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The Influence of Self-Construal on Consumer Responses to Sizing Discrepancy

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The Influence of Self-Construal on Consumer Responses to Sizing Discrepancy

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The Influence of Self-Construal on Consumer Responses to Sizing Discrepancy

Abstract

Purpose—This study examines how consumers' self-construal moderates their buying behavior in situations requiring consumers to buy larger-than-expected clothing sizes. We explore the potential effectiveness of two distinct communication strategies - emotional versus informational ad appeals - to mitigate the negative effects of sizing discrepancies.

Design/methodology/approach—A total of three experiments were conducted to examine the proposed framework. Studies 1 and 2 investigate whether self-construal moderates the relationship between sizing discrepancy and purchasing intentions. Study 3 examines the effectiveness of communication strategies in reducing the detrimental effects of sizing discrepancy.

Findings—When encountering sizing discrepancies, we find that consumers with an interdependent self-construal have lower purchase intentions than those with an independent self-construal. We demonstrate that an emotional communication strategy is more effective for consumers with an interdependent self-construal, whereas an informational communication strategy is more effective for consumers with an independent self-construal.

Originality—With the lack of a universal sizing system, consumers often struggle to find clothes that fit as expected. However, extant research has not explored cross-cultural differences in how consumers respond to sizing discrepancies and how managers can reduce any potential negative effects.

Keywords: vanity sizing effect, sizing discrepancy, self-construal, purchase intention

Introduction

“There are no standard clothing sizes, something that anyone who has stood in a dressing room trying on jeans, tops, or dresses can attest. ... Brands have tried to solve for this problem by adding new silhouettes such as curvy or straight, sometimes creating even more confusion for consumers” (Kapner, 2019).”

As Kapner (2019) illustrates, many consumers struggle to find the right size while shopping for clothes due to significant differences in sizing. Existing clothing and textile literature has pointed out the growing problems with inconsistency in garment sizing. For example, a study found that only 20% of garments fit the expected size, which means that 80% of all clothes do not conform to expected measurements (Kinley, 2003).

Sizing inconsistency began, in part, when brands started to alter measurement specifications for garments in an attempt to enable consumers to feel like they fit into “smaller” sizes, a practice referred to as “vanity sizing” (DesMarteau, 2000; Friedman, 2021). Brand managers are hoping that vanity sizing will lead consumers to evaluate the brand more favorably through positive mental imagery evoked by fitting into “smaller” sizes (Hoegg *et al.*, 2014).

However, extant research has found that sizing inconsistencies can also negatively influence consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses when it turns out that the best-fitting clothes are a larger-than-expected size or when consumers perceive sizing irregularities as deceptive (Hoegg *et al.*, 2014; Ketron and Spears, 2017). For example, if a consumer expects to fit into a size *medium*, but it turns out that the appropriate fit is a *large*, then the consumer is likely to experience increased dissatisfaction, abandonment of the shopping experience, and develop a negative brand image (DesMarteau, 2000; Faust and Carrier, 2010; Hoegg *et al.*, 2014).

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3 The focus of this study is on instances where consumers require a larger-than-expected
4 size, and its consequences. “Self-discrepancy” is a term often used in the psychology literature to
5 describe the gap between the individual’s view of their actual self and internalized standards
6 (Higgins, 1987). We, therefore, draw on this term and use the concept of “sizing discrepancy” to
7 refer to situations in which consumers find that the expected size is too small.
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15 Despite the recognition of changes in consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses
16 caused by sizing discrepancy, extant research has (1) mostly examined the phenomenon based on
17 consumers from Western cultural backgrounds, and thus neglected to explore how it affects
18 consumers from Eastern cultural backgrounds; and (2) not offered effective marketing strategies
19 to assist firms in suppressing the detrimental effects of sizing discrepancy. The objective of this
20 study is to address these research gaps by exploring cross-cultural differences in how consumers
21 respond to sizing discrepancy and by offering practical guidance for brands to handle the
22 negative effects of sizing discrepancy.
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33 Thus, to fill these research gaps, this study focuses on addressing two critical research
34 questions: (1) how cross-cultural values influence the effects of sizing discrepancy on purchasing
35 intentions; and (2) how firms can mitigate the negative effects of sizing discrepancy. By
36 examining these research questions, we offer a theoretical contribution to the international
37 consumer behavior literature and guidance for retail managers.
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44 First, drawing on self-construal theory, we posit that the influence of sizing discrepancy
45 on consumer purchasing intention is moderated by consumer self-construal. Self-construal refers
46 to the extent to which the self is viewed as being separate and distinct from, or interconnected
47 with, others (Singelis, 1994). An independent self-construal emphasizes uniqueness, self-
48 expression, privacy, and autonomy. In contrast, an interdependent self is connected to others and
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3 emphasizes belongingness, harmony with others, and relationships (Markus and Kitayama,
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5 1991).

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8 Whereas this is an individual-level theory of the self, there is strong evidence that
9
10 individual-level self-construal is closely related to societal differences in terms of individualism
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12 versus collectivism. In Western societies, which tend to score high on individualism, an
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14 independent self-construal tends to dominate. In contrast, in more collectivist societies (e.g.,
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16 Asia), an interdependent self-construal tends to dominate (Oyserman *et al.*, 2002; White *et al.*,
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18 2012). Our conceptual arguments are based on differences in information processing tendencies
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20 between people with an independent versus interdependent self-construal (Nisbett *et al.*, 2008),
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22 which is expected to lead to differences in how consumers respond to sizing discrepancy. To add
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24 confidence in our empirical findings, we follow best-practice guidelines and offer empirical
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26 evidence at both the individual (through cultural priming) and societal levels (Oyserman and
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28 Lee, 2008).
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33 Beyond investigating the moderating role of self-construal, this study also explores how
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35 different marketing communication strategies can be used to mitigate the negative effects of
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37 sizing discrepancy based on alignment with the dominant cultural values and thinking style.
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39 Specifically, one key distinction is whether the communication is focused on *informational* or
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41 *emotional* aspects. Informational ads emphasize a product's utilitarian and functional attributes,
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43 whereas emotional ads accentuate affective aspects of a product (Mano and Oliver, 1993). We
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45 posit that an advertisement with an informational appeal, which emphasizes a focal item's
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47 utilitarian and functional characteristics, would be more effective at reducing the negative effects
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49 of sizing discrepancy among consumers with an independent self-construal. In contrast, an
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51 advertisement with an emotional appeal, which emphasizes the feelings that a focal item can
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3 generate, is expected to be more effective among consumers with an interdependent self-
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6 construal.

