

Buying behavior can be swayed by cultural mindset

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There are some combinations that just go well together: Milk and cookies, eggs and bacon, pancakes and maple syrup. But new research reveals that people with individualistic mindsets differ from their collectivist counterparts in ascribing value to those perfect combinations.

The collection of new studies, published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, demonstrate that people with collectivist mindsets tend to value the relationships between items more than the particular items themselves. People with individualistic mindsets, on the other hand, tend to see an item's [intrinsic value](#), and are, therefore, more likely to split up a complete set of items.

The individualistic [mindset](#), as psychological scientist and lead author Daphna Oyserman of the University of Michigan and her colleagues explain, centers around [personal goals](#).

"Institutions and relationships are just backdrops to individual striving," Oyserman explains. This individualistic mindset is found most often in the United States and Western Europe.

Conversely, the collectivist mindset is more common in Eastern cultures, and ascribes value to the oneness of communities, stressing the relationships between individuals.

Though research has typically focused on relationships between individual people and their communities, Oyserman and her colleagues

were interested in how these different mindsets affect [consumer decision](#)-making.

In the first of several experiments, the researchers asked Anglo- and Latino-American students to choose their favorite cell phone accessory set (red, blue, black, or white). Afterward, the participants were told that one of the items in their preferred set was no longer available. At this point, the participants had two options: They could still choose their favorite set and simply replace the unavailable item with an item from another set, or they could choose a new set entirely—one that matched.

The Anglo-American students—who were likely to have more individualistic mindsets—usually picked another individual item from a different set rather than starting over with a completely new set.

But Latino-American students showed the opposite effect: When one of the accessories in their favorite set was unavailable, they were more likely to choose a new set altogether, even one that they didn't like all that much to begin with. They appeared to take a collectivist perspective, focusing on the inherent relationship between the matching accessories, which led them to view each set as one item.

Because all societies socialize for both collectivistic and individualistic mindsets at least to some degree, Oyserman and colleagues hypothesized that it should be possible to cue either mindset under certain conditions. In line with the initial studies, further experiments revealed that participants who were cued to have a collectivist accessible mindset were more hesitant to break up their preferred set, were more willing to pay extra to restore a set, and gave more compelling reasons explaining why items in a set should be grouped together.

This effect held across several different decision making scenarios. In one experiment, for example, participants were asked to choose their

two favorite two puppies to suggest to a friend, but were then told that only one puppy could be adopted. As predicted, collectivist thinkers were more likely to choose an entirely new puppy instead of choosing to split up their favorite two.

Similarly, collectivist thinkers were more likely to choose an entirely new snack when their favorite snack/drink combo became unavailable.

"These choices seem odd until one considers what the collectivistic mindset does," Oyserman explains. "It makes what would otherwise be two separate items feel like a single combined element."

The researchers suggest that these effects might also generalize to other domains, such as public-policy.

"Our studies imply that an accessible collectivist mind-set would reduce willingness to accept some chosen policy options if others cannot be obtained, which would reduce compromise," the authors conclude.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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