

Impact of Culture on the Pursuit of Beauty: Evidence from Five Countries

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Abstract

Human beings have always coveted beautiful objects, but the desire to look good is reaching new heights worldwide. Although the pursuit of beauty appears universal, industry evidence suggests that it is particularly strong in Asia. This research examines the effect of culture on the pursuit of beauty. Three studies provide converging evidence that interdependent self-construal increases the likelihood of using appearance-enhancing products. Study 1 operationalizes culture through nationality and self-construal and shows that Easterners (more interdependent) are more likely to use appearance-enhancing products than Westerners (less interdependent). This use is driven by interdependents' tendency to conform to societal norms, which in turn leads to heightened self-discrepancy (Study 2). The use of appearance-enhancing tools helps minimize this discrepancy. Study 3 shows that strength of norms moderates the impact of interdependence on the use of appearance-enhancing tools. When norms are loosely defined and adherence is not strictly enforced, interdependents' appearance enhancement tendency is reduced. This research offers actionable insights into the pursuit of beauty, marketing of beauty brands, policy making, and consumer well-being.

Keywords

physical attractiveness, culture, conformity, norms, self-discrepancy

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Women's quest for beauty and felt need to enhance their appearance are gaining unparalleled attention around the world. Powered by double-digit growth in cosmetic, skin care, and hair care industries, the global beauty market is set to reach US\$493 billion by 2020 (Euromonitor 2017). Moreover, the beauty industry seems almost immune to economic shocks (Hill et al. 2012). In the United States and United Kingdom, some women run marathons in full makeup (Weiner 2015; Wiseman 2013), and many others are spending increasing amounts of money to achieve the perfect face and body at the expense of other needs (YMCA 2008). Although the obsession with beauty may appear universal, evidence suggests that this pursuit is even stronger in Asian countries. Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong are the top spenders (per capita) on skin care in the world (Euromonitor 2013). Furthermore, Asia has the highest concentration of plastic surgeons (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons 2016). One of every three women in the 19–29 age group admits to having gone under the knife in South Korea (Hu 2018). An analysis of Google Trends further reveals that Singapore leads in “plastic surgery” web searches across the world. Such industry evidence suggests that the culture to which consumers belong exerts a strong influence on their pursuit of beauty and appearance enhancement.

An understanding of the influence of culture on the pursuit of beauty has far-reaching implications for both firms and

policy makers. For multinational companies operating in the highly competitive multibillion dollar beauty industry, a more targeted and efficient allocation of marketing resources across countries can have a large impact on sales growth and profitability. Furthermore, as firms look to Asia for expansion, an understanding of the cultural influences on beauty can aid decision making about product launches and assortment selection, product attributes and benefits, communications campaigns, and frontline sales training.

However, the relentless pursuit of beauty ideals has led to a worldwide surge in objectification, face and body shaming, body-related disorders, and an obsession with plastic surgery, and this phenomenon is especially prevalent in the East (Zeilinger 2015). Such a pursuit has both individual and

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societal costs. Understanding the antecedents and the underlying psychological mechanism behind the prevalence of beauty pursuit among Eastern (vs. Western) consumers is valuable for policy makers to design interventions that may help curb the negative consequences associated with it. Yet, despite the ubiquity and practical and social implications of this phenomenon, marketing researchers have paid scant attention to this cultural difference in the pursuit of beauty.

Research on the pursuit of beauty and appearance enhancement has focused mainly on demographic factors, such as age (Clarke and Griffin 2008) and gender (Kwan and Trautner 2009), along with other individual differences, such as vanity concern, self-efficacy, and material needs (Mowen, Longoria, and Sallee 2009). The handful of studies examining the influence of culture on the evaluation of physical attractiveness (e.g., Cunningham et al. 1995) have largely focused on identifying cross-cultural differences in what constitutes beauty. For example, Cunningham et al. (1995) show that East Asians and white Americans value somewhat different beauty traits. Comparing consumers in the United States and Korea, Jung and Lee (2006) find that while body image is correlated with self-esteem in both countries, Korean consumers have more appearance-related thoughts, lower body image-related satisfaction, but higher body weight-related satisfaction.

Although these studies convey the existence of cultural differences in the perception of beauty, they remain silent on the specific cultural values and psychological processes that may influence appearance enhancement pursuits. We aim to address this gap in the literature with this research. Specifically, we propose that self-construal differences across cultures, or the manner in which people define themselves in relation to others (Markus and Kitayama 1991), exert a consequential influence on consumers' pursuit of beauty. Prior research has shown that people from industrialized Western countries hold a predominantly independent self-construal whereas those from traditional Eastern countries hold an interdependent self-construal (Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier 2002). Across three studies involving female consumers from five countries (two Western and three Eastern countries), we show that consumers from a more interdependent culture, or those possessing a stronger interdependent self within a particular culture, are more likely to pursue appearance enhancement. We further argue that Easterners, who have a stronger interdependent self-construal, are more likely to feel obligated to conform to socially defined beauty ideals, leading to a sense of discrepancy between their ideals and current self. Use of beauty-related products and other appearance-enhancing tools is one way to reduce this sense of discrepancy. Finally, in an organizational context, we show that interdependents' socially driven pursuit of beauty can be mitigated if they perceive the appearance-related norms as loose (vs. tight; Gelfand et al. 2011). Our research contributes to the beauty and appearance enhancement literature that has mostly focused on the downstream consequences of physical attractiveness but not on its antecedents (Belmi and Neale 2014; Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972; Fisher and Ma 2014).

By examining cultural differences in the pursuit of beauty through the lens of self-construal, we contribute to the body of work in international marketing that leverages such cultural differences to explain substantive cross-cultural phenomena (Agarwal, Malhotra, and Bolton 2010; Hui, Ho, and Wan 2011). Using both secondary (industry) and primary (lab and online studies) data, we underscore the importance of this study to the field of international marketing. Furthermore, prior research has shown that collectivist consumers, or those with an interdependent self-construal, are more likely to conform to societal norms (Lascu and Zinkhan 1999; Rose et al. 1994). Research in international marketing has identified culture-based conformity as a predictor in diverse domains such as consumer innovativeness (Steenkamp, Ter Hofstede, and Wedel 1999), manner of dressing (Manrai et al. 2001), luxury consumption (Shaikh et al. 2017; Wong and Ahuvia 1998), and green behavior (Chan and Lau 2002). Our findings build on and extend this line of research by identifying the underlying mechanism through which such culture-based conformity influences behavior, specifically in the beauty context. To the best of our knowledge, this research is the first to show that cultural differences in the motivation to conform to societal norms increase consumers' level of self-discrepancy, which in turn drives consumption behavior. With this research, we also respond to Li, Gordon, and Gelfand's (2017) call to leverage the cultural tightness and looseness framework in consumer research, by showing that situational differences affecting the need to conform may mitigate the impact of interdependence on consumers' appearance-enhancing behavior.

