less likely to choose brand-name options. We hypothesized that immigrant Asian Americans would choose brand-name options more than would European Americans and that later-generation Asian Americans would fall between these two groups.

Method

Participants and procedure. Fifty-four U.S.-born European American, 50 Asian-born Asian Americans, and 133 U.S.-born Asian American students (M_age = 23, 53% female) from a West Coast university participated
in the study for a $20 payment. The questionnaire was part of a packet of surveys that was administered in a large group setting.

Materials. Participants were asked to imagine they were shopping for various products and that they had narrowed the choices to the two products shown. They were told that in each case, they would see the key features that distinguished the two options. They were asked to assume that all other features were the same. Participants made choices in three product categories: lemon-lime soda, corn flake cereal, and aspirin. Each choice set contained one brand-name option and one generic option. The brand-name option was always priced higher than the generic option. For example, in the lemon-lime soda choice set, a 2-liter bottle of the brand-name option (Sprite®) cost $1.49 compared to the generic option that cost $.99.

It is important to note that a (social) self-expressive concern is not the only potential reason underlying the choice of a brand-name versus generic option. For example, financial resources could play a deciding role if one option is clearly unaffordable. Because the focus of the present research is on choices that express external and social aspects of the self, to the extent that it is possible, it is important to minimize the impact of extraneous factors, such as actual financial resources. The materials for Study 1 and for all of the studies in this research were designed with this goal in mind. First, we used categories in which products’ prices were well within college students’ range of affordability and in which price differences between the brand-name option and its generic counterpart were relatively small (in all cases around or under $1). Second, for purposes of generalizability, we used multiple products. Across all studies, we used 11 product categories.

Results and Discussion

Our dependent variable was the proportion of brand-name options that individuals chose across the three sets. Using one-way ANOVA, we compared the proportion of brand-name choice among the three cultural groups, and there was a significant group difference, \( F(2, 234) = 6.09, p = .003 \).

As we predicted a linear tendency across the three groups, we conducted a planned contrast assigning weights of \(-1, 0, 1\) to European Americans (\(M = .29, SD = .28\)), U.S.-born Asian Americans (\(M = .43, SD = .31\)), and Asian-born Asian Americans (\(M = .49, SD = .34\)), respectively. The contrast was significant, \( t(234) = 3.33, p = .001 \). In summary, there was a significant linear tendency in the choice of brand-name products in relation to the degree to which people are exposed to the U.S. versus Asian cultural influence. These results provide support for the idea that exposure to more collectivistic versus individualistic cultures increases preference for brand-name (vs. generic) products.

STUDY 2

We theorized that Asian Americans’ choice of brand-name products is driven by their motivation to project positive social characteristics, namely, high status. Thus, in Study 2, we examined whether the social status concern explains the cultural difference in the choice of brand-name options as revealed in Study 1. Moreover, we tested an alternative explanation. That is, people from different cultures might simply view brand-name products and generic products differently. Perhaps only Asian Americans consider brand-name products to have superior status or only European Americans view them as more unique compared to the other group, and perhaps cultural differences in the choice of brand-name products are driven by such differences rather than the difference in the relative psychological importance of social status.

Thus, in addition to replicating Study 1, we examined whether social status concern mediates the cultural difference in choice of brand-name products and examined the role of cultural perceptions of brand-name products. We hypothesized that social status concern would mediate the cultural difference in the choice of brand-name products but that other concerns relating to brand-name products do not explain the cultural difference in choice.

Method

Participants. Seventy-three European American and 55 Asian-born Asian American students (\(M_{age} = 20, 67\%\) female) from a West Coast university participated in the study for payment.

Materials. The questionnaire included a series of five choices among sets of two options: lemon-lime soda, corn flake cereal, toothpaste, potato chips, and aspirin. The structure of the choice sets was the same as in Study 1; each set contained one brand-name option that was slightly higher priced and one generic option that was lower priced.

Procedure. Participants were first asked two questions about the degree to which they are concerned about social status (“I want others to respect my social status” and “I care about social status”); \( r = .60 \) for European Americans and \( r = .60 \) for Asian Americans. After these status concern questions, participants completed the choice questionnaire. After making their choices, participants...
were asked about their general impressions of brand-name versus generic products. Specifically, they rated the extent to which a brand-name versus a generic product was associated with the impressions of intelligent, unique, wasteful, high quality, and high status on semantic differential scales (e.g., 1 = *frugal* and 7 = *wasteful*). Participants completed the study either individually or in a small-group setting. At the end of the survey, participants answered demographic questions.

