Choice and Self-Expression: A Cultural Analysis of Variety-Seeking

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Three studies examined whether the tendency to seek variety in choices depends in part on cultural assumptions of choice and uniqueness. Study 1 showed that people from different cultures where different assumptions of choice and uniqueness dominate show different levels of variety in their choice rule use. Study 2 primed participants with magazine ads highlighting different representations of uniqueness dominant in individualist versus collectivist cultures to show the influence of cultural meanings of uniqueness on the variety-seeking tendency. Study 3 manipulated the motivation to display variety to demonstrate that variety-seeking in the United States partly hinges on cultural meanings of choice as self-expression. Variety-seeking in choice rule use was eliminated when participants had the chance to self-express through choice listing. The research illustrates the role of cultural assumptions in the variety-seeking tendency.

A simple act is rarely a simple act. An act often reflects and implies values, assumptions, and meanings that are shared. Because these values, assumptions, and meanings are locally and culturally bound (Bruner, 1990; Moscovici, 1984; Shweder, 1995), a seemingly identical act can mean something different and evoke different responses in one cultural context than in another (Kim, 2002; Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996). With the act of choice, for example, people might have different goals and expect different outcomes depending on their cultural context. Given these differences, people will not perceive the act of choice in the same way and so will not choose in the same way.

In particular, a person in one cultural context might make a choice in order to express individuality and appear unique. In this cultural context, choice is self-expression. If the choice is an entirely individual endeavor, done by oneself and impacting no one but oneself, a person can demonstrate his or her own unique blend of volition, feelings, and opinions through the act of choice. In this context, you are what you choose, and you can show who you are by what you choose: the hairstyle you choose to wear, the car you choose to drive, the person you choose to marry, and the presidential candidate for whom you choose to vote.

A person in another cultural context might not have the self in mind at all when choosing. In this cultural context, calling choice a “self-expression” makes less sense. If the choice is an endeavor that involves not just a person but also others around the person, the act of choice might not implicate the self very much, and few would connect choice to the chooser’s internal attributes. In this context, you might not be what you choose. Your hairstyle, car, spouse, or vote might not show who you are.

Much past research has suggested that people have a tendency to regularly vary the choices they make. People tend to seek variety both in the items they choose (e.g., Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Simonson, 1990) and in the manner in which they choose items (Drolet, 2002). Past research has focused on persons from Western cultural contexts who may seek to convey their unique individuality, an important U.S. value (Kim & Markus, 1999), by varying their choice behaviors (Ariely & Levav, 2000; Drolet, 2002). Given these findings, there appear to be a number of assumptions that are made by those who seek variety. One assumption is that the act of choice is an act of self-expression. People assume that choice is an act through which an individual makes a statement about himself or herself. Another assumption is that uniqueness is good. In summary, people make particular choices to paint particular portraits of themselves.

The current research sought to contextualize this variety-seeking tendency, because we believe that its existence depends in part on these cultural assumptions of choice and uniqueness. Thus, we argue that the tendency to seek variety in choice making will differ from one cultural context to another. The variety-seeking tendency will be more evident in cultural contexts where choice is assumed to be a self-expression, and uniqueness is assumed to be good, but not in other cultural contexts where these same assumptions are not held. Accordingly, we examined how presentation of different meanings of choice and uniqueness in choice contexts affects variety-seeking behavior. In so doing, we sought to illustrate the influence of assumptions held in a given context on individual psychological functioning.

The Variety-Seeking Tendency

Research has shown that people often desire to seek variety in their behavior. Variety-seeking has been defined as the tendency for a person to switch away from a choice made on the last
occasion (Kahn, Kalwani, & Morrison, 1982; Ratner et al., 1999). This tendency appears commonplace (for reviews, see McAllister & Pessemer, 1982; Ratner et al., 1999). It has been found in both intrapersonal and interpersonal choice contexts, even though variety-seeking often leads to lower overall satisfaction with choices. In particular, individuals will switch from more preferred to less preferred options so as to vary their choices, despite lower satisfaction (e.g., Ratner et al., 1999). Similarly, in interpersonal contexts (e.g., groups at a restaurant), individuals will tend to choose options different from options previously chosen by other individuals in their group (e.g., order a different entrée) even though their variety-seeking undermines individual happiness and increases regret (Ariely & Levav, 2000).