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8 We offer guidance to managers alongside the theoretical contributions by increasing
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10 awareness regarding the negative impact of sizing discrepancy among consumers, firms, and
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12 society. Situations where consumers are required to buy clothes of larger sizes than anticipated
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14 can psychologically impact them by lowering their self-esteem, consequently leading to less
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16 purchasing and/or increased returns. Garment returns increase costs related to inventory
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18 management and disposing and recycling products, as well as having an environmental and
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20 societal impact such as extra carbon emissions and waste. Raising consumer awareness about the
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22 impact of firm strategies, such as manipulating size charts, can assist in mitigating confusion,
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24 depression, and disappointment; consequently, their buying behavior is less likely to be
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26 influenced. As firms gain greater awareness of the negative impact of sizing discrepancy, they
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28 will strive to address this issue more proactively.
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33 In the following section, we provide the conceptual background, which serves as the
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35 foundation for our hypotheses. This is followed by three experimental studies. The first study is
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37 cross-cultural and examines chronic differences in self-construal. The second study examines
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39 situational self-construal made accessible through a priming exercise, and the third study
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41 explores the mitigating effects of the different communication strategies. We conclude by
42
43 discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our study, identifying limitations, and
44
45 suggesting avenues for future research.
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51 **Conceptual development**

52 *Shopping and Sizing Discrepancy*

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3 The majority of research on clothing sizing has examined the general trend of brands
4 gradually assigning smaller sizes to clothing compared to the reality of the measurements and the
5 effects of this on promoting a positive self-concept, appearance self-esteem, and attitude toward
6 the brand (Aydinoğlu and Krishna, 2012; Dooley, 2013). Ingraham (2015) illustrated the gradual
7 trend of brands assigning smaller sizes over time by noting that in 1958, a waist measurement of
8 26 inches generally corresponded to size 16. Today, a 26-inch waist measurement typically
9 corresponds to size 4 and size 16 generally corresponds to a waist measurement of 36.

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19 As more and more companies alter clothing sizes to take advantage of vanity sizing,
20 shoppers are left with large discrepancies in sizing structures between brands, which means that
21 shoppers are more confused than ever and, in turn, they experience potentially negative side
22 effects. For example, to deal with sizing uncertainty, many shoppers try on, and sometimes even
23 purchase and bring home, multiple sizes of the same garment to ensure an appropriate fit (Faust
24 and Carrier, 2009, 2010). Such practices increase the retailer's inventory costs, create staffing
25 demands for restocking and procuring clothing displays, as well as increasing "wear-and-tear" on
26 "new" clothes. It also creates a societal problem since "returns in the US alone create 5 billion
27 pounds of landfill waste and 15 million tonnes of carbon emissions annually" (Schiffer, 2019),
28 and incorrect size is one of the main reasons for returns (Kapner, 2019).

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Even though there has been a general trend of lowering clothing sizes, the lack of a
uniform sizing structure means that it is quite likely consumers will sometimes encounter
clothing sizes that are larger than expected, and consumer confusion and complaints caused by
sizing irregularities will continue to persist (Bourne, 2017). This is particularly the case given
that global brands have their own sizing system that is developed based on "secret" in-house
formulas, and there can be vast differences between brands as they diverge from general

standards (Kapner, 2019). Accordingly, consumers often encounter the need for larger-than-expected clothing sizes, and the effect can be destructive.

Specifically, while smaller clothing sizes may elicit positive mental responses, larger-than-expected clothing sizes elicit the opposite negative mental responses and can be detrimental to self-worth (Aydinoğlu and Krishna, 2012; Hoegg *et al.*, 2014). This self-worth is negatively impacted when the *right-fitting* clothes are sized larger than expected, causing a failure to meet the socially determined standards for physical attractiveness (Alexander *et al.*, 2005; Bearman *et al.*, 2006). Thus, evidence suggests that sizing discrepancy will have a negative effect. Table 1 provides a summary of extant research related to vanity sizing and sizing discrepancy effects.

“Insert Table 1 about here”

Self-Construal and Sizing Discrepancy

Even though sizing discrepancy may negatively influence all consumers, we predict that this effect is more detrimental when consumers are from Eastern societies. Since most extant research has examined the negative effect of sizing discrepancy on consumers from Western societies, they have overlooked the more significant impact it may have in another culture. The main purpose of this research is to demonstrate how the detrimental effects of sizing discrepancy may be even greater for consumers with non-Western backgrounds, and thus to urge marketers to address this phenomenon and actively resolve its social and industry implications.

Why then are non-Westerners more vulnerable to sizing discrepancy when compared with Westerners? We posit that self-construal theory can be used to understand this phenomenon. Self-construal is referred to as what individuals “believe about the relationship between the self and others, and especially, the degree to which they see themselves as separate from others and as connected with others” (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 226). Individuals from countries with

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3 an individualist heritage (e.g., North American, Western European) are more likely to have an
4 independent self-construal (Kapoor *et al.*, 2003). Individuals with an independent self-construal
5 view themselves as individually stable and separated from others in a social context (Yang *et al.*,
6 2015). They are more likely to focus on their own internal abilities, uniqueness, self-realization,
7 and their own goals with limited consideration of others (Zhang and Shrum, 2008).

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10 In contrast, individuals from a collectivist heritage (e.g., East Asian, Latin American)
11 tend to have an interdependent self-construal (Bresnahan *et al.*, 2005; Heine *et al.*, 1999; White
12 *et al.*, 2012). Individuals with an interdependent self-construal view themselves as connected
13 with the social context (Simpson *et al.*, 2017; Triandis, 2018). They tend to focus on public
14 features, try to fit into social groups, comply with social norms, and are consistently impacted by
15 social pressure. They emphasize maintaining harmony with other people, which contributes to
16 the formation of their self-esteem (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994; Zhang and
17 Shrum, 2008).

