

## Impact of culture on the pursuit of beauty : evidence from five countries

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**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 touching new heights worldwide. Although the pursuit of beauty appears to be 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 compared to Westerners (less interdependent). This 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 to minimize this discrepancy. Lastly, Study 3 shows that the impact of interdependence on usage of appearance-enhancing tools is moderated by strength of norms. 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, policymaking, and consumer well-being.

*Keywords:* Physical attractiveness, beauty, culture, conformity, norms

Women's quest for beauty and the need to enhance their appearance is gaining unparalleled attention across the world. Powered by double-digit growth in cosmetic, skin care, and hair care industries, the global beauty market is set to touch \$493 billion by 2020 (Euromonitor 2017). Moreover, the beauty industry seems almost immune to economic shocks (Hill et al. 2012). In the US and UK, some women are running marathons in full make-up (Weiner 2015; Wiseman 2013) and many others are spending increasing amounts of money to achieve the perfect face and body – money that can otherwise contribute towards college tuition or retirement (YMCA 2008). Although the obsession with beauty may appear to be universal, evidence from the industry suggests that this pursuit of beauty is even stronger in Asian countries. Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong have been the top spenders (per capita) for skincare in the world (Euromonitor 2013). Furthermore, Asia has the highest concentration of plastic surgeons (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons 2016). One out of three women in the age group of 19 to 29 admit 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 (Google Trends 2018). Such industry evidence suggests that the culture to which a consumer belongs may exert 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 businesses and policy makers. For multinational companies operating in the highly competitive multi-billion dollar beauty industry, a more targeted and efficient allocation of marketing resources between countries can have a huge impact on sales growth and profitability. Further, as firms look towards Asia for expansion, an understanding of the cultural influences on beauty can aid decision making about, but not limited to, product launches and assortment selection, product attributes and benefits, communications campaigns, and frontline sales training.

On the other hand, 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). This has both individual and societal costs. Understanding the antecedents and the underlying psychological mechanism behind the higher prevalence of beauty pursuit among Eastern (vs. Western) consumers is valuable for policy makers to design interventions that may help to curb the negative consequences associated with it. Yet, despite the ubiquity and practical and social implications of the 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 papers that have examined the influence of culture on the evaluation of physical attractiveness (e.g., Cunningham et al. 1995) have generally focused on identifying cross-cultural differences in what constitutes beauty. For example, Cunningham et al. (1995) showed that East Asians and White Americans valued somewhat different beauty traits. Comparing consumers in US and Korea, Jung and Lee (2006) found that while body image was correlated with self-esteem in both countries, Korean consumers exhibited higher appearance related thoughts, lower body image related satisfaction, but higher body weight related satisfaction.

Though these findings point towards 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. This is the gap in the literature that we aim to address 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), exerts consequential influence on consumers' pursuit of beauty. Prior research has shown that people from industrialized Western nations hold a predominantly independent self-construal whereas those from traditional Eastern nations hold an interdependent self-construal (Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier 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, with a stronger interdependent self-construal, are more likely to feel obligated to conform to socially defined beauty ideals, and this leads to a sense of discrepancy between the ideals and their current self. Usage of beauty related products and other appearance enhancement tools is one way to reduce this sense of discrepancy. Finally, we show, in an organizational context, that such socially driven pursuit of beauty by interdependents can be mitigated if the appearance related norms are perceived to be 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 (Belmi and Neale 2014; Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972; Fisher and Ma 2014) but not on its antecedents.

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 industry data and experimental evidence, we underscore the importance of this study to the field of international marketing. Further, 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, Hofstede, and Wedel 1999), manner of dressing (Manrai et al. 2001), luxury consumption (Shaikh et al. 2017; Wong and Ahuvia 1998), and green behaviour (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 yields its influence on behaviour, 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 behaviour. Through this research, we also respond to the recent call to leverage the cultural tightness and looseness framework in consumer research (Li, Gordon, and Gelfand 2017) by showing that situational differences affecting the need to conform may mitigate the impact of interdependence on individuals' appearance enhancing behaviour.

Managerially, a sharper understanding of cultural differences in appearance enhancement is an imperative for the beauty industry where Asia contributes to over 30% of sales and is the growth powerhouse for the global beauty conglomerates (Madan 2016). Our findings provide compelling and pragmatic insights to managers and policy makers. Leveraging the cultural nuances of appearance enhancement can help businesses formulate better-informed strategies about international expansion, market entry, resource allocation, developing relevant products, insightful communication campaigns, and frontline sales training plans. Finally, our findings suggest that policy makers and organizations can curb the negative consequences associated with the over-pursuit of beauty by loosening appearance related norms in their society or in organizations.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we review 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 about the influence of self-construal on the pursuit of beauty and the underlying mechanism. Further, we delve into the role of tightness-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. We then discuss limitations and outline several possibilities for future research.

## CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

### The Pursuit of Beauty

The notion that *beautiful-is-good* is ingrained in people very early in life (Rubenstein, Kalakanis and Langlois 1999). Childhood stories all over the world almost always depict a beautiful princess, a handsome prince, and an ugly villain. While the villain rots in hell, the prince and the princess live happily ever after. With beautiful people 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 to be more intelligent (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972; Kanazawa and Kovar 2004) and more decisive and logical (Dipboye, Fromkin, and Wiback 1975). There is a beauty premium even in the labor market, with attractive candidates being more likely to be hired, be considered more talented, having better leadership skills, commanding higher salaries, eliciting greater co-operation, and being rewarded more often (Hamermesh 2011).

While being beautiful is coveted highly the world over, what is considered ‘beautiful’ varies by culture (Cunningham et al. 1995). Anthropologists and ethnographers have long



contended that beauty is culturally driven and subjective (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). In other words, there is no absolute definition of beauty and the standards of beauty are defined normatively based on socialization processes and media influences (Banner 1983; Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). Growing from common experiences, societal norms define who (or what) is considered beautiful (Banner 1983; Hamermesh 2011). For example, Asians, compared to Europeans, are less likely to prefer features indicating sexual maturity and expressiveness (Cunningham et al. 1995). As norms of beauty are defined by the society, anyone who wishes to be perceived as beautiful needs to and strives to adhere to these norms (Davis, Sbrocco, Odoms-Young, and Smith 2010; Kim, Young, and Keun 2014). However, the motivation to adhere 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 dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede 1991). The key premise of the distinction between individualism and collectivism is the extent to which members of a society view themselves as singular entities or belonging to a network involving others (Hui 1988; Hui, Ho, and Wan 2011). Individualistic societies espouse a worldview where personal autonomy is emphasized (Hofstede 1980; Markus and Kitayama 1991). On the other hand, collectivistic societies adopt a philosophy that the individual and the group are indistinguishable. Common goals, values, and fate are assumed to bind the individuals of 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 collectivistic (Inglehart 1997; Sampson 2001). The impact of national culture on consumer behaviour has been studied extensively in international marketing research (e.g. Kirkman, Lowe, and

Gibson 2006; Laroche, Kalamas, and Cleveland 2005; Park and Jun 2003; see Steenkamp 2001 for a discussion).

Individualism-collectivism encompass multiple different values, for example, the dominance of individual rights (in individualism) and duties and obligations (in collectivism). Focusing specifically on how these societal differences affect the way individuals 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 of connectedness (or separateness) of the self from others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier 2002). Individuals with a dominant independent self tend to feel distinct from others whereas those with a strong interdependent self tend to focus on connectedness with others. For independents, the normative imperative is to appreciate and assert one's unique self, without being influenced by the context or the presence of others around them. On the contrary, for interdependents, the self is meaningful and complete only when cast in an appropriate relationship and context.

Although there may be intra-country variations in self-construal, studies have shown that Easterners, or those living in collectivist countries such as China, Korea and Japan, generally possess a stronger interdependent self-construal (or 'interdependents'). On the other hand, Westerners, such as those living in individualistic countries, epitomized by Americans, have been shown to possess a stronger independent self-construal (or 'independents'; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Singelis 1994; Lalvani and Shavitt 2013). For example, when asked to define themselves in open-ended questions, people from Western countries were more likely to describe themselves independent of any group and focus on their personal autonomy. In contrast, those from Eastern countries used more interdependent descriptions (Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999; Hannover and Kuhnlen 2004). Further, self-construal priming has been shown to mirror cultural differences in worldview and judgment (Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee

1999). Given this, extant research in cross-cultural psychology (Cross 1995; Gudykunst et al. 1996), consumer behaviour (Ahluwalia 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005), and international marketing (Agarwal, Malhotra, and Bolton 2010; Hui, Ho, and Wan 2011) has used self-construal to operationalize culture at an individual level. For example, in the international marketing literature, this difference has been demonstrated to have an impact across various 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 in relationship marketing (Hoppner, Griffith, and Whyte 2015). Building on and extending these findings, this research proposes that self-construal also influences consumers' motivation to adhere to beauty norms.

### **Culture and Beauty: The Role of Norms**

While the definition of beauty may differ across cultures, the normative requirement is clear and well understood by individuals within a particular culture (Cunningham et al. 1995). However, having clear norms alone is not enough to motivate consumers to adhere to them. The way a person views herself has also been shown to affect their motivation to adhere to norms. Savani and colleagues (2015) found that even when the content of the norms is similar across cultures, the motivation to adhere to the norms is stronger for interdependents, as compared to independents. Easterners (interdependents) gain their sense of worth and satisfaction from belonging to a larger group and adjusting oneself 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, compared to independents, interdependents' self-perceptions are influenced to a larger extent by others' opinions (Kim and Markman 2006; Kim and Markus 2004; Savani et al. 2015). Further, when a person's interdependent self-construal or collective self is activated, subjective norms (instead of personal attitudes) guide behavioural intentions

(Ybarra and Trafimow 1998). Individuals with an interdependent self-construal tend to conform and adhere to others' judgment 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 the obligation to ensure that they are conforming to the requirements of the group (Heine et al. 2001).