Recent research has suggested that the variety-seeking tendency extends beyond the choice of items to the choice of choice rules themselves (Drolet, 2002). People rely on various rules to resolve choice problems, and which rules people select from their repertoire depends on various characteristics of choice problems, such as framing (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) and task and context factors (e.g., Huber, Payne, & Puto, 1982; Simonson & Tversky, 1992; Tversky, Sattath, & Slovic, 1988). In addition, however, people tend to vary their use of rules independent of choice problem characteristics. Independent of problem characteristics, use of a particular choice rule on one occasion leads to decreased use of that rule on a subsequent occasion (Drolet, 2002). For example, imagine a person who has to make a series of choices between options that vary in terms of their price and quality; the more affordable option is of lower quality and the more expensive option is of higher quality. An increase in the likelihood that the person will select one option on the basis of price (i.e., will choose the cheaper option) on one occasion increases the likelihood that the person will then select an option on the basis of quality (i.e., will choose the higher quality option) on the next occasion. Similarly, the tendency of a person to compromise and choose a middle option (i.e., an option with intermediate values along attributes) on one occasion is associated with decreased compromising and choice of extreme options on later occasions.

Need for Uniqueness and the Variety-Seeking Tendency

One of the reasons why people may tend to seek variety in their choice making is the desire to appear unique (for recent reviews of other reasons, see Kahn, Ratner, & Kahneman, 1997; Ratner et al., 1999). Research on variety-seeking in interpersonal contexts has shown that individuals try to make different choices from other people’s, because individual choices in an interpersonal context are aimed at satisfying goals of portraying oneself as unique in the eyes of others rather than risking the appearance of imitation by making the same choices as others (Ariely & Levav, 2000). The desire to appear unique also plays a role in intrapersonal choice contexts. Past research has shown that behavioral change within a person is associated with perceptions of uniqueness (Fromkin & Snyder, 1980; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Individuals who value uniqueness desire to see themselves as different from other individuals. To differentiate themselves from others, these individuals strive to maintain a sense of “specialness.” They can show specialness by displaying variation in their own choice behavior (Fromkin & Snyder, 1980; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Counterconformity with one’s own behavior can represent a display of situational abnormality aimed at avoiding excessive similarity, thereby violating a standard of behavioral consistency and showing an individual as unique. Indeed, in an examination of variety-seeking in choice rule use, Drolet (2002) found that people scoring high on the Need for Uniqueness Scale (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) tended to vary their choice rules more than those scoring low.

A moderate amount of variation in behaviors and attitudes is often perceived more positively than consistency (Ratner & Kahn, 2001; Sherman, Nelson, & Ross, in press). Moderate variation suggests positive and adaptive values and personality traits, such as balance, discrimination, uniqueness, and varied taste, whereas too much repetition suggests negative and maladaptive values and traits, such as rigidity, indiscrimination, and monotonous taste (e.g., Ratner & Kahn, 2001; Simonson, 1989). Ratner and Kahn (2001) argued that variety-seeking is socially perceived to be normative. Accordingly, they suggested that those who follow this “consumption norm” are viewed more positively than those who do not, and that most individuals seek to vary their behavior to follow this implicit social rule.

A notable aspect of social norms is that they vary from one context to another. The association of variety-seeking and uniqueness gains a positive meaning in certain cultural contexts because positive meanings are attached to the notion of uniqueness in these contexts. Moreover, variety-seeking occurs in certain cultural contexts because choice is assumed to be an act of self-expression in these cultural contexts. The variety-seeking tendency would probably not be considered so favorably and engaged in as frequently in cultural contexts in which the assumptions regarding choice and uniqueness differ.

The Variety-Seeking Tendency and Cultural Assumptions of Uniqueness and Choice

The cultural context in which the tendency to seek variety has mostly been observed is that of the United States (e.g., Ariely & Levav, 2000; Drolet, 2002; Ratner & Kahn, 2001; Simonson, 1989). In the U.S. cultural context, individuals are encouraged to follow their own volitions, feelings, and convictions and also to express such internal attributes (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Triandis, 1995). Consequently, uniqueness, or being different from the rest, takes on positive meaning, because the state of uniqueness clearly signals the individual freedom to follow one’s mind and the expression of one’s specialness (Kim & Markus, 1999).

Relatedly, in this culture, choice is an opportunity through which individuals express their individuality, which is otherwise private and internal. When the act of choice is assumed to be an act of self-expression, it becomes an important task, a task that cannot be taken lightly or done mindlessly (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Thus, the psychological impact of lack of choice or failed choice on individuals is relatively large (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1997; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), and individuals adopt certain strategies, such as variety-seeking, to make sure that what is expressed through their choices is good, such as uniqueness.