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20 How individuals view themselves in relation to others determines the relevance of sizing
21 discrepancy to consumption behavior. Sizing labels are perceived and marketed as social beauty
22 standards and conflated with social success. By interacting with various platforms, such as social
23 media and advertisements, many consumers associate beauty with a thin and slim body and set
24 this as their personal beauty standard (Onque, 2022). The size of clothes is not just a number, but
25 also a standard of beauty we want to communicate to others. As a result of comparison culture,
26 people from collectivist societies are often under pressure to meet beauty standards when they
27 are with their peers due to fear of missing out on social bonds and being rejected from their
28 social groups (Harris, 2022). Therefore, because individuals with an interdependent self-
29 construal rely more heavily on relationships with others for their self-evaluation, failure to meet
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3 social standards on beauty may have a greater impact compared to those with an independent
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5 self-construal.
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8 Considering the differences in information processing between independent and
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10 interdependent self-construal can help us understand why they respond to sizing discrepancy to
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12 different degrees. An interdependent self-construal is associated with a holistic thinking style,
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14 whereas an independent self-construal is associated with an analytical thinking style (Nisbett *et*
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16 *al.*, 2001). These two styles of thinking have been shown to place different levels of importance
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18 on contextual factors, which then leads to different behavioral responses. Holistic thinkers, more
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20 commonly collectivists, tend to focus on context and contextual factors, such as their mood,
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22 emotions, feelings, and internal values, which together become impactful antecedents of their
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24 behavioral responses (Monga and John, 2008). They tend to consider the universe to be
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26 interconnected, and they are impacted by stimuli collectively rather than rationalizing them
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28 individually (Zhou *et al.*, 2021).
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33 On the other hand, analytic thinkers, more commonly individualists, tend to separate the
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35 focal object from its context and reason for or against it using categories and rules (Hossain,
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37 2018). Analytical thoughts hinge on the “detachment of the object from its context” (Nisbett *et*
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39 *al.*, 2001, p. 293), and this type tends to exclude contextual information in favor of reasoning
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41 toward their desires. Thus, analytic thinkers tend to follow a logical structure using more formal
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43 reasoning strategies because they view the universe as composed of isolated elements.
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47 Therefore, while holistic thinkers establish strong connections between discrete events or
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49 entities, analytic thinkers perceive the different elements as separate, excluding the context from
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51 the object (Hossain, 2018). When it comes to a shopping experience, these different styles of
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53 thinking may influence the degree of negative impact caused by sizing discrepancy. Consumers
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3 with an independent self-construal (or individualists) tend to focus more on the product itself,
4 such as product quality, fit, price, and advantages, then decide whether to buy after rationalizing
5 their decision following logical reasoning. With analytic thinking styles, independents' purchase
6 decisions are less likely to be influenced by unpleasant feelings due to sizing discrepancy. In
7 contrast, consumers with an interdependent self-construal (or collectivists) tend to focus more on
8 situational factors than just the product itself when making purchase decisions, suggesting that
9 interdependents are more susceptible to negative feelings and moods when experiencing sizing
10 discrepancy. Therefore, considering the different thinking styles associated with differences in
11 self-construal, we formally hypothesize that:
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24 H1: Sizing discrepancy has a stronger negative effect on purchase intentions for
25 consumers with an interdependent self-construal than for consumers with an
26 independent self-construal.
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33 *Self-Construal and Effective Marketing Strategies*

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35 Although we anticipate a stronger negative effect for interdependents compared to
36 independents, the effect of sizing discrepancy is expected to have some degree of negative
37 impact on both groups. Thus, it may be important for brand managers to attempt to mitigate the
38 negative effects in both cultural environments characterized by an interdependent (or collectivist)
39 worldview and in markets dominated by an independent (or individualist) worldview.
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47 Previous research has demonstrated that marketers can utilize different communication
48 appeals to promote a product. Specifically, one key distinction is whether the communication is
49 focused on *informational* or *emotional* aspects. Informational ads emphasize a product's
50 utilitarian and functional attributes, whereas emotional ads accentuate affective aspects of a
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3 product (Mano and Oliver, 1993). Informational ads draw on more rational responses, describing
4 the practical functions and useful abilities of the product. On the other hand, emotional ads
5 appeal to a more innate response in the consumer and focus on the feelings that the product can
6 generate (Adaval, 2001). It is important to note that the same product can be marketed using
7 either informational or emotional ad appeals. For example, “the same pair of sneakers can be
8 advertised using an emotional ad format, ‘These sneakers will make you feel good when
9 running,’ or an informative ad appeal, ‘These sneakers are made of high-quality materials to
10 protect your feet’” (To and Patrick, 2021, p. 132). While brands may attempt to convey both
11 emotional and informational appeals in the same ad, marketing communications typically have
12 limited space constraints and consumers have limited processing capabilities, which means that
13 effectively incorporating both appeals is often challenging (Guitart and Stremersch, 2020).
14 Therefore, similar to past research, we treat these as binary options and suggest that clothing
15 brands can emphasize either informational or emotional appeals, and we predict that their
16 effectiveness in mitigating the negative effects of sizing discrepancies will vary based on the
17 self-construal values of the consumer.

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19 The analytical thinking style closely associated with an independent self-construal is
20 expected to lead to a more objective evaluation of the focal item that is detached from its context
21 (Hossain, 2018; Nisbett *et al.*, 2001). Thus, even if independents experience negative feelings
22 while shopping, they are still more likely to focus on the functional aspects of the product in lieu
23 of negative feelings when making purchase decisions. Thus, as a coping mechanism, they more
24 commonly adopt formal reasoning strategies. Therefore, informational appeals are expected to be
25 more effective at minimizing the detrimental effects of sizing discrepancy for those with an
26 independent self-construal.

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3 However, an informational appeal is expected to be less effective in contexts when
4 experiencing sizing discrepancy and is more likely to be taken personally, as is the case for
5 consumers with an interdependent self-construal. Interdependents are more likely to engage in
6 holistic thinking, and thus both the focal object and contextual factors influence their feelings
7 and behaviors (Hossain, 2018; Nisbett *et al.*, 2001). Accordingly, when interdependents
8 experience sizing discrepancy, it is not only the quality of the item itself but also their negative
9 feelings, low self-esteem, and vulnerability that impact their purchase intentions as a whole.
10 When their self-esteem is threatened, individuals wish to restore feelings of self-worth, leading
11 them to seek positive reinforcement and avoid negative implications (Sedikides, 1993). In this
12 case, an informational appeal can be viewed as reinforcing their shortcomings, resulting in worse
13 outcomes rather than comforting them. Thus, advertisements using an emotional ad format are
14 expected to be more effective at reducing the negative effects of sizing discrepancy.

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31 H2a: An *informational appeal* will be more effective at mitigating the negative effects of
32 sizing discrepancy on purchasing intention among consumers with an *independent*
33 self-construal.
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38 H2b: An *emotional appeal* will be more effective at mitigating the negative effects of
39 sizing discrepancy on purchasing intention among consumers with an
40 *interdependent* self-construal.
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47 **Methods**

48 *Overview of Studies*

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50 We employ a multi-study approach to robustly examine the proposed framework. This
51 follows recommendations that “the study of any phenomenon requires the use of multiple
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3 methodological procedures to avoid the systematic biases, errors, omissions, and limitations
4 introduced by any single option” (Nielsen *et al.*, 2020, p. 1478). This is especially important for
5 studies examining self-construal values where it is important to offer both cross-cultural and
6 causal evidence (Oyserman and Lee, 2008).
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12 Following evidence that those from Western cultural backgrounds tend to have relatively
13 more independent self-construals, whereas those from East Asian cultural backgrounds tend to
14 possess more interdependent self-construals (e.g., Heine *et al.*, 1999; Triandis, 1989), in Study 1,
15 we seek to examine chronic differences in self-construal by examining the effect of two countries
16 that are polar opposites in terms of self-construal values. The US, with a Hofstede individualism
17 score of 91, has consistently been found to be one of the most individualist societies dominated
18 by an independent self-construal. In contrast, China, with a Hofstede individualism score of 20,
19 is one of the most collectivist societies in the world and is dominated by an interdependent self-
20 construal (White *et al.*, 2012).
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33 However, this research design has a key limitation in that we are using nationality of the
34 respondent as a proxy for their self-construal. Although we measure and confirm that the
35 respondents’ self-construal values conform to expectations, using nationality as the selection
36 criterion runs the risk that other unmeasured traits that are also associated with the nationality
37 may be influencing the results. Therefore, Study 2 uses a priming exercise to make independent
38 vs. interdependent self-construal temporarily salient. Respondents are all drawn from a sample of
39 American participants and are assigned randomly to either the independent or interdependent
40 priming task. In all other respects, Study 2 mirrors Study 1, and it offers a critical supplementary
41 step in order to confirm causality (Oyserman and Lee, 2008). We conclude with Study 3 to
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3 examine the effectiveness of informational vs. emotional ad appeals to mitigate the negative
4 effect of sizing discrepancy.
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10 **STUDY 1**