Drawing from this stream of literature, we propose that due to a stronger interdependent self, Easterners, compared to Westerners, would be more motivated to conform to the set of criteria considered beautiful in their society. This greater motivation to conform to beauty related norms will lead interdependents to have a greater proclivity for appearance enhancing tools and products that can help them to conform to beauty related normative ideals. This will influence their usage of appearance enhancing products.

Thus, we hypothesize that:

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

### **Conformity and Self-discrepancy**

Having established our expectations about the influence of interdependence on the use of appearance-enhancing products and tools, we next delve deeper into the psychological mechanism underlying this effect. Specifically, we ask: 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 as it directs one's attention to what is widely accepted socially (Savani et al. 2015; Torelli 2006). Thus, interdependents' need to conform to norms would make beauty related ideals in the society salient in their mind. More importantly,

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 that showed that interdependents' need to conform to societal norms may make the required ideal standards salient, thus heightening the perceived gap between the current state (actual) and the ideal standard (Lee, Aaker, and Gardner 2000), leading to self-discrepancy.

Self-discrepancy, defined as the incongruity between how one perceives oneself and how one desires to view oneself (Higgins 1987), is a powerful driver of consumer behaviour (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) triggers 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 ways and means to reduce this feeling of self-discrepancy, such as the usage of readily available appearance enhancement 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. Hence, we hypothesize the psychological mechanism underlying the effect as follows:

**H2a:** Compared to Westerners (less interdependent), Easterners (more interdependent) will be more motivated to conform to social norms in the domain of beauty, leading to heightened self-discrepancy.

**H2b:** Heightened self-discrepancy among Easterners (more interdependent) will result 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 leads to greater motivation to conform to beauty related norms and subsequently, heightened self-discrepancy. From a societal point of view, this is not necessarily a desirable phenomenon as it could lead to a surge in objectification, pre-occupation 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: how can we reduce interdependents' potentially harmful pursuit of beauty? We explore a boundary condition for the observed effect. Specifically, we investigate if interdependent consumers can be motivated to not adhere to social norms by changing the norm itself. In other words, what if policy makers could change what is considered normative?

H1 argues that those high in interdependence are more likely to use appearance-enhancing products as they are motivated to adhere to social norms. However, social norms of behaviour can vary in strength and perceived to be tight or loose. Gelfand et al. (2011) differentiate between "tight" and "loose" cultures as those with strong social norms and demanding adherence (tight) vs. those with weak social norms and high tolerance for non-conforming behaviour (loose) (Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver 2006; Torelli and Rodas 2017). Applying this to the current research, situations or contexts with tight norms about physical appearance will drive greater adherence (and hence enhanced usage of appearance enhancing tools), compared to situations or contexts with loose norms of physical appearance. We posit that the extent to which interdependent consumers feel a strong pressure to adhere to beauty norms would influence their motivation to use beauty-enhancing products to bridge the ideal-actual beauty gap. As discussed, those high in interdependence have a desire to not fall behind the group (Heine and Lehman 1999) and feel compelled to conform to societal expectations

and norms (Torrelli 2006). However, this pressure to conform should be felt more strongly when the tolerance of deviant behaviour is low (i.e., when situational norms are tight). When the situational norms are loose, interdependents may feel lesser need to conform to appearance related standards. This may result in reduced usage 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).

Formally, we propose:

**H3:** Situational norms (tight vs. loose) will moderate Easterners' (more interdependent) usage of appearance enhancing products such that they will be less (more) likely to use appearance-enhancing products when the norms are loose (tight). This would have no effect on those who are less interdependent.

## OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

Given the ubiquity of the phenomenon, and 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 both through nationality (Canada and China) and self-construal to test if, compared to Westerners (low interdependence), Easterners (high interdependence) have a greater preference for beauty products. Study 2 uncovers the underlying mechanism driving the effect by measuring interdependence within the US, hence 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 females

between 18-35 years of age as they are the key target group for beauty companies and the context of this research is most relevant for this demographic segment.

### **PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE FROM INDUSTRY DATA**

With the dual objective of underscoring the ubiquity of the phenomenon and 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 USD million) from the Passport Database (erstwhile Euromonitor, 2017) for full year 2016. We included beauty and personal care as defined by Euromonitor excluding baby and child specific products, fragrances, and men's grooming. Ranking countries purely on beauty related spending is not a valid way to look at beauty related consumption as it would be unduly affected by size of economy (e.g., USA) and population (e.g., China, India). To avoid these issues, and compare apples to apples, we decided to examine spends on beauty categories as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP; World Bank 2018) for each country for the same year. Looking at the level of spending on beauty as the percentage of GDP for each country allows us to accurately capture the proclivity for beauty displayed by its population, irrespective of state of economic development or overall size of market driven by sheer size of population.

Ranking countries on this basis revealed the Asian preference for beauty, with four out of Top 5 countries being in Asia. Japan (0.63%), South Korea (0.53%), Hong Kong (0.45%), and Thailand (0.40%) lead the Top 5 tally with UK (0.42%), the sole Western country, coming in at number 4. This data shows that despite any within category consumption differences that may exist between Asian and Western countries (such as skin care and make-up), Asians consistently spend more on beauty products than their Western



counterparts. Further, 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

In this study, our main objective 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, respectively. We expected that participants from China would exhibit a more positive attitude towards a beauty product as compared to those from Canada. A second aim of this study was also to provide initial evidence that individual differences in interdependence, operationalized using items from the self-construal scale, would also predict attitude towards the beauty product.