In contrast, different assumptions about uniqueness and choice are shared in more collectivist cultures, such as the East Asian cultural contexts (Kim & Markus, 1999). In these cultural contexts, individuals are encouraged to respect and follow group norms and
decisions, yield their individual wishes, and reserve their individual feelings and opinions in the interests of group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Hence, uniqueness, the expression of defiance against group norms, has a negative meaning in these contexts (Kim & Markus, 1999).

Moreover, in these cultural contexts, where the distinction between an individual and group is blurred, choice is not an individual task. Choice is often neither a reflection of an individual’s desire only (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999) nor considered to be an act of self-expression. Instead, choice is an interpersonal task. One’s choice is often made by close others and made for close others (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Hoshino-Browne, Zanna, Spencer, & Zanna, in press). Thus, the success or failure of making a choice that portrays oneself in the most positive light does not concern people in these cultural contexts as much (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1997; Hoshino-Browne et al., in press; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999).

Given the different assumptions of both choice and the uniqueness in different cultural contexts, the amount of variety-seeking behavior that is associated with choice and uniqueness should also differ across cultural contexts. People in more individualist cultural contexts, such as that of the United States, should show a tendency to vary their choice making, whereas people in more collectivist cultural contexts, such as that of Korea, may not. In this research, we examined the effect of different assumptions of choice and uniqueness on the variety-seeking tendency.

Overview

The present research builds on past research on variety-seeking in the use of choice rules. Again, that research has shown that individuals from the U.S. cultural context have a tendency to vary their use of choice rules when making a series of contiguous choices (Drolet, 2002) and that use of a particular choice rule (e.g., compromise) decreases later use of that same choice rule. This tendency to seek variety in choice rule use was found to be related to individuals’ desire to appear unique (Drolet, 2002).

In the present research, we conducted three studies to examine how different cultural assumptions of choice and uniqueness influence variety-seeking in the use of choice rules. Study 1 examined cultural differences in variety-seeking tendencies. We compared people from an individualist culture (the United States), where uniqueness is valued and choice is assumed to be an act of self-expression, with people from a collectivist culture (Korea), where such assumptions are not shared. We examined the amount of variation in choice rule use as a function of individuals’ culture.

Study 2 was conducted to show that different representations of uniqueness indeed influence variety-seeking in choice rule use. We primed participants with the representations of uniqueness versus relatedness that are dominant in individualist versus collectivist cultures to place participants in a psychological context where uniqueness versus relations are salient. We then examined the effect of these primed representations on variety-seeking.

Study 3 was designed to test the idea that the variety-seeking tendency relies on the assumption of choice as a self-expression. We had some participants recall and list choices they had made before the study. If choice is assumed to be an expression of self, we hypothesized that these participants would feel a reduced need to self-express through varied choice rule use in the main study task when their individuality was expressed through the choice-listing task.

With these three studies, we sought to demonstrate that the need to seek variety varies across different cultural contexts, thereby increasing understanding of the reasons underlying purposefully varied choice behavior and illustrating the connection between cultural assumptions and individual psychological tendencies.

Study 1

Study 1 was designed to assess cultural differences in variety-seeking. We argued that people in the U.S. cultural context would seek variety in their use of choice rules because of two culturally shared assumptions: the assumption that how they make their choices reveals their internal attributes and the assumption that uniqueness is good. However, if the assumptions of choice and uniqueness are different in another cultural context, how people make their choices should be different as well. In a more collectivist cultural context, choice is less likely to be considered a form of self-expression, and uniqueness is not considered to be so positive (Kim & Markus, 1999). In such a cultural context, people should have a weaker tendency to seek variety in their choice rules because the act of choice does not involve themselves as much, and what is revealed by variety-seeking behavior, uniqueness, does not have positive meanings.

We conducted Study 1 with participants from U.S. and Korean cultural contexts. We hypothesized that participants from U.S. cultural contexts would switch away from choice rules used on previous choice occasions, replicating previous findings (Drolet, 2002), whereas participants from Korean culture would not show the switching effect.

Method

Participants. Three hundred forty-three undergraduate and graduate students (165 men and 178 women) at a West Coast university participated in a decision-making study for course credit. Among those, 137 were born in the United States, and 206 were born in Korea.