### Results and Discussion

**Cultural differences in means.** First, Study 2 replicated the cultural difference result found in Study 1. Asian American participants were significantly more likely ($M = .49, SD = .30$) than European Americans ($M = .38, SD = .28$) to choose brand-name products, $t(126) = 2.17, p = .03$. As predicted, Asian Americans ($M = 3.64, SD = .90$) reported more social status concern than European Americans ($M = 3.12, SD = .79$), $t(125) = 3.74, p = .001$.

The perceptions of brand-name versus generic products were examined using $t$ tests. The only perception that significantly differed across culture was “intelligent.” Asian Americans ($M = 4.64, SD = .99$) perceived the brand-name products to be more intelligent than did European Americans ($M = 4.18, SD = .92$), $t(125) = 2.67, p = .009$. There was no other significant cultural difference on any of the characteristics ($ps$ ranging from .11 to .93; see Table 1). We also conducted a repeated measures ANOVA to examine which characteristics are most strongly associated with brand-name products. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of characteristics in both cultures: European Americans, $F(4, 284) = 12.07, p < .001$, and Asian Americans, $F(4, 216) = 16.09, p < .001$. Planned pairwise comparisons revealed that in both cultures, brand-name products were perceived to be more high status and high quality than intelligent, unique, or wasteful ($ps$ between .006 and < .001). These results show that high status, along with high quality, is the characteristic that is more strongly associated with brand-name products than characteristics such as unique, intelligent, or wasteful in both cultures.

**Mediation analyses.** We conducted a set of hierarchical linear regression analyses to test the hypothesis that other perceptions of brand-name products (besides status) mediate the effect of culture on the tendency to choose brand-name options. Intelligent was the only characteristic that differed cross-culturally. Thus, we conducted the mediation-like analysis with intelligent. The results showed that the perception of intelligent in brand-name products did not significantly explain the observed cultural difference in brand choice (Sobel test $z = 1.29, p = .20$). Thus, the finding that Asian Americans are more likely than European Americans to choose brand-name options appears not to be due to a cultural difference in perceptions of brand-name versus generic products. In summary, these results show that brand-name products are associated with the image of high status in both cultures and that the cultural difference in brand choice is explained by the differential importance of high status in these cultures.

### Study 3

Study 3 tested the proposition that social status is more chronically self-relevant among Asian Americans than among European Americans. We propose that Asian Americans choose brand-name products more than do European Americans because the self-relevant attribute expressed through the choice of brand-name versus generic products (higher social status) is more central to Asian Americans’ (interdependent) self-concept than to European Americans’ (independent) self-concept. To examine this question, we examined whether higher SC is associated with more frequent choice of brand-name options.

We used a dispositional measure of SC, which is the tendency to direct attention and thought to oneself

### Table 1: Mean (and Standard Deviation) Ratings of Brand-Name Options in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Asian Americans</th>
<th>European Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>4.64 (0.99)</td>
<td>4.18 (0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High quality</td>
<td>5.35 (1.10)</td>
<td>5.05 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>4.20 (1.30)</td>
<td>4.22 (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High status</td>
<td>5.09 (1.10)</td>
<td>5.12 (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasteful</td>
<td>4.25 (1.20)</td>
<td>4.56 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$t(124) = 1.96, p = .05$. The Sobel test was marginally significant ($z = 1.77, p = .077$).

We also conducted a similar set of hierarchical linear regression analyses to test an alternative hypothesis that other perceptions of brand-name products (besides status) mediate the effect of culture on the tendency to choose brand-name options. Intelligent was the only characteristic that differed cross-culturally. Thus, we conducted the mediation-like analysis with intelligent. The results showed that the perception of intelligent in brand-name products did not significantly explain the observed cultural difference in brand choice (Sobel test $z = 1.29, p = .20$). Thus, the finding that Asian Americans are more likely than European Americans to choose brand-name options appears not to be due to a cultural difference in perceptions of brand-name versus generic products. In summary, these results show that brand-name products are associated with the image of high status in both cultures and that the cultural difference in brand choice is explained by the differential importance of high status in these cultures.
(Fenigstein et al., 1975). High SC people tend to overestimate the degree to which they are in the public eye (Fenigstein, 1984) and are more aware of how others perceive them. Furthermore, high-SC people are more concerned about how others regard them. As a result, compared to low-SC people, they tend to (a) behave in ways to avoid social censure (e.g., Raichle et al., 2001), (b) have a protective self-presentational style (e.g., Froming, Corley, & Rinker, 1990), and (c) be more risk-averse (Tunnell, 1984).

