

The Effect of Self-Construal on Statue and Role-Relaxed Consumption

Enes Emre Başar

Research Assistant, Bayburt University, Turkey
Email: eebasar@bayburt.edu.tr

Aysel Erciş

Prof. Dr., Ataturk University, Turkey
Email: ayselercis@atauni.edu.tr

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Abstract

Consumer behavior researches indicate that individuals prefer the products which are compatible with themselves. For instance, individuals with highly independent-self take into account the functional benefits whereas individuals with highly interdependent-self take into account the symbolic benefits on their product preferences. Related studies in literature show that there are two different consumption patterns, which are called statue and role-relaxed consumptions, those take the lead on explaining consumers' brand or product preferences. Statue consumption concentrates on symbolic meanings of the products, whereas role-relaxed consumption focuses on the functional benefits. This research examines the effects of self-construal on statue and role-relaxed consumption patterns with reference to the close relationships of independent self and interdependent self with role-relaxed consumption and statue consumption, respectively. The results indicate that self-construal has significant effects on statue and role-relaxed consumption.

Keywords: Consumer behavior; self construal; statue consumption; role-relaxed consumption.

1. Introduction

The concept of "self" is a very popular subject not only in psychology, but also in marketing research field, in recent years. The self-construal concept, which is widely examined in the cross-cultural psychology field on the other hand, is defined as a holistic approach on relationships and the thoughts and feelings different from others (Singelis, 1994). According to this view, self-construal in a culture is developed in two different ways as interdependent or independent. Individuals with highly interdependent-self take into account the opinions of the people around them and pay special attention to adaptation. In other words, they live together with the environment. Therefore, their social status is important for them. On the other hand, individuals with highly independent selves prioritize their individual identity, prefer to live according to their own values and pay special attention to act independently of the environment. Thus, they do not care about social status.

On the other hand, especially according to consumer behavior researches, individuals choose the products compatible with themselves. Accordingly, "self" has a significant effect on consumers' pre- or post-purchase attitudes and behaviors, such as their brand or product preferences, purchasing trends, level of satisfaction and brand loyalty. For instance, the individuals with highly independent selves take into account the functional benefits whereas the individuals with highly interdependent selves take into account the symbolic benefits on their product preferences. Related studies in literature show that there are two different consumption patterns, which are called statue and role-relaxed consumptions, those which take the lead on explaining consumers' brand or product preferences. Statue consumption concentrates on symbolic meanings of the products, whereas role-relaxed consumption focuses on the functional benefits.

This research aims to determine the effects of self-construal on statue and role-relaxed consumption patterns with reference to the close relationships of independent self and interdependent self with role-relaxed consumption and statue consumption, respectively.

The research consists of two chapters. Chapter one includes literature review on self-construal, role-relaxed consumption and statue consumption concepts. Chapter two focuses on the field study conducted for the purpose of the research and interpretation of the outcomes of the analysis conducted with the data obtained from this study.

2. The Self Construal Concept

The self-construal concept explains the individual approach to the culture and its effects on the behaviors (Levine et al., 2003). According to Singelis (1994), the self-construal is the sum of actions, emotions and thoughts which separate the individual from her/his environment and affect her/his relationship with it. As stated in self-construal theory, individuals have several different selves. Therefore, the self should not be considered under a single conceptual framework (Singelis, 1994). Hence self-construal has been built on two different concepts which are called interdependent self and independent self. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), these concepts affect perception, emotion and motivation of individuals. Independent self is limited, whole and stationary; whereas interdependent self is flexible and variable. Individuals with highly independent selves prefer limited and direct communication with their environment. Additionally, they have more individualistic behavior. However, individuals with highly interdependent selves live closer to their environments. Moreover, they value social class, social roles and relationships.

Several studies in the field of self-construal have suggested that the independent self and the interdependent self are completely opposite of each other (Hui, 1988; Kitayama et al., 1997). Accordingly, it is stated that independent self is more dominant in western societies which are defined to be individualistic; interdependent self is more dominant in eastern societies which are described to be collectivistic (Markus ve Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). However, in numerous recent studies, it is claimed that independent self and interdependent self may exist together and complement each other in some countries such as Turkey (Assor et al., 2002; Chirkov et al., 2003; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005; Gezici and Güvenç, 2003; İmamoğlu, 2003).