Managerially, a greater understanding of cultural differences in appearance enhancement is imperative for the beauty industry, in which Asia contributes more than 30% of sales and is the growth powerhouse for global beauty conglomerates (Madan 2016). Our findings provide compelling and pragmatic insights for managers and policy makers. Leveraging the cultural nuances of appearance enhancement can help firms formulate better-informed strategies on international expansion, market entry, resource allocation, product development, communication campaigns, and frontline sales training plans. In addition, our findings suggest that policy makers can curb the negative consequences associated with the overpursuit of beauty by working to loosen appearance-related norms in society.

We begin with a review of the literature on beauty, culture and self-construal, and the role of norms. Building on this literature, we present our theorization and develop a set of hypotheses on the influence of self-construal on the pursuit of beauty and the underlying mechanism. Furthermore, we delve into the role of tightness or looseness as a moderator for the effect. We report results from three studies involving consumers from five countries to provide evidence for our hypotheses. Following this, we present the theoretical, managerial, and policy-related implications of this research. Finally, we discuss limitations and outline several possibilities for further research.

Conceptual Development

The Pursuit of Beauty

The notion that *beautiful is good* is ingrained in people early in life (Rubenstein, Kalakanis, and Langlois 1999). Childhood stories depicting a beautiful princess, a handsome prince, and an ugly villain abound throughout the world. While the villain is killed or rots in jail, the prince and princess live happily ever after. With beautiful people seemingly getting better grades (Clifford and Walster 1973), earning more (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972; Rhode 2010), and being luckier in love (Udry and Eckland 1984), the allure of beauty is not just strong but compelling.

Indeed, multiple research programs dedicated to understanding this beautiful-is-good belief (also referred to as “physical attractiveness stereotyping”) have found that beautiful people are perceived as more intelligent (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972; Kanazawa and Kovar 2004) and more decisive and logical (Dipboye, Fromkin, and Wiback 1975). A beauty premium even exists in the labor market, with attractive candidates being more likely to be hired, to be considered more talented, to have better leadership skills, to command higher salaries, to elicit greater cooperation, and to be rewarded more often (Hamermesh 2011).

While being beautiful is coveted the world over, what is considered “beautiful” varies by culture (Cunningham et al. 1995). Anthropologists and ethnographers have long stressed that beauty is culturally driven and subjective (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). In other words, no absolute definition of beauty exists, and the standards of beauty are defined normatively by socialization processes and media influences (Banner 1983; Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). Derived from common experiences, societal norms define who (or what) is considered beautiful (Banner 1983; Hamermesh 2011). For example, Asians are less likely than Europeans to prefer features indicating sexual maturity and expressiveness (Cunningham et al. 1995). As society defines the norms of beauty, anyone wanting to be perceived as beautiful needs to adhere to these norms (Davis et al. 2010; Kim, Young, and Keun 2014). However, the motivation to conform to societal norms may also depend on the salient cultural values of an individual (Savani et al. 2015).

Culture and Self-Construal

Cultures are most often compared along the dimensions of individualism/collectivism (Hofstede 1991). The key distinction between individualism and collectivism is the extent to which members of a society view themselves as singular entities or as members of a network of others (Hui 1988; Hui, Ho, and Wan 2011). Individualist societies espouse a worldview that emphasizes personal autonomy (Hofstede 1980; Markus and Kitayama 1991), whereas collectivist societies adopt a philosophy that the individual and the group are indistinguishable; common goals, values, and fate help bind individuals in these societies together (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis

1995). Members of industrialized Western countries demonstrate greater individualism, whereas those belonging to traditional Eastern societies tend to be more collectivist (Inglehart 1997; Sampson 2001). International marketing research has extensively examined the impact of national culture on consumer behavior (e.g., Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson 2006; Laroche, Kalamas, and Cleveland 2005; Park and Jun 2003; for a discussion, see Steenkamp 2001).

Individualism and collectivism encompass multiple different values—for example, the dominance of individual rights (individualism) and duties and obligations (collectivism). Focusing specifically on how these societal differences affect the way people define themselves in relation to others, Markus and Kitayama (1991) developed the concepts of independent and interdependent self-construals. Self-construal refers to the degree to which the self is connected with (or separate from) others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier 2002). People with a dominant independent self tend to feel distinct from others, whereas those with a strong interdependent self tend to focus on the connectedness with others. For independents, the normative imperative is to appreciate and assert their unique self, without being influenced by the context or presence of others around them. Conversely, for interdependents, the self is meaningful and complete only when cast in an appropriate relationship and context.

Although self-construal levels may vary within a country, studies have shown that, in general, Easterners, or those living in collectivist countries such as China, Korea, and Japan, possess a stronger interdependent self-construal, while Westerners, such as those living in individualist countries such as the United States, possess a stronger independent self-construal (Lalwani and Shavitt 2013; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Singelis 1994). For example, people from Western countries are more likely to describe themselves as being independent of any group and focus on their personal autonomy, while those from Eastern countries use more interdependent descriptions (Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999; Hannover and Kuhnen 2004). Furthermore, research has shown that self-construal priming mirrors cultural differences in worldview and judgment (Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999). Given this, studies in cross-cultural psychology (Cross 1995; Gudykunst et al. 1996), consumer behavior (Ahluwalia 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005), and international marketing (Agarwal, Malhotra, and Bolton 2010; Hui, Ho, and Wan 2011) have used self-construal to operationalize culture at the individual level. For example, studies in international marketing have found that this difference exerts an impact across domains such as willingness to complain about product and service performance (Chelminski and Coulter 2007), response to service failures (Hui, Ho, and Wan 2011), and reciprocity (Hoppner, Griffith, and Whyte 2015). Building on and extending these findings, we propose that self-construal also influences consumers’ motivation to adhere to beauty norms.

Culture and Beauty: The Role of Norms

Although the definition of beauty may differ across cultures, the normative requirement is clear and well understood by individuals in a particular culture (Cunningham et al. 1995). However, having clear norms alone is not enough to motivate people to adhere to them; the way they view themselves can also affect their motivation to adhere to norms. Savani et al. (2015) find that even when the content of the norms is similar across cultures, the motivation to adhere to them is stronger for interdependents than independents. Easterners (interdependents) gain their sense of worth and satisfaction from belonging to a group and adjusting themselves to promote and ensure group harmony, whereas Westerners (independents) gain their sense of worth from being unique and achieving personal goals (Bond and Smith 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1991). As such, others' opinions influence interdependents' self-perceptions to a larger extent than independents' self-perceptions (Kim and Markman 2006; Kim and Markus 2004; Savani et al. 2015). Furthermore, when a person's interdependent self-construal or collective self is activated, subjective norms (vs. personal attitudes) guide behavioral intentions (Ybarra and Trafimow 1998). People with an interdependent self-construal tend to conform and adhere to others' judgments, as interdependence requires fitting into a larger network of socially prescribed roles, standards, and duties (Ji, Peng, and Nisbett 2000; Torelli 2006; Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto 1991). Thus, interdependents, but not independents, feel an obligation to conform to the requirements of the group (Heine et al. 2001).

