Psychological Correlates of Chinese Buffet Preferences: Based on the Perspective of Cultural Self-Construal

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Accepted in June 2006
Available online

Abstract

This article examined whether two prominent characteristic of Chinese self-construal, contingent orientation and constrained autonomy, were related to their prevalent buffet preferences. Findings in a panel survey revealed that participants’ contingency was positively correlated with their buffet preferences, whereas autonomy was negatively correlated with this diet preferences. Moreover, the results showed that participants’ prior contingency and autonomy could predict their subsequent buffet preferences over a half-year period. Data from an experimental study showed that the lower autonomy participants perceived; the higher buffet preferences evoked. The results provide insights into market segmentation and strategy innovation in the international diet market.

Keywords: Autonomy; Contingency; Diet preferences; Panel study; Self-construal

1. Introduction

Because the change of economic structure and social trends directly or indirectly influence people’s dietary habits, more and more consumers in Taiwan expect to access to quick, hygienic, delicious, and inexpensive food (Chen, 1997). In recent years, all-you-can-eat cuisine has become a prevailing food-consuming pattern in Taiwan. From a common saying on the street, one can recognize the nationals’ fever about all-you-can-eat buffet: “There are three kinds of treasure (Pao) in Taiwan: health insurance (Chian Pao), labor insurance (Lao Pao), and 199 all-you-can-eat (Chih Tao Pao).” For the consumers, the food and beverage service of all-you-can-eat buffet not only allows them to enjoy abundant diet but get rid of the annoyance of ordering and waiting. Besides, consumers’ choices in buffet consumption are more flexible and multiple than those in set menu cuisine. The new diet pattern is thus relatively popular in Chinese diet market (Ai, 2001).

Although Chinese preference for all-you-can-eat buffet is quite popular, not any empirical study explores the psychological correlates of their buffet preferences. According to the review of past studies with respect to Chinese consumption in all-you-can-eat buffet, all of them employed management approach and focused on marketing strategy, promotion planning, customer behavior, and pricing, etc. For example, Ai (2001) once explored the operation and marketing strategies of all-you-can-eat buffets in international tourist hotels of Taipei city through depth-interviews. By conducting Delphi method, this research attempted to obtain the experts’ opinions with regard to the development of marketing strategy of all-you-can-eat buffet in international tourist hotels of Taipei city in the following five years. Lu (1997) has studied how consumers’ dietary self-efficacy, body image, and demographic factors affect their food selection behavior in buffet consumption as well as their evaluations on buffet price. Since Chinese buffet favor is prevalent (Ai, 2001; Lu, 1997; Su, 2000), one may further investigate this diet preferences from the perspective of cultural psychology. The present research focused on the prominent characteristics of self-construal in Chinese culture and examined whether they are associated with Chinese prevailing preferences for buffet consumption.

2. Chinese Self-Construal and Diet Preferences

In general, Chinese culture and Western culture exhibit extremely different self-construes that affect individuals’ recognition, emotion, and inner motives and thereby determine their behavior. Western culture regards oneself as an independent individual, stresses that one should be an “individualist” with high individuation, and further emphasizes that one should develop one’s distinct potential to seek for self-actualization, whereas Chinese culture tends to value the connectedness and interdependence between individuals and other people (e.g., Kim, 1997; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Voronov and Singer,
Chinese interdependent self-construal suggests that their internal characteristics such as capacity, opinions, judgments, and personality are contingent upon interpersonal interaction. These personal characteristics should be understood in a situation-specific manner (Triandis, 1989; Triandis et al., 1988). In other words, Contingency-oriented appears to be a prominent characteristic of Chinese self-construal.

Further, self-construes in Eastern and Western cultures are quite different which considerably affects individual’s development of autonomy. Western culture emphasizes one’s individualization and values the expression of one’s inner needs, rights, and capacity standing up to social pressure (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). However, in Chinese culture (Yang, 1992), an interdependent self-construal tends to regard the interdependence between an individual and significant others as an ultimate goal. Individuals in an interdependent self-construal culture (e.g., Taiwan in this article) are likely to restrain or hide their real selves in order to be recognized by significant others, family, and society (Yang, 1993). Their autonomy appears to be vulnerable compared to individuals in an independent self-construal culture in which personal autonomy is highly encouraged and respected (Hsu, 1981). Obviously, constrained autonomy tends to be another characteristic of Chinese self-construal. Contingency-oriented and autonomy were thus chosen in the present research.