By reviewing literature studies, it can be understood that there is a relationship between the self and consumer behavior. The relationship between the self and consumer behavior depends on whether consumers are individualistic or collectivistic and similar or different than their environment. In other words, interdependent or independent self of consumers affects their behavior. Thus, companies design their marketing strategies with respect to personality characteristics of consumers. For instance, retention strategies in western societies where independent self is dominant, consist of themes on individualism and competitiveness, and comparison of brands (Wang and Chan, 2001). The reason of making comparisons between brands is that individuals with independent selves care the functional benefits of the brand rather than the symbolic benefits of it. Additionally, brand association and awareness in individuals with independent self is weaker (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). On the other hand, status symbols and indirect expression are used in eastern societies where interdependent self is dominant (Polyorat et al., 2005). According to Escalas and Bettman (2005), the symbolic value of the brand is important for individuals with interdependent self. Thus, the brands with highly symbolic value are seen as important tools for these individuals to communicate with the groups they considered to be the reference.

3. The Role-relaxed Consumption Concept

Several studies have suggested that consumers' product preference depends on functional and symbolic benefits of the products (Bhat and Reddy, 1998). These studies indicate that the functional benefits are product-oriented. That is, the functional benefit of a product refers to the performance, quality and reliability (Keller, 2003). On the other hand, some consumers focus on the symbolic meaning beyond the physical characteristics of the product (Levy, 1959). Accordingly, the consumers consider the products they have as the communication tools with the reference groups (Banister and Hogg, 2003). Moreover, symbolic benefit contributes to self-esteem and self-confidence of consumers (Markus and Nurius, 1986). However, not all consumers care about symbolic benefits of products. Kahle (1995) defines the individuals who are focused on functional benefits rather than symbolic benefits, as role-relaxed consumers. Role-relaxed consumers care about the performance, quality and reliability of the product, rather than its ability to provide status or prestige. This point does not indicate that role-relaxed consumers are the people who prefer cheap products and refrain from purchasing branded products. On the contrary, comparing with other consumers; they are wealthy individuals with high self-confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, they consider themselves as educated, wise, sensible, sensitive and intellectual individuals (Clark, Zboj and Goldsmith, 2007).

Kahle (1995b) argues that the role-relaxed consumers do not have a desire for social status and popularity. Therefore, they care less about social norms related to consumption. Unlike the statue consumers; they are independent from the group and less subject to the normative pressures. Finally, the role-relaxed consumers have less interpersonal interactions. Therefore, satisfying social expectations is not their concern (Clark and Goldsmith, 2007).

4. The Statue Consumption Concept

The consumption, welfare and thus the level of satisfaction are assumed to be increased with the increase of individuals' incomes. However, Ehrhardt and Veenhov (1995) claim that the satisfaction levels of individuals with a very high level of welfare, remain constant or even fall over time. Veblen (1922) mentioned the importance of the relative wealth of the people, for the first time. Accordingly, individuals want to increase not only their own welfare, but also their status in society. In this context, relative wealth owned by individuals provides more social status. Bakshi and Chen (1996) demonstrated, for the first time with an experimental work, that wealth is gained not only for the consumption, but also to gain status.

Status is defined as the prestige, honor and respect recognized by other members to a group member in the group hierarchy (Burn, 2004). Moreover, it is believed that some products and brands provide status to consumers (O'Case and Frost, 2002). According to Kilsheimer; statue consumption is a conspicuous consumption that individuals do in order to show their prestige and status to those around (Aslay, Unal and Akbulut, 2013). According to Eastman et al. (1999), although they are sometimes used in the same meaning, statue consumption and conspicuous consumption are two different concepts. Statue consumption is not only to buy the prestigious products to show off the richness, but also means to be willing to pay a very high price for specific products in order to gain prestige and status (Chao and Schur, 1998). In this way, it differentiates from the conspicuous consumption.