Drawing from this stream of literature, we propose that Easterners' stronger interdependent self will lead them to be more motivated to conform to the set of criteria considered beautiful in their society than Westerners. With this greater motivation to conform to beauty-related norms, interdependents will have a greater proclivity for appearance-enhancing tools and products that can help them reach beauty-related normative ideals, which in turn will influence their use of appearance-enhancing products. Thus:

H₁: Easterners (more interdependent) are more likely to use appearance-enhancing products and tools to adhere to societal norms than Westerners (less interdependent).

Conformity and Self-Discrepancy

Having established the expected influence of interdependence on the use of appearance-enhancing products and tools, we next delve into the psychological mechanism underlying this effect. Specifically, how does interdependents' need to conform to norms affect their pursuit of beauty? A stronger need to conform to normative ideals would invariably make norms more salient, because it directs attention to what is widely accepted socially (Savani et al. 2015; Torelli 2006). Thus, interdependents' need to conform to norms should make beauty-related ideals in the society salient in their minds. More important, this salience of beauty-related norms may heighten the perceived difference between the societal ideals of beauty and the

assessment of their current state of beauty. This is consistent with prior research showing that interdependents' need to conform to societal norms makes the required ideal standards salient, heightening the perceived gap between the current state (actual) and the ideal standard (Lee, Aaker, and Gardner 2000) and thus leading to self-discrepancy.

Self-discrepancy, or the incongruity between how a person actually perceives him- or herself and how he or she desires to view him- or herself (Higgins 1987), is a powerful driver of consumer behavior (Mandel et al. 2017). In general, everyone strives to maintain stable self-views, and experiencing discrepancy in domains such as self-esteem (Crocker and Park 2004), intelligence, power, and belongingness in a social context (Lee and Shrum 2012) can trigger a motivational urge to reduce that discrepancy.

In the domain of beauty, the motivation to conform to societal norms may lead to heightened self-discrepancy between the ideal beauty standards revered by the society and how beautiful women perceive themselves to be. This may prompt consumers with a stronger interdependent self to use different means to reduce this feeling of self-discrepancy, such as readily available appearance-enhancing tools and products. Use of such products may help them believe that they are moving closer to the ideal standards of beauty, thus reducing the feeling of perceived self-discrepancy. We hypothesize the psychological mechanism underlying the effect as follows:

H_{2a}: Easterners (more interdependent) are more motivated to conform to social norms in the domain of beauty than Westerners (less interdependent), leading to heightened self-discrepancy.

H_{2b}: Heightened self-discrepancy among Easterners results in a greater use of appearance-enhancing tools and products.

Tightness and Looseness of Norms

H₁ and H₂ predict that a stronger interdependent self-construal will lead to a greater motivation to conform to beauty-related norms and, subsequently, heightened self-discrepancy. From a societal standpoint, this is not necessarily a desirable phenomenon, as it could lead to a surge in objectification, preoccupation with appearance, body and face shaming, and various other physical and psychological negative consequences (Kim, Young, and Keun 2014; Markey and Markey 2012). This begs the question whether interdependents' potentially harmful pursuit of beauty can be reduced. We explore a boundary condition for the observed effect; specifically, we investigate whether interdependent consumers can be induced not to adhere to social norms by changing the norm itself. In other words, can policy makers change what is considered normative?

H₁ argues that people high in interdependence are more likely to use appearance-enhancing products because they are motivated to adhere to social norms. However, social norms of behavior can vary in strength and be perceived as tight or loose. Gelfand et al. (2011) differentiate between "tight" and "loose" cultures, defining the former as those with strong social norms

and demanding adherence and the latter as those with weak social norms and high tolerance for nonconforming behavior (see also Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver 2006; Torelli and Rodas 2017). If we apply this difference to the current research, situations or contexts with tight norms about physical appearance will drive greater adherence (and, thus, enhanced use of appearance-enhancing tools) than situations or contexts with loose norms of physical appearance. We posit that the extent to which interdependents feel pressured to adhere to beauty norms will influence their motivation to use beauty-enhancing products to bridge the ideal–actual beauty gap. As discussed, people high in interdependence have a desire not to fall behind the group (Heine and Lehman 1999) and feel compelled to conform to societal expectations and norms (Torrelli 2006). However, they should feel this pressure to conform more strongly when the tolerance of deviant behavior is low (i.e., when situational norms are tight); when the situational norms are loose, they may feel lesser need to conform to appearance-related standards, resulting in reduced use of appearance-enhancing tools and products. Given their low motivation to adhere to norms, we expect consumers low in interdependent self-construal to be relatively unaffected by situational norms (either tight or loose). Thus:

H₃: Situational norms (tight vs. loose) moderate Easterners' (more interdependent) use of appearance-enhancing products, such that they are less (more) likely to use these products when the norms are loose (tight). Conversely, these norms have no effect on Westerners (less interdependent).

Overview of Studies

Given the ubiquity of the beauty phenomenon, as well as its relevance to international marketing, we first present secondary data–based evidence from the industry that shows that Eastern countries dominate the scorecard on beauty-related consumption. We then test our hypotheses in three studies conducted across five countries. In Study 1, we operationalize culture through both nationality (Canada and China) and self-construal to test whether Easterners (high interdependence) have a greater preference for beauty products than Westerners (low interdependence). Study 2 uncovers the underlying mechanism driving the effect by measuring interdependence in the United States, thus controlling for potential alternative explanations. Finally, in Study 3 we demonstrate that when situational norms are loosened, interdependents do not feel compelled to use appearance-enhancing products. All participants were women between 18 and 35 years of age, as this demographic is the key target group for beauty companies and the context of this research is most relevant for these women.

Preliminary Evidence from Industry Data

With the dual objectives of underscoring the ubiquity of the beauty phenomenon and proving its importance to international marketing scholarship, we explored secondary data from the

beauty industry for supporting evidence. We obtained country-level spending on beauty categories (in millions of U.S. dollars) from the Passport database (Euromonitor 2017) for 2016. We included beauty and personal care as defined by Euromonitor and excluded baby- and child-specific products, fragrances, and men's grooming. Ranking countries purely on beauty-related spending is not a valid way to judge beauty-related consumption as it is unduly affected by size of economy (e.g., United States) and population (e.g., China, India). To avoid these issues and for comparison purposes, we decided to examine spends in beauty categories as a percentage of gross domestic product (World Bank 2018) for each country for the same year. Assessing the level of spending on beauty in this way allows us to accurately capture the proclivity for beauty by country, regardless of state of economic development or overall size of market driven by sheer population size.

