

The Cultural Difference In Nonverbal Expressivity Is Moderated By The Extent of Subjective Self-Construal: A Two-Study Examination Targeting Japanese And Korean Individuals

Youngsun Yuk¹ , Mariko Kikutani² 

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Corresponding Author:

Youngsun Yuk

Graduate School of Human and Socio-Environmental Studies, Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, Japan. Email: yysring@hotmail.com

Abstract: This research comprises two studies that examined cultural differences in nonverbal expressivity between Japan and Korea. While prior research has highlighted East–West contrasts, less attention has been given to distinctions within collectivistic cultures. Employing the psychological construct of self-construal (subjective, objective, and autonomous selves), which is thought to distinguish Japanese and Korean cultures, we investigated how these dimensions relate to nonverbal expressiveness. Two questionnaire-based studies were conducted with Japanese and Korean undergraduates. The study measured participants' extent of the three types of self-construal and nonverbal expressivity. Study 1 included 284 Japanese and 272 Koreans. Autonomous self-construal was omitted in this study. Study 2 replicated the design with 189 Japanese and 199 Koreans, incorporating autonomous self-construal. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether culture (Japan and Korea), the three types of construal, and culture × self-construal interaction predict nonverbal expressivity. The main effect of culture was observed in both studies, indicating greater expressivity among Koreans. Also, the culture × subjective self-construal interaction was consistently found, showing that higher subjective self-construal predicted greater nonverbal expressivity among Koreans but lower expressivity among Japanese. Subjective self-construal signifies motivation to influence others in interpersonal relationships, and the interaction effect is interpreted in relation to culturally endorsed communication styles in Japan and Korea. Objective and autonomous self-construal were not strongly related to nonverbal expressivity. The present findings challenge the assumption that nonverbal communication styles are relatively uniform across collectivistic cultures and underscore the importance of self-construal for understanding cultural variations in emotional communication.

Keywords: Self-Construal, Emotion Expression, Nonverbal Communication, Emotional Communication, Japanese and Korean cultures

1. Introduction

Nonverbal expressions of emotion, such as facial expressions, gestures, vocal tone, posture, and eye contact, are fundamental components of interpersonal communication, providing cues that clarify and reinforce verbal messages (Daibo, 1991; Lee & Matsumoto, 2011). Cross-cultural research has long demonstrated that culturally shared norms shape emotional expression. Western cultures generally emphasize expressivity, viewing overt facial and bodily signals as essential to positive social engagement (Matsumoto et al., 2008). In contrast, Eastern cultures tend to endorse emotional moderation, believing that suppressing overt expressions helps preserve social harmony (Matsumoto et al., 2008; Nisbett, 2003).

Despite the rich literature on cultural influences on emotional expression, prior research has predominantly relied on an East–West contrast, characterizing Westerners as expressive and Easterners as restrained (Butler et al., 2007; Kang et al., 2003; Song et al., 2024). Such generalizations overlook meaningful variations within each cultural group. Regarding East Asians, recent work shows that their expressive norms are far from uniform (Kikutani et al., 2024), and these intra-regional differences can create misunderstandings or relational tension in intercultural communication contexts (Ishii & Eisen, 2018; Kim & Sherman, 2007; Matsumoto, 1990). This growing evidence underscores the need to examine nonverbal expressivity not only across cultural blocs but also within the East Asian cultural sphere. So, the present research examined how nonverbal expressivity differs between Japanese and Koreans and investigated the psychological mechanisms underlying these differences.

Although there are many combinations of East Asian countries to choose from for the investigation, we believe that the Japan-Korea combination is particularly suitable for comparing nonverbal expressivity. Firstly, robust differences in communication styles between the two cultures have been documented and researched (see Kikutani et al., 2024), providing a solid foundation for the present research. Secondly, despite reported differences in communication styles, these countries share several cultural characteristics. For example, people's ethnicities, lifestyles, and political structures are very similar in Japan and Korea. This

¹ Graduate School of Human and Socio-Environmental Studies, Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, Japan

² Institute of Liberal Arts and Science, Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, Japan

suggests that these factors can be disregarded as causes of differences in nonverbal communication styles, indicating that the differences are related to psychological constructs.