11 *Design, Participants, and Procedure*

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15 This study employs a shopping scenario experiment to examine the effect of chronic
16 differences in self-construal on how consumers respond to sizing discrepancy. As a first step, in
17 an iterative process, we developed a shopping scenario, adapted from Aydinoğlu and Krishna
18 (2012), in which the participants were out shopping for a pair of jeans (see Appendix 1). We
19 asked the participant first to indicate what he or she would consider to be their usual jeans size.
20 This was followed by a few filler questions, and then we presented the shopping scenario.
21 Participants were randomly assigned to one of two clothing size conditions (larger-than-expected
22 size vs. usual size). In the usual condition, we piped in the size the participant had indicated as
23 their usual size and told them that the jeans fit nicely. In the sizing discrepancy condition, we
24 also piped in the usual size, but the participant was told that the usual size did not fit. Instead,
25 they were forced to ask for one size bigger. Then, they were told that the larger-than-usual size
26 jeans fit well.
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42 After reading the scenario, participants were asked to respond to a three-item purchase
43 intention scale, adapted from Teng and Laroche (2007). The items include “If I were going to
44 buy jeans, the probability of buying these jeans is,” “The likelihood that I would purchase these
45 jeans is,” and “My willingness to buy these jeans is” ($\alpha = 0.94$). After fine-tuning the scenario,
46 we pre-tested it with 107 student participants, recruited from a large North American university
47 (Mage = 21.68) to confirm that the sizing discrepancy condition would have a negative effect on
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3 purchase intentions. Consistent with expectations, an independent samples *t*-test revealed that the
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5 clothing size condition had a significant influence on purchase intentions. For participants in the
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7 sizing discrepancy condition, the likelihood of purchasing the jeans was significantly lower than
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9 for those in the usual size condition ($M_{\text{Sizing discrepancy}} = 5.25$, $M_{\text{Usual}} = 5.82$, $t(105) = 2.50$, $p =$
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11 0.01).
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15 After developing and pre-testing the shopping scenario, we turned our attention to
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17 examining whether US consumers with a predominantly independent self-construal versus
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19 Chinese consumers with a predominantly interdependent self-construal would have the same
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21 response to a sizing discrepancy experience while shopping. Thus, the study employed a 2 (size
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23 condition: usual size vs. sizing discrepancy) \times 2 (chronic self-construal: independent self-
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25 construal [US] vs. interdependent self-construal [China]) between-subjects design.
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29 After excluding a few foreign exchange students, our sample consists of 123 valid
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31 participants (68% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.81$) that we recruited from large universities in the United
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33 States (62 participants) and China (61 participants) in exchange for nominal course credit. The
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35 study was first developed in English and then the Chinese version was translated into Chinese
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37 and then back-translated into English in order to ensure equivalence (Brislin, 1970). Following
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39 the scenario, participants responded to the same three-item purchase intentions scale ($\alpha = 0.93$).
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41 Additionally, we measured the participants self-construal orientation with a four-item scale
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43 adapted from Yoo *et al.* (2011) to verify that the Chinese participants indeed have a higher
44
45 interdependent self-construal compared with the US participants. Items include “Individuals
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47 should sacrifice self-interest for the group,” “Group success is more important than individual
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49 success,” “Individuals should only pursue their goals after considering the welfare of the group,”
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51 and “Group loyalty should be encouraged even if individual goals suffer,” and they were
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3 measured on a seven-point scale anchored by strongly disagree=1 and strongly agree=7. The
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5 items were combined into a self-construal index ($\alpha = 0.83$).
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8 9 10 *Results*

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12 First, we examined whether the study participants conformed to the established cultural
13 expectations in chronic self-construal. Consistent with prior evidence, the Chinese participants
14 scored higher on interdependent self-construal than the American participants ($M_{\text{China}} = 4.43$ vs.
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 $M_{\text{US}} = 3.59$, $t(121) = 4.028$, $p < 0.001$).

Subsequently, we conducted a two-way ANOVA with size condition and country as the
independent variables, purchase intention as the dependent variable, and gender and age as the
control variables. The results indicate that both main effects are significant. The effect of size
condition is significant ($M_{\text{Usual}} = 5.56$, $M_{\text{Large}} = 4.54$, $F(1, 117) = 20.63$, $p < 0.001$), and the US
consumers had higher purchase intentions ($M_{\text{US}} = 5.44$, $M_{\text{China}} = 4.66$, $F(1, 117) = 8.94$, $p =$
 0.003). Importantly, we found a significant interaction between sizing discrepancy and chronic
self-construal on purchase intentions ($F(1, 117) = 5.32$, $p = 0.02$), which supports H1. For
Chinese consumers, the negative effect of requiring a larger clothing size on purchase intentions
is highly significant ($M_{\text{Usual}} = 5.52$, $M_{\text{Large}} = 3.99$, $F(57) = 18.94$, $p < 0.001$), whereas the effect
of sizing discrepancy on purchase intention is significantly weaker for the American consumers
($M_{\text{Usual}} = 5.61$, $M_{\text{Large}} = 5.08$, $F(58) = 3.76$, $p = 0.06$). We illustrate the significant interaction
effect in Figure 1.

“Insert Figure 1 about here”

Study 1 Discussion

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3 Study 1 offers evidence that self-construal may influence consumer reactions to sizing
4 discrepancy. Among the American consumers with a chronic independent self-construal, we
5
6 found only a weak negative relationship between sizing discrepancy and purchase intentions,
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8 whereas among Chinese consumers with a chronic interdependent self-construal, the effect was
9
10 highly significant. Thus, significant chronic differences in self-construal appear to influence the
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12 effect. However, this study is limited by the fact that the US and China may differ on many other
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14 attributes as well, in addition to self-construal. Thus, we cannot confidently conclude that the
15
16 significant differences are driven by self-construal differences and not some other factor. To
17
18 remedy this shortcoming, we turn to Study 2 where we examine the effect of self-construal
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20 through the use of priming. This offers stronger causal evidence as all aspects of the respondents
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22 are subject to random assignment.
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28 **STUDY 2**

29 *Self-Construal Priming Pre-test*

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32 To make independent or interdependent self-construal temporarily salient, we employed a
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34 previously established and validated priming exercise, developed by Trafimow *et al.* (1991).
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36 This task is called the *Similarities and Differences with Family and Friends* (SDFF) priming
37
38 task. Participants are randomly assigned to either the independent or interdependent self-
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40 construal condition. In the independent self-construal condition, participants describe three
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42 things that make them unique from their family and friends. They then describe a time when they
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44 achieved a goal resulting from figuring something out independently. In contrast, in the
45
46 interdependent self-construal condition, participants describe three things that they have in
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48 common with their family and friends, followed by describing a time when they sacrificed
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50 something for the good of the group.
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To further validate this already established priming tool, we conducted a pre-test with 86 participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk online consumer panel. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions, and then we measured their self-construal with the four-item self-construal scale ($\alpha = 0.90$) that we used in Study 1 (Yoo *et al.*, 2011). As anticipated, participants that completed the interdependent self-construal prime scored higher on interdependent self-construal than participants who completed the independent self-construal prime ($M_{\text{Interdependent}} = 4.36$, $M_{\text{Independent}} = 3.73$, $t(84) = 2.25$, $p = 0.03$), which offers further evidence that this is a valid and reliable priming exercise.