Procedure. All participants were asked to make three choices among sets of three options, starting with two background choices followed by a target choice (for a description of the same procedure, see Simonson & Tversky, 1992). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: compromise and noncompromise. Participants in the compromise condition made two (background) choices in product categories that tend to generate high shares of compromise (i.e., middle) choices. Participants in the noncompromise condition made two (background) choices in product categories that tend to generate high shares of noncompromise (i.e., end or extreme) options. In particular, past research (Drolet, Simonson, & Tversky, 2000) has indicated that compromise options tend to be chosen in the category of portable grills (with options defined in terms of weight and square inches of cooking area) and stereo speakers (with options defined in terms of power and price), whereas noncompromise options tend to be preferred in the category of dental insurance (with options defined in terms of percent coverage and amount of annual premium) and ice cream (with options defined in terms of fat grams and taste rating). Thus, in the compromise background condition, participants first made two choices in the categories of portable grills and stereo speakers. In the noncompromise background condition, participants first made two choices in the categories of ice cream and dental insurance. The Appendix shows Study 1 stimuli. In addition to using different product categories, the attribute values of background set options were manipulated to increase or decrease further compromising. That is, in the compromise condition, the attribute value differences between options tended to favor the middle option (e.g., Brand
B is 170 square inches more than Brand A and 4.5 lb less than Brand C. In contrast, in the noncompromise condition, the attribute value differences between brands tended to disfavor the middle option (e.g., Brand B is 12 points lower than Brand C and has 7 g more fat per serving than Brand A; again, see the Appendix for stimuli).

All participants, regardless of background condition, then made a third choice in the same set, tickets to a baseball game (with options defined in terms of row number and price). Previous research found that choice shares of the compromise versus noncompromise options in this set were relatively equal (Drolet, 2002). Participants then provided demographic information. In summary, Study 1 had a 2 (type of background: compromise or noncompromise) × 2 (culture: U.S. born or Korean born) between-subjects factorial design.

Results

Manipulation check. To make sure that participants’ preference patterns for background sets were as intended, the shares of the compromise and noncompromise options in the background sets were examined. Regardless of culture, the two compromise background sets elicited, both individually and on average, significantly higher shares of compromise choices than did the two noncompromise background sets (ps < .01; see Table 1). For U.S.-born participants, the average share of compromise choices in the compromise background sets was 67.5% versus 13.6% in the noncompromise background sets. For Korean-born participants, the average share of compromise choices in the compromise background sets was 67.3% versus 16.5% in the noncompromise background sets.

Target set choices. Logistic regression analysis found a significant interaction between background type and culture, \( \chi^2(1, N = 343) = 6.14, p < .01 \). Separate logistic regressions show that U.S.-born participants who first made choices in two compromise background sets were significantly less likely to choose a compromise option from the third target set (11.9%) than were U.S.-born participants who were exposed to two noncompromise sets first (35.7%; Fisher’s Exact Test, \( p < .01 \)). In contrast, there was no significant effect of the background manipulation for Korean-born participants. Korean-born participants who first made choices in two compromise background sets were not significantly less likely to choose a compromise option from the target set (22.6%) compared with Korean-born participants who first made choices in the two noncompromise sets (23.0%; Fisher’s Exact Test, \( ns \); see Table 1).

Discussion

As predicted, results show that U.S.-born participants from the more individualist cultural context have the tendency to switch choice rules, replicating the previous findings on variety-seeking in the use of choice rules (Drolet, 2002). Increased earlier choice of a particular type of option led to decreased choice of the same type of option and increased choice of another type of option later, whether participants were in the compromise condition or noncompromise condition. In contrast, Korean-born participants from the more collectivist cultural context did not show the tendency to switch choice rules. The choice rules they used in the background sets did not appear to influence their use of choice rules in the target set to the same degree.

These findings show that the variety-seeking in the use of choice rules is indeed culturally bound. However, a simple cultural comparison is not informative as to which aspect of cultural contexts may be responsible for such a difference. In the present research, we are suggesting that cultural assumptions of uniqueness and choice shared in a given cultural context influence individuals’ motivation to vary their use of choice rules. Studies 2 and 3 were designed to test these ideas more directly.

Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to investigate whether the cultural assumption of uniqueness influences variety-seeking in the use of choice rules. In every cultural context, there are sets of dominant and prevalent core cultural assumptions that are represented through social practices and institutions (Farr, 1998; Moscovici, 1984; Shweder & Sullivan, 1990). As an example of such cultural representations, we selected magazine advertisements and used them as primes to make a certain set of assumptions more salient.

