

Self-Construal and Exposure to American Entertainment and News Programs Among Malaysian Youths

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ABSTRACT

This study examined self-construal (self-independence/self-interdependence) of Malaysian youths, and its relationship with the exposure to American entertainment and news programs. A total of 401 Malay, Chinese and Indian youths participated in the survey by completing the self-administered questionnaires. The results revealed that the respondents exhibited fairly balanced levels of self-interdependence and self-independence. The Malay respondents showed somewhat a higher level of self-interdependence than that of the Chinese and Indians. The respondents who described self primarily in independent, rather than interdependent term, were more likely to have a higher level of exposure to American movies and music. Nevertheless, no significant difference was observed in the exposure to American news programs. The findings supported the contention on the role of self-construal in explaining the variation in the consumption of American movies and music among the youth in a non-western country.

Keywords: Self-construal, media exposure, U.S. media programs, Malaysian youth

INTRODUCTION

Why do some non-American audience in non-western countries consume more American media programs than others? Although there have been immense amount and variety of scholarships on the topic of media use, literature on the influence of self-construal on exposure to U.S. entertainment and news programs among non-American audience in collectivistic societies such as Malaysia is still lacking.

Media scholars are in agreement that the context of audience does play a role in the motivation of media use and the resulting pattern of exposure. Individuals use the media for many different purposes and receive many gratifications from this use. The use and gratification sought are assumed to be related to how audience see and define themselves—their identity (Kim *et*

al., 2001). In this sense, self-construal should provide additional theoretical explanation for the variation in the pattern of media use, including its use across the culture. While culture does affect individual communication behaviour, at the individual level, self-construal is more useful and appropriate in analyzing cultural influence on an individual's communication behaviour (Kim *et al.*, 2001). Despite the growth in the literature on the use of media and an increasing globalization of the American media programs, none of the past media use and exposure studies have investigated the relationship between self-construal with exposure to American entertainment and news programs among the non-American audience. Assuming that the U.S. media programs are culturally inappropriate in the non-western cultures and that the inflow of the American

media programs is seen as a form of cultural imperialism (e.g. Shigeru, 1998; Park, 2005) as well as given the gap in the literature on the influence of self-construal on media use, it is worthwhile to examine whether self-construal is in any way related to the exposure to American entertainment and news programs among the non-western audience. The present analysis was carried out in the case of the Malaysian audience. The findings of the study would provide an insight into the role of self-construal in predicting the media use behaviour in the context of trans-cultural impact of media systems.

Television Programming

The dominance of the United States in the international trade, specifically in supplying the American entertainment and news programs has so far been well-documented and this is accordingly applicable to the issues of cultural imperialism and the negative effects of exposure to foreign (western) media programs, particularly the entertainment programs which have been raised in many Third World countries. Despite the concerns, the popularity of the imported media programs, especially from the U.S. in the non western countries, is not diminishing (Shigeru, 1998; Park, 2005).

In Malaysia, television is the main source of news and entertainment (Media Guide, 2006). With the growth of the media and entertainment industry in the country, the availability of and accessibility to the U.S. imported media programs is not a problem. In fact, the trend of high percentage of imported programs, mainly from the United States in Malaysian televisions, has been the case since early seventies (Mohd Yusof Hussain, 2006). The continuous popularity of the western media programs, particularly from the U.S. among Malaysian audience, is understandable, given the lack of quality local entertainment programs in the country.

The Impacts of Trans-Cultural Television Programming

The issue of trans-cultural impact of the media system is important. In the case of Malaysia, the government has set a broadcasting policy which targets at a certain minimum percentage of the local contents in the media programs. While the government has established guidelines for media organizations to follow, in practice much improvement still needs to be made. In more

specific, the American programs still dominate the Malaysian television programming. Most of the western movies promote the lifestyle, values, morals and belief system which are truly foreign; the news programs are based on the western conception of truth, freedom and democracy, which may not resonate with the Malaysian cultural values, and their music videos are based on the changing western taste devoid of the spiritual values (Mohd Yusof Hussain, 2006). Logically, those who are concerned with or fearful of the negative influence of western programs would refrain themselves and their family members from such programs. Some, on the contrary, view the exposure to western programs as a source of learning about foreign cultures and help broaden audience's outlook and world view (Shigeru, 1998; Park, 2005).