In this study, the relationship between the statue consumption and the demographic characteristics such as gender, income level, education level and ethnicity, has been demonstrated (Chao and Schur, 1998; O'Case and Frost, 2002). In the studies on the psychological factors that affect the statue consumption, it is indicated that the statue consumers tend to adapt to the group norms, need to be unique and are exposed to normative pressures (Clark, Zboj and Goldsmith, 2007).

5. The Current Work

As it is previously indicated, the concept of self-construal has two dimensions which are independent self and interdependent self. The individuals with highly independent selves take into account the functional benefits rather than the symbolic benefits of the products. Therefore, they prefer the products with high functional value. Additionally, role-relaxed consumption describes purchasing a product for its functional meaning rather than its symbolic meaning.

Symbolic benefits of products are more important than functional benefits of them, for individuals with highly interdependent selves. Therefore, they prefer the products with high symbolic value, more. The statue consumption means purchase of the products due to their symbolic meanings.

This research aims to determine the effects of self-construal (independent and interdependent) on statue and role-relaxed consumption patterns with reference to the close relationships of independent self and interdependent self with role-relaxed consumption and statue consumption, respectively.

Two models have been developed for the purpose of research. First model is shown in Figure 1, second model is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 1. Theoretical model 1



Figure 2. Theoretical model 2

5.1 Hypotheses

Based on the reasoning offered above, we advanced the following hypotheses:

- H1: The independent self has an effect on role-relaxed consumption.
- H2: The interdependent self has an effect on statue consumption.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Participants

Data were collected using trained student interviewers at Ataturk University. The interviewers successfully contacted 400 respondents to complete survey instrument. Altogether, the sample age above 18 (median = 23). Approximately half of the respondents were female (47.5%).

5.2.2 Survey instrument

All respondents were administered a version of Singelis's (1994) Self-Construal Scale, Kahle's (1995a) Role-relaxed Consumption Scale and Eastman et al.'s (1999) Status Consumption Scale. The Self-Construal Scale is designed to measure the strength of respondents' independent and interdependent self-construal. 12 item comprise the independent subscale (current study $\alpha = .83$), while 14 item form the interdependent subscale (current study $\alpha = .86$). Role-relaxed consumption was measured using a seven-item scale (current study $\alpha = .85$), developed as an operationalization of a consumer's tendency to ignore interpersonal influences in making product and brand decisions and to prefer substantive product attributes over stylistic product attributes. Status consumption was operationalized by a four-item (current study $\alpha = .90$) to measure the extent to which individuals strive to improve their social status through consumption of consumer products that confer status both to the individual and to surrounding significant others. All scales have been found to possess adequate validity and reliability (Singelis, 1994; Singelis and Sharkey, 1995; Kahle, 1995a; Eastman et al., 1999; Clark et al., 2007). All responses were made on five point Likert-type scale with "1" indicating "strongly disagree" and "5" indicating "strongly agree".

5.3 Findings

5.3.1 Model 1 Test

A path analysis was next conducted to test the model 1. The theoretical model less than adequate fit indices. Based on an examination of modification indices, five item were freed (three item from independent self-subscale and one item from interdependent self-subscale). As can be seen in Fig. 3, the revised model resulted in a significant chi-square ($\chi^2(136) = 225.34, p < .001$). However, the chi-square test is highly sensitive to large sample sizes (Kline, 2011). Moreover, the remaining fit statistics indicated that the revised model fit the data well, based on recommended cutoffs (CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.072; Browne and Cudeck, 1993; Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2011), and structural paths were significant and in the expected direction. In sum, path analyses support H1.

