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ABSTRACT

This paper explores multiple selves and their inconsistent consumption preferences among East-Asians. The findings from 28 depth-interviews in Japan illustrate that East-Asians, contrary to Westerners, experience less psychological tension facing their inconsistent consumption preferences. They therefore have less need to find an agreement among inconsistencies. Dialectical thinking theory is employed to understand cultural differences towards contradictions. East Asian cultures tend to more tolerate psychological contradiction, whereas Western cultures are less comfortable with contradiction. Our research also suggests the absence of consumers' need for a coherent identity narrative in Japan, whereas in Western cultures, particularly in North America, consumers seek to reconcile identity contradictions. From the childhood, Japanese learn to shift between multiple selves. This norm is called *kejime*, the ability to make distinctions. Hence, Japanese consumers are culturally accustomed to shifting among multiple selves than to pursuing a consistent global self-concept.

Today, it has become common to view consumers' selves as involving multiplicity (Gergen 1981; Markus and Wurf 1987). We now have a great deal of information and choices about who we want to be. Multiple selves often involve inconsistent views and affect consumer behavior. Hence, many consumer studies have examined multiple selves and consumption (e.g., Ahuvia 2005; Bahl and Milne 2010; Firat and Shultz 2001; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Schenk and Holman 1980; Schouten 1991; Tian and Belk 2005).

Yet, little attention has been focused on the issue of whether the findings apply to consumers around the globe. Although consumers from different cultures may vary in their response to inconsistent consumption preferences, the majority of research has been conducted in the U.S. Indeed, recent studies in cultural psychology have identified that cultures differ in the tolerance towards contradiction (Peng and Nisbett 1999). More particularly, East Asian cultures tend to more tolerate psychological contradiction (Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, and Peng 2010), whereas Western cultures are less comfortable with contradiction (Festinger 1957; Lewin 1951). In this article, we explore the various implications of multiple selves and consumption among Japanese.

This article is organized as follows. In the first section, we review the existing literature on the multiple selves and consumption; then we discuss synthetic versus dialectical thinking. In the second section, we describe our methodology used in this study. In the third section, based on the data gathered from the Japanese participants, we argue that Japanese consumers experience no significant psychological tension facing own inconsistent consumption preferences. In the fourth section, we discuss our findings. Finally in the fifth section, we provide limitations in our study and suggestions for future directions.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Multiple Selves and Consumption

In the literature discussing multiple selves and consumption, the term 'conflict' has been used frequently. For example, Bahl and Milne (2010) state in their study on the dialogical self that navigates through inconsistent consumption preferences that "dialog is used to manage *conflict*...to avoid *conflict*" (190, emphasis added). Ahuvia

(2005) also states in his study on the role of loved objects in the construction of a coherent identity narrative that "consumers attempt to reconcile identity *conflicts*" (181, emphasis added). The researchers seem to implicitly presume that consumers' inconsistent consumption preferences or inconsistencies among multiple selves are in conflict with each other.

Bahl and Milne (2010) define conflict using Janis (1959) and Emmons and King (1988). Janis (1959) defines conflict as "opposing tendencies within an individual, which *interfere with the formulation, acceptance, or execution of a decision*" (as cited in Bahl and Milne 2010, emphasis added). Emmons and King (1988) define it as "a situation in which one goal striving is *seen by an individual as interfering* with the achievement of other strivings in the individual's striving system" (as cited in Bahl and Milne 2010, emphasis added). Both definitions consider that in conflict, an individual regards the situation as interfering. Based on these two definitions, Bahl and Milne (2010) provide more nuanced understanding of conflict; however, they consider conflict as one *hindering* the other. Hence, there is an implied meaning of confrontation among consumers' inconsistent consumption preferences or inconsistencies among multiple selves.

However, the term 'inconsistent' does not necessary imply confrontations. According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, inconsistent is defined as "lacking consistency: as a) not compatible with another fact or claim; b) containing incompatible elements; c) incoherent or illogical in thought or actions: changeable; d) not satisfiable by the same set of values for the unknowns." We feel that the view towards inconsistency as conflicting may be culturally limited. This will be further explained in the next section.