Exposure to mass media is an important subject worth examining because of the role mass media play in the society. Emmers-Sommer and Allen (1999), based on their meta-analysis of the media effect studies, reaffirmed the claim that mass media are a significant source of learning and could influence the attitude and behaviour of individuals. In the trans-cultural media systems, Park (2005), for instance, found that the perception of the foreign culture was more strongly affected by media use. Meanwhile, many studies on mass media effects have found that media do have an influence on audience's knowledge, attitude, and behaviour; the impact is dependent on the amount and the type of media the audience are exposed to (Frey Meyer, 2006).

Studies which specifically examine the impacts of foreign media programs, particularly the entertainment and news programs from the U.S. on the non-Western audience are not many, and the findings are mixed. Elasmr and Hunter (1997) pointed out that there were reports of negative impacts of exposure to western media programs on the values and identities of the non-Western audience; others observed that the exposure to the western programs broadened the perspective and promoted learning about the foreign culture.

Taking note of the inconsistency in the findings of past studies in relation to the impacts of exposure to foreign (western) programs on non-Western audience and culture, the present study was not focusing on the media effect or the inconsistent media effect findings. Instead, the present study addressed a different issue

and attempted to fill in the gap in the literature, especially to clarify a possible association of self-construal with the exposure to the western entertainment and news programs among the non-western audience from the use and gratification as well as social identity perspectives. In the age of increasing foreign programming availability in the Malaysian mass media system, and the concern over the negative influence of these programs, it is very pertinent to uncover the correlates of the exposure to western programs. The interest here is on the role of self-construal, although many other factors, such as age and gender, have been observed to correlate with the exposure to the media programs in several past studies (Elasmar and Hunter, 1997; Emmers-Sommer and Allen, 1999; Park, 2005).

Self-Construal Influence

Kim *et al.* (2001) argued that one way to understand the influence of culture on an individual's communication behaviour was to determine the way the individual conceives himself/herself, that is, his or her self-construal. On the contrary, Markus and Kitayama (1994) argued that self-construal influenced cognition, emotion and motivation of individuals. Generally, self-construal has been defined in terms of perceived interconnectedness and distance from other people, and concerned on self over others. Independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal are the two dimensions of self-construal which have been widely studied and discussed in the literature. The central difference between independent-self and interdependent-self lies in a person's belief of how his or her self is related to others and the society. Although people possess both independent and interdependent self-identity, one generally predominates over the other. Gudykunst *et al.* (1996) found that self-construal was related to the values of individualism and collectivism, and self-construal was found to be a better predictor of specific behaviour choices than the cultural-level notion of individualism/collectivism. They further noted that independent self-construal is used predominantly by people of individualistic culture, while the interdependent self-construal is largely used by those of collectivistic culture. In the case of Malaysia, Bochner (1994) reported that Malaysians' self-construal was more interdependent rather than more independent. This resonates with the claim that Malaysia is a

collectivistic society (e.g. Tamam, Hassan and Yadi, 1997). Nevertheless, Malaysia is not a homogenous collectivistic society. Malaysia comprises of a multiethnic and multicultural society. While it is expected that Malaysians define their selves more in interdependent term, it is not clear if there is significant variation across the ethnic groups.

Self-construal has been identified as a predictor of communication behaviour. Past studies have found that it is related to communication orientation and behaviour such as verbal promotion (Wittenbaum, 2000), conversational constraints (Oetzel, 1998), and preferences consumption through the process of self-expression (Aaker and Schmitt, 2001), to mention a few. However, the relationship of self-construal with media use has not been examined. Oskam and Hudson (1999) pointed out that some scholars had proposed that subscription to and the use of media was related to individuals' identity with their communities and neighbours. This resonates well with the social identity view. In this sense, it is probable to anticipate that self-construal correlates with media use. The normative imperative of the independent self-construal is to achieve independence and self-actualization. Those with highly developed independent self-construal would see themselves as separate from others. Thus, their media use behaviour would not be much subjected to what is approved and disapproved in the society and culture. In contrast, the normative imperative of the interdependent self-construal is to maintain connected and harmony with significant others. It is important to note that people with interdependent self are concerned with others' feelings and evaluation. For individuals who maintain a collectivistic view of self, identity is acquired from their group. Allegiance to their group identity and cultural values is of supreme importance. In a sense, people with highly developed interdependent self-construal would control and restrict emotional expression and communication behaviour, including the media programs they consume. In short, individuals with different orientations of self-construal should exhibit different media consumption pattern.