Ranking countries on this basis revealed the Asian preference for beauty, with four of the top five countries being in Asia—Japan (.63%), South Korea (.53%), Hong Kong (.45%), and Thailand (.40%) lead the top-five tally, with the United Kingdom (.42%), the sole Western country, coming in at fourth place. These data show that despite any within-category consumption differences that may exist between Asian and Western countries (e.g., skin care, makeup), Asians consistently spend more on beauty products than their Western counterparts. This finding also highlights the importance of cross-cultural differences in the pursuit of beauty as a pertinent research question for international marketing scholars.

Study 1

Our main objective in Study 1 was to test our key hypothesis (H₁) by operationalizing cross-cultural differences in self-construal through nationality. We conducted this study in two countries: China and Canada. We expected that participants from China would exhibit more positive attitudes toward a beauty product than those from Canada. A second aim was to provide initial evidence that individual differences in interdependence, operationalized with items from the self-construal scale, would also predict attitude toward the beauty product.

Method

We recruited 97 female participants from Canada ($M_{\text{age}} = 27.87$ years) using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and 102 female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 27.39$ years) from two Chinese cities, Beijing and Shanghai, using SoJump. In line with previous research, we expected that participants from China would be more interdependent than those from Canada (Li et al. 2006). Chinese participants responded to the Mandarin version of the survey. Two research assistants proficient in both Mandarin and English helped translate the survey into Mandarin, with one assistant translating the survey from English to Mandarin and the other translating it back from Mandarin to English.

We showed all participants an advertisement for a hypothetical beauty product—Instant Skin Perfector—that promised “instant radiant, even toned skin - right when you need it.” The product and advertisement were fictitious and mentioned no specific brand name. To ensure that our results are not driven by specific aspects of a product being preferred by different cultures, we used typical claims of Blemish Balm creams (available in both Canada and China), a skin care/makeup hybrid product that provides dual benefits of light coverage and skin care (Levitt n.d.), to create the advertisement. The advertisement included an image of the product and described the product benefits (see Web Appendix A).

Attitude. We asked participants to indicate their attitudes toward the product using a four-item, seven-point semantic differential scale (like it/dislike it, positive/negative, good/bad, appealing/unappealing). The average of these items ($\alpha = .94$; reverse scored) was our first dependent variable—that is, participants’ attitudes toward the product. A higher value indicated a more positive attitude.

Willingness to pay. Next, we told Canadian (Chinese) participants that an average skin cream costs approximately CAD 8 (RMB 16) and asked them to indicate how much they would be willing to pay for the advertised product on a slider scale ranging from 0 to twice the average price of the product for each country (i.e., CAD 16 and RMB 32). As we measured participants’ willingness to pay on different scales in the two countries, we normalized their responses in each country such that the values lie between 0 and 1.

Interdependence. Finally, we used four items from the self-construal scale of Singelis (1994) to measure participants’ interdependent self-construal. Participants responded to four items on a seven-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”; $\alpha = .85$): (1) “My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me,” (2) “I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in,” (3) “I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments,” and (4) “It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group.”

Results

Invariance tests. We assessed measurement invariance in line with Steenkamp and Baumgartner’s (1998) recommendations. The results from a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis showed that the fit of the baseline configural invariance model was satisfactory (comparative fit index = .976, Tucker–Lewis index = .965, root mean square error of approximation = .080). Next, we assessed metric invariance by constraining the factor loadings to be invariant across Canada and China. The fit of the resultant model was satisfactory as well (comparative fit index = .972, Tucker–Lewis index = .965, root mean square error of approximation = .080). Moreover, the increase in chi-square relative to the baseline model was not significant ($\Delta\chi^2(6) =$

9.78, $p = .13$). Thus, the measurement items used in this study were invariant across countries.

Country-level analyses. To test our hypothesis that participants from China would have a greater preference for the beauty product than those from Canada, we analyzed country-level differences in attitudes toward the product and the amount participants were willing to pay for it. First, an independent samples t-test with attitude toward the skin cream as the dependent variable indicated a significant effect of culture. Participants from China indicated more positive attitudes toward the product than those from Canada ($M_{CN} = 5.89$, $SD_{CN} = .94$; $M_{CA} = 4.75$, $SD_{CA} = 1.72$; $t(197) = 5.75$, $p < .001$). Second, the results from a similar independent samples t-test with the amount participants were willing to pay for the product (normalized within each country) as the dependent variable indicated that the Chinese participants were willing to pay more for the cream than the Canadian participants ($M_{CN} = .67$, $SD_{CN} = .20$; $M_{CA} = .54$, $SD_{CA} = .25$; $t(197) = 4.21$, $p < .001$).

Individual-level analyses. Next, we analyzed whether individual differences in interdependence predicted preference for the beauty product. A hierarchical regression with participants’ average scores on the interdependence items (mean-centered) nested within countries as the independent variable and attitude toward the beauty product as the dependent variable showed a significant, positive relationship ($B = .36$, $SE = .090$, $t(196) = 3.97$, $p < .001$). A similar hierarchical regression with willingness to pay as the dependent variable also revealed a significant, positive relationship ($B = .042$, $SE = .015$, $t(196) = 2.79$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The results provide strong evidence for H_1 . First, they show that participants from China, who have a stronger interdependent self-construal, had more positive attitudes toward the beauty-enhancing product than those from Canada, who have a weaker interdependent self-construal. The results also reveal that Chinese participants were willing to pay more for the product than their Canadian counterparts. Second, we provide initial evidence that individual differences in interdependence have the same positive relationship to the preference for beauty products. This finding provides converging evidence that self-construal is an important factor influencing consumers’ consumption of beauty products. In Study 2, we explore the underlying psychological mechanism driving the observed effect and also generalize our findings to a different context.

Study 2

Study 1 provided strong evidence for the hypothesis that an interdependent self-construal predicts a greater preference for beauty products. Thus, we designed Study 2 to accomplish multiple objectives. First, we aimed to delve deeper into the phenomenon and examine the underlying psychological process. We predicted that an interdependent self-construal would

be positively related to the desire to conform to societal norms (H_{2a}). This desire, in the domain of beauty, would lead to heightened perceived differences between the person's actual and ideal beauty standards (i.e., appearance-related self-discrepancy), which in turn would result in greater use of appearance-enhancing tools (H_{2b}).