Another common trait identified in the existing literature on multiple selves and consumption is that consumers usually seek to reconcile differences and achieve coherence in their identity. Although Firat and Venkatesh (1995) see the postmodern consumers as possessing multiple selves with no need to reconcile identity contradictions, researchers have not found many examples of consumers abandoning the desire for a coherent identity narrative. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) deny Firat and Venkatesh's claim as an "optimistic theoretical construction" (151). Thompson and Haytko (1997) and Murray (2002) find that young adults experience a tension in their sense of identity as they strive to be both unique individuals and part of a group, and they use fashion to resolve this tension. The plurality of fashion discourses allows diverse interpretive positions, enabling consumers to find meaning by contrasting opposing values and beliefs. These "countervailing meanings" are used by consumers to moderate tensions arising from their efforts to develop a sense of individual agency (i.e., distinction) and perceptions of social prescription (i.e., social integration). The study by Ahuvia (2005) also shows that consumers attempt to reconcile identity conflicts using three strategies labeled "demarcating," "compromising," and "synthesizing" solutions. However, this need for coherence in self-identity may also be culturally specific.

In extending multiple selves and consumption theory beyond the Western cultural realm, we question the view of consumers' navigation of inconsistent consumption preferences as management or avoidance of identity conflicts. We also question the view of consumers as having the desire for the coherent identity narrative. Cultural differences in the tolerance towards contradictions will be discussed next.

Synthetic versus Dialectical Thinking

Culturally shared folk epistemologies influence people's reasoning about contradiction and their tolerance for ambiguity (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Western psychology has largely assumed that individuals are uncomfortable with incongruity and that they possess a basic need to synthesize contradictory information (Festinger 1957; Lewin 1951; Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995). Western cultures tend to be more linear or synthetic in their cognitive orientation. They consider both sides of an opposing argument and then they search for synthesis and the resolution of incongruity (Lewin 1951; Peng and Nisbett 1999). Western folk epistemologies are rooted in Aristotelian traditions, which emphasize three basic principles (Peng and Nisbett 1999): the law of identity (if A is true, then A is always true), the law of noncontradiction (A cannot equal not A), and the law of the excluded middle (all propositions must be either true or false). As a result, Westerners are generally less comfortable with contradiction, and attitudinal ambivalence is associated with psychological tension and conflict (Festinger, 1957; Lewin, 1951).

On the other hand, East Asian epistemologies tend to tolerate psychological contradiction. East Asian cultures tend to be more dialectic in their cognitive orientation. Recognizing and accepting the duality in all things is regarded as normative in East Asian cultures. Two central features of dialectical ways of knowing are moderation and balance: good is counterbalanced by evil, happiness is offset by sadness, and self-criticism is tempered by sympathy for the self (Kitayama and Markus 1999; Peng and Nisbett 1999). Dialectical thinking is rooted in East Asian philosophical and religious traditions, and is based on three primary tenets: the principle of contradiction (two opposing propositions may both be true), the principle of change (the universe is in flux and is constantly changing), and the principle of holism (all things in the universe are interrelated). Dialecticism also discourages the adoption of extreme positions. A principal consequence of dialectical thinking is that East Asians more comfortably accept psychological contradiction (Spencer-Rodgers et al. 2009).

Consequently, the Western and East Asian views of contradiction are fundamentally different (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Hence, we argue that consumer attitude towards inconsistent consumption preferences and the consumers' desire for the coherent identity narrative may differ between the West and East Asia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Because the concept of self is complex, the study required a research method with the ability to delve into the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of informants and to capture the social and situational contexts of those phenomena (Schouten 1991). The study was conducted in Japan, one of Asia's leading countries. Since the Japanese consumer market is mature as the one in Western counterparts such as the U.S, the selection of Japan allows us to control confounding. In-depth interviews with 28 Japanese informants (14 females and 14 males) were conducted. Our sample was composed of various age groups, from twenties to fifties. The informants were recruited using the research agency. They were given 10,000 yen (about \$100) for their participation. The interviews lasted three hours and were audiotaped. The data collection process took place between April 27 and May 13, 2009. All interviews were conducted in the local language (Japanese).