Advertisements reflect cultural values and ideas (Caillat & Mueller, 1996; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Kim & Markus, 1999). Previous cultural analyses of magazine advertisements have revealed that the majority of U.S. advertisements use individualist themes, emphasizing uniqueness and the individual self (Aaker & Williams, 1998; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Kim & Markus, 1999). In contrast, the majority of East Asian advertisements were shown to rely on collectivist themes, focusing on conformity and relations with others (Aaker & Williams, 1998; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Kim & Markus, 1999). Moreover, advertisements occupy a large part of our modern social context. Most individuals are exposed to the messages conveyed through advertisements, and thoughts and actions of individuals are influenced by those ideas (Kim & Markus, 1999). The tendency to seek variety in order to be unique seems to be one such example.

Thus, in Study 2, we tested the effect of situational exposure to advertisements that emphasize either uniqueness themes or relational themes on individuals’ motivation to seek variety in their

### Table 1

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<td>Average background</td>
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<td>Target</td>
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choice rule use. The hypothesis was that participants who were primed by uniqueness themes would show the switching of choice rules, whereas participants who were primed by relational themes would not.

**Method**

**Participants.** One hundred eighty-one undergraduate students (70 men and 111 women) at a West Coast university each received $5 for their participation in Study 2.

**Procedure.** Each participant received a questionnaire packet consisting of two parts. In the first part, participants looked at three advertisements and filled out a questionnaire on how each ad made them feel. In this task, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the uniqueness priming condition or the relatedness priming condition. In the uniqueness priming condition, participants received three ads that promote uniqueness and individuality (e.g., “Routine, the enemy” or “Ditch the Joneses”). In the relatedness priming condition, participants received three ads that highlight relationality and connectedness among people (e.g., “Looks like we all share more in common than we think” or “E-mail when I want to talk to my best friend”). With each ad, participants received a questionnaire that presented a list of emotion words indicating both the feeling of uniqueness (e.g., unique, rebellious) and the feeling of relatedness (e.g., caring, indebted). The questionnaire asked participants to indicate how much each ad evoked the listed feelings in themselves.

The second part of the questionnaire packet was a choice questionnaire identical to the questionnaire used in Study 1. As in Study 1, participants made three contiguous choices first in two background sets followed by a third target set. Again, there were two randomly assigned background conditions, compromise and noncompromise. All participants, regardless of condition, then made a third choice in a common set, tickets to a baseball game. After filling out the questionnaires, participants answered demographic questions. In summary, Study 2 had a 2 (type of background: compromise or noncompromise) × 2 (priming: uniqueness or relatedness) between-subjects factorial design.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks.** To check whether the priming manipulation affected participants as intended, we examined the feelings evoked by the ads. Both the uniqueness emotion words and relatedness emotion words were highly correlated (Cronbach’s α = .90 for uniqueness words and .85 for relatedness words). Thus, these scores were combined to yield two measures, feeling of uniqueness and feeling of relatedness. As intended by the manipulation, participants in the uniqueness priming condition indicated that the ads made them feel more unique (M = 3.95, SD = 1.25, n = 87) than participants in the relatedness priming condition (M = 3.29, SD = 1.24, n = 94), t(179) = 3.54, p < .01. In contrast, participants in the relatedness priming condition indicated that the ads made them feel more related (M = 3.33, SD = 1.24) than participants in the uniqueness priming condition (M = 2.94, SD = 1.21), t(179) = 2.17, p < .05.

In addition, to ensure that participants’ preference patterns for options in the background sets were as expected, we examined background choices in the compromise and noncompromise conditions. Results show that the two compromise background sets elicited, both individually and on average, significantly higher shares of compromise options than the two noncompromise sets (all ps < .01). Table 2 shows Study 2 choice shares.

**Target set choices.** Results support the hypothesis that the content of priming affects participants’ target set choice. As predicted, the logistic regression analysis revealed a significant interaction between the content of priming (uniqueness vs. relatedness) and the background condition (compromise vs. noncompromise), χ²(1, N = 180) = 5.72, p < .02. Participants who were primed with the uniqueness themes in ads were significantly influenced by the background manipulation (Fisher’s Exact Test, p < .01). They were relatively more likely to choose the compromise option (38.8%) in the noncompromise condition compared with participants in the compromise condition (10.5%).