### Method

We recruited 97 female participants from Canada (CA:  $M_{age} = 27.87$  years) using Amazon Mechanical Turk and 102 female participants ( $M_{age} = 27.39$  years) from two Chinese (CN) cities, Beijing and Shanghai using SoJump (<https://www.wjx.cn/>). In line with previous research, we expected that participants from China would be more interdependent as compared to those from Canada (Li, Zhang, Bhatt, and Yum 2006). Chinese participants responded to the Mandarin version of the survey. Two research assistants proficient in both Mandarin and English helped with the translation of the survey into Mandarin, with one translator translating the survey from English to Mandarin and the other research assistant translating it back from Mandarin to English.

We showed all participants an advertisement for a hypothetical beauty product – Instant Skin Perfector – which promised “instant radiant even toned skin, right when you need it”. The product and advertisement were hypothetical (not existent in either country) 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 made by Blemish Balm creams (available in both Canada and China), a skincare/makeup hybrid product that provides dual benefits of light coverage along with skin care (Levitt. N.D.) to create the advertisement. The advertisement included an image of the product and went on to describe the product benefits (see Web Appendix A for the advertisement).

**Attitude.** We asked participants to indicate their attitude towards the product using a 4-item, 7-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 – participants' attitude towards the product. A higher value indicated a more positive attitude towards the product.

**Willingness to pay.** Next, we told Canadian (Chinese) participants that an average skin cream costs about 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 which ranged from 0 to twice the average price of the product for each country (i.e., CAD 16 for Canada and RMB 32 for China). As participants' willingness to pay was measured on different scales in the two countries, we normalized the participants' responses within each country such that the values lie between 0 and 1.

**Interdependence.** Finally, we used four items from the self-construal scale (Singelis, 1994) to measure participants' interdependent self-construal. Participants responded to the following items on a 7-point scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ; 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*): (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 relationship with others are more important than my own accomplishments", (4) "It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group".

## Results

***Invariance tests.*** We first assessed measurement invariance as per the guidance provided by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998). Results from a multi-group confirmatory factor analysis suggested that the fit of the baseline, configural invariance model was satisfactory ( $CFI = .976$ ,  $TLI = .965$ ,  $RMSEA = .080$ ). Next, we assessed metric invariance by constraining the factor loadings to be invariant across China and Canada. The fit of the resultant model was satisfactory as well ( $CFI = .972$ ,  $TLI = .965$ ,  $RMSEA = .080$ ). Further, 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 compared to those from Canada, we analyzed country level differences in the attitude towards the product and the amount participants were willing to pay for it. First, an independent samples  $t$ -test with attitude towards the skin cream as the dependent variable indicated a significant effect of culture. Participants from China indicated a more positive attitude towards the product as compared to those from Canada ( $M_{CN} = 5.89$ ,  $SD_{CN} = .94$ ,  $M_{CA} = 4.75$ ,  $SD_{CA} = 1.72$ ,  $t(197) = 5.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Next, results from a similar independent samples  $t$ -test with the amount the participants were willing to pay for the product (normalized within each country) as the dependent variable indicated that Chinese participants were willing to pay a higher amount for the cream as compared to Canadian participants ( $M_{CN} = .67$ ,  $SD_{CN} = .20$ ,  $M_{CA} = .54$ ,  $SD_{CA} = .25$ ,  $t(197) = 4.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

***Individual level analyses.*** We next analyzed whether individual differences in interdependence predicted preference for the beauty product. A hierarchical regression with

participants' average scores on the interdependence items (mean-centred) nested within countries as the independent variable and attitude towards 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**

These results provide strong evidence for our hypothesis (H1). First, the results show that participants from China, with a stronger interdependent self-construal, exhibited a more positive attitude towards the beauty-enhancing product, as compared to those from Canada, with lower interdependent self-construal. The results also suggest that Chinese participants were willing to pay more for the product compared to those from Canada. Secondly, we provide initial evidence that individual differences in interdependence demonstrate the same positive relationship with the preference for beauty products. This therefore provided converging evidence that self-construal is an important driving factor influencing consumers' consumption of beauty products.

In the next study, we explore the underlying psychological mechanism driving the observed effect as well as generalize our findings to a different context.

## **STUDY 2**

The previous study provided strong evidence for the hypothesis that an interdependent self-construal predicts a greater preference for beauty products. Study 2 was designed to accomplish multiple objectives. First, in this study, 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 (H2a). This desire, in the domain of beauty, would lead to heightened perceived difference between the current and the ideal beauty standards of the individual, i.e., appearance related self-discrepancy. This, in turn, would result in greater use of appearance enhancing tools (H2b).