The Objectives of the Study

Drawing on the above discussions, the objectives of the present study were to test the following hypotheses:

- H1: Malaysian youth described their self-construal more in interdependent rather than independent term.
- H2: Malaysian youth, who described themselves primarily in independent-self rather than primarily in interdependent-self, are more likely to have greater exposure to U.S. movies.
- H3: Malaysian youth, who described themselves primarily in independent-self rather than primarily in interdependent-self, are more likely to have greater exposure to U.S. music.
- H4: Malaysian youth, who described themselves primarily in independent-self rather than primarily in interdependent-self, are more likely to have greater exposure to U.S. news.

METHODS

Samples

A total of 401 students completed the survey on a voluntary basis. For this purpose, a convenience sampling technique was used in getting the respondents for the study. The sample consisted of slightly more females (51%) than males, and a fairly representative distribution of ethnicity (49% Malays, 32% Chinese, and 13% Indians, the three major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia) and religions (51% Islam, 13% Christian, 11% Hindu, and 22% Buddhist). Meanwhile, the average age of respondents was 21.4 years ($SD = 2.6$).

Instrument

Copies of self-administered questionnaire were distributed to undergraduate and graduate students who had enrolled themselves in for the communication and business classes at three large public universities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The questionnaire was originally written in English and then translated into Bahasa Malaysia by native speakers. The questionnaire took between ten to fifteen minutes to be completed.

Independent/ interdependent self-construal. Self-construal was measured using a series of 26 statements adapted from Gudykunst *et al.* (1996). The first subscale, which measures an independent self-construal, includes 13 items which ask respondents on how much they agree with statements, such as "I should decide my future on my own," "I try not to depend on others," or "I enjoy being unique and different from others." Meanwhile, the second subscale,

which measures an interdependent self-construal, also consists of 13 items which ask respondents to indicate their agreement with statements, such as "I respect decisions made by my group," "I stick with my group even through difficulties," or "I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of my group." All the items were assessed on a seven-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree") and added into the two separate self-construal scales. Higher scores mean greater tendencies towards the type of self-construal measured. In this study, both the independent self-construal (Cronbach's alpha = .68, $M = 5.2$, $SD = .73$) and the interdependent self-construal scales (Cronbach's alpha = .79, $M = 5.2$, $SD = .63$) achieved an acceptable level of reliability.

Exposure to U.S. media program. The exposure to three different media programs was also measured. Firstly, the exposure to U.S. television series/movies and theatre films; second, listening to U.S. music, and third, watching CNN news. The measurement of the exposure to U.S. series/movies/films was done by asking the respondents, (1) to indicate on a four-point scale how regularly (1 = "never" to 4 = "regularly") they watched any of the nine popular television shows (CSI, Medical Investigation, Apprentice, Desperate Housewives, Fear Factor, Survivor, Amazing Race, Lost, Prison Break), and (2) whether they saw any of the 12 movies which were shown in the Malaysian cinemas at the time of this study (The Da Vinci Code, X-Men: The Last Stand, Pirates of the Caribbean 2, The Omen, Cars, The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift, Superman Returns, Just My Luck, Scary Movie 4, Over the Hedge, The Lake House, The American Haunting). The extent of exposure to U.S. series/movies/films was determined by calculating the mean score of the nine questions. Once again, a higher mean score indicates a greater exposure.

Exposure to U.S. music was measured using this question: Considering the time spent each day listening to music, how much of the music you listened to is American music? (1=most of the music listened to are U.S. music, 2=some of the music are U.S. music, 3= do not listen to American music). Similarly, in order to account for the exposure to U.S. news, the respondents were asked to indicate on a four-point scale (1 = "never" to 4 = "regularly") how regularly they watched "CNN" and "major news from the United States." A higher score on the one-item exposure to U.S. music scale and one-item exposure to U.S.

news scale indicated a greater exposure to U.S. music and news.

Analysis Procedure

Prior to the actual data analysis, data exploratory analysis was done to check for any data entry error and normality in distribution. Paired t-tests were used to test all the four hypotheses. All the four hypotheses tested were the comparison of the group means. The level of significance used to accept or reject the hypotheses was 0.05.

RESULTS

The first hypothesis (H1) of the study predicted that Malaysian youth described themselves more in interdependent-self rather than independent-self. *Fig. 1* summarizes the mean scores on the independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal of the respondents. No significant difference was observed in the mean scores between the independent self-construal ($M=5.15$, $SD= .773$) and interdependent self-construal ($M=5.16$, $SD= .667$) ($t= .053$, $n= 401$, $\rho = .957$). The result clearly shows that the respondents exhibited fairly balanced levels of the interdependent-self and independent-self. In addition, an extra analysis was performed to determine if the mean scores on the two construal of self were significantly different across the ethnic groups. The comparatively analysis showed that Malays

($M=5.28$) scored higher in the interdependent-self as compared to that of the Indians and Chinese ($M=5.09$, $SD=.669$; $M=4.99$, $SD=.767$ respectively). Meanwhile, the Malays' score was significantly higher than the other two ($F=6.826$, $df=2$, $n=398$, $\rho =.001$). Nevertheless, no significant differences in the independent-self scores were observed between the Malays, Chinese and Indians ($F= .498$, $df=2$, $n=398$, $\rho =.608$).