Based upon differential self-construal across cultures, Lee and Green (1991) claimed that cultural self-construal would influence nationals’ behavior and consuming preferences. Roth (1995) also found that consumers’ preferences would be affected by social value system such as their culture. Thus, whether products or services meet social function is critically important in an interdependent self-construal culture. In the context of diet consumption, one will notice that all-you-can-eat buffet offers and attracts the customers with multiple choices and diverse cuisines (Ai, 2001; Su, 2000). If the characteristics in all-you-can-eat buffet are congruent with Chinese self-construal, one might further assume that their diet preferences would be associated with self-construal.

2.1 Contingency-Oriented and Chinese Preferences for Buffet Consumption

In terms of Chinese interdependent self-construal, situation-specific and contingent orientations play as crucial determinants that operate their overt behavior (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Contingency-oriented in Chinese self-construal means that individuals have to flexibly adjust personal decisions as well as expressions under different roles, interpersonal relations, and occasions (Yang, 1993). The market in an individualist culture reveals that one’s consuming preferences merely depend on individual’s free will (Roth, 1995). On the other hand, in order to acquire sense of belonging or to reduce the risk of not accepted by others, products or services in an interdependent self-construal culture is more likely to satisfy the demands of social function. Yang (1992) proposed that within social orientation in Chinese culture, individuals are likely to comply with others and concern about others’ opinions and feelings.

Consumers’ consumption in all-you-can-eat restaurants is usually collective and they rarely go alone (Ai, 2001). Buffet-style restaurants offer diverse and multiple options for meals and this will allow group members in collective consumption to choose their preferred meals contingently. Compared to other kinds of restaurants (e.g., set menu or single-cuisine ones), group members’ diverse preferences are easily to be satisfied with all-you-can-eat buffet. Moreover, seeking for interpersonal harmony and avoiding interpersonal disagreement and conflict are highly valued in Chinese culture (Kim and Markus, 1999; Yang, 1992). With respect to collective assumption, buffet not only satisfies group members’ diverse preferences more likely but also meets the social orientation of Chinese culture norms. Therefore, when other conditions (such as price, environment, service quality, etc.) are equivalent, Chinese consumers with higher contingent orientation would be more likely to prefer all-you-can-eat restaurants while deciding their diet consumption. The characteristic of contingency-oriented in Chinese interdependent self-construal may highlight the advantage of all-you-can-eat buffet over the others such as set menu or single-cuisine restaurants.

H1: Chinese contingency-oriented would be associated with their preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet.

2.2 Constrained Autonomy and Chinese Preferences for Buffet Consumption

Past literature consistently pointed out that the development and practice of Chinese autonomy appear to be restrained in major life events such as education, friendship, marriage, or occupation (Hsu, 1981; Yang, 1992, 1993). In such circumstances, Chinese consumers may seek for the compensation of personal independence in another field in order to redeem their constrained autonomy. Upon this point, sufficient freedom of choice and autonomous selection in all-you-can-eat buffet thus provide a convenient relief for Chinese consumers to regain their autonomy. Being free from the limited choices in set menu or single-cuisine restaurants (Ai, 2001; Lu, 1997; Su, 2000), buffet restaurants might be more likely to satisfy Chinese’s psychological needs due to their constrained autonomy. Based upon the above rationale, one might assume that if a Chinese consumer has less autonomy in major life events, he or she would be more likely to seek for compensatory satisfaction through all-you-can-eat buffet compared to the one who has high autonomy with the living aspects.
H2: Chinese perceived autonomy would be related to their preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet.