To obtain a first-person description of consumers' experience, the goal of the phenomenological interview, the interview was intended to yield a conversation with the informants. During the interview, a concerted effort was made to allow informants freely describe

their experiences in detail. Respondents were assured of anonymity (names are all pseudonyms). The questions and probes were aimed at bringing about descriptions of experiences and were not intended to confirm theoretical hypotheses. Such attempts were important to capture the true feelings of informants because Japanese people have a tendency to value social harmony and not to reveal their true inner feelings. In fact, one of the informants commented that "I'm talking a lot today. I can't talk about it [the topic] normally."

The luxury consumption was chosen as the specified domain of experience for this study. Luxury is nonessential that is closely associated with indulgence and hedonics (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). Consumers often show ambivalent attitudes towards luxury (Dubois and Laurent 1994). Furthermore, it is often associated with consumers' self-concepts (Vigneron and Johnson 1999). Hence, we assumed that the luxury consumption would be a good context to study consumers' multiple selves and consumption.

We used a hermeneutic process to analyze the text, first completing an emic analysis for each informant with regard to his/her multiple selves and luxury consumption experiences and then moving to an etic analysis by comparing our findings across the informants (Bahl and Milne 2010; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Findings were interpreted using an iterative process of going back and forth between our findings and those in the literature. Concepts from the literature were compared and contrasted with our findings to arrive at new insights.

CREATING A NARRATIVE: MULTIPLE SELVES AND CONSUMPTION IN JAPAN

Excerpts from an Interview with Erika: Worker-Self versus Private-Self

Erika is 24 years old OL (office lady) who lives with her parents and siblings. Now working at a bank, she has two selves – one as a banker (worker-self) and another as a private. As a banker, she invests in fashion to look professional. She comments about wearing a manicure:

Interviewer (I): Why do you think it's important to take care of your fingers?

Erika (E): Well... I wonder... My mother doesn't wear the manicure. So... My mother thinks I don't need to wear it. But... when I started to work, I felt that those who can take care even of their fingers appear to do well in their work. So, well... I began to wear the manicure.

Erika wears the manicure because she thinks that women wearing it portray the successful women. In her view, those who can pay careful attention to the details (as represented in wearing manicures on fingers) do well in the work. She also thinks it is important to look nice at work. Hence, she spends money on fashion including the manicure.

On a contrary, as a private-self, Erika has no interest in investing in fashion. She feels that fashion is a waste of money. She speaks with confidence that she will never spend money on a house dress.

E: I never experienced this [buying an expensive house dress], so I'm not sure, but I think this dress really addresses only me and not others. It's like I want to look nice even if there's no one around.

I: Do you think you'll purchase one in the future?

E: Well, I really doubt it. Even if I became to wear something nicer, I don't think I'll spend money on this [house dress].

I: Why is that?

E: Why? Well, let's see... I can't think of spending money on something that I'm not going to wear outside.

As the private-self, Erika has no concern to look nice. This is perhaps because her family admires the spirit of simplicity and frugality.

Although Erika has seemingly inconsistent preferences towards the fashion consumption, she seems to have no need to reconcile them. During the three hours interview, she told numerous episodes about her fashion consumption such as the manicure, lash extensions, depilation, and luxury brand wallet, but also told about her thoughts on fashion how it is not a necessity in life. At one side, she feels spending money on fashion is important and fun, whereas on the other side, she feels fashion is unnecessary and should be avoided. She has mixed emotions towards the fashion consumption. Although her fashion consumption preferences are inconsistent, she accepts them without any psychological tension. It seems that she simply makes distinction between outside (*soto*) and home (*uchi*). She says that "I can't think of spending money on something that I'm not going to wear outside," which indicates that she would spend money for public but not for private.