Fig. 2 presents the results on the hypothesized difference between the respondents who described themselves primarily in the interdependent-self or primarily in the independent-self with regard to the exposure to the American media programs. As expected, the respondents who described themselves as more towards independent rather than interdependent were found to watch more U.S. movies than those who described themselves as more interdependent than independent, as indicated by the mean scores of 2.56 ($SD=.641$) for the more independent-self samples and 2.43 ($SD=.621$) for the interdependent-self samples ($t= -1.866$, $\rho = .031$). A similar pattern of findings was also observed for the test to determine the difference between the two samples on the exposure to the U.S. music. Based on the findings, those who described themselves as primarily in the independent rather than interdependent term were found to listen more to U.S. music than those who described themselves more in the interdependent than independent term, as shown

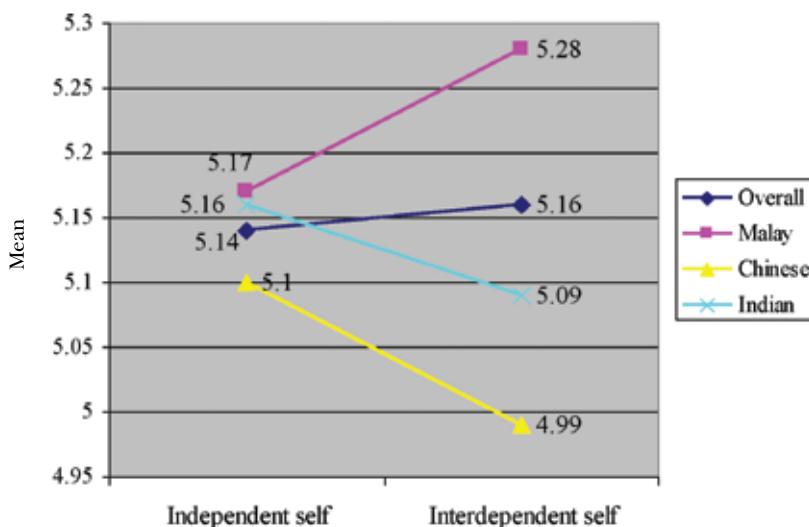


Fig. 1: Independent self and Interdependent self scores by ethnic

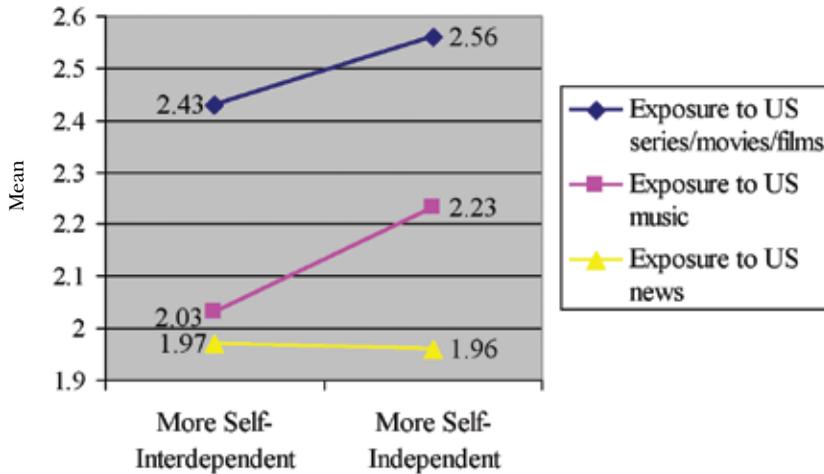


Fig. 2: Exposure to American media programs by self-construal

by the mean scores of 2.23 ($SD=.595$) for the more self-independent-self samples and 2.03 ($SD=.609$) for the interdependent-self samples ($t=-3.394$, $p=.031$). Therefore, H2 and H3 are supported. However, the study failed to find any support for H4. Both the more independent-self and more interdependent-self groups did not differ in the mean score on the exposure to the American news in the U.S. news media.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the relationship between self-construal with exposure to U.S. entertainment and the news programs among university students in Malaysia. Malaysia is categorized as a collectivistic country, and in a collectivistic society, the assumption is interdependent self-construal is dominant over independent self-construal. The study first predicted that Malaysian youth described themselves more in the interdependent-self rather than independent-self term. On the contrary to the expectation, the data of the present study showed inconsistencies with the prediction. Therefore, H1 is not supported. Both self-construal types are fairly visible among all the samples. The findings also implied that the characteristics of the independent self-construal are getting more visible among the Malaysian youth. This could be attributed to modernization and the progress which have been taking place in the society. The general perception is that as people modernize, they tend to be more materialistic and individualistic. This finding resonates with