There are three subcomponents of SC: public, private, and social anxiety. Among these, studies have linked the subcomponent public SC to the tendency to prefer brand-name versus generic products. Bushman (1993) suggested that people who are high in public SC prefer brand-name products to generic products because they are seeking to avoid social censure. Consistent with this result, Bushman also showed that this relationship was stronger in the presence versus absence of an audience.

Given these findings, there are two ways SC may be related to the cultural difference in choice of brand-name options. First, it could be that public SC mediates the cultural difference in the choice of brand-name products. Previous research (Heine, Takemoto, Moskalenko, Lasalaeta, & Henrich, 2008) has found that, compared to North Americans, the Japanese are more concerned about how they are viewed by others. And as Bushman (1993) shows, concerns for others’ appraisals seem to increase anxiety associated with choice making. Accordingly, the difference in choice of brand-name versus generic options might be due to the fact that Asian Americans generally feel higher public SC than European Americans. This cultural difference in the level of public SC, but not private SC, could explain the observed cultural difference in choice of brand-name products.

It may also be that the choice of brand-name products conveys more positive social attributes that are more centrally relevant for the self of Asian Americans than for the self of European Americans. Then, culture might moderate the relationship between SC and the tendency to choose brand-name products. That is, SC should be even more strongly related to brand choices among Asian Americans than among European Americans. If brand product choice has the potential to indicate something central and important about oneself within a culture, high-SC people should choose brand-name options that make them appear more positive compared to low-SC people, who are less concerned about what the choice implies. However, if in a particular cultural context brand product choice does not convey core aspects of oneself, even high-SC people should care relatively less fundamentally. Moreover, if this explanation is valid, the cultural difference in the relationship strength between SC and brand choice would be particularly pronounced with the private subcomponent of SC, as social attributes implicated by brand-name choice are centrally and fundamentally relevant to the self. It appears that public SC, the concern for social evaluation and censure, is predictive of brand-name choices even among European Americans (Bushman, 1993) and that having high public SC perhaps leads people to scrutinize the social implications of most of their choices. However, private SC would predict the choice outcomes only among the people to whom the choice implicates core aspects of their selves chronically (i.e., with or without public eyes), and cultural differences might become more pronounced.

In this study, we predicted that Asian Americans would show higher public SC than European Americans, that public SC would positively predict the brand choice, and that this relationship would be similar in both cultures. We did not have a strong prediction regarding cultural difference in the level of private SC. However, we hypothesized that the relationship between private SC and brand choice would be moderated by culture. That is, we predicted that high-public-SC Asian Americans would choose brand-name options more frequently than would low-public-SC Asian Americans. In contrast, we hypothesized that the same relationship would be relatively weaker for European Americans.

**Method**

**Participants.** Ninety-four European American and 83 Asian-born Asian American students (M_age = 20.97, 62% female) from a large West Coast university were paid to participate in the study.

**Procedure.** All participants were asked to make a series of eight choices among sets of two options: cotton swabs, sugar, aspirin, corn flake cereal, lemon-lime soda, facial tissue, fruit yogurt, and pine cleaner. As in earlier studies, each set contained one higher priced brand-name option and one lower priced generic option. For example, in the sugar set, a 5-lb bag of the brand-name option (C&H®) cost $3.89 compared to the generic option, which cost $2.69.

After making their choices, participants then completed Fenigstein et al.’s (1975) 23-item SC scale (example items are: “I am concerned about what other people think about me” for public SC, “I reflect about myself a lot” for private SC, and “It takes me time to overcome my shyness in new situations” for social anxiety). Participants completed the study in a large-group setting. At the end of the survey, participants answered demographic questions.