Instead of relying on broad cultural constructs such as individualism–collectivism, we focused on self-construal, a culturally shaped system of self-definition that guides interpersonal motivations and communicative behavior. The theoretical framework of self-construal is believed to distinguish Japanese and Koreans relatively clearly (Cho et al., 2005; Kim et al., 1990; Yeoun, 2010). Therefore, the present research aimed to investigate 1) whether nonverbal expressivity and the characteristics of self-construal differ between Japan and Korea, and 2) the relationship between nonverbal expressivity and self-construal. The following section summarizes relevant literature comparing the nonverbal expressivity of Japanese and Koreans, along with descriptions of self-construal and the expressivity scale used in the research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Japanese–Korean Differences in Nonverbal Expressivity

Although Japan and Korea are geographically proximate and share many sociocultural similarities, their norms of emotional display differ substantially. Japanese individuals tend to restrict or soften their emotional expressions, reflecting the cultural ideal of *wa* (和), which prioritizes group harmony and discourages behaviors that may disrupt social cohesion (Ishii & Eisen, 2018; Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989). Excessive expressiveness is often viewed as socially inappropriate or even disruptive, and individuals are expected to regulate emotional signals to maintain relational balance (Matsumoto, 1990).

In contrast, Koreans tend to display more open, intense emotional expressions, especially in close interpersonal relationships (Lee, 2018). This tendency is closely tied to *Jeong*, an indigenous concept signifying deep emotional attachment, reciprocity, and a commitment to relational maintenance. Unlike Western notions of love or friendship, "*Jeong*" is not confined to familial or romantic relationships but extends to a wide range of social bonds, including collegial relationships and even acquaintances. Koreans believe that "*Jeong*" evolves and solidifies through the free and uninhibited exchange of emotions (Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kim et al., 2008), because trust should be built on honesty.

Japan and Korea's distinct cultural norms are reflected in their nonverbal expressions. Comparative research has consistently shown that Japanese individuals display lower facial expression intensity than Koreans (Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989; Lee & Matsumoto, 2011). Regarding anger expression, for example, Lee & Matsumoto (2011) found that Korean participants expressed anger immediately and overtly, using distinct facial expressions, an elevated vocal tone, intense gestures, and direct eye contact. In contrast, Japanese participants chose to use silence or avoid eye contact. Korean's open style and Japanese's restricted style were also found for nonverbal expression of happiness (Lee, 2018). The use of physical contact (e.g., holding hands and linking arms) to convey emotions also differs between the two cultures. Choi (2024) found that Korean university students viewed physical contact between friends as a natural and positive expression of intimacy and trust. On the contrary, Japanese students regarded them as uncomfortable or intrusive.

2.2. Theoretical Framework of Self-Construal

This research focused on the framework of self-construal as a psychological construct that differs between Japanese and Koreans. Self-construal refers to culturally shaped ways in which individuals define and understand themselves in relation to others. The traditional framework proposed by Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguishes between independent and interdependent self-construal. Independent self-construal, prevalent in individualistic cultures, emphasizes autonomy, uniqueness, and personal goal pursuit. In contrast, interdependent self-construal, commonly observed in collectivistic cultures such as Japan, Korea, and China, emphasizes relational harmony, social roles, and connectedness.

Although this binary model has been influential in explaining broad cultural patterns of emotion and behavior, it has been increasingly criticized for its limitations in capturing within-culture variability (Cross et al., 2011). East Asian societies differ considerably in how individuals define themselves in interpersonal contexts. To address these limitations, Han et al. (2016) proposed a multidimensional model comprising three distinct self-construal dimensions: subjective, objective, and autonomous selves. Studies consistently show that the prominence of these three dimensions differs between Japanese and Koreans (Han et al., 2016; Inumiya & Kim, 2006; Inumiya et al., 2007).