Secondly, as the previous study was conducted in two different countries, it may be argued that country level differences in beauty consumption may be an artefact of lack of face and body positivity programs in emerging economies such as India and China, compared to Western countries. Thus, we conducted this study in a single country, USA, to eliminate such potential confounds of exposure to body and face positivity awareness communications. Further, by conducting this study in a single country, we build on the findings of the previous study to show that even in a Western society, interdependence drives preference for appearance enhancing products.

Finally, in this study, we aimed to test our hypothesis in a different context. In the current age of handheld mobile devices, technology enabled appearance-enhancing tools, such as smartphone apps and filters that offer a quick fix to digitally edit photos. The functionality includes, but is not limited to, creating a flawless complexion without blemishes or marks, feature enhancement for bigger, brighter eyes, sharper nose, angular jawline, removing dark circles, whitening teeth and even changing eye color with contact lenses (Voo 2013). Given the pervasive presence of Internet and smartphones in the lives of consumers today, it is only expected that these technologies be used in the pursuit of beauty. Hence, we decided to explore the impact of self-construal on the adoption and usage of such image-enhancing apps.

### **Dependent measure and cross-national pilot study**

Although our aim was to conduct this study in a single country to ensure other cross-national differences do not affect the results, given the use of unconventional appearance

enhancing tool (image enhancing apps) as the dependent variable, we decided to conduct a cross-national pilot study to test if Easterners indicated greater usage of image enhancing apps compared to Westerners. Forty-two female participants from India ( $M_{\text{age}} = 27.90$  years) and 39 female participants from the United States ( $M_{\text{age}} = 27.34$  years) completed the study on Amazon Mechanical Turk.

We presented participants with a short paragraph that stated that social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter present several opportunities to share their pictures (or “selfies”) with friends, family, and the wider audience. It also included a brief description of image correcting apps and their typical usage. Next, we asked participants to respond to a 7-item, 7-point scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) measuring their attitude towards the usage of such image enhancing apps. Some 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 correction 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 (who are more interdependent) indicated greater usage of image enhancing apps ( $M_{\text{India}} = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) compared to Americans (who are more independent) ( $M_{\text{USA}} = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ,  $t(79) = -2.13$ ,  $p = .036$ ). This suggested that similar to other, more conventional beauty products, Easterners were more likely to use such image enhancing apps compared to Westerners. Next, we proceeded to examine the underlying mechanism for our phenomenon.

## **Method**

One hundred and forty one female participants in the age group 18-35 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 27.41$  years) from the US completed the study on MTurk. Participants read the same description of

image enhancing apps mentioned in the pilot study above. Next, we measured their attitude towards using the apps using the same items ( $\alpha = .92$ ) as those described in the pilot study. This served as our dependent variable. After measuring participants' attitude towards the apps, we also measured their interdependent self-construal using the 12-item interdependence sub-scale ( $\alpha = .83$ ; Singelis 1994), tendency to conform, and appearance related self-discrepancy. Tendency to conform was measured using items from Mehrabian and Stefl (1995). Participants responded to a 9-item scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ;  $1 = \text{very strong disagreement to } 9 = \text{very strong agreement}$ ). Items included "I often rely on, and act upon, the advice of others", "Generally, I'd rather given 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". Appearance related self-discrepancy was measured by adapting the Body Image Ideals Scale (Cash and Szymanski 1995). We presented participants with ten different physical attributes such as skin complexion, hair, and facial features. Participants were asked 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 ( $\alpha = .83$ ;  $1 = \text{exactly as I am to } 4 = \text{very unlike me}$ ). The average of the ten items formed a measure of appearance related self-discrepancy such that a higher score indicated a greater gap between their current self and their personal ideal.

## Results

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

Further, we hypothesized that interdependents' need to conform to beauty norms will lead to greater salience of ideal normative standards, resulting in a heightened sense of discrepancy between their actual and ideal state of beauty (H2a). We tested this hypothesis using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2012). We entered participants' interdependence score as the independent variable, their appearance related self-discrepancy as the outcome variable, and conformity as the mediator. Bootstrapping analysis with 5000 iterations revealed that the direct effect of interdependence on perceived self-discrepancy was mediated by conformity (Indirect effect:  $B = .12$ ,  $SE = .037$ ,  $95\% CI = [.057, .20]$ ). 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 (H2a and H2b), we performed a serial mediation analysis using Model 6 of the PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Hayes 2012). We entered participants' interdependence score as the independent variable, their usage of appearance enhancing products 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. This bootstrapping analysis with 5000 iterations revealed that the direct effect of interdependence on the attitude towards the usage of image-enhancing apps was mediated by conformity and self-discrepancy (Indirect effect:  $B = .096$ ,  $SE = .041$ ,  $95\% CI = [.032, .20]$ ). The results indicate that greater interdependence was related to higher conforming tendencies. This was positively related to heightened appearance related self-discrepancy, which, in turn, predicted usage of the image-enhancing app.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

Insert Table 1 about here



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**Discussion**

Replicating the results of Study 1 using an individual level measure, Study 2 showed that there was a main effect of interdependence on the tendency to use appearance-enhancing products. Additionally, we found that those with a stronger interdependent self-construal had a greater need to conform to societal standards that led to a heightened sense of appearance-related self-discrepancy. This increased feeling of discrepancy in turn resulted in a more positive attitude towards image enhancing apps. Further, measuring self-construal within one country allowed us to eliminate any other potential cross-country differences that could have been driving the results in the previous studies. In addition, to ensure that the results in this study were not driven by impression management concerns, we also included participants' tendency to modify self-presentation (Lennox and Wolfe 1984) in our study. Controlling for self-monitoring had no impact on the results, both for the main effect of self-construal on the usage of the app as well as for the mediation analysis.