**Results and Discussion**

As expected, Asian Americans reported higher levels of SC compared to European Americans in terms of the
public subcomponent of SC but marginally lower levels of private SC (see Table 2). We first conducted a set of hierarchical linear regression analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) to test the hypothesis that public SC explains the effect of culture on the tendency to choose brand-name options. The analysis showed that the public SC scale did not explain the effect of culture (Sobel test $p = .17$).

Next, we conducted another set of hierarchical linear regression analyses to test whether cultural groups differ in the relationship between the levels of public and private SC and the likelihood of choosing brand-name options. At Step 1, we entered the dummy coded culture (–1 for European Americans, 1 for Asian Americans) and the level of SC (mean centered) as predictors. At Step 2, we entered the interaction.

Public SC. At Step 1, the model was significant, $R^2 = .09$, $F(2, 174) = 6.52$, $p < .001$, as the main effect of culture was significant, $\beta = .24, t(174) = 3.31, p = .001$, replicating the basic finding from Studies 1 and 2. The main effect of level of public SC was also significant, $\beta = .15, t(174) = 2.10, p = .04$. The interaction between culture and public SC entered at Step 2 was not a significant predictor of choosing brand options, $\beta = .12, t(173) = 1.51, p = .13$.

Private SC. At Step 1, the model was significant, $R^2 = .07$, $F(2, 174) = 6.44, p = .002$, as the main effect of culture was again significant, $\beta = .26, t(174) = 3.55, p < .001$. The main effect of level of private SC was not significant, $\beta = -.003, t(174) = -.04, p = .97$. However, the interaction between culture and private SC entered at Step 2 was a significant predictor of choosing brand options, $\beta = .19, t(173) = 2.49, p = .01$.

We conducted simple slopes analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) to examine the exact nature of the relationship between private SC and choice of brand-name options. We plotted the relationship between private SC (at 1 SD above and below the mean) and choice of brand-name options among Asian Americans and European Americans (see Figure 1). As predicted, for Asian Americans, private SC was significantly related to the choice of brand options, $\beta = .25, t(173) = 1.99, p = .048$. For European Americans, the relationship was not significant and, in fact, was in a negative direction, $\beta = -.14, t(173) = -1.50, p = .14$. As can be seen in Figure 1, high-private-SC Asian Americans were more likely to choose brand-name options (predicted $M = .54$) compared to low-private-SC Asian Americans (predicted $M = .41$). In contrast, high- and low-private-SC European Americans were equally likely to choose brand-name options (predicted $M$s = .29 and .36, respectively).

In summary, Study 3 revealed that the relationship between public SC and brand-name choice was overall significantly positive, replicating the findings of Bushman (1993), and was not significantly moderated by culture. But the relationship between private SC and the choice was significantly moderated by culture. Private SC significantly predicted choosing brand-name options among Asian Americans but not among European Americans. Taken together, our results support the idea that Asian Americans choose brand-name options more than do European Americans because what is implicated by the choice of a brand-name product is more central and chronically important to Asian Americans’ sense of the self than to that of European Americans.

**STUDY 4**

If choosing brand-name options is motivated by social status concern, and even more strongly so among Asian Americans, what would the choices of Asian Americans be like when they were made to see themselves as being lower versus higher in socioeconomic status? To examine the question, we primed Asian Americans and European Americans to consider themselves as having either high

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**TABLE 2:** Cultural Differences in Self-Consciousness (SC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SC Component</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private†</td>
<td>European Am</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Am</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public†</td>
<td>European Am</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Am</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social anxiety**</td>
<td>European Am</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Am</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†$p = .07$. **$p < .01$. 

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**Figure 1** Choice of brand-name options as a function of culture (Asian Americans and European Americans) and self-consciousness (no writing vs. writing) in Study 3.

NOTE: Points are predicted values based on values plotted 1 SD above and below the mean on private self-consciousness (SC).
status or low status. We examined how the priming of status affects both groups’ choices between brand-name and generic products. In the high-status condition, participants engaged in a task that led them to view themselves as having relatively higher status. In the low-status condition, participants engaged in a task that led them to view themselves as having relatively lower status. Our theorizing suggests that participants’ situation-specific self-perception of status should affect choice of brand-name options, but only among those who consider the choice of brand-name options self-relevant. Thus, manipulating self-perception of social status should affect the choices of Asian Americans more so than the choices of European Americans. Accordingly, we hypothesized that Asian Americans in the high- (vs. low-) status condition (i.e., those who were led to see themselves as having higher status) would make choices that are more concordant with this self-perception (i.e., choices of brand-name products), reflecting their consideration of such a choice as self-relevant. We hypothesized that European Americans would not differ in their choices between status conditions.