The subjective self represents a relational mode of self-definition in which individuals view themselves as central and agentic participants in interpersonal contexts. Rather than defining the self through externally prescribed roles or expectations, individuals high in subjective self-construal rely primarily on internal criteria, such as personal wishes, ideals, and visions, when interpreting their place within social relationships (Han et al., 2016; Inumiya & Kim, 2006; Inumiya et al., 2007; Noh & Lee, 2020; Ryu et al., 2014). This form of selfhood reflects the belief that one's intentions and internal motivations hold meaningful influence over relational dynamics. Empirical evidence indicates that subjective self-construal is characteristic of Korean cultural contexts, in which individuals are motivated to construct the self as a capable and influential presence in social interactions (Inumiya, 2009).

The objective self refers to a self-definition grounded in external standards, including social norms, role obligations, and others' expectations (Inumiya & Kim, 2006; Inumiya et al., 2007; Noh & Lee, 2020; Ryu et al., 2014; Suh et al., 2016). Individuals high in objective self-construal tend to perceive themselves as peripheral or receptive figures within relational structures. Their identity is organized around maintaining harmony, fulfilling socially shared expectations, and adjusting to contextual demands. This orientation is associated with heightened relational sensitivity and an emphasis on situating the self in accordance with collective norms. Cross-cultural research identifies objective self-construal as particularly salient in Japanese cultural contexts, where individuals are more likely to define themselves through the perspectives and evaluations of significant others (Inumiya & Kim, 2006; Inumiya, 2009).

The autonomous self reflects a mode of self-definition anchored in personal values, internal attributes, and self-determined goals, relatively independent of immediate relational contexts (Inumiya et al., 2007). Although autonomy is traditionally associated with Western cultures, research demonstrates that it is also a meaningful dimension of selfhood in East Asian contexts (Han et al., 2016). The autonomous self is theoretically distinguished from the subjective self in that the former reflects

self-guidance based on internally endorsed principles, whereas the latter focuses on relational influence or social positioning. Individuals high in autonomous self-construal prioritize internal coherence and personal authenticity as foundational elements of identity.

The distinction between the subjective and autonomous self-construals is most notable in their relational orientation and functional roles in social interaction. Subjective self-construal is inherently interpersonal and influence-oriented, whereas personal goal fulfillment among individuals with a high level of autonomous self is not necessarily directly linked to taking initiative in social relationships. They may do so if it helps preserve their personal values and authenticity, but otherwise they would not (Inumiya et al., 2007; Han et al., 2016). Such differences have been confirmed empirically, with studies examining the relationship between the subjective and autonomous selves and internal criteria such as self-esteem. Only subjective self-construal was consistently linked to interpersonal dominance, sociability, and active engagement in social influence processes, whereas autonomous self-construal showed weaker or nonsignificant associations with these relational tendencies (Han et al., 2016; Inumiya et al., 2007).

Prior cross-cultural studies show that Koreans tend to report higher subjective self-construal, whereas Japanese individuals tend to report higher objective self-construal (Han et al., 2016; Inumiya & Kim, 2006; Inumiya et al., 2007). The difference in self-construal appears to correspond to the nonverbal expressiveness of Japanese and Koreans, who are, respectively, restrictive and open. Therefore, we hypothesize that self-construal level affects the extent of nonverbal expression in the two groups. More precisely, individuals with high levels of subjective self-construal, who view themselves as central agents in social interactions, would seek to express their internal emotions and influence others through active, explicit nonverbal communication. Conversely, those with high objective self-construal, prioritizing social harmony and relational roles, may show relatively low levels of nonverbal expressivity.