In general, the present research employed two quantitative methods; a panel survey and an experiment, to examine whether contingency and autonomy are psychological correlates of Chinese buffet preferences. The first study aimed to explore if contingent orientation and constrained autonomy, the prominent characteristics in Chinese self-construal, were both associated with their preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet. The second study employed a laboratory experiment to investigate on the effect of perceived autonomy on buffet preferences.

3. Study One

3.1 Participants and Design

Participants are Taiwanese adolescents since the major consuming population of all-you-can-eat buffet is young generation (Ai, 2001; Lu, 1997; Su, 2000). The population was stratified into three demographic areas: Northern, Central, and Southern Taiwan. A longitudinal study with six-month time lag was conducted in collaboration with 23 buffet restaurants. Nine hundred and twenty consumers were recruited to participate in the first survey. They were asked to finish a series of questionnaires about their contingency and autonomy in major life events as well as their preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet. There were 684 participants who mailed back their responses. The response rate was 74 percent. After six months, the questionnaires of the second survey were mailed to those participants in the initial sample. After excluding the data with missing value, obvious response bias, and subject loss at posttest, there were 530 Taiwanese adolescents as the formal sample. Among them, there are 286 males and 244 females.

The panel analysis of Study 1 was conducted with the cross-lagged panel design (Cook and Campbell, 1979). The framework of this design was shown in Figure 1, “variable A” is contingency or autonomy, where as “variable B” is buffet preferences. Subtitled numbers signify the timing of measurements: “1” denotes the pretest and “2” denotes the posttest. Test-retest reliability coefficients are calculated by the correlation of A1 and A2 as well as the B1 and B2. The correlations of A1B1 and A2B2 are defined as the synchronous coefficients, which are used to examine if the relationship of two test variables are stable and consistent over time. The correlations of A1B2 and B1A2 are defined as the panel coefficients and they are used to explore the predictive relationships of two test variables. More specifically, rA1B2 is used to examine if individuals’ prior contingency or autonomy may predict their subsequent buffet preferences, whereas rA2B1 is used to examine if individuals’ prior buffet preferences may predict their subsequent contingency or autonomy.

![Figure 1. The Cross-Lagged Panel Analysis](image)

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Contingency

Contingency was measured by the respondents’ evaluations on the contingent orientation while making decisions on major life events. The Contingency Scale for Taiwanese Adolescents (CST) was self-developed for the specific purpose of this study. Twenty-one initial items were developed according to the development task model (Havighurst, 1972) and the Seven Vectors Model (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). One hundred and two participants were recruited as a preliminary sample for item analysis. Those items which failed to increase internal consistency reliability and their item-scale correlations were not significant were excluded from the pool. The formal scale consisted of 15 items, which measure the contingency on a 6-point scale from “least contingently” to “very contingently.” Higher scores represent higher contingent orientation in participants’ making decisions on major life events. Cronbach $\alpha$ of the formal scale was .93 and the test-retest reliability was .69 over a half-year period. All the item-total correlations (ranged from .55 to .72) of the CST were significant at $p < .01$, which showed satisfactory internal consistency (Anastasi and Urbina, 1996).

3.2.2 Autonomy

As to the measurement of autonomy, items of the Autonomy Scale for Taiwanese Adolescents (AST) were the same as those of the CST, which were major life events for adolescents. Participants were asked to rate their perceived autonomy on a 6-point scale from “totally constrained” to “totally autonomous.” Higher scores represent greater perceived autonomy in their making decisions on major life events. The coefficient of internal consistency reliability was .95 and the test-retest reliability was .93 over a half-year period. The item-total correlations (ranged from .60 to .80) were all significant at $p < .01$, and the results indicated that the AST showed satisfactory internal consistency.