In contrast, participants primed with the relatedness themes in ads were not at all influenced by the background manipulation (Fisher’s Exact Test, ns). Participants in the noncompromise condition were not any more likely to choose the compromise option (26.7%) than participants in the compromise condition (31.3%; see Table 2).1

**Discussion**

Study 2 shows that priming of uniqueness or relatedness themes influences the variety-seeking tendency. When individuals were primed with uniqueness themes in the advertisements, they tended to switch choice rules. However, when they were primed with

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1 Although we did not specifically include Korean-born participants in Study 2, we made comparisons between Asian American participants and European American participants to examine the possibility that the priming might have affected people from different cultural backgrounds differently. The analyses show that the uniqueness and relatedness priming affected Asian Americans and European Americans in the same way. Both groups showed strong variety-seeking tendency in the uniqueness priming condition, χ²(1, N = 37) = 9.81, p < .01, for Asian American participants, and χ²(1, N = 32) = 4.52, p < .05, for European American participants, but not in the relatedness condition, χ²(1, N = 42) = .35, ns, for Asian American participants, and χ²(1, N = 27) = .68, ns, for European American participants.
relatedness themes, they tended not to switch choice rules. These findings provide evidence that the variety-seeking tendency is influenced by cultural representations of uniqueness and relatedness.

Whereas Study 2 highlights the importance of cultural representation of uniqueness and relatedness in the shaping of the variety-seeking tendency, Study 3 was designed to examine the role of the cultural meaning of choice as self-expression in the shaping of the variety-seeking tendency. In the U.S. cultural context, choice is often equated with self-expression, and people are motivated to seek variety in their choices in order to express their individuality. The question, then, is what would happen if individuals had a chance to be reminded of abundance and variety in the choices they have made and to have their sense of individuality affirmed. We addressed this question in Study 3.

Study 3

To demonstrate that the variety-seeking tendency in the United States depends on the cultural assumption that choice is a form of self-expression, Study 3 tested the effect of a choice-listing task on the amount of variety-seeking in choice rules. In particular, we had some participants list the choices they had made the morning prior to their study participation. If choice is indeed assumed to be an act of self-expression in the U.S. cultural context, we hypothesized that this exercise of recalling and listing various choices they had made would satisfy their need for self-expression, because listing of choices would provide them a chance to show variety in their earlier choices. If the variety-seeking tendency involves the assumption that choice is an act of self-expression, this exercise would reduce the need for variety-seeking in the main study task. Thus, we hypothesized that participants who engaged in the choice-listing task would be less likely to switch their choice rules than those in the control condition who did not have the opportunity to recall and list choices.

Method

Participants. Six hundred two U.S.-born undergraduate and graduate students at a West Coast university each received either $2 or course credit for their participation in Study 3. There were approximately equal numbers of men and women.

Procedure. Each participant received a questionnaire packet consisting of two parts. In the first part, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: choice-listing condition versus no-choice-listing condition. Participants (n = 306) in the choice-listing condition were asked to complete a choice-listing task. That is, they were asked to list all of the choices they could recall making that morning before the study. Participants could list up to 20 choices. Participants in the no-choice-listing condition (n = 296) were not asked to recall any choices.

The second part of the questionnaire packet was the choice questionnaire that was used in Studies 1 and 2. All participants made three contiguous choices first in two background sets followed by a common target set. As in Studies 1 and 2, there were two randomly assigned conditions of the background sets (compromise and noncompromise). Then, all participants, regardless of background condition, made a third choice in a common target set, tickets to a baseball game. Participants then answered demographic questions. Study 3 had a 2 (type of background: compromise or noncompromise) × 2 (choice-listing task: choice listing or no choice listing) between-subjects factorial design.

Results

Manipulation checks. To ensure that participants’ preference patterns for background sets in the compromise and noncompromise conditions were as expected, participants’ background choices were examined. The results show that regardless of the choice-listing condition, the two compromise background sets elicited, both individually and on average, significantly higher shares of compromise options than in the two noncompromise sets (all ps < .01). Table 3 shows Study 3 background choice shares.

Target set choices. Results support the hypothesis that the choice-listing task would affect participants’ choice in the target set. As predicted, the logistic regression analysis revealed a significant interaction between the choice-listing task and the type of background, χ²(1, N = 601) = 6.48, p < .01. Participants who were not asked to list their choices were significantly influenced by the background manipulation (Fisher’s Exact Test, p < .02), because they were relatively more likely to choose the compromise option (39.0%) in the noncompromise condition than participants in the compromise condition (26.5%). In contrast, when asked to list choices, participants were not influenced by the background manipulation (Fisher’s Exact Test, ns). Participants in the noncompromise condition were not significantly more likely to choose the compromise option (28.3%) than participants in the compromise condition (35.1%; see Table 3).