2.3. The Affective Communication Test (ACT)

The present research used the Affective Communication Test (ACT; Friedman et al., 1980), which is a widely used self-report instrument that measures individual differences in nonverbal expressiveness. It is a 13-item scale that assesses expressive tendencies across multiple channels, including facial movements, gestures, vocal tone, posture, and bodily movements. Individuals with high ACT scores tend to communicate emotions vividly and often take socially central or expressive roles. The ACT has been validated across cultures. Konoo et al. (2008) found that higher ACT scores were associated with extraversion and openness. Running (2011) reported that ACT scores positively correlate with charismatic communication and leadership-related behaviors. The scale has also been adapted into Japanese (Daibo, 1991), and culturally appropriate versions show adequate reliability and validity in East Asian contexts. Because the ACT measures spontaneous expressive tendencies, it is an appropriate tool for examining cultural differences in nonverbal expressivity between Japan and Korea.

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical background above, this study sets the following research questions: 1) Do Japanese and Koreans differ in the extent of nonverbal expressivity? 2) Do Japanese and Koreans differ in the extent of the three types of self-construal? 3) Are the relational patterns between the three types of self-construal and nonverbal expressivity identical between the two cultures?

Some predictions can be made about these questions, summarized as hypotheses below. For the first question, we expect Koreans to be more expressive than the Japanese (H1). For the second question, Koreans are expected to have a higher subjective and autonomous self than the Japanese, whereas the opposite pattern is expected for the objective self (H2). For the final question, we hypothesize that individuals with higher subjective self-construal and who are highly motivated to exert influence on others would show greater nonverbal expressivity. On the contrary, individuals with a higher objective self would tend to suppress expression, leading to reduced nonverbal expressivity (H3). However, the pattern of the relationship between nonverbal expressivity and self-construal may differ between cultures. For example, although having a high subjective self is expected to be associated with high nonverbal expressivity, whether this pattern is observed depends on culture. Since this last point is exploratory, there is no clear prediction about which self-construal interacts with culture and how it affects nonverbal expressivity. So, the possibility of the interactional effect was set as a hypothesis here.

Below are the summarized hypotheses based on the above predictions.

H1: *Koreans will exhibit higher levels of nonverbal expressivity than Japanese individuals.*

H2: *Koreans will score higher on subjective self-construal, whereas Japanese individuals will score higher on objective self-construal.*

H3: *Individuals with higher subjective self-construal will show greater nonverbal expressivity, whereas those with higher objective self-construal will show less nonverbal expressivity.*

H4: *The association between self-construal and nonverbal expressivity will differ across cultures.*

4. Transparency and Originality Statement

A portion of the data used in this manuscript has appeared in earlier publications; Study 1 was published in Japanese in the Bulletin of the Faculty of Sociology, Toyo University, a non-peer-reviewed university repository, and Study 2 has been published in the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences. However, the present study is an original and substantially distinct contribution. Previous works analyzed Japan–Korea differences under the assumption of cultural universality—namely, that the association between self-construal and nonverbal expressiveness does not vary across cultures. In contrast, the current manuscript addresses an entirely different research question by explicitly testing the interaction between culture and self-construal. This analytical approach reveals a previously undocumented form of culture-contingent emotional regulation. Moreover, the present study adopts theoretical frameworks not used in earlier publications (e.g., culturally endorsed leadership prototypes) to interpret cross-cultural differences in nonverbal expressivity. Finally, the present manuscript includes an expanded methodological evaluation—such as a detailed discussion of measurement limitations, response-style biases, and

cultural validity issues, which was not addressed in the earlier works. For these reasons, the manuscript constitutes an original, non-duplicative contribution to the field of intercultural communication research.

5. Methodology

5.1. Participants

The present research comprises two studies with nearly identical procedures. Participants were all university undergraduates in both studies. The minimum sample size was determined based on a power calculation described at the end of the data analysis section. Study 1 involved 284 Japanese (119 males, 165 females, $M = 20.96$, $SD = 1.27$) and 272 Koreans (155 males, 117 females, $M = 21.74$, $SD = 1.52$). Study 2 included 189 Japanese (97 males, 92 females, $M = 19.11$, $SD = 1.22$) and 199 Koreans (117 males, 82 females, $M = 20.77$, $SD = 1.57$). University students, rather than samples from the working population, were chosen to ensure cultural equivalence between the two groups in terms of age, educational background, and financial background.