3.2.3 Buffet Preferences

Preference for all-you-can-eat buffet was measured by relative preference in the choice alternatives of diet consumption. Relative preference for buffet restaurants over
single-cuisine and set menu restaurants was measured on a non-graded scale with two end points: “Single-cuisine or set menu restaurants are more attractive (on the left end)” and “All-you-can-eat buffet restaurants are more attractive (on the right end).” Participants were asked to rate the relative preferences under other consuming conditions (price, atmosphere, transportation, service quality, and decoration styles) are constant in two alternatives. There are 10 occasions which were selected from a preliminary study (N = 202) as the most frequent diet consuming conditions, such as birthday celebration, peer get-together, victory celebration, banquet for appreciating teacher, date, family meeting, during travel, festival celebration, etc. Respondents’ evaluations on each occasion were later quantified by measuring the distance from the left end of the scale to the mark reflecting the relative preference between two end points. Responses were then standardized on a 100-point scale (also see Chernev, 2001, for a similar scaling) so that 1 signified “strong preference for single-cuisine or set menu restaurants” and 100 signified “strong preference for all-you-can-eat buffet restaurants.” Mean of preference scores across 10 occasions was computed for subsequent analysis.

3.3 Results

According to the results of normality testing and the Means of measures in this study (see Table 1), respondents’ contingency was towards the lower end on a 6-point scale, where as their autonomy was towards the higher end on a 6-point scale at both pretest and posttest. The results not only indicated that participants’ contingency-oriented and constrained autonomy were magnificent but also showed that they appeared to be the prominent characteristics among Chinese participants. Participants’ buffet preferences over other diet styles at pretest and posttest were both significantly higher than the midpoint (μ = 50) of a 100-point scale at p < .001 (t (529) = 14.17 at pretest and t (529) = 16.82 at posttest, respectively). The findings revealed that participants’ exhibited greater preference for buffet consumption over the others.

To test the hypotheses, contingency and autonomy were served as predictor variables, and the relative preference of buffet restaurants and the others was treated as a criterion variable. Multiple regression analysis was conducted with the pretest and posttest data respectively (see Table 2).

According to Table 2, overall model testing at both pretest and posttest were significant (Adjusted R^2 Pretest = .46, F (2, 527) = 227.09, p < .001; Adjusted R^2 Posttest = .19, F (2, 527) = 62.93, p < .001, respectively). The regression coefficients at pretest revealed that contingency was positively correlated with buffet preferences (β = 0.60, t (528) = 18.48, p < .01), whereas autonomy was negatively correlated with buffet preferences (β = -0.23, t (528) = -7.02, p < .01). In the posttest data, the coefficients of contingency (β = 0.37, t (528) = 9.30, p < .01) and autonomy (β = -0.22, t (528) = -5.62, p < .01) also exhibited a similar pattern with the findings found at pretest. Together these findings indicated that participants’ contingency and autonomy appeared to be the significant predictors of their buffet preferences.

The cross-lagged panel analysis (Cook and Campbell, 1979) was further conducted to test whether the relationship of contingency (or autonomy) and buffet preferences is stable over time and whether prior contingency (or autonomy) may predict subsequent buffet preferences. Results of the cross-lagged panel analysis were presented with the correlation matrices in Table 3.

For the relationship between contingency and buffet preferences, the synchronous coefficients in the pretest and posttest data were both significant at p < .01 (r = .64 at pretest and r = .38 at posttest, respectively). The results replicated the findings found in regression analysis and indicated that participants’ contingency was positively correlated with their buffet preferences. Moreover, the correlations of contingency and buffet preferences were relatively stable over a half-year period.
Table 3. Correlations Matrixes of the Cross-lagged Panel Analysis

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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross-lagged panel analysis of contingency and buffet preferences</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Contingency at pretest</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Buffet Preferences at pretest</td>
<td>.64(^a)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Contingency at posttest</td>
<td>.69(^b)</td>
<td>.38(^c)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Buffet Preferences at posttest</td>
<td>.57(^c)</td>
<td>.84(^b)</td>
<td>.38(^c)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-lagged panel analysis of autonomy and buffet preferences</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Autonomy at pretest</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Buffet preferences at pretest</td>
<td>-.34(^*)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Autonomy at posttest</td>
<td>.93(^b)</td>
<td>-.28(^c)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Buffet Preferences at posttest</td>
<td>-.32(^c)</td>
<td>.84(^b)</td>
<td>-.25(^*)</td>
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</table>

N = 530. All correlations were significant at p < .01. a The synchronous coefficients. b The coefficients of test-retest reliability. c The panel coefficients.