Method

Participants. Seventy-six European American and 84 Asian-born Asian American students (M_age = 22, 60% female) from a large West Coast university participated in the study. Asian American participants were all Asian-born students.

Procedure. Participants first had to complete a “Background Questionnaire.” There were two versions of the questionnaire: high status and low status. Both versions contained the same five questions regarding socioeconomic status. These questions asked participants to indicate their personal monthly income, their family income, their mother’s and father’s education levels, and their social class on a 1 (lowest status response) to 3 (highest status response) scale. Although the questions were identical, the response categories provided for the questions differed between the two versions. In the high-status version, the response categories were anchored lower, and thus participants were likely to choose the highest response category. For example, the responses among which one could select for the mother’s education level question were (a) no formal education, (b) some high school, and (c) $400 or more. In the low-status version, the responses were anchored higher, and thus participants were more likely to select the lowest response category. In the low-status version, the possible responses for the mother’s education level question were (a) college degree or less, (b) master’s or professional degree, and (c) doctorate. In brief, the response options were stated in such a way that most participants would have to choose the lowest options in the low-status condition and the highest options in the high-status condition. The rationale of this manipulation is that consistently circling the highest options (or lowest options) causes people to consider themselves to be higher (or lower) in status. A similar method was used effectively in Nelson and Morrison (2005).

After the manipulation, all participants were asked to make a series of five choices (aspirin, cereal, soda, toothpaste, and potato chips), each between one brand-name and one generic option. At the end of the study, participants answered demographic questions. Participants completed the study individually.

Results and Discussion

As a manipulation check, we tested whether participants in the low-status condition chose lower status response options more than did participants in the high-status condition, using a Culture (Asian Americans vs. European Americans) × Status (high vs. low) ANOVA. Indeed, participants chose lower response options more in the low-status condition (M = 1.35, SD = .35) than in the high-status condition (M = 2.50, SD = .46), F(1, 156) = 370.32, p < .001. We also found a significant cultural group difference in that European Americans chose higher responses (M = 2.08, SD = .69) more than did Asian Americans (M = 1.77, SD = .66), F(1, 156) = 27.36, p < .001. These main effects were not qualified by the interaction, F(1, 156) = 2.53, p = .14. To further confirm that our manipulation led to the intended responses, we conducted pairwise comparisons between the high- and low-status conditions within each cultural group. And the difference between experimental conditions was highly significant in both cultural groups (p < .001 for both groups).

A Culture (Asian Americans vs. European Americans) × Status (high vs. low) ANOVA found a significant main effect of culture on the proportion of brand (vs. generic) options chosen from the five sets, F(1, 156) = 9.52, p < .002. On average, Asian Americans chose brand options more than did European Americans (M = .54, SD = .33 vs. M = .38, SD = .30, respectively). More important, although there was no main effect of status, F(1, 156) = 1.79, p = .18, there was a significant Culture × Status interaction, F(1, 156) = 3.81, p = .05. Planned pairwise comparisons revealed that the choice of European Americans did not differ between the high- and low-status conditions (M = .40, SD = .32 in the low-status condition and M = .37, SD = .29 in the high-status condition), p = .67. However, Asian Americans chose more brand-name options in the high-status condition than in the low-status condition (M = .63, SD = .29 and M = .46,
In summary, the patterns of results for Study 4 support our hypotheses. Only Asian Americans’ choices differed between the status conditions. When Asian Americans and European Americans were made to feel that they had either higher or lower social status, only Asian Americans made choices concordant with the self-perception. These results support our argument that choice of brand-name versus generic products is a form of self-expression among Asian Americans because this choice implicates social status, which is more self-relevant to them than to European Americans.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We examined the cultural difference in the tendency to choose brand-name products over generic products and the underlying reasons for the difference. We found that Asian Americans consistently chose brand-name options more often than did European Americans. We also found that this difference could be explained by the cultural difference in social status concerns. Moreover, although the relationship between public SC and brand-name choice was not moderated by culture, the relationship between private SC and brand-name choice was. Finally, when experimentally made to perceive oneself to be of either high or low social status, only Asian Americans made choices that reflected their self-perception of social status. Taken together, these findings support the idea that choices that have implications for social characteristics have greater importance for those from more collectivistic cultures, and this heightened importance occurs because such social characteristics are more chronically relevant and central to the self of people from these cultural contexts compared to people from more individualistic cultures.