As an ancillary analysis, we examined the effect of the number of recalled choices listed in the choice-listing task condition on choice in the target set. Using an interquartile split along the number of recalled choices listed (bottom quartile < 7 choices

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listed, \( n = 78 \); top quartile \( > 12 \) choices listed, \( n = 79 \)) to divide participants into two groups, we found a marginally significant interaction between background condition and group, \( \chi^2(1, N = 157) = 2.91, p < .09 \). Consistent with results for the choice-listing conditions, participants who listed a relatively small number of choices showed a significant effect of background condition (23\% change in target choice share between background conditions; Fisher’s Exact Test, \( p = .03 \)). In contrast, participants who listed a relatively large number of choices showed no effect of background condition (2\% change in target choice share between background conditions; Fisher’s Exact Test, \( ns \)).

**Discussion**

Results of Study 3 support the hypothesis that the listing of choices would reduce variety-seeking tendency. Those who listed choices prior to the main task sought less variety in their choice rules than those who did not, and those who listed more choices sought less variety in their choice rules than those who listed fewer choices. In other words, listing choices, and hence having an opportunity to satisfy the need to express one’s individuality in another way, seems to have successfully reduced the motivation to seek variety in their choice rule use. This pattern of findings provides support for the idea that choice is assumed to be an act of self-expression in U.S. culture and that this assumption is one of the core foundations of the variety-seeking tendency in choice rule use.

**General Discussion**

**Summary and Implications**

Past research has shown that people have a tendency to seek variety in their choice making. The present research contextualizes this variety-seeking tendency. Past research has focused on persons from cultural contexts who strive to be unique and seek to differ from others by varying their choice behavior (e.g., Ariely & Levav, 2000; Drolet, 2002). We argued that variety-seeking would depend on cultural assumptions of choice and uniqueness and demonstrated how different cultural assumptions of choice and uniqueness affect people’s tendency to seek variety.

In particular, in three experiments we showed the effect of assumptions of choice and uniqueness on variety-seeking in choice rules. In Study 1, we found that people from different cultural contexts differ in the likelihood of variety-seeking in the use of choice rules. Participants from an individualist culture tended to vary their choice rule use, whereas participants from a collectivist culture did not. In Study 2, we showed that different cultural representations of uniqueness and relatedness lead to different degrees of variety-seeking. Using magazine ads, we primed participants with the representations of uniqueness and relatedness that are dominant in the individualist and collectivist cultures. Participants put into a psychological context in which uniqueness was emphasized tended to seek variety, whereas participants put into a psychological context in which relatedness was emphasized did not. Finally, in Study 3, we experimentally manipulated the degree of need for variety-seeking behavior by making some participants list their choices prior to the main choice task. Participants who were given a chance to reflect and express their individuality through an alternative choice-listing exercise did not seek variety in their subsequent choices. These results support the idea that choice is considered to be a form of self-expression in the U.S. cultural context and that variety-seeking in the U.S. cultural context relies on the cultural assumption that individuals can express themselves through their choice making. Of course, we are not suggesting that a few ads can wholly serve as a proxy for culture or that a simple situational task manipulation can be used to explain cultural processes in general. However, we do think that exposure to cultural ideas through means such as ads does have some influence on how people behave and that such influence is one way in which culture can affect individuals’ psychology (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Our aim is to document one of many ways that culture shapes psychology.

Taken together, these three studies’ findings, that the variety-seeking tendency depends on cultural assumptions of choice and uniqueness, imply that the tendency to seek variety may not be as pervasive as has been previously suggested. This raises the question of how “hard-wired” the variety-seeking tendency is. The value individuals place on the act of choice and uniqueness appears to be an important moderator of variety-seeking behavior.

The current findings provide evidence for the cultural nature of one particular kind of variety-seeking behavior, variety-seeking in the use of choice rules. However, because not all variety-seeking behaviors may share the same underlying motivations, we cannot assume that culture would affect all forms of variety-seeking in the same way. For example, choice rule use is intrapersonal in nature, so variety-seeking in this behavior might be motivated by different goals than variety-seeking in more interpersonal contexts. Given that the value of variety-seeking behavior relates to people’s views of what the relationship between the individual and collective should be, the tendency to seek variety might differ in a group setting. One possibility is that when part of a group, people from a collectivist cultural context might show a consistency-seeking tendency rather than just a lack of a variety-seeking tendency because of a desire to conform to group norms. Generalization of the current findings to more interpersonal and social choice settings is needed to understand the intricate nature of the relationship between the variety-seeking tendency and its contexts.