Design, Participants, and Procedure

After validating the priming task, we turned our attention to the main study. The goal of Study 2 is to complement Study 1 by further confirming the effect of self-construal values through the use of priming. This offers stronger causal evidence as all aspects of the respondents are subject to random assignment. We employed the same shopping scenario as in Study 1, but just prior to reading the shopping scenario, the participants completed the self-construal prime. Thus, this experiment employed a 2 (size condition: usual size vs. sizing discrepancy) \times 2 (primed self-construal: independent self-construal vs. interdependent self-construal) between-subjects design. We recruited 223 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.99$). After completing the priming exercise and reading the shopping scenario, they were instructed to indicate their purchase intentions toward the jeans on the three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Results

We examined the effect with a two-way ANOVA with purchase intention as the dependent variable, and gender and age were included in the model as the control variables. The main effects of clothing size ($M_{\text{Usual}} = 5.57$, $M_{\text{Large}} = 5.44$, $F(1, 217) = 0.81$, $p = 0.37$) and self-construal were not significant ($M_{\text{Independent}} = 5.60$, $M_{\text{Interdependent}} = 5.42$, $F(1, 217) = 1.56$, $p = 0.21$). More importantly, we observed a significant interaction between clothing size and self-construal on purchase intentions ($F(1, 217) = 5.24$, $p = 0.02$), which supports H1. For participants with an activated interdependent self-construal, sizing discrepancy has a statistically significant negative effect ($M_{\text{Usual}} = 5.67$, $M_{\text{Large}} = 5.20$, $F(101) = 4.54$, $p = 0.04$). Interestingly, however, when participants' independent self-construal is activated in a society famous for its chronic independence, the effect of sizing discrepancy actually becomes positive, albeit the effect is not statistically significant ($M_{\text{Usual}} = 5.48$, $M_{\text{Large}} = 5.69$, $F(114) = 0.79$, $p = 0.38$). We illustrate these findings in Figure 2.

“Insert Figure 2 about here”

Study 2 Discussion

Across two studies, we have found consistent evidence that self-construal differences influence how consumers respond to sizing discrepancies. Not surprisingly, the effect was more pronounced in the first study when we examined chronic differences in self-construal. In the second study, the effect was somewhat smaller, but that is to be expected given that self-construal differences were only evoked through a priming mechanism. The consistent evidence across the two studies offers robust evidence that sizing discrepancy may be more detrimental among consumers with an interdependent self-construal.

Further, it is interesting to note that when our American consumers, which have a chronic independent self-construal, had their independence reinforced and amplified through an

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3 independent priming exercise, the effect of sizing discrepancy turned slightly positive. Evidence
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5 has shown that when an individual's independence is made more salient, it leads to an even
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7 stronger independent self-construal (Nanakdewa *et al.*, 2021), and this may explain why sizing
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9 discrepancy does not have a negative effect in this group. In effect, a chronic independent self-
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11 construal *topped off* with an independent priming exercise turns these consumers into hyper-
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13 individualists where the number on a sizing label is unable to affect someone's self-worth.
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16 17 **STUDY 3**

18 19 *Design, Participants, and Procedure*

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21 The objective of Study 3 is to offer potential managerial strategies to effectively attenuate
22
23 the detrimental effects of sizing discrepancies on purchase intentions. Specifically, we have
24
25 theorized that an informational ad appeal emphasizing functional product aspects will be more
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27 effective for consumers with an independent mindset, whereas an emotional ad appeal will be
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29 more effective for consumers with an interdependent self-construal.
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33 To examine this hypothesis, we amended the shopping scenario to include a common
34
35 table display advertisement. The table display ad incorporated a customer testimonial (see
36
37 Appendix 2) that either was based on an informational or emotional ad appeal. In the
38
39 informational ad appeal, the copy of the ad states "These jeans are very high quality. The design
40
41 is very flattering and the cut allows me to hide the flaws around my stomach area!" In contrast,
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43 in the emotional ad appeal condition, we changed the quote to "These jeans are very high quality.
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45 I feel like a million bucks in them."
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49 To verify that the advertisements reflected informational (emotional) appeals, we
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51 conducted a pre-test with 55 MTurk participants (52.7% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.82$). Participants were
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53 randomly assigned to one of the two advertisements and asked to indicate which message
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3 framing best describes the advertisements via a single-item 7-point scale (1 = emotional ad
4 framing, 7 = informational ad framing). The independent samples t-test revealed that the
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6 manipulation was effective. Participants in the informational ad appeal condition perceived the
7
8 informational appeal as more informational than the emotional appeal ($M_{\text{Information}} = 5.28$, M_{Emotion}
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10 $= 3.15$, $t(53) = 4.451$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, we conducted a post-test to verify that there is no
11
12 significant difference in the perceived attractiveness of the informational versus emotional
13
14 advertisements. We recruited 70 participants from a large North American university who were
15
16 randomly assigned to either the informational or emotional ad appeals and asked them to indicate
17
18 the level of perceived attractiveness of the assigned advertisement on a seven-point scale. As
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20 expected, an independent samples t-test shows that participants find similar attractiveness levels
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22 for the informational and emotional ad appeals ($M_{\text{Information}} = 4.53$, $M_{\text{Emotion}} = 4.75$, $t(68) = -0.55$,
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24 $p = 0.58$).

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31 After establishing the effectiveness of the ad appeal manipulation, we turned our
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33 attention to the main experiment. Given that we are interested in examining the interaction
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35 between self-construal and ad appeal when experiencing sizing discrepancy, all the participants
36
37 were given the larger-than-usual sizing discrepancy scenario that we used in the prior studies.
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39 Thus, the experiment is a 2 (primed self-construal: independent vs. interdependent) \times 2 (ad
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41 appeal: informational vs. emotional) between-subjects design. We recruited 164 American
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43 participants from MTurk to participate in this experiment ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.85$).