Second, as we conducted Study 1 in different countries, it could be argued that country-level differences in beauty consumption are an artefact of the lack of face and body positivity programs in emerging economies (e.g., India, China), as compared with Western countries. Thus, we conducted Study 2 in a single country (the United States) to eliminate the potential confound of exposure to body and face positivity awareness communications. Furthermore, by conducting this study in a single country, we build on the findings of Study 1 and show that even in a Western society, interdependence drives preference for appearance-enhancing products.

Finally, we aimed to test our hypothesis (H_1) in a different context. In the current age of handheld mobile devices, technology-enabled appearance-enhancing tools such as smartphone apps and filters offer a quick way to correct and enhance photos digitally. The functionality includes, but is not limited to, creating a flawless complexion without blemishes or marks; enhancing features for bigger and brighter eyes, a sharper nose, and an angular jawline; removing dark circles, whitening teeth, and even changing eye color (Voo 2013). Given the pervasive presence of the Internet and smartphones in consumers' lives, it is expected that people will use these technologies in the pursuit of beauty. Thus, we decided to explore the impact of self-construal on the adoption and use of such image-correcting and enhancing apps.

Dependent Measure and Cross-National Pilot Study

Although our objective was to conduct this study in a single country to ensure that other cross-national differences would not affect the results, given the use of unconventional appearance-enhancing tools (image correcting and enhancing apps) as the dependent variable, we decided to conduct a cross-national pilot study to test whether Easterners reported greater use of image-correcting apps than Westerners. Forty-two female participants from India ($M_{age} = 27.90$ years) and 39 female participants from the United States ($M_{age} = 27.34$ years) completed the study on MTurk.

Participants read a short paragraph that stated that social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter offer opportunities to share pictures (or "selfies") with friends, family, and the wider audience. The statement also included a brief description of image-correcting apps and their typical usage. Next, participants responded to a seven-item, seven-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .89$) that measured their attitudes toward the use of such apps. Examples of the items are "I like to use image-correcting tools to improve my pictures before posting them online," "I believe in being real and not using any app or tool to make my pictures look more attractive" (reverse coded), "I do not like to use image-

correcting tools to appear more attractive than I am" (reverse coded), and "Using image-correcting tools or filters allows me to show my best appearance to the world." The mean of the seven items formed our dependent variable.

An independent samples t-test revealed that Indian participants (more interdependent) indicated greater use of image-enhancing apps ($M_{India} = 4.39$, $SD = 1.12$) than Americans (more independent) ($M_{US} = 3.69$, $SD = 1.77$; $t(79) = -2.13$, $p = .036$). This suggests that similar to other, more conventional beauty products, Easterners are more likely to use image-enhancing apps than Westerners. Next, we proceeded to examine the underlying mechanism for our phenomenon.

Method

One hundred forty-one female participants in the 18–35 age group ($M_{age} = 27.41$ years) from the United States completed the study on MTurk. Participants read the same description of image correcting and enhancing apps as in the pilot study. Next, as our dependent variable, we measured their attitudes toward using the apps with the same items ($\alpha = .92$) as in the pilot study. After measuring participants' attitudes toward the apps, we also assessed their interdependent self-construal using Singelis's (1994) 12-item interdependence subscale ($\alpha = .83$). Furthermore, we measured the tendency to conform with items from Mehrabian and Stefl (1995). Participants responded to a nine-item scale (1 = "very strong disagreement," 9 = "very strong agreement"; $\alpha = .86$). Items included "I often rely on, and act upon, the advice of others"; "Generally, I'd rather give in and go along for the sake of peace than struggle to have my way"; and "I tend to rely on others when I have to make an important decision quickly." Finally, we assessed appearance-related self-discrepancy by adapting Cash and Szymanski's (1995) Body Image Ideals scale. We presented participants with ten physical attributes, such as skin complexion, hair, and facial features, and asked them to think about their personal ideal (how they wish or prefer to be) and how well they currently resemble or match this personal ideal for each of the ten attributes (1 = "exactly as I am," 4 = "very unlike me"; $\alpha = .83$). The average of the ten items formed a measure of appearance-related self-discrepancy; a higher score indicated a greater gap between participants' current self and personal ideal.

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all the variables. We regressed participants' interdependent self-construal on their attitudes toward the use of such apps. The analysis revealed a significant effect of interdependence on the use of appearance-enhancing tools ($B = .37$, $SE = .16$, $t(138) = 2.30$, $p = .023$). Thus, the more interdependent participants indicated they were, the greater was their indicated use of the appearance-enhancing app.

We hypothesized that interdependents' need to conform to beauty norms would lead to greater salience of ideal normative

Table 1. Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Interdependence	4.62	.92	–		
2. Conformity	4.44	1.61	.55**	–	
3. Self-discrepancy	2.25	.58	.00	.24**	–
4. Attitude toward the app	3.49	1.86	.21*	.33**	.32**

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

standards, resulting in a heightened sense of discrepancy between their actual and ideal state of beauty (H_{2a}). We tested this hypothesis using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2012). We entered participants' interdependence scores as the independent variable, their appearance-related self-discrepancy as the outcome variable, and conformity as the mediator. Bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 iterations revealed that conformity mediated the direct effect of interdependence on perceived self-discrepancy (indirect effect: $B = .12$, $SE = .037$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.057, .20]). The results indicate that greater interdependence was related to higher conforming tendencies, leading to greater self-discrepancy.

Next, we tested the underlying mechanism for this phenomenon. To test the mediation hypotheses (H_{2a} and H_{2b}), we performed a serial mediation analysis using Model 6 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2012). We entered participants' interdependence scores as the independent variable, their use of image correcting and enhancing apps as the dependent variable, and conformity and appearance-related self-discrepancy as the two serial mediators. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for this mediation analysis. Bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 iterations revealed that conformity and self-discrepancy mediated the direct effect of interdependence on attitudes toward the use of image-enhancing apps (indirect effect: $B = .096$, $SE = .041$, 95% CI = [.032, .20]). The results supported the hypotheses and indicated that greater interdependence was related to higher conforming tendencies, which in turn were positively related to heightened appearance-related self-discrepancy (H_{2a}). Further, this appearance-related

self-discrepancy predicted use of the image-enhancing app (H_{2b}).