Excerpts from an Interview with Keiko: Duality of Japanese Self (*Omote* and *Ura* Dimensions)

Keiko is 23 years old OL working in the financial industry. She has just graduated from a highly reputable university in Japan. Like Erika, she now has the worker-self and private-self. In addition, she also has the friend-self which surfaces when she is with her former classmates.

Keiko also has two dimensions of self, *omote* (public-self that she shows to others) and *ura* (private, inner-self that she does not show to others). With *omote*-self, she adjusts consumption preference to fit with her friends. Such consumption preference is seemingly inconsistent with the one of her *ura*-self. To give an example, Keiko talks about drinking Dom Pérignon Rosé at the party with her friends:

Keiko (K): I don't like a carbonated drink, so I don't like champagne. I don't want to drink, but [others want to order. They say] 'let's order because it's expensive,' or 'we're going to order *pin-don* (abbreviated word for pink Dom Pérignon) today.' [...] [People consider that *pin-don* is] a must-have item for the party. Speaking the truth, I don't understand its price [...] I prefer *shochu* (Japanese spirits) or sake. [...]

Interviewer (I): How do you feel when you're drinking *pin-don*?

K: [...] it's not tasty at all. It's carbonated. I don't want it. [...]

I: Why do you drink it if it's not tasty?

K: Well, I don't [want to] order it but others want to.

Keiko shows her *omote*-self to her friends and hides her *ura*-self. With the *omote*-self, she hides her real drinking preference and adjusts it to her friends. Although she does not like champagne, she orders it because her friends want it. She does not mention her dislike of champagne nor order the other preferred drink such as *shochu* or sake.

Keiko's two-tiered self is also apparent in her opinion towards possessions such as the luxury brand handbag and watch. She has the Chanel handbag and Piaget watch to which her *omote* and *ura* selves have different opinions.

K: To tell the truth, I'm not materialistic. For a watch, if I can tell the time, it's enough. In reality, I'm such person. Still, [I feel good] when people tell me 'Wow, you're wearing that watch [Piaget watch]! How nice!' It's really Japanese-like. So, I think it's better to have one. It's like wearing armor. [...] It's same for a handbag. Really, I want to walk around empty-handed. If I have my cigarettes, wallet, and mobile phone, I'm fine. I want to put them in my pockets. But I'm a female [so I should carry around some kind of bag]. I can't be walking around with the supermarket's shopping bag. If I have the handbag of this sort [Chanel handbag], people tell me 'That's nice.' And I learnt. So I think it's better to have one. That's why I want it.

Keiko's *ura*-self has no interest towards the luxury brand goods; however, her *omote*-self needs them. She feels a need in order to fit in with society and survive (as reflected in her use of the armor metaphor).

Like Erika, Keiko does not seem to feel psychological tension from these seemingly inconsistent opinions between her *omote* and *ura* selves. Rather, she accepts *omote* and *ura* as the characteristics of Japanese society. Comparing Japan and New York (from her experience of visiting NY), she recognizes that *omote* and *ura* do not exist at NY. She comments that people are more plain and natural at NY. Still, she does not have negative feelings towards Japan. When the interviewer asked Keiko where she prefers to live, she chose Japan without hesitation.