**Lack of Variety-Seeking Versus Consistency Seeking**

There is a seeming inconsistency between the present findings and previous findings that needs to be explained. Previous research on culture and the preference for uniqueness (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999) has indicated that people from individualist cultural contexts prefer uniqueness or standing out, but people from collectivist cultural contexts prefer conformity or blending in. Although results from the present research are consistent with the overall pattern of the previous findings, they also differ in a subtle but meaningful way. The difference is with the pattern of choices made by participants from collectivist cultural or situational contexts. On the basis of the previous findings that people from collectivist cultural contexts prefer conformity, one might expect that participants who were from collectivist cultural contexts or who were primed with collectivist themes would show a consistency-seeking tendency in their choice rule use. Yet in our research, participants did not seem particularly interested in appearing consistent. Rather, their choice patterns suggest that their later choices were not affected by their earlier choices.
Prior research on culture and preference for uniqueness (Kim & Markus, 1999) dealt with the basic cultural values regarding uniqueness and conformity and created situations in which participants had to indicate preference for one concept over the other. Hence, participants were somewhat forced to adopt the assumption that choice is self-expression and to express their feelings through their choices. The situations in the present research do not pit a value for uniqueness and a value for conformity against each other. Therefore, it is probably the case that participants in the present research (i.e., those who were from collectivist cultural contexts or primed with collectivist representations) were able to act on the basis of the more collectivist assumption of choice. In other words, the task in the present research did not have participants choose one value over the other, and so participants had the option of behaving according to the assumption that choice is not an act of self-expression.

The present results, then, highlight the importance of cultural assumptions about choice as an act of self-expression. If individuals consider choice to be a reflection of themselves, they will want to convey a positive image of themselves. The image can be of uniqueness or conformity depending on which is valued in a given cultural context. However, if individuals do not consider choice to be the expression of themselves, they would not think that how and what they choose matters much, and they might not think of trying to convey any image. That is, participants, when they were from more collectivist cultural contexts, when they were primed by relatedness themes, or when their need for self-expression was reduced did not seek variety, because they probably felt that their choices did not implicate themselves and that how they chose was relatively insignificant. If these participants had sought greater consistency, it would have meant that they considered choice to be a self-expression and that the only difference was which image they wanted to show.

It is perhaps ironic that the choices of these participants may actually reflect the better application of individuals’ “true” preferences than the choices of more individualist-oriented participants. That is, in a normative sense, the lack of influence of these participants’ own previous choices suggests a stronger tendency to ignore irrelevant information and a tendency to make choices with more satisfying outcomes when collectivist representations are in mind. Additional research would be needed to test this possibility.

Conclusion

The present research aimed to show cultural divergence in the variety-seeking tendency. We found that variety-seeking in choice making is not only culturally bound but also contextually bound. This finding implies that the variety-seeking tendency might not be as universal and robust as previously thought and might partly be explained by the assumption that choice is an act of self-expression and that the only difference is which image they wanted to show.

An act reflects and implies its social and cultural context. Even with the same act, people intend to convey different meanings and expect different consequences. A person in one cultural context might make a choice to express individuality, whereas another person in another cultural context might not have the self in mind at all. Two persons may not perceive the act of choice in the same way and so will not make the same choice. A choice is not just a choice, because a simple act is rarely a simple act.

References


(Appendix follows)
Appendix

Study 1 Choice Set Stimuli

Compromise Condition Background Sets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portable Bar-B-Q Grill</th>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Brand A</th>
<th>Brand B</th>
<th>Brand C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooking area (sq. inches)</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>550</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight (lb)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speakers for an Audio System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Model A</th>
<th>Model B</th>
<th>Model C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power (watts)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price ($)</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Target Set (Common to Both Conditions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tickets to a Baseball Game</th>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Choice A</th>
<th>Choice B</th>
<th>Choice C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Row number (lower numbers are better)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price ($)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. sq. = square.

Noncompromise Condition Background Sets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ice Cream</th>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Brand A</th>
<th>Brand B</th>
<th>Brand C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taste rating (0–100 point scale)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of fat (grams per serving)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dental Insurance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Plan A</th>
<th>Plan B</th>
<th>Plan C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual premium ($)</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage (%)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>80</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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