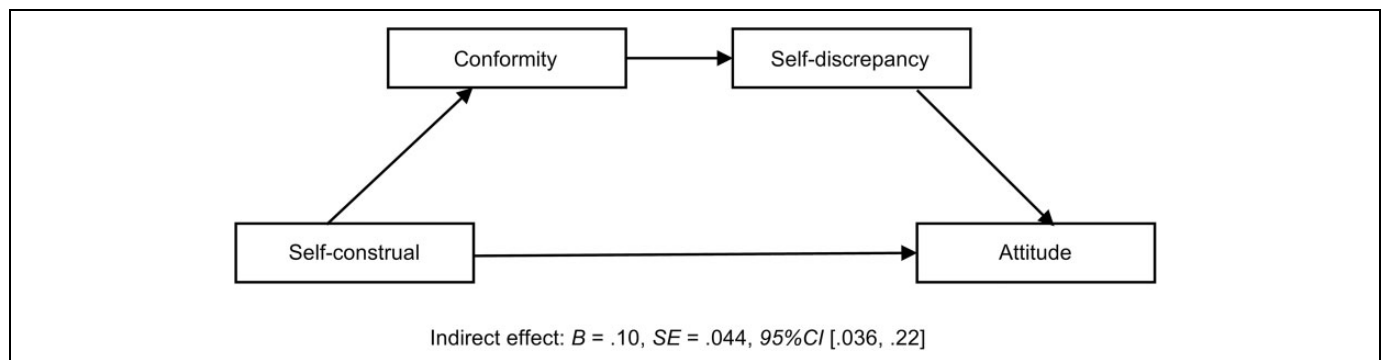
Discussion

Replicating the results of Study 1 using an individual-level measure, Study 2 showed a main effect of interdependence on the tendency to use appearance-enhancing products. We also found that participants with a stronger interdependent self-construal had a greater need to conform to societal standards, which led to a heightened sense of appearance-related self-discrepancy. In turn, this increased feeling of discrepancy resulted in a more positive attitude toward image-enhancing apps. Furthermore, measuring self-construal in one country in the current study enabled us to eliminate other potential cross-country differences that might have driven the results in Study 1. Finally, to ensure that the results were not driven by impression management concerns, we also included participants' tendency to modify self-presentation (Lennox and Wolfe 1984) in this study. Controlling for self-monitoring had no impact on the results, neither for the main effect of self-construal on the use of the app nor for the mediation analysis.

Given the extant discourse on the negative consequences of the pursuit of beauty, we aspired to identify a boundary condition that could help mitigate such tendencies if required. Study 3 builds on our previous studies and shows that the preference for appearance-enhancing products among interdependents is not indiscriminating. Insofar as we can convince interdependents that adherence to norms is not strictly enforced, they should be less likely to gravitate to such beauty enhancement products (H_3).

Study 3

The results from Studies 1 and 2 indicate that interdependents are prone to conform to their perceived beauty ideals, resulting in a sense of discrepancy between their perceived actual and ideal state of beauty. This sense may put them at risk of pursuing unhealthy beauty enhancement methods that can have negative effects on their physical (e.g., continuous face and body surveillance) and psychological (e.g., eating disorders, use of excessive cosmetic surgery) well-being (Kim, Young, and

**Figure 1.** Study 2: serial mediation model for the underlying mechanism of the impact of self-construal on attitude toward app usage.

Keun 2014). In the quest to meet idealized beauty standards, women are sometimes even willing to put their health in danger (Mowen, Longoria, and Sallee 2009). Are there ways to curb their need to conform to such beauty ideals?

We leverage the power of social context to investigate a potential intervention to attenuate interdependents' proclivity for appearance enhancement. Specifically, we respond to prior research's call to integrate the tightness/looseness framework (Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver 2006; Gelfand et al. 2011; Li, Gordon, and Gelfand 2017) in consumer research. To do so, we explore the possibility of reducing the pressure to conform by loosening the perceived norms (of physical appearance). Specifically, we manipulate the strength of social norms and need for adherence in the context of organizational culture. We asked participants to think about two organizational cultures, one having strong norms of physical appearance and low tolerance for deviant behavior and one having weak physical appearance-related norms and high tolerance for deviant behavior (Chan 1996). We expected the looseness of norms in an organizational culture to affect the beauty product usage intentions of those high in interdependence more than those low in interdependence.

Method

We recruited 144 undergraduate female students ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.80$ years) from a large university in Singapore and paid them S\$5 for their participation in the study. To manipulate the type of norms (tight or loose), we randomly assigned participants to one of the two conditions. In the tight (loose) norms condition, we asked participants to imagine that Citibank (Facebook) was visiting their campus for recruitment interviews. We selected these organizations from a pilot study in which we tested expectations of tightness versus looseness of appearance-related norms for multiple organizations. As a manipulation check in the current study, participants indicated how demanding they felt the company was in terms of physical appearance on a ten-item, seven-point scale ($\alpha = .92$; e.g., "Looks and physical appearance would matter at this company," "Female employees would be expected to wear formal clothes in this company").

Following this, we showed participants the advertisement for a skin care beauty product. The ad was similar to the one used in Study 1 (see Web Appendix B). However, as possessing a clear, fair complexion is a deep-seated desire among Asian women (Li et al. 2008; Madan et al. 2017), we framed the benefits of the product in terms of providing fair, blemish-free skin. We asked participants to imagine that they had been shortlisted for an interview and measured their likelihood of using the cream before attending the interview, on a three-item, seven-point scale. Specifically, we asked participants to indicate their agreement with the following: (1) "I think White Glamour Skin Perfector will be helpful if I use it before the interview," (2) "I would buy White Glamour Skin Perfector before the interview if I happened to see it in the store," and (3) "I would actively seek out White Glamour Skin Perfector in

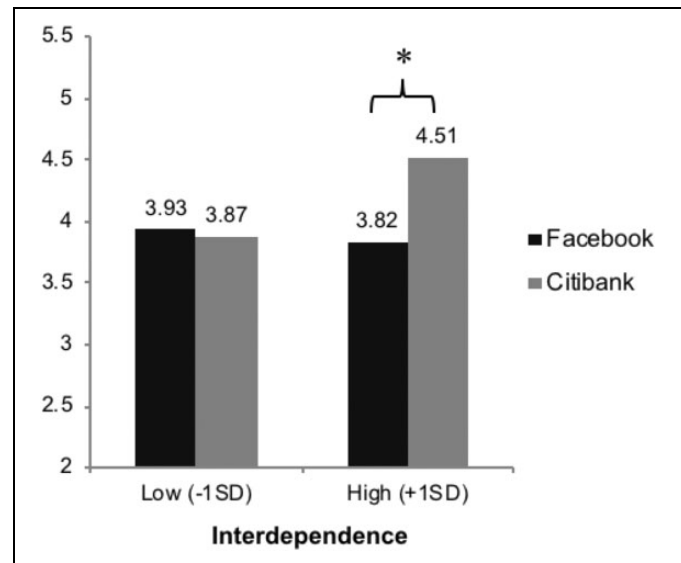


Figure 2. Study 3: usage intention of the complexion correction cream based on interdependence score and experimental conditions.

a store to purchase it before the interview" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .82$; adapted from Stafford 1998). Next, we measured interdependence using Singelis's (1994) 12-item interdependence subscale ($\alpha = .71$). Finally, participants responded to the desirability and prestige of the organization (i.e., Citibank or Facebook, depending on condition).