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47 The study used the same self-construal priming task as in Study 2. Following the priming
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49 task, participants were randomly assigned to the sizing discrepancy shopping scenario, which
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51 was combined with one of the two ad appeals. After reading the sizing discrepancy shopping
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3 scenario combined with the table display advertisement, participants completed the purchase
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5 intention scale ($\alpha = 0.89$).
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8 9 10 *Results*

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12 We examined the effect by conducting a two-way ANOVA with purchase intention as the
13
14 dependent variable; gender and age were included in the model as the control variables. The
15
16 main effects of self-construal ($M_{\text{Independent}} = 5.41$, $M_{\text{Interdependent}} = 5.40$, $F(1, 158) = 0.002$, $p = 0.96$)
17
18 and ad appeal on purchase intentions ($M_{\text{Information}} = 5.38$, $M_{\text{Emotion}} = 5.43$, $F(1, 158) = 0.09$, $p =$
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20 0.77) were not significant. More importantly, the interaction effect between self-construal and ad
21
22 appeal on purchase intentions was significant ($F(1, 158) = 10.31$, $p = 0.002$), which supports H2.
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24 For participants with an independent self-construal, the informational advertisement led to
25
26 significantly higher purchase intentions when consumers encountered sizing discrepancy
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28 ($M_{\text{Information}} = 5.69$, $M_{\text{Emotion}} = 5.15$, $F(71) = 5.13$, $p = 0.03$). In contrast, for those encountering
29
30 sizing discrepancy and primed with an interdependent self-construal, the emotional
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32 advertisement led to significantly higher purchase intentions ($M_{\text{Information}} = 5.06$, $M_{\text{Emotion}} = 5.72$,
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34 $F(85) = 5.33$, $p = 0.02$). The significant interaction effect is illustrated in Figure 3.
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40 “Insert Figure 3 about here”
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42 *Study 3 Discussion*

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44 The results of Study 3 provide evidence that when consumers experience sizing
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46 discrepancy, the effectiveness of different communication appeals varies depending on the
47
48 cultural values of consumers. Among consumers with an independent self-construal, we found
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50 that an informational ad appeal emphasizing functional product aspects was significantly more
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3 effective than an emotional ad appeal. In contrast, an emotional ad appeal, promoting a positive
4 self-image, was more effective for consumers with an interdependent self-construal.
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10 **Theoretical implications and contributions**

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12 The objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of sizing discrepancy and its
13 impact on consumers. Extant research has mostly examined consumers' psychological and
14 behavioral responses from a Western cultural point of view, and thus their findings may not be
15 generalizable across cultures.
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21 Drawing upon self-construal theory, we demonstrate that in situations where consumers
22 need to buy larger sizes than expected, its impact on their buying behavior is moderated by self-
23 construal. Individuals with an interdependent self-construal (Easterners) tend to comply with
24 social standards and connect a focal object to contextual factors (i.e., mood, emotions, and/or
25 feelings), leading them to be less likely to purchase products when encountering sizing
26 discrepancy compared to those with an independent self-construal (Westerners). We conducted
27 two empirical studies in which we examined the moderating effect of chronic self-construal
28 (Study 1) and situational self-construal (Study 2) to provide robust findings.
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40 Furthermore, this study explores the effectiveness of different marketing communication
41 strategies for mitigating the detrimental effect of sizing discrepancy. We posit that marketing
42 strategies should be tailored to align with the cultural characteristics of the target consumers,
43 rather than being standardized or using a uniform approach. Based on self-construal
44 characteristics, consumers with an interdependent self-construal tend to be influenced by both
45 focal object and contextual factors when making decisions, and therefore we argue that being
46 exposed to an advertisement that boosts the emotional state will significantly reduce the negative
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3 influence of sizing discrepancy. In contrast, consumers with an independent self-construal tend
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5 to separate the focal object from contextual factors and rely on logical thinking processes;
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7 therefore, advertising messages that highlight a focal object's utilitarian and functional attributes
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9 will be more effective. Our empirical study provides evidence that an emotional communication
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11 strategy is more effective for consumers with an interdependent self-construal, whereas an
12
13 informational communication strategy is more effective for consumers with an independent self-
14
15 construal.
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21 **Managerial implications**

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24 This research also provides a managerial contribution by bringing to light the negative
25
26 influence of a lack of standard sizing structure on consumers, firms, and society as a whole.
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29 First, this research may help consumers realize the extent to which external factors such
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31 as media, social platforms, and business strategies can influence their behavior. In the past,
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33 beauty standards were mainly shaped by celebrities; however, nowadays various social media
34
35 platforms allow ordinary individuals to spread the trend associating beauty with a thin body even
36
37 further. Many people find it challenging to meet this unrealistic beauty standard, resulting in
38
39 various psychological impacts, such as low self-esteem, low confidence, depression, and anxiety.
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41 Even though vanity sizing was originally introduced as a way to boost an individual's self-
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43 esteem, it unintentionally results in situations where consumers end up wearing clothes of sizes
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45 larger than they expect, rendering consumers more vulnerable. This study may increase
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47 consumer awareness of the potential impact of business tactics and ultimately will empower the
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49 consumer and help them make more informed purchasing decisions.
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3 In addition, this research could raise awareness among companies, encouraging them to
4 take a more proactive approach in addressing issues resulting from sizing discrepancy. Existing
5 literature has mostly examined the phenomenon by considering consumers from Western cultural
6 backgrounds, thereby ignoring the fact that consumers from Eastern backgrounds may react
7 more to sizing discrepancy. Based on self-construal theory, this research provides evidence that
8 Easterners or individuals with an interdependent self-construal are more likely to reduce their
9 purchasing intentions due to sizing discrepancy compared to Westerners or those with an
10 independent self-construal. These research findings may provide in-depth understanding of the
11 detrimental impact of sizing discrepancy on businesses, urging them to find strategies to deal
12 with or prevent these issues.
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26 The societal implications of this research are profound. When consumers encounter a
27 discrepancy between their expected size and the actual size, they may be dissatisfied with the
28 product and seek to return it. The rising trend of returning garments contributes to large amounts
29 of waste and carbon emissions, exacerbating environmental impacts. Examining the negative
30 impact of this on the environment and society can generate interest among consumers, firms, and
31 society as a whole, motivating them to find a way to reduce the negative environmental impact.
32 This awareness can contribute to achieving sustainability goals.
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42 Lastly, the study provides suggestions on ways firms can mitigate the negative impact of
43 sizing discrepancy on purchasing intentions, which include the creation of a globally-mandated
44 universal sizing system that all brands have to comply with. However, since the adoption of such
45 a system does not appear imminent, we created firm-level strategies by integrating self-construal
46 theory with advertising communication appeals. By considering the different thinking styles in
47 communications, we proposed and found that consumers with an independent self-construal
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3 respond better to an informational ad appeal, whereas consumers with an interdependent self-
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5 construal respond better to an emotional appeal. In addition, given that sizing discrepancy has a
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7 more pronounced negative effect in collectivist societies dominated by interdependent self-
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9 construal, it would make sense for managers in these societies to devote more resources to
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11 explaining their sizing structure.
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14 15 16 17 **Limitations and Future Research**