Theoretical Implications

Previous research has shown that choice generally holds greater importance among European Americans than among Asian Americans. European Americans care about what to choose and how to make choices because of concerns about the self-implications of their choices (e.g., Kim & Drolet, 2003). Moreover, European Americans are more strongly affected by their choices, for example, increasing their commitment for the chosen object (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Kim & Sherman, 2007) or increasing their intrinsic motivation to work on the activity they have chosen (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). However, most of these studies used choice contexts that mainly reflect one’s individual attributes (i.e., one’s own unique thoughts, feelings, and traits). In the present research, we demonstrated that Asian Americans are in fact more concerned than European Americans about choice if the choice reflects a person’s social and external characteristics. Thus, it appears that when a choice implicates culturally important aspects of the self, people are more chronically concerned about making the choice.

Moreover, the present findings, combined with other findings (e.g., Bushman, 1993; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Kitayama et al., 2004) in the literature that reveal boundary conditions for the seeming relative importance of choice between cultural groups, suggest that perhaps cultural differences in the importance of choice lie in how “deep” the implications of a choice are for the self. Studies have identified situations in which Asians do care about choices that reflect nonsocial and internal characteristics. For instance, experimentally manipulated salience of social others tends to increase the anxiety associated with choice making among Asians, even with choices that implicate individualistic attributes (Kitayama et al., 2004) and among European Americans with choices that implicate social attributes (Bushman, 1993). Similarly, compared to European Americans, Asian Americans experience greater postdecision dissonance if the decision has interpersonal consequences (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005).

The present research, in combination with the existing findings, suggests that the real or imagined presence of social others heightens one’s scrutiny over his or her own choices that are relevant to both culturally more...
important and culturally less important aspects of the self and, consequently, minimizes cultural differences in what people typically choose. In a relatively private context, cultural differences appear to emerge more clearly. European Americans typically experience greater anxiety associated with their choice even in private settings, whereas Asians do not (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama et al., 2004). In the present research, Asian Americans showed a significant link between private SC and brand-name choice, but European Americans did not. Taken together, these findings are consistent with the basic notion that cultures differ in the extent to which characteristics of a person constitute the core of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Although even less important aspects of the self are still parts of oneself, and therefore chronic consciousness of social others can increase one’s awareness of the self-relevance of any given choice, culturally important aspects of the self are more chronically accessible and have deeper impact.

In view of these findings, it seems clear that future research should reconsider the definition of choice that is shared implicitly and explicitly in the Western cultural context. That is, in the United States, choice is assumed to be, and likewise is assumed it should be, a reflection of one’s individual thoughts, ideas, and traits. From this perspective, choice assumes freedom, and therefore choice reflects individuality. When a choice is made for reasons other than one’s personal motivation, for example, in a situation that has external constraints, choice is no longer seen as choosing but merely as picking. In other words, individual freedom from social influence is a necessary condition for choice to be an act of self-expression.

Yet emerging research on culture and choice demonstrates that choice can be motivated by reasons other than one’s personal preferences (e.g., Savani et al., 2008). Of course, researchers have known that choices are influenced, and often profoundly so, by factors other than personal characteristics. However, the importance of social and relational factors has not been fully incorporated into the methods used to study choice behaviors. Even when researchers study factors other than personal characteristics that drive choice, by and large these drivers have been intrapersonal factors, such as cognitive biases or affective influences. Social concerns, such as the desire to accommodate others’ needs, the need to fulfill social responsibilities, and the motivation to convey belongingness to better social groups, can be equally strong drivers of how and what people choose. In different cultural contexts, individual preferences are expected to play only a modest role. Thus, choosing might mean what a person is able to pick given social and relationship concerns. Choices that do not involve social and relational concerns might be meaningless.