Results

Manipulation checks. A one way analysis of variance indicated that participants perceived Citibank as having tighter norms regarding physical appearance than Facebook ($M_{\text{Citibank}} = 5.16$, $SD = .53$, $M_{\text{Facebook}} = 3.22$, $SD = .66$; $F(1, 142) = 381.86$, $p < .001$). Both companies were similar in desirability and prestige (all $ps > .1$).

Usage intention. We controlled for participants' year in the undergraduate program in the analysis because it may have an impact on their involvement with a career-related scenario. We regressed the tightness of norms (Citibank [tight] = .5, Facebook [loose] = -.5), participants' score on the interdependence scale (mean-centered), their interaction, and the current year in the program (as a control variable) on their usage intentions for the cream before the interview. This analysis revealed nonsignificant effects of interdependence ($B = .25$, $SE = .17$, $t(138) = 1.47$, $p = .14$), tightness of norms ($B = .27$, $SE = .19$, $t(138) = 1.45$, $p = .15$), and year in program ($B = -.17$, $SE = .11$, $t(138) = -1.63$, $p = .10$). However, the interaction between type of norms (tight or loose) and interdependence was significant ($B = .69$, $SE = .34$, $t(138) = 2.02$, $p = .045$). To probe the interaction effect, we conducted a spotlight analysis one standard deviation above and below the mean of the interdependence measure. As Figure 2 shows, participants high (+1 SD) in interdependence expressed lower intentions to use the cream

when preparing for an interview at Facebook (loose norms) ($M_{\text{Facebook}} = 3.82$) than when preparing for an interview at Citibank (tight norms; $M_{\text{Citibank}} = 4.51$; $t(138) = 2.46$, $p = .015$). We found no such difference for participants low in interdependence ($-1SD$, $M_{\text{Facebook}} = 3.93$, $M_{\text{Citibank}} = 3.87$; $t(138) = -.061$, $p = .81$), supporting the hypothesis (H_3).

Discussion

In this study, we identified a boundary condition for the observation that stronger interdependent self-construal leads to a greater tendency to use beauty enhancement products. Specifically, we showed that a person's appearance-related self-discrepancy can be reduced by loosening the perceived norms in an organizational setting. When undergraduate female participants believed that the norms in a company they were interviewing with were loose, they were less likely to use appearance-enhancing tools before the interview. These findings have important policy implications. If managers and policy makers can loosen (relax) the relevant norms in the organization or society, people may feel less at odds with their appearance, leading to lower use of appearance-enhancing products. This relaxation can be a simple but powerful and actionable intervention to reduce the incidence of harmful behavior related to the pursuit of beauty.

General Discussion

The constant effort of mass media to establish a direct correlation between beauty and a high self-worth in women's minds (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994) can undermine women's self-confidence and shift their focus from skills and capabilities to an unhealthy obsession with physical appearance (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). This results in the ubiquitous use of appearance-enhancing tools such as image filters, cosmetics, and even plastic surgery to improve appearance. However, research has paid scant attention to the antecedents of this important phenomenon in the marketing literature. Across three studies, we show that self-construal, a widely examined dimension of culture, is an important predictor of the pursuit of beauty through the use of appearance-enhancing tools and products. Study 1 showed that participants from Eastern countries, who are high in interdependence, had more positive attitudes toward and usage intentions for appearance-enhancing products than those from Western countries, who are low in interdependence. Study 2 delved deeper into the underlying mechanism by showing that interdependent consumers' pursuit of a socially defined standard of beauty is driven by their need to conform to the perceived ideals of beauty, leading to a greater sense of discrepancy between their actual and ideal state of beauty. Study 3 showed that this behavior can be attenuated if the appearance-related norms are loosened. We found converging evidence through a two-way operationalization of self-construal—using cross-country differences (Study 1) and scale measurement (Studies 2 and 3).

Theoretical Contributions

The findings from this research contribute to the literature on multiple fronts. First, they contribute to the literature on beauty and appearance enhancement. The goal of this research was to examine a globally prevalent but underinvestigated phenomena—namely, the pursuit of beauty—through the lens of self-construal. Although previous research has identified antecedents of the pursuit of beauty such as age (Clarke and Griffin 2008), race, and gender (Kwan and Trautner 2009), only a handful of studies have examined cross-cultural differences in beauty perception (e.g., Cunningham et al 1995; Jung and Lee 2006). Even so, these inquiries have focused more on identifying perceptual differences across cultures, without providing a strong theoretical understanding of why such perceptual differences occur. The current research is the first not only to empirically demonstrate the significant cross-cultural variations in the affinity for beauty products and services but also to focus on the underlying psychological mechanism driving this difference. This research highlights the significant role of self-construal in driving this phenomenon and its impact on consumers' motivation to conform, and further, self-discrepancy.

Second, our work also contributes to extant research in international marketing that investigates cross-cultural differences in attitudes and behaviors. Recent work in international marketing literature has explored the influence of culture on diverse consumer behavior-related constructs such as superstition and pricing strategy (Westjohn, Roschk, and Magnusson 2017), perception of corporate social responsibility efforts (Choi et al. 2016), willingness to complain about product and service performance (Chelminski and Coulter 2007), response to service failures (Hui, Ho, and Wan 2011), satisfaction with mobile services (Morgeson, Sharma, and Hult 2015), reciprocity in relationship marketing (Hoppner, Griffith, and Whyte 2015), and selection of loyalty programs (Thompson and Chmura 2015). We add another nuance to this literature by using culture as an antecedent for the pursuit of beauty and exploring the phenomenon among consumers across five countries (China, Singapore, India, Canada, and the United States).

Third, we highlight a nuance in how conformity may influence consumption. Prior research has shown that consumers with a more interdependent self-construal are more likely to adhere to societal norms in consumption (Ahuvia and Wong 1998; Shaikh et al. 2017). For example, Shaikh et al. (2017) show that the motivation to conform to societal norms is one of the underlying reasons for interdependent consumers' purchase of mass luxury products. However, most of the current research stops short of examining how conformity affects behavior. To the best of our knowledge, our research is the first in the international marketing area to show that cultural differences in the motivation to conform to societal norms affect behavior through self-discrepancy. Whereas prior work has explored the potential connection between culture and body image issues (Jung and Lee 2006), our work elucidates the process behind the phenomena and also demonstrates substantive downstream effects.