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19 Even though this research makes an important contribution to international consumer
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21 behavior literature, there are a few limitations to be noted. First, there will be some occasions
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23 when the sizing discrepancy effect is not applicable. For example, it is likely to be less relevant
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25 to children's clothing. There are also some products (e.g., bras) where consumers consider a
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27 larger size to be better; however, in such instances, the framework presented here may still apply
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29 but in reverse.
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33 With regard to future research, it would be beneficial if researchers could examine
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35 various consumer emotional or behavioral responses. Purchasing intention is one of the most
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37 important variables and directly influences a firm's performance. However, there are many other
38
39 crucial outcome variables to consider, such as word-of-mouth, perceived product quality, brand
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41 switching, etc. Thus, future researchers could identify unexplored variables that potentially play
42
43 an essential role in different consumers' reactions across cultures.
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47 Finally, the detrimental effects of sizing discrepancy can be mitigated in a direct manner.
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49 For example, salespeople could help consumers by providing information about sizes. It may be
50
51 effective and practical if future researchers could find simpler ways to directly mitigate sizing
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53 discrepancy instead of using indirect marketing strategies to comfort consumers.
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International Marketing Review

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TABLES AND FIGURES

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Table 1 Extant research in vanity sizing and sizing discrepancy effects

Study	Key Findings
Aydinoğlu and Krishna (2012)	Although vanity sizing leads to improved mental imagery in high and low-appearance self-esteem participants, positive imagery only has significant effects on people with low appearance self-esteem when discussing clothing preference.
Hoegg <i>et al.</i> (2014)	The negative influence of needing a size that is larger than expected in clothing will be mitigated by higher appearance self-esteem. It is found that larger sizes lead to greater spending on appearance-enhancing and non-sized products as consumers attempt to compensate for their damaged self-esteem.
Ketron (2016)	Consumer cynicism is considered to have a stronger effect on perceived deception when consumers are aware that the retailer has a history of deceptive labeling. This effect is reduced if the retailer is upfront about size labeling issues.
Franz (2017)	It is found that women's apparel brands with slightly higher prices inflate sizes. While very expensive brands use considerably smaller sizing than lower priced brands, it is also found that brands targeting young women have considerably smaller sizes than brands focusing on older women.
Ketron and Naletelich (2017)	Consumers may wish to be larger or smaller in different areas of their bodies. Smaller sizes are more socially desirable in pants and other categories based on measurement of the stomach and waist area. In the context of garments such as bras, the vanity sizing effect will be reversed with larger sizes perceived to be better.
Ketron and Spears (2017)	There are reduced responses to vanity sizing when discrepancies between the actual and the labeled size is perceived to be significant. The believability of the labeled size mediates the effect. Consumers are also likely to respond more positively to vanity sizing in a trendy retailer compared to a classic one.
Ketron and Williams (2018)	The size-related self-concept (SRSC) is considered to have no impact on perceived deception among women when a garment that fits properly is labeled a size smaller than the consumer's usual size. When the garment is the same size as usual, SRSC is positively related to perceived deception. Additionally, gender moderates the SRSC effect on perceived deception and purchase intention toward a vanity size.

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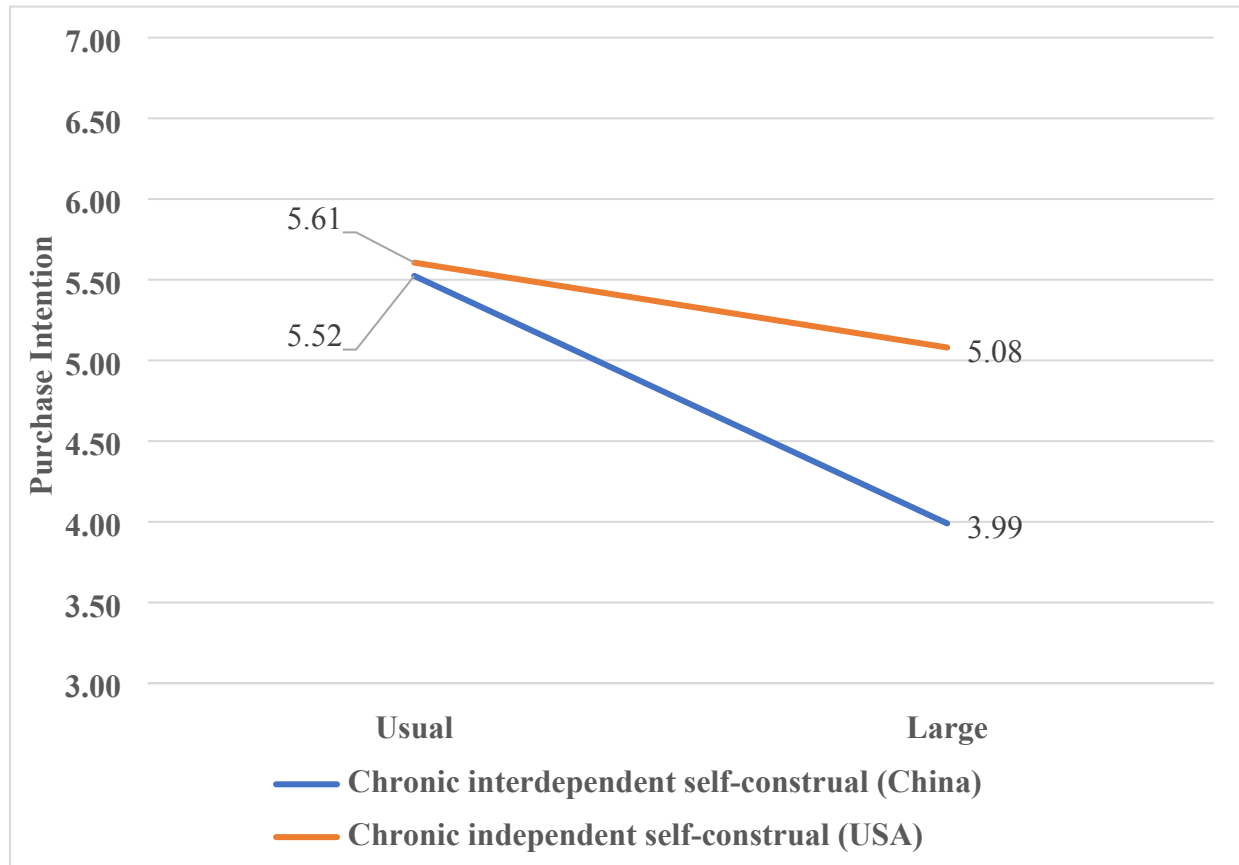
Figure 1 The effect of sizing discrepancy and chronic self-construal on purchase intention

Figure 2 The effect of sizing discrepancy and situational self-construal on purchase intention