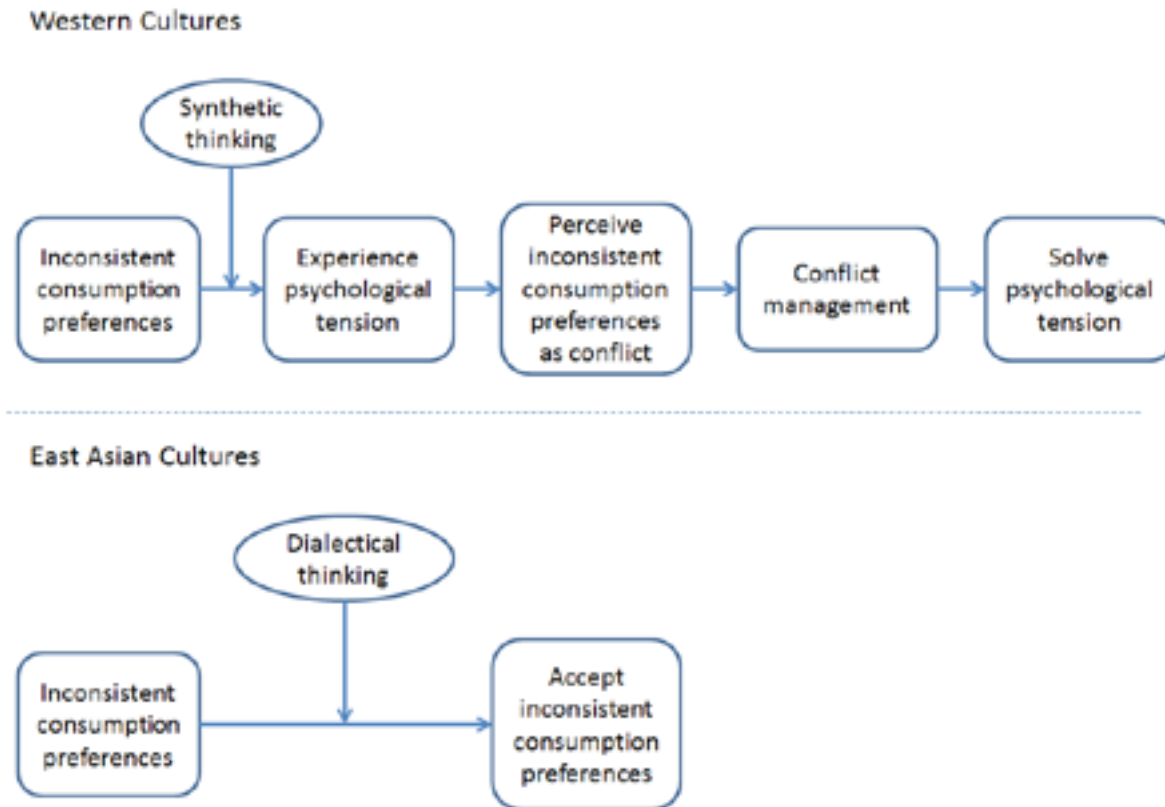
DISCUSSION

Western versus East Asian View towards Inconsistent Consumption Preferences

Erika and Keiko, like other informants, have multiple selves and inconsistent preferences towards consumption, but they don't seem to be uncomfortable with contradictions or attitudinal ambivalence. Is this uniquely Japanese? Westerners, like Japanese, also have multiple selves and are able to adjust to different social relationships and situations. The difference may be of the tolerance for holding apparently contradictory beliefs. Japanese, unlike Westerners, tend to tolerate psychological contradictions (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Whereas Westerners are uncomfortable with inconsistencies and perceive them as conflict (Ahuvia 2005; Bahl and Milne 2010), Japanese accept them without feeling much psychological tension. The model in figure 1 explains the differences between East Asia such as Japan and West on consumers' approach towards inconsistent consumption preferences.

We argue that the dialectical thinking allows East Asians to accept inconsistent consumption preferences without much psychological tension. Our informants show the tendency towards dialectical thinking. One of the characteristics of dialectical thinking is the acceptance of contradiction. For example, majority of participants speak about their contradicting view towards luxury consumption.

FIGURE 1
CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CONSUMER APPROACH TOWARDS INCONSISTENT CONSUMPTION PREFERENCES



On the one hand, they feel that luxury consumption is unnecessary. However, on the other hand, they consume luxury to fulfill their desire. They recognize that there is a contradiction; however, they simply accept it. Consider how Koji (male, age 44) speaks on this issue.

Koji: Under original Buddhism [...], recognition itself brings perplexity. For example, we look at water; then we think it is tasty or not tasty. [...] From the sense, all fantasies emerge. Well...when you come to think of it, various things including desire are evoked. So I deny it. [...] I don't think about the unnecessary things, such as what I need to do tomorrow or about a beautiful lady. In a nutshell, I don't think about those noises; rather, I feel that just being there is of greatest happiness. Honestly speaking, I think such way of thinking is best for human beings. Then, there would be no perplexity. [...] But having said that, I'm a vulgar person who lives in a secular world. So, I enjoy eating nice foods and talking with beautiful ladies. I was happy when I bought good things.