Fourth, we show that the culturally driven motivation to conform heightens the perceived difference between the ideal normative standard in the society and consumers' current self. It is this difference between actual and ideal standards that drives behavior. This finding is in line with recent research (Savani et al. 2015) that highlights self-construal as a key predictor for adherence to norms. Our findings are robust, replicated across multiple countries in the East and West.

Last, we also contribute to the literature on culture and norms in international marketing by demonstrating that interdependent consumers are sensitive to the situational need for conformity. In doing so, we also extend work on the strength of social norms and tolerance for deviance (e.g., Gelfand et al. 2011). Norm strength refers to "unwritten rules and social pressures that individuals feel they must follow in a given culture; tolerance refers to the severity of punishments that results when individuals violate norms" (Li, Gordon, and Gelfand 2017, p. 378). We show that the looseness of situational norms (not just national culture) may lead to differential behavior in terms of conformance depending on the dominant self-construal of an individual. Specifically, we find that interdependent consumers do not always conform to norms. When the situational demand for conformity is low, the cultural differences in conformity are attenuated, and interdependent consumers no longer exhibit norm-consistent attitudes and intentions.

Managerial Contributions

This research offers several insights for managerial decision making. The diverse contexts in which we show the effect to occur also broadens the applicability of our findings not just to conventional beauty products and services but also to technology-driven appearance-enhancing tools (e.g., smartphone apps, filters). With this research, we investigate the cultural antecedents of the pursuit of beauty driving this multibillion dollar industry. As firms expand into Asian markets, an understanding of the cultural influences on beauty can aid efficient resource allocation related decision making.

Furthermore, given the limited consumer behavior research on the antecedents of the pursuit of beauty, this research is insightful for managers attempting to develop products and communication campaigns to attract consumers in the culturally diverse, extremely competitive beauty market. As beauty conglomerates expand in Asian markets, the findings from our research can help them avoid cultural faux pas and develop campaigns, concepts, and products that resonate with consumers. Understanding the cultural nuances such as those we found in this research should aid not only Western brands entering Asian markets but also Asian brands trying to expand beyond their shores.

More broadly, our research supports the adage "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder," with consumers in the East wanting to correct more appearance-related discrepancies through beauty products and services. This has direct implications for

cross-selling and up-selling a wide range of products and services to consumers in Asia.

Implications for Policy Makers

At the societal level, women's pursuit of beauty can sometimes be taken to extremes. As mentioned, the incessant discourse from mass media alleges that looking beautiful equates to self-worth (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). The pressure to conform to this normative definition of beauty can lead to face and body shaming, stress, anxiety, and eating disorders (Frederickson and Roberts 1997; Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Kim, Young, and Keun 2014; Milkie 1999). The dramatic rise in the number of plastic surgeries may be an indication that many women are yielding to the pressure to conform to the norms.

In this research, we demonstrate a potential intervention for preventing the onset of negative consequences of the excessive pursuit of beauty by altering the strength of physical appearance-related norms in an organizational context. When participants believed that the company they were interviewing for did not have strict norms in place and had a high tolerance for divergent behavior, they were less likely to use appearance-enhancing products (Study 3). Situationally controlling this potentially harmful pursuit of beauty is a simple but effective intervention and demonstrates the power of context and environment in ameliorating the negative fallouts of an unhealthy obsession with beauty. Importantly, our findings suggest that interventions such as loosening the organizational culture for appearance-related standards are likely to work in interdependent cultures, in which the pursuit of beauty is most relentless and prevalent.

These findings have important policy implications. If managers and policy makers can promote the organizational or societal culture to be more diverse and focus more on skills and competences instead of looks, people may feel less inclined to pursue appearance enhancement. Extending this notion to a broader societal level, efforts to loosen the beauty norms or promote a more inclusive definition of beauty can help alleviate the pressure that women feel to look beautiful and, thus, the extreme steps they may take in its pursuit.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While we investigate the impact of self-construal on the pursuit of beauty, other factors may play a role in determining the extent to which women enhance their appearance, such as wanting to display high status. Arguably, owing to their colonial past, citizens of several countries in Asia tend to prefer light-colored skin (Li et al. 2008). In colonial times, tanned (brown) skin was a mark of slavery; dark-skinned workers toiled in the fields in extreme heat in British colonies such as India (Frost 2005). As a result, white skin is associated with power, status, and desirability. Although this may still be one of the reasons for appearance enhancement in contemporary society, status concerns are arguably less salient, given the ubiquity and democratization of beauty with makeup and other tools

being accessible to all rather than the purview of only a few (higher classes). However, further research might test this historically relevant variable of status conferment and hierarchy as another predictor for cross-cultural differences in the use of beauty-related products. Doing so would add to the current body of beauty-related research in international marketing, by identifying another variable that could differentiate consumer behavior in emerging and developed markets.

Furthermore, the underlying mechanisms of conformity and self-discrepancy proposed herein open up several new avenues for future investigation. We demonstrate one such avenue by manipulating the need to conform through tightness or looseness of situational norms in Study 3. Another pertinent direction would be to investigate ways to minimize appearance-related self-discrepancy. In other words, what are some alternative interventions that can help reduce the perceived gap between ideal beauty and the current state? One such potential route is to enhance self-esteem, thus raising the level of the perceived actual self. Given the variation in the definition and understanding of self-esteem across the East and West, international marketing scholars might explore whether consumers across cultures perceive self-esteem-boosting communication (e.g., Dove advertisements) differently.

In this research, we focused on female consumers and their attitudes toward appearance enhancement. Further research could extend this inquiry to male consumers. While beauty has historically been the prerogative of women (Hsu 2008), recent trends show that the male grooming category is growing around the world (Fung Global Retail and Technology 2017). Though still a fraction of the female beauty market, there is no doubt that men are becoming more concerned about and involved with their appearance. Furthermore, the use of cosmetic products (e.g., BB creams) by male consumers, which was hitherto exclusive to female consumers, is a growing trend in East Asia. While male grooming products are popular in the West, the use of cosmetics by men has been confined to East Asia. Are men across cultures equally concerned about normative requirements? This is an important research question for cross-cultural consumer behavior research.

Our research shows that consumers with a strong interdependent self-construal are more likely to use beauty products to conform to societal norms. What if looking natural or healthy were to become the new normative standards for beauty? In line with our theorization, interdependent consumers would be more likely to adhere to this normative standard and make consumption decisions consistent with this norm. As such, they might be less likely to use beauty products (attaining the natural/healthy look through natural means) or, contrary to expectations, might use even *more* beauty products to achieve this natural/healthy beauty look. While real-world evidence shows that consumers tend to use several products to achieve the elusive “no-makeup” look (Viera-Newton 2017), this remains an important question for empirical research.

Overall, beauty is a complex, rich, and pertinent research area with the potential to contribute to both theory and practice

of consumer research. We hope that our initial effort sparks further work in this exciting field.

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