According to the panel coefficients, they were both significant at p < .01. Specifically, participants’ contingency at pretest was positively correlated with their buffet preferences at posttest (r = .57); and participants’ buffet preferences at pretest was also positively correlated with contingency at posttest (r = .38). The results indicated that participants’ prior contingency was positively associated with their subsequent buffet preferences. Furthermore, the difference between the two panel coefficients was significant (t (527) = 2.75, p < .01), and the finding revealed that the predictability of prior contingency towards subsequent buffet preferences was greater than the reverse direction.

With regard to the cross-lagged panel analysis of autonomy and buffet preferences, the synchronous coefficients were both significant at p < .01 (r = -.34 at pretest and r = -.25 at posttest, respectively). These findings indicated that participants’ autonomy was negatively associated with their buffet preferences. The results revealed that the correlations of autonomy and buffet preferences were quite stable over a half-year period and also showed a consistent pattern in line with the findings observed in regression analysis. The panel coefficients showed that participants’ prior autonomy was negatively correlated with their subsequent buffet preferences (r = -.32, p < .01), and their prior buffet preferences were also negatively correlated with subsequent perceived autonomy (r = -.28, p < .01).

In conclusion, the hypotheses (H\(_1\) and H\(_2\)) were supported by the empirical findings found in the present study. Contingent orientation and constrained autonomy are distinct characteristics among Chinese consumers and they are closely related to buffet preferences.

4. Study Two

The aim of the present study was to examine the impact of consumers’ perceived autonomy on their buffet preferences. This study was conducted with a laboratory experiment and the findings could be compared to the results of the first study to achieve more reliable conclusions. However, contingent orientation is a trait-like construct, and it is not appropriate for experimental manipulation. Therefore, this study only examined the effect of perceived autonomy on buffet preferences.

4.1 Participants and Design

There were 288 college students who participated in this experiment to receive course credits. Perceived autonomy was manipulated between-subjects. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions (low vs. moderate vs. high autonomy) with block-random method in groups of three. In the high autonomy condition, male students were 52 and female students were 44. Forty-two male students and 54 female students were in the moderate autonomy condition. As to the low autonomy condition, there were 46 male students and 50 female students.

4.2 Procedure

Participants’ perceived autonomy was manipulated with the emotional-event recollection technique (Leith and Baumeister, 1996), which was designed to enable them to experience various levels of autonomy through the recall of major life events. The emotional-event recollection was disguised by a self-reflection study for real purposes. Participants were informed that the major purpose of the research was “to explore the relationship between self-reflection and decision-making”. Before starting to recall past life events, participants received a booklet describing self-reflection as the “ability to re-experience personal past events with significant meaning here and now.” To increase involvement with this task, participants were further told that “people with better self-reflection are found to be better parents, lovers, couples, and managers, and they tend to learn lessons from experiences which enable them to avoid making the same mistakes.”

Next, each participant was presented with the instruction of one of the three levels of perceived autonomy conditions. In the high autonomy condition, participants were asked to recall two major life events in which they felt the strongest sense of control and sufficient autonomy. On the contrary, respondents who were assigned to the low autonomy condition, they were asked to recall two major life events that made them feel the weakest sense of control and autonomy. For the moderate autonomy condition, they recalled one major life event with a higher sense of control and the other one with a lower sense of control.

Each participant was offered enough time to get involved in the recollection procedure. Yoked-control method was employed to control the duration of participants’ recollections for each session. After participants reported that they were capable of reentrance in the re-
called life events, they were asked to rate their affective state and sense of control in life on a 7-point scale for manipulation check. Finally, each respondent was then asked to imagine if they want to go for a meal with the present mood they experienced; which kind of diet style is more preferable.