Koji speaks about how his beliefs and actions towards consumption are contradicting. He does not seem to be irritated by his contradictory thoughts, however. The tone of his voice remains calm. His comment 'I'm a vulgar person' suggests that he considers a vulgar person to be contradictory. Indeed, East Asians do possess more contradictory self-beliefs, attitudes, and values (Campbell et al. 1996; Choi and Choi 2002; Spencer-Rodgers et al. 2009; Wong, Rindfleisch, and Burroughs 2003), compared with Westerners.

Dialectical thinking is also characterized by the acceptance of changes. Consider how some of the informants have shown such changes in attitude and behavior. Ichiro (male, age 52) shows attitudinal change towards brands. He says that "I don't like brands. I

have a perverse opinion towards brands." Hence, when purchasing the condominium, he didn't choose the famous developer. Still, he now has a desire for Ferrari. He says that Ferrari is "an ideal. It's my aspiration." He admits that Ferrari's premium price includes the cost for its brand name; however, he still desires it. Shizue (female, age 36), like Erika and Keiko, show behavioral changes depending on the situation. Her behavior with friends is quite different from her behavior in private. Since marrying to the owner of game software company, she has friends who come from the rich background. However, she spent her childhood in poverty. Hence, when she is in the gorgeous places, she feels ashamed. She thus pays a careful attention and makes an extra effort when she is with her current friends. For example, when she goes to the restaurant with her friends, she matches her clothing and accessories to them. She says,

Shizue (S): I don't want to be rude to my friends when eating at a restaurant. My friends have very nice fashion goods, so when we go to the restaurant, I feel that I cannot take the 3,980 yen handbag.

Shizue feels that taking 3,980 yen handbag is improper when meeting her rich friends. So, she brings an expensive Hermès handbag. On the other hand, when she goes to casual, cheap restaurants such as fast food restaurants, most often alone, she feels that the Hermès handbag is improper. Depending on the situation, she drastically changes her behavior (i.e., dressing in this case) without any hesitation.

Multiplicity of Self for Japanese

We also argue that multiplicity of self for Japanese is culturally embedded; therefore, the Japanese consumers have less need

for the coherent identity narrative compared with Westerners. Anthropologists studying Japan have claimed that Japanese selves are multiple and changing (Rosenberger 1992). They demonstrate that the Japanese nurture multiple selves to reconcile what Westerners have viewed as oppositions in Japanese life such as public versus private life. The Japanese are multifaceted people who are subject to the influences that surround them, but shape selves creatively around a broad spectrum of social relationships and situations. They define and redefine themselves in relation to the social relationship. In addition to this shifting relational self, the Japanese also conceive the multiplicity of self in various dimensions such as in relation to objects, aspects of nature, and historical ideologies (Rosenberger 1992).

In the Japanese life, a series of antonyms, which include *soto* versus *uchi*, *omote* (in front; surface appearance) versus *ura* (in-back, what is hidden from others), and *tatemaie* (the surface reality) versus *honme* (inner feelings), appears in every sphere (Bachnik 1992). The meanings of these sets of terms are related; aspects of public / social cluster at one pole (*soto*, *omote*, *tatemaie*), while aspects of private / self cluster at one pole (*uchi*, *ura*, *honme*) (Doi 1986).

Japanese shift between two poles, adjusting their self to fit in a given social relationship and situation. From the childhood, Japanese learn to shift between two poles (Tobin 1992). Japanese select certain behavior, including choice, in consistency with social relationship and situation (Bachnik 1992). This is called *kejime*, the ability to make distinctions (Hendry 1986). *Kejime* indexes what kind of behavior or personality characteristic is appropriate; or how little emotion and self-expression is appropriate in a given situation (Bachnik 1992). Our informants also seem to be aware of *kejime*. For example, Keiko is very considerate of a social context. Consider the following comment that she speaks about living in a society:

K: After all, I'm not living alone. To live in a society, it's not okay that only I'm satisfied. For example, when walking in the city, I'm comfortable wearing sweatshirts and sneakers with my hairs loose. This may be okay to me, but [there are other people in the city and it may not be okay for them]. I need to worry about what others think of me and I can't live alone. At work, it's impolite if I'm not wearing a make-up.