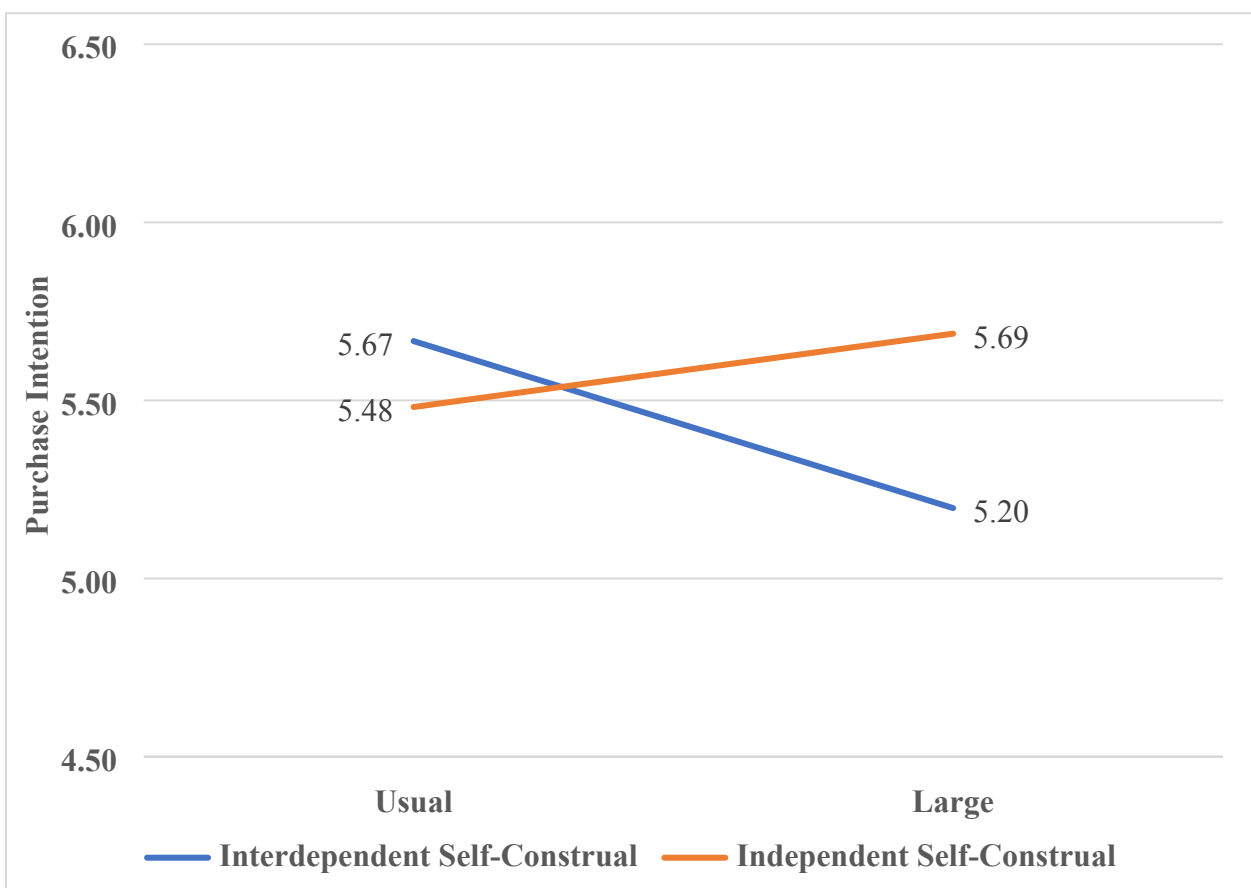
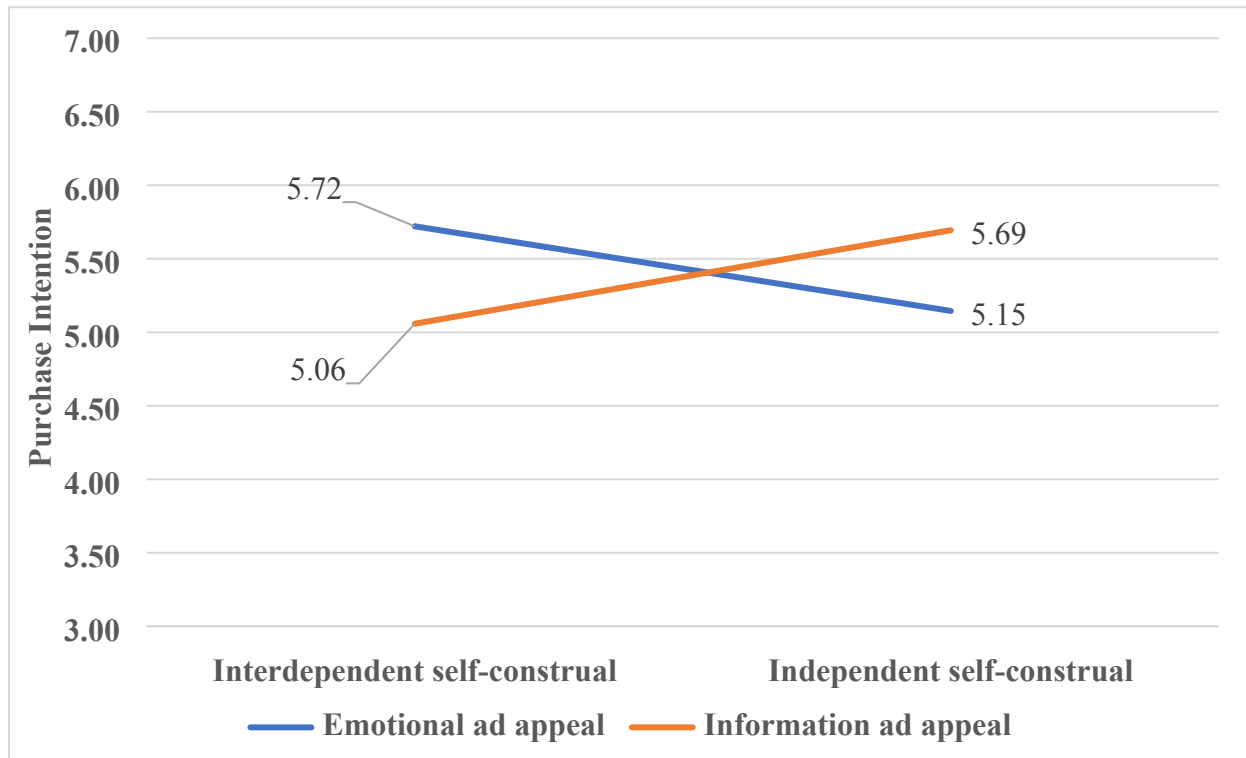


Figure 3 The effect of situational self-construal and advertising appeals on purchase intention



Appendix 1 Shopping Scenario

Please imagine that you are out shopping for a new pair of jeans. You are visiting a store that you have never visited before, and you are hoping to find a new style of jeans. You look at various styles of jeans and find a relatively new style with a different cut than the jeans you currently have.

(Usual) ... You try on the usual size that normally fits you and it fits very nicely.

(Larger-than-expected sizing discrepancy) ... You try on the usual size that normally fits you, but you cannot get it to fit correctly as the jeans are too tight. So you are forced to ask the sales person for a larger size. The size that fits you the best ends up being one size larger than your usual size.

Appendix 2 Study 3 Informational and emotional advertisement Stimuli

An ad appeal image from survey



Detailed image of Informational ad appeal



Detailed image of Emotional ad appeal