4.3 Dependent Measure

Relative preference for all-you-can-eat buffet over single-cuisine or set menu restaurants was measured on a non-graded scale with two end points “All-you-can-eat buffet restaurants are more attractive” and “Single-cuisine or set menu restaurants are more attractive.” Participants were asked to rate the relative preference without considering other conditions relevant to diet preferences (such as price, atmosphere, transportation, service quality, and decoration styles). Respondents’ evaluations of the relative preference were transformed into a 100-point scale as the method employed in the first study. So the 1 signified “strong preference for single-cuisine or set menu restaurants” and 100 signified “strong preference for all-you-can-eat buffet restaurants.”

4.4 Results

Manipulation check was conducted before the formal analysis. Respondents’ sense of control in life and positive affective states were used to examine the perceived autonomy manipulation. Descriptive statistics of the measures in this study were shown in Table 4.

For participants’ sense of control in life, one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of the perceived autonomy manipulation (F(2,285) = 26.46, p < .001). Further trend analysis indicated that individuals with higher level of perceived autonomy exhibited higher sense of control, (F(1,285) = 52.16, p < .001).

With regard to participants’ affective states, positive affective states (happiness and joy) should be positively correlated with their perceived levels of autonomy. A linear trend of the perceived autonomy on positive affects was significant (F (1, 285) = 150.10, p < .001), and this finding indicated that the higher levels of perceived autonomy, the higher scores on positive affective states. The results in manipulation check indicated that the perceived autonomy manipulation was satisfactory.

After manipulation check, ANOVA was then conducted to examine if the perceived levels of autonomy affect participants’ buffet preferences. Result showed that a main effect of the perceived autonomy was significant (F(2,285) = 61.46, p < .001). Subsequent trend analysis revealed a linear effect (F(1,285) = 121.82, p < .001), which indicated that individuals with lower perceived autonomy generated higher preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet over other diet styles. Follow-up contrasts revealed that the participants in the low autonomy group (MLow = 71.79) exhibited significantly higher preferences than those in the moderate autonomy group (MModerate = 46.97) (t (285) = 6.43, p < .001), whereas the participants in the moderate autonomy group showed significantly higher preferences than those in the high autonomy group (MHigh = 29.32) (t (285) = 4.61, p < .001).

In conclusion, the data from an experimental study suggests that Chinese consumers’ buffet preferences were negatively associated with their perceived levels of autonomy, which was also congruent with the findings obtained in the first study. The autonomy date in the two quantitative studies consistently shows that Chinese consumers’ autonomy is closely related to their preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of the Measures in Study Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Perceived Autonomy Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of control</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive affective states</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffet preferences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>71.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>29.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each group consisted of 96 participants. Sense of control and positive affective states were both rated on a 7-point scale. Buffet preferences were rated on a non-graded scale and later transformed into a 100-point scale. Higher scores represent greater preferences for buffet restaurants.

In the cross-lagged panel analysis, the results indicated that the perceived autonomy was positively related to the dependent variable, which was also congruent with the findings obtained in the first study. The findings of the cross-lagged panel analysis echoed a stable relationship between contingency and buffet preferences over a half-year period. Interdependent self-construal exhibits situation-specific and contingent orientation in making decisions (Roth, 1995). All-you-can-eat buffet provides abundant dish as a primary appeal (Ai, 2001; Su, 2000). “Multiple and flexible choices” in buffet consumption comply with the characteristic of Chinese contingency-oriented. Chinese consumers who are more contingency-oriented in their major life events appear to exhibit a similar inclination towards their diet consumption.