Tamam, Hassan and Yadi's (1997) finding which states that individualistic values are getting more and more visible in the Malaysian society. Based on Tamam, Hassan and Yadi's (1997) findings and the findings of the present study, it seems that the Malaysian youth are no longer defining their construal of self more in the interdependent than independent terms. Hence, by implication, claiming or stereotyping Malaysians, primarily as a collectivistic society, is most likely no longer accurate. The finding challenges prior simplistic notion that Malaysia seems to be a culture that ranks high on the collectivistic values.

The finding also suggests that the two dimensions of self-construal are not related. This is supported by the results gathered from the additional analysis using the bivariate Pearson correlation procedure, which show that both interdependent self-construal and independent self-construal are independent dimensions of self-construal ($r=.078$, $p=.577$).

The finding of the present study which is not in line with the assumption that interdependent-self is more predominant in a collectivistic culture could also be interpreted as self-construal is not related with individual-collectivism. This is in line with Park and Levine's (1999) conclusion that their research did not provide any conclusive link between culture and self-construal.

Thus, a question was raised, i.e. whether the Malays, Chinese and Indians differ in the level of interdependent and independent self-construal. The finding suggests that the Malays seem to describe themselves more in the interdependent

terms as compared to that of the Chinese and Indians; the result suggests that the Malays are more collectivistic than that of the Chinese and Indians.

The central question of the present analysis is whether self-construal could be used to explain the variation in the exposure to the American entertainment and news programs among Malaysian youth. The study predicted that the respondents who described themselves primarily in independent rather than interdependent terms were more likely to have a greater exposure to U.S. movies and music, H2 and H3, respectively. These two hypotheses were supported. People who described self-construal more in interdependent rather than independent term seemed to be less exposed to the American movies and music. The logical explanation for this was that the values imparted in the American entertainment programs would have an unhealthy effect on the traditional and local culture and values. The exposure to the American cultural values could be seen as a threat to their socio-cultural identity and values. Therefore, as the present analysis showed that individuals with a dominant interdependent self-construal were more likely to demonstrate allegiance and conformity to social and cultural demand via their behaviour including the media use behaviour by limiting or restraining exposure to western media programs. The result is paralleled with Adker and Schmitt's (2001) finding which states that the differences in self-construal affect the preference consumption through the process of self-expression.

However, the present study failed to find support for the hypothesized difference in the exposure to U.S. news between the individuals who identified themselves primarily in interdependent rather than primarily in independent term. Nonetheless, the reason for this is not clear. Similarly, the study also failed to observe a significant difference, and this was probably because there was not much variation in the exposure to U.S. news among the respondents in the first place. However, this is merely a methodological explanation. Another possible explanation is that, unlike listening to the music or watching the movies which promotes the American life-style clearly and directly, watching western-based news programs is not construed as bad and culturally inappropriate. The general perception is that entertainment, particularly western-originated, is bad. However, as for the

news, news is informative, and listening or watching news is educational and it increases one's general knowledge.

Overall, the findings support the contention that the differences in consumption of American movies and music among the youth in Malaysia were because of the differences in how the youth viewed their self-construal. The consumption of American movies and music seemed to be higher among the youth who described themselves as primarily in independent rather than interdependent term.

The findings of this study are, of course, limited by the fact that data were collected from a non-representative student sample. While the study acknowledges that such a sample cannot be representative of the general youth population, the findings could still be generalized to the youth population in general, because the media use process is thought to be generic, that is the media use process should be similar, be it among students or non-student youth populations.

Finally, measures of media exposure traditionally have been problematic. The present study employed close-ended questions to measure the exposure to U.S. movies, music and news. In this sense, the findings on the relationship of self-construal with exposure to American entertainment and news are not conclusive. The study needs to be replicated using different measures, such as using open-ended questions which ask respondents to report the actual time they spend in a week for consuming U.S. music, movies and news programs, as well as the different segments of the society, to see if the present findings hold true.

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