Given the extant discourse on the negative consequences of the pursuit of beauty, the next study aspires to identify a boundary condition that could help mitigate such tendencies if required. Study 3 builds on our earlier studies to show that this preference for appearance enhancing products among interdependents is not indiscriminating. To the extent we can convince interdependents that adherence to norms is not strictly enforced, they would be less likely to gravitate towards such beauty enhancement products (H3).

**STUDY 3**

Results from the earlier two studies 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 may put them at risk to pursue unhealthy beauty

enhancement methods that can have negative effects on the physical (e.g., continuous face and body surveillance) and psychological well-being (e.g., eating disorders, use of excessive cosmetic surgery) of a person (Kim, Young, and Keun 2014). In the quest to pursue 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 the call of scholars (Li, Gordon, and Gelfand 2017) to integrate the tightness-looseness framework (Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver 2006; Gelfand et al. 2011) in consumer research

To do this, we explore the possibility of reducing the pressure to conform by loosening the perceived norms (of physical appearance). Specifically, we manipulate strength of social norms and need for adherence in the context of organizational culture. We asked participants to think about two different organizational cultures, with one that has strong norms of physical appearance and low tolerance for deviant behaviour versus another culture with weak physical appearance related norms and high tolerance for deviant behaviour (Chan 1996). We expected that the beauty product usage intention of those high in interdependence to be more affected by the looseness of norms in the organization relative to those low in interdependence.

## **Method**

We recruited 144 undergraduate female participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.80$  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, 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 this pair of organizations based on a pilot study where we tested expectations of tightness vs looseness of appearance related norms for multiple organizations. Further, as a manipulation check within the current

study, participants indicated how demanding they felt the company was in terms of physical appearance on a 10-item, 7-point scale ( $\alpha = .92$ , e.g., “Looks and physical appearance would matter at this company” and “Female employees would be expected to wear formal clothes in this company”).

Following this, we showed participants the advertisement (ad) for a skin related 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 they attend the interview, on a 3-item, 7-point scale. Specifically, we asked participants to indicate their agreement on: (i) “I think White Glamour Skin Perfector will be helpful if I use it before the interview”, (ii) “I would buy White Glamour Skin Perfector before the interview if I happened to see it in the store”, (iii) “I would actively seek out the White Glamour Skin Perfector in a store to purchase it before the interview” (1= *strongly disagree* to 7=*strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .82$ ; adapted from Stafford (1998)). Following this, we measured interdependence using the 12-item interdependence sub-scale ( $\alpha = .71$ ) from Singelis (1994). Finally, participants responded to desirability and prestige of the organization (i.e., either Citibank or Facebook, as per condition).

## Results

**Manipulation Checks.** A one way ANOVA indicated that participants perceived Citibank to have tighter norms regarding physical appearance compared to Facebook ( $M_{\text{Citi}} = 5.16$ ,  $SD = .53$ ,  $M_{\text{FB}} = 3.22$ ,  $SD = .66$ ,  $F(1, 142) = 381.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while being similar in desirability and prestige (all  $p$ 's  $> .1$ ).

*Usage Intention.* As participants' involvement with a career related scenario may vary based on how advanced they are in the undergraduate program, we controlled for participants' year in the undergraduate program in the analyses. We regressed the tightness of norms (Citibank [tight] = .5, Facebook [loose] = -.5), participants' score on the interdependence scale (mean-centered), their interaction, and current year in the program (as a control variable) on the usage intention for the cream before the interview. This analysis revealed non-significant 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, 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 shown in Figure 2, participants who were high (+1 SD) on interdependence expressed lower intentions to use the cream when preparing for an interview at Facebook (loose norms) ( $M_{\text{Facebook}} = 3.82$ ) as compared to Citibank (tight norms;  $M_{\text{Citibank}} = 4.51, t(138) = 2.46, p = .015$ ). No such difference was found for participants who were low on interdependence (-1SD,  $M_{\text{Facebook}} = 3.93, M_{\text{Citibank}} = 3.87, t(138) = -.061, p = .81$ ).

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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## 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 one's appearance-related self-discrepancy can be reduced by

loosening the perceived norms in an organizational setting. When undergraduate female participants felt 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 an organization or society, people may feel less discrepant about their appearance leading to lower usage of appearance enhancing products. This can be a simple, yet powerful and actionable intervention to reduce the incidence of harmful behaviour related to the pursuit of beauty.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The constant focus of mass media to establish a direct correlation between looking beautiful and 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 how one looks. However, scant attention has been paid to 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 beauty pursuit through the usage of appearance enhancing tools and products. Study 1 showed that compared to participants from Western countries, who were low in interdependence, those from Eastern countries, who were high in interdependence, had a more positive attitude and usage intention for appearance enhancing products. Study 2 delved deeper into the underlying mechanism by showing that interdependent consumers' pursuit of socially defined standard of beauty is driven by their need to conform to the perceived ideals of beauty, leading to greater sense of discrepancy between their actual and ideal state of

beauty. Finally, Study 3 showed that this behaviour may be attenuated if the appearance related norms are loosened. We found converging evidence through two ways of operationalizing self-construal, i.e. using cross-country differences (Study 1) and scale measurement (Study 2 and 3).