5. General Discussion

The research employed a panel survey and a laboratory experiment to explore the determinants of Chinese buffet preferences based on two prominent characteristics of their self-construal, namely, contingent orientation and constrained autonomy. For Chinese contingency-oriented, the results of Study 1 found out that it was positively correlated with their buffet preferences and also played as a significant predictor of the diet preferences. The findings of the cross-lagged panel analysis echoed a stable relationship between contingency and buffet preferences over a half-year period. Interdependent self-construal exhibits situation-specific and contingent orientation in making decisions (Roth, 1995). All-you-can-eat buffet provides abundant dish as a primary appeal (Ai, 2001; Su, 2000). “Multiple and flexible choices” in buffet consumption comply with the characteristic of Chinese contingency-oriented. Chinese consumers who are more contingency-oriented in their major life events appear to exhibit a similar inclination towards their diet consumption.
With regard to autonomy, Chinese autonomy in making decisions on major life events tends to be vulnerable (e.g., Hsu, 1981, Yang, 1982). This is because to satisfy significant others’ expectations and to concern the interdependence are highly valued in a culture with high interdependent self-construal (Triandis, 1989; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990). Buffet, which offers sufficient autonomy in choosing dishes and enables consumers to avoid limited the annoyance of ordering meals, may provide the Chinese with a convenient way to compensate their constrained autonomy experienced in major life events. The outcomes of Study 1 seem to support the above argument. Findings indicated that those participants who felt lower autonomy in major life events exhibited greater preferences for buffet over other diet styles such as single-cuisine or set menu dish. Moreover, the results of the cross-lagged panel analysis not only revealed that the negative correlation of participants’ autonomy and their buffet preferences was stable but also pointed out that their prior autonomy was significantly correlated with subsequent buffet preferences over a half-year period. These findings suggest that due to the prevalent constrained autonomy in Chinese, they tend to adopt diet consumption as a channel to compensate their need for autonomy. Chinese, who have lower autonomy in major life events, may be more likely to obtain substitute satisfaction through the consumption of all-you-can-eat buffet. In general, Chinese consumers’ autonomy in major life events might be associated with their buffet preferences.

Further, participants’ buffet preferences in the first study were measured on an attitude scale that consisted of 10 occasions. Their evaluations on the relative preference of buffet and other diet styles might reflect a persistent conation. Moreover, the correlations of participants’ contingency (or autonomy) and buffet preferences in the longitudinal data were stable over a half-year period. Thus, Chinese consumers’ autonomy in major life events appears to be associated with their “trait-like” buffet preferences.

The results of Study 2 also supported that Chinese perceived autonomy would affect their preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet. It indicated that the higher perceived level of autonomy, the stronger references for all-you-can-eat buffet over other diet styles. Except need for autonomy-compensation, the notion of “affect-as-information” (Schaller and Cialdini, 1990; Zillmann, 1988) might also explain the observed findings. It suggests that individuals’ moods or affective states tend to involve in decision-making at the very moment. For the people who are experiencing negative affective states, they would actively proceed with strategic actions or decisions in order to compensate or alter negative moods. In order words, the adjustment of affective states would be one of the main objectives when individuals are making decisions and thus affect the preference of choice alternatives (Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz and Clore, 1988). Following the above rationale, lower perceived autonomy might result in negative affective states. The finding of Study 2 revealed that participants’ perceived autonomy affected their choices of diet consumption. Thus, the findings of the second study further suggest that buffet consumption is likely to be used for both autonomy-compensation and mood-repair purposes. Furthermore, the perceived autonomy manipulation in the present experiment was temporary and the measurement of buffet preferences was immediate, it might conclude that Chinese “state-like” preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet would be influenced by their immediate consciousness of felt autonomy.

5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

First, the research employed two quantitative research methods: survey and experiment. However, Chinese preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet could be also explored by conducting qualitative methods such as depth-interviews, projective techniques, collage research, and metaphor analysis. Via the comparison and complementarity of the findings found in both quantitative and qualitative research, the underlying mechanism of Chinese prevalent preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet can be further understood.

Second, the samples in this research were Chinese young generations. Future research may employ the samples with cross cohorts and ages to examine the external validity of the results obtained in this research. After all, to explore and construct the underlying mechanism of the nationals’ diet preferences from the perspective of cultural psychology, a nation-wide sample will allow one to develop more generalized explanations and arguments. Moreover, this article focused on psychological correlates of buffet preferences among Chinese consumers. Because all participants were Chinese, no attempt had been made to make any comparison between Chinese and non-Chinese in the present data. Cross-cultural studies may shed lights on whether consumers’ psychological correlates of buffet preferences are culture-bounded.