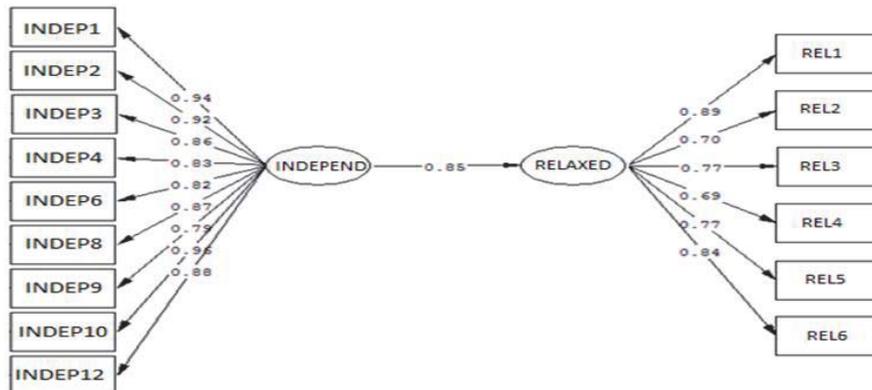


Figure 3. Model 1's Path Diagram

5.3.2 Model 2 Test

A path analysis was also conducted to test the model 2. The theoretical model less than adequate fit indices. Based on

an examination of modification indices, two item were freed (three item from interdependent self-subscale). The revised model (Fig. 4.) resulted in a significant chi-square ($\chi^2(89) = 176.11, p < .001$). Additionally, all index values are within suggested ranges for acceptable fit: (CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.065; Joireman et al., 2012), and structural paths were significant and in the expected direction. Briefly, H2 was also supported.

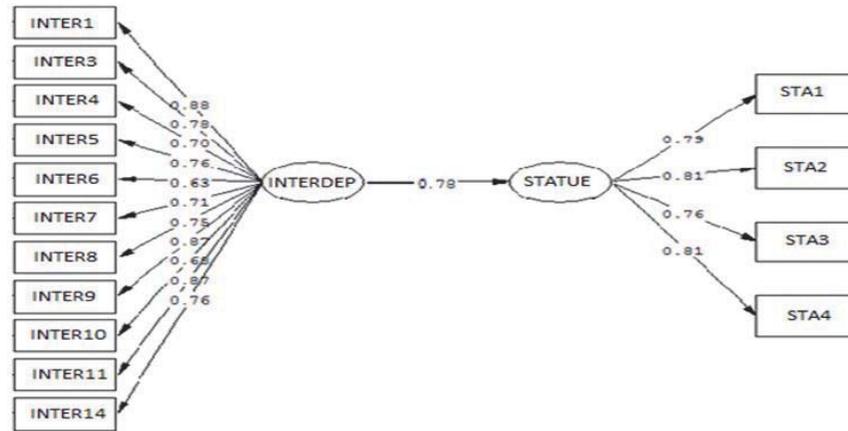


Figure 4. Model 2's Path Diagram

6. Conclusion

Related studies in literature state that there is a relationship between self-construal and consumer behavior (eg. Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Polyorat and Alden, 2005). Accordingly, individuals with highly independent selves attribute more importance to functional benefits of the products, rather than symbolic benefits. On the contrary, individuals with highly interdependent selves take into account symbolic benefits of the products rather than the functional benefits. In our study which is based on this conceptual framework, it is determined that the independent self has a high level of effect on the role-relaxed consumption which indicates the purchase of the products because of their high level of functional meaning. Additionally, it is identified that interdependent self has a high level of effect on the statue consumption, which expresses the purchase of the products because of their high symbolic meaning. These results are consistent with the studies which theoretically suggest the relationship between self-construal and consumer behavior. Moreover, it experimentally proves these propositions.

The obtained results indicate that statue consumption is higher in the individuals with interdependent selves. In other words, the individuals who take into account the adaptation to the environment and assume that their happiness depends on the others' opinions on themselves, make more statue consumption. Therefore, for the companies which plan to make status-oriented product positioning, it is significant to take into account the characteristics of interdependent self. In addition, it is determined that the role-relaxed consumption is generally made by the individuals with highly independent selves. The individuals with highly independent selves are not very much affected by their environment, happy to do what they want, care about their independence and individual identity and try to stay imaginative. The companies which express the functionality of their products should conduct marketing activities taking into account the characteristics of the individuals with highly independent selves, in order to meet the expectations of these consumers.

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