Hence, Keiko accepts *omote* and *ura* dimensions of self, and shifts between the two according to the situations. Similarly, other informants also shift between social contexts of work and private, between the social group and the family, among friends, children, husbands or wives, and in-laws; among boss and staff; between the outer dimensions of self and inner self. Japanese consumers shift among multiple selves, instead of attempting to reconcile multiple selves and to construct a coherent identity narrative.

CONCLUSIONS

This study emphasizes the importance of redefining our understanding of multiple selves and consumption through data gathered in Japan. We argue that consumer approach towards inconsistent consumption preferences and the consumers' desire for the coherent identity narrative may differ between West and East Asia such as Japan. Our findings suggest that Japanese consumers experience less psychological tension facing their seemingly inconsistent consumption preferences. They therefore are accepting inconsistencies and have a less need for solving them. We also argue that the difference in consumer approach towards inconsistent consumption preferences may be due to the difference in tolerance toward contradictions. East Asians (including Japanese) have dialectical thinking and are more tolerant toward contradictions, whereas Westerners have synthetic

thinking and are less tolerant toward contradictions (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Findings also suggest the absence of consumers' need for a coherent identity narrative in Japan. We argue that shift among multiple selves are culturally embedded in Japan as reflected in the paired antonyms such as *soto* versus *uchi*, *omote* versus *ura*, and *tatemaie* versus *honme*.

Our findings suggest the absence of consumers' need for a coherent identity narrative in Japan. While consistency of the self-concept across different social relationships and situations may be less important in Japan than West, Japanese consumers may still have a need to maintain consistency within a specific social relationship and situation (English and Chen 2011). For example, Erika may seek consistency in her worker-self over time; and Keiko in her *omote*-self over time. As such, as English and Chen (2011) claim, pursuit of a consistent self-concept may be important in East Asian cultures such as Japanese as in Western cultures. However, we suspect that in the degree of consumers' consciousness about consistency may be much smaller in this case than in the case of maintaining consistency in self-image across different social relationships and situations. The reason is that while global self-concept is created and actively managed by the individual, social self (i.e., socially appropriate person image) is defined by the community like a cultural norm and shared by its members. Therefore, Western consumers who pursue the consistency in the global self-concept are more apt to be conscious about consistency as they define the attributes themselves. In contrast, East Asian consumers who pursue the consistency in the social self may be less conscious about consistency as they may be simply following cultural norms defined by the community.

In any case, none of our informants seem conscious about inconsistency across different social relationships and situations; therefore feeling no significant psychological tension facing own inconsistent consumption preferences. Future research could explore conceptual distinctions between different types of self-concept consistency and consumers' consciousness about consistency.

Furthermore, there are still some unanswered questions on East Asians' tolerance toward contradictions. For example, do East Asians have tolerance toward inconsistencies even within a specific social self and/or inner self? It could be argued that inconsistency of the self-concept across different social relationships and situations among East Asians can also be explained by the interdependent self-construal theory (Markus and Kitayama 1991) besides dialectical thinking. Since the principal goal of the interdependent self-construal is to maintain connectedness and harmony with others, it may be natural for the individuals with interdependent self-construal to change their attitudes across different social relationships. Thus, by examining the tolerance towards inconsistencies within a specific social relationship yet across varying situations (e.g., with a professor in classroom vs. in cafeteria) or within a varying situations not involving social relationships (i.e., inner-self) (e.g., consistency in brand preference of a yogurt at home or at office), it would be possible to disentangle the effects of dialectical thinking from that of interdependent self-construal. These questions require further exploration and examination.

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