### **Theoretical Contributions**

Findings from this research contribute to the literature on multiple fronts. First, our findings contribute to the literature on beauty and appearance enhancement. The goal of this research was to study a globally prevalent yet under-investigated phenomena, the pursuit of beauty, through the lens of self-construal. Although previous research has identified some antecedents of the pursuit of beauty such as age (Clarke and Griffin 2008), race, and gender (Kwan and Trautner 2009), only a handful of research has examined cross-cultural differences in beauty perception (e.g., Cunningham et al 1995; Jung and Lee 2006). Even then, these inquiries have focused more on identifying perceptual differences across cultures, without providing a strong theoretical understanding why such perceptual differences exist. The current research is the first to empirically demonstrate the significant cross-cultural variations in the affinity for beauty products and services as well as focus on the underlying psychological mechanism driving this difference. This research highlights the significant role that self-construal plays in moderating this phenomenon and its impact on consumers' self-discrepancy.

Second, our research also contributes to the extant research in international marketing that investigates cross-cultural differences in attitudes and behaviours. Recent work in international marketing literature has explored the influence of culture on diverse consumer behaviour related constructs such as superstition and pricing strategy (Westjohn, Roschk, and Magnusson 2017), perception of corporate social responsibility related efforts (Choi, Chang, Li and Jang 2016), willingness to complain against 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 looking at culture as an antecedent for the pursuit of beauty and validating the hypothesis with consumers across five countries, namely China, Singapore, India, Canada, and USA.

Third, we also highlight a nuance in how conformity may influence consumption. Prior research has shown that consumers who possess 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, recent work by Shaikh et al (2017) shows 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 behaviour. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research in the international marketing area to show that cultural differences in the motivation to conform to societal norms affect behaviour through self-discrepancy. While prior work has explored the potential connection between culture and body image issues (Jung and Lee 2006), our work is the first to elucidate the process behind the phenomena as well as demonstrate substantive downstream effects.

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 behaviour. This is in line with recent research (Savani et al. 2015) that highlights self-construal as a key predictor for adherence to norms. The findings are robust, replicated across multiple countries in the East and West.

Lastly, we also contribute to the literature on culture and norms in international marketing by demonstrating that interdependent consumers are sensitive to situational need for

conformity. In doing so, we also extend the work on strength of social norms and tolerance for deviance by 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, pp. 378; Torelli and Rodas 2017). We show that looseness of situational norms (and not just national cultures) may lead to differential behaviour in terms of conforming to the norms depending on the dominant self-construal of an individual. Specifically, we found that interdependent consumers do not invariably conform to norms always. When the situational demand for conformity is low, the cultural differences in conformity are mitigated and interdependent consumers do not exhibit norm-consistent attitudes and intentions anymore.

### **Managerial Contributions**

Our research offers several insights for managerial decision-making. The diverse contexts in which the effect has been shown to exist also broadens the applicability of our findings to not just be relevant for conventional beauty products and services but also technology driven appearance enhancing tools such as smartphone apps and filters. Through this research, we investigate the cultural antecedents of the pursuit of beauty driving a multi-billion dollar appearance industry. As firms seek to expand and grow in Asian markets, an understanding of the cultural influences on beauty can aid efficient resource allocation decision making for international expansion.

Further, given the limited consumer behaviour research on the antecedents of pursuit of beauty, this research is insightful for managers looking to develop products and communication campaigns to attract consumers in a culturally diverse, extremely competitive beauty market. As beauty conglomerates expand in Asian markets, findings from our research can help them avoid cultural faux pas and develop campaigns, concepts, and products that resonate with consumers. Understanding cultural nuances such as those we found in this research aids not



only Western brands entering Asian markets, but is also helpful for Asian brands seeking to expand beyond the Asian 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 regime of products and services to the consumers in Asia.

### **Implications for Policymakers**

At the societal level, women’s pursuit of beauty can sometimes be taken to extremes. The incessant discourse from mass media alleges that looking beautiful equates to self-worth in women’s minds (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). The pressure to conform to this normative definition of beauty is known to lead to stress and anxiety (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Milkie 1999). Women’s need to conform to these idealistic standards of beauty prevalent in society has been shown to lead to face and body shaming, stress, anxiety and eating disorders (Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Kim, Young, and Keun 2014). The dramatic rise in the number of plastic surgeries may be an indication that a lot of women are yielding to the pressure of conforming to the norms.