Limitations and Future Research

The present research examined choice tendencies using sets of hypothetical situations. We used this method to gain greater experimental control. Nevertheless, it is important to examine the same questions with real-world choices in different choice contexts. Such contexts would include not only choices made in a private setting but also choices made in a public setting (e.g., Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008). The products in our choice sets contained commonly needed, frequently purchased, affordable products to minimize the role of personal circumstances (e.g., financial constraints) in participants’ choices. We did so with the express purpose of making the findings reflective of most real-world consumer choices. Although these findings regarding cultural differences in the psychological processes underlying choice behaviors should be relevant, reliable, and valid, an examination of real choices would provide further information about the factors underlying decision processes and speak to the generalizability of our results.

For example, there are categories of products that are much more socially self-expressive than the products used in our studies (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Different patterns of choices for the different cultural groups might emerge for products such as luxury goods or goods that are coconsumed. For the reasons stated previously, we focused on choices involving products that are generally individually chosen and privately consumed and therefore are not highly socially self-expressive. An examination of choices among more socially self-expressive options (e.g., clothing, cars, colleges, or neighborhoods) is important and may or may not yield the patterns of choices we found between cultural groups. These decisions are frequently made in view of implications both for personal and internal traits and motives and for social and external traits and motives. These two types of motives are not necessarily oppositional. However, it is possible that a person could make a satisfying choice, weighing one motive against the other. The weighing process would be influenced by culturally shared assumptions and models of personhood. Accordingly, we predict that the basic underlying process that we demonstrated in the present research would still be informative to understanding the decision processes for these larger choices.

In addition, the present research examined the patterns of choice that differ across cultural groups that are known to subscribe to different views of the self. However, ethnic and national culture is not the only factor that affects individuals’ choices and their psychological importance. For instance, other sociocultural factors such as social class (Bowman, Kitayama, & Nisbett, in press; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2008) and age (for a review, see Peters,
Finucane, MacGregor, & Slovic, 2000) are also found to affect how and why individuals make choices. These are not the factors that were considered in the present studies, but it will be important to address them in future research.

Conclusion

In the present research, we found cultural differences in the tendency to choose brand-name versus generic products. Furthermore, we found that these choices are motivated, at least in part, by the desire to project a positive self-image in both cultures. However, the choice pattern differs between cultures because the cultures differ in the relative centrality of social characteristics in how the self is defined. It should be noted that in addition to the cultural difference we found, there was a cultural similarity. Whereas how and what consumers choose differs cross-culturally, the function of choice as an act of self-expression does not. Across cultures, consumers appear to assume that their choices can signal something about who they are, whether it is about their individual self or their social self.

Our findings underscore the importance of researchers reconsidering the implicit definition of choice in research. Choice can be made not only by individuals but also by groups. Choice can reflect not only individuals’ preferences and values but also their social ties and roles. Choice can be motivated not only by the desire to express uniqueness and individuality but also by the desire to express belongingness and connection to a group. Obviously, these different goals and the accompanying implications of their choices are not mutually exclusive. Even brief reflection raises examples of both types of choices among people of all cultures, even though the relative salience and prevalence of individual versus social motivating factors might differ. In summary, we believe that broadening the definition of choice would further the understanding of choice processes and their consequences.

NOTES

1. Overall, the reliability among these perception items (with wasteful reverse coded) was very low (Cronbach’s α = .24 for European Americans and .33 for Asian Americans). Removing unique and wasteful improves the reliability for Asian Americans (α = .73) but not much for European Americans (α = .35). We found that a composite of the three items, nevertheless, does not mediate the cultural difference in choice.

2. Although we did not have strong predictions regarding the social anxiety subcomponent of self-consciousness (SC), we conducted a similar analysis, and the results show a pattern similar to the other two components of SC. The main effect of level of social anxiety was not significant, β = .023, t(174) = .31, p = .76. However, the interaction between culture and social anxiety entered at Step 2 was a marginally significant predictor of choosing brand options, β = .14, t(173) = 1.89, p = .06. Simple slopes analyses showed that for Asian Americans, social anxiety was somewhat positively related to the choice of brand options, β = .20, t(173) = 1.66, p = .10, but for European Americans, the relationship was not significant, β = –.09, t(173) = –.94, p = .35.

3. In our study, we used a method in which participants had to state their social status before making their choices, and participants could not alter the impression of their social status by choosing more brand options. Thus, the manipulation was expected to affect brand-name choices consistent with their perceived social status rather than affecting the motivation to portray oneself in a more positive manner.

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