Third, Chinese self-construal appears to be interdependent and their consuming habit in all-you-can-eat restaurants is group consumption. Based upon the characteristics of “relationship-orientation” and “favor-orientation” in Chinese culture (Huang, 1987; King, 1991; Yang, 1992), future studies may further examine if the nationals with high “favor-orientation” will be more likely to prefer all-you-can-eat buffet when deciding their diet consumption, particularly for the group dinner party.

Finally, findings in this research indicated that Chinese contingent orientation and constrained autonomy were associated with their buffet preferences. As to the individuals of Western culture with an independent self-construal, diverse choices in all-you-can-eat buffet may be less likely to attract them, because an individualist
culture values the uniqueness of personal expression (Yang, 1992). Besides, individuals’ individuation and autonomy are highly encouraged in a culture with independent self-construal (Kim, 1997; Lee and Green, 1991). Their autonomy is less vulnerable than in a culture with interdependent self-construal such as Chinese. Therefore, buffet consumption might be less likely to employ for an autonomy-compensation purpose in an individualist diet market.

5.2 Managerial Implications

Culture, a concept crucial to the understanding of consumer behavior, determines the overall priorities that the consumer attached to different activities and products, and it also mandates the success of failure of specific products and services. Since this research has demonstrated that contingency-oriented in Chinese self-construal was closely related to their diet preferences. For marketers or managers who want to target cultures with high interdependent self-construal (e.g., Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, and Turkey, and Thailand; Triandis, 1989), “multiple choices” and “a flexible combination of diverse cuisines” may be attractive appeals that resonate with the characteristics of consumers’ self-construal.

In terms of Chinese inclination towards autonomy-compensation, both studies consistently found that Chinese consumers with lower autonomy exhibited greater preferences for all-you-can-eat buffet over single-cuisine and set menu restaurants when other consuming conditions are equivalent. Buffet consumption may serve as an alternative channel to compensate their constrained autonomy. Thus, “sufficient autonomy” and “freedom of choice” appear to be crucial criteria on diet consumption for Chinese consumers whose autonomy is restrained in major life events. Marketers what to break into Chinese diet market may monitor the development and practice of autonomy among the nationals. If Chinese autonomy is still vulnerable under the impact of interdependent self-construal, all-you-can-eat buffet could be promoted as compensation for their constrained autonomy. On the other hand, when Chinese autonomy is not as vulnerable as it was before, the effectiveness of a promotion through autonomy-compensation would be undermined.

As to market segmentation, contingency-oriented in Chinese culture may provide an effective basis for cultural segmentation because it has been identified as a predictor of Chinese buffet preferences. The results also suggest that Chinese buffet preferences are related to their perceived autonomy. Thus, autonomy may also serve as a basis for psychological segmentation. Based upon that contingency and autonomy are psychological correlates of Chinese buffet preferences, marketers can further conduct the hybrid segmentation approach by combining the two prominent characteristics of Chinese self-construal to obtain accurately defined consumer segments in Chinese buffet market.

Further, culturally distinct segments can be prospects for the same product but often are targeted more efficiently with different promotional appeals. For Chinese with high interdependent self-construal, buffet might be promoted as multiplicity and freedom of choice. As to individualists with high independent self-construal (e.g., Europeans and Americans), they are more likely to be appealed by reinforcing their senses of self-identity and uniqueness. Thus, buffet might be promoted as free from the limitation of set menu or single-cuisine dish.

In general, findings in this research supported the view of marketers who endorse an emic perspective that stresses variations across culture. This perspective emphasize that each culture is unique, with its own value system, conventions, and regulations. An effective strategy must be tailored to the sensibilities and needs of each specific culture because each country has a national character, a distinct set of behavior and personality characteristics (also see Clark, 1990, for a similar viewpoint). The present research demonstrated that both contingency-oriented and autonomy-compensation were the crucial needs and wants of Chinese consumers in buffet consumption. Marketers may also develop a variety of dishes that are designed to appeal directly to Chinese consumers in terms of their contingent orientation and seeking for autonomy-compensation. Overall, researchers or practitioners who wish to investigate on foreign diet markets must think globally and act locally if we are what we eat.

References