In this research, we demonstrate a potential intervention for preventing the onset of negative consequences of excessive beauty pursuit by altering the strength of physical appearance related norms in an organizational context. When participants felt that the company they were interviewing for did not have strict norms in place and had high tolerance for deviant behaviour, they were less likely to use appearance-enhancing products (Study 3). It is a simple, but effective intervention to situationally control this potentially harmful pursuit of beauty. It demonstrates the power of context and environment in ameliorating the negative fallouts that can accompany an unhealthy obsession with beauty. Importantly, our results suggest that interventions such as loosening the organizational culture for appearance

related standards are likely to work in interdependent cultures such as Asian countries, where 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 competencies instead of looks, individuals may feel less inclined to pursue appearance enhancement. Extending this notion to a broader societal level, efforts to loosen the beauty norms or promoting a more inclusive definition of beauty can help alleviate the pressure that women feel to look beautiful and further, take extreme steps in its pursuit.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

While we investigate the impact of self-construal on the pursuit of beauty, there can be other factors that may play a role in determining the extent to which women like to enhance their appearance, such as wanting to display high status. Arguably, owing to their colonial past, citizens of several countries in Asia have a preference for 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. While 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 make-up and other tools being accessible to all rather than being the purview of only higher classes. However, future research may look at this historically relevant variable of status conferment and hierarchy as another predictor for cross-cultural differences in usage of beauty related products. This would add to the current body of beauty related research in international marketing, by identifying another variable that could differentiate consumer behaviour in emerging and developed markets, respectively.

Further, the underlying mechanism of conformity and self-discrepancy proposed in this research opens up several new avenues for future investigation. We demonstrate one such possibility by manipulating the need to conform through tightness/looseness of situational norms in Study 3. Another pertinent course of future direction is to investigate ways in which appearance related self-discrepancy may be minimized. In other words, what are some alternative interventions to help reduce the perceived gap between ideal beauty and current state? One such potential route is to enhance self-esteem, thus raising the level of perceived actual self. Given the variation in the definition and understanding of self-esteem across East and West, international marketing scholars may explore if self-esteem boosting communication, such as those by Dove are perceived differently by consumers across cultures.

In the current research, we focused on studying female consumers and their attitude towards appearance enhancement. Moving forward, researchers may extend this inquiry to male consumers. While beauty historically has been the prerogative of women (Hsu 2008), recent trends show that male grooming category is growing by leaps and bounds across the world (Fung Global 2017). Even though it is still a fraction of the female beauty market, there is no doubt that men are getting more concerned and involved with their appearance. Further, the use of cosmetic products such as BB creams by male consumers, which was hitherto exclusive to females, is a growing trend in East Asia. While male grooming products are popular in the West, the use of cosmetics by men is thus far confined to East Asia. Are men across cultures equally concerned about normative requirements? This is an interesting research question for cross-cultural consumer behaviour 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

consumptions decisions consistent with this norm. This could mean that they may be less likely to use beauty products (so as to attain the natural/healthy look through natural means) or contrary to expectations, consumers may 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 that elusive 'no-makeup' look (Viera-Newton 2017), this remains an interesting 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 can spark further work in this exciting field.

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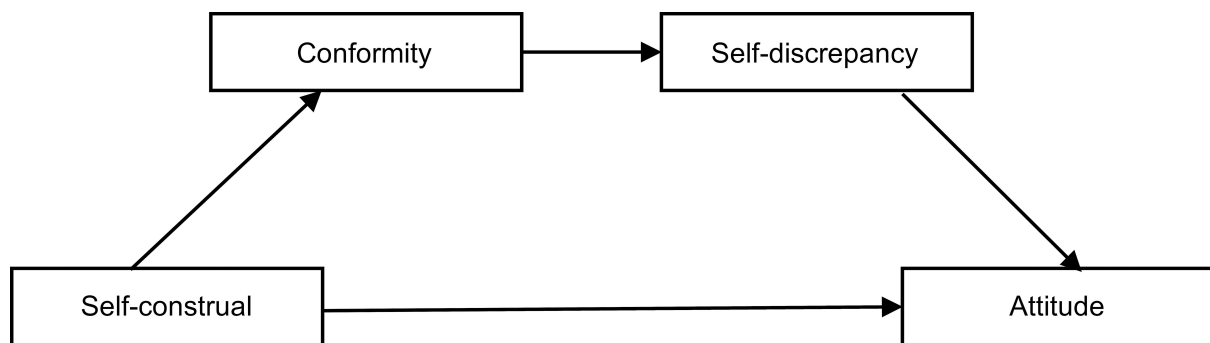
**TABLE 1**  
STUDY 2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS

	Mean	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 towards the app	3.49	1.86	.21*	.33**	.32**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**FIGURE 1**

STUDY 2: SERIAL MEDIATION MODEL FOR THE UNDERLYING MECHANISM OF THE IMPACT OF SELF-CONSTRUAL ON ATTITUDE TOWARDS APP USAGE



Indirect effect:  $B = .10$ ,  $SE = .044$ ,  $95\%CI [.036, .22]$

**FIGURE 2**

STUDY 3: USAGE INTENTION OF THE COMPLEXION CORRECTION CREAM  
BASED ON INTERDEPENDENCE SCORE AND EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