5.2. Measures

Three questionnaires were administered. The first assessed participants' demographic characteristics, including nationality, gender, and age.

The second questionnaire was the self-construal scale (Han et al., 2016), which measures subjective, objective, and autonomous self-construal. Eighteen items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = to a great extent). Example items for subjective self include "It is important that I possess leading control over all situations" and "I wish to have the power to lead others." Examples for objective-self are "It feels easier when someone tells me what to do rather than I tell them" and "I am a follower rather than a leader." Finally, example autonomous items were "I feel comfortable making decisions by myself" and "It is important to me to be independent and self-dependent." Study 1 measured only subjective and objective self, whereas all three were measured in Study 2.

The final questionnaire was the Affective Communication Test (ACT; Friedman et al., 1980), a 13-item scale using a 9-point response format (1 = not at all true of me; 9 = very true of me) assessing individual differences in nonverbal expressiveness. Example items include "I show that I like someone by hugging or touching that person" and "I usually have a neutral facial expression." A validated Japanese version (Daibo, 1991) was administered to Japanese students. A Korean version was developed through standard back-translation procedures (Beaton et al., 2000; Epstein, 2015), beginning from the Japanese version due to linguistic similarity. Two bilingual psychologists independently translated the items from Japanese to Korean, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. A bilingual person unfamiliar with the original items back-translated the Korean version into Japanese. Cronbach's alphas obtained in the current study were above .70 and acceptable (see Tables 1 and 2).

5.3. Procedure

All questionnaire items were compiled in an online survey using Google Forms. Participants completed the survey during class sessions. The first page included an informed consent statement describing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, confidentiality, and participants' rights. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any time without penalty. Only those who provided consent proceeded with the survey. The procedure was approved by the ethical committee of the first author's affiliation (No. P240002; approved April 02, 2024).

6. Data Analysis

SPSS (version 27) was used for analysis. The data from all participants were used since there were no missing values, outliers, or potential violations of statistical assumptions. Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) and multiple regression were used to test hypotheses. To examine cultural differences in nonverbal expressivity (H1) and in the three types of self-construal (H2), one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare Japanese and Korean participants. Effect sizes were reported using partial eta squared (η_p^2). ANOVA was chosen to demonstrate simple mean-level cultural differences in nonverbal expressivity and self-construal, since such comparisons directly indicate whether H1 and H2 are confirmed. A more finely grained multi-group comparison was conducted next using regression analysis.

To test the hypothesized relationships between self-construal and nonverbal expressivity (H3) and the interactional effects of culture and self-construal on nonverbal expressivity (H4), multiple regression analyses were performed. Standardized regression coefficients (β) and 95% confidence intervals were reported. ACT scores served as the dependent variable. Predictor variables were culture (Japan and Korea), subjective, objective, and autonomous self-construal scores, and their interaction terms. The predictors were entered into the regression model using a stepwise method. In Step 1, culture (0 = Japan, 1 = Korea) and three types of self-construal scores (subjective, objective, and autonomous) were entered. In Step 2, the interaction term (culture \times subjective self) was added. It should be noted that Study 1 omitted the autonomous self-construal scale. Significant interaction terms and significant changes in R^2 were interpreted as evidence of moderation. Normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were evaluated using residual plots, skewness and kurtosis values, and variance inflation factors (VIFs). No violations that would compromise the interpretation of the findings were detected.

A power calculation was performed for the regression design of Study 2, using Free Statistics Calculators, ver. 4 (<https://www.danielsoper.com/statcalc/calculator.aspx?id=1>). Anticipated effect size (f^2), desired statistical power level (1 - β), and probability level (α) were set as 0.15, 0.80, and 0.05, respectively. The number of predictors was 7 (culture, three types of self-construal, three types of culture \times construal interactions). The minimum required sample size was determined to be 103.

7. Results

7.1. Study 1

In Study 1, the mean scores for the self-construal scale and ACT were calculated for each participant. For the self-construal, the subjective-self score and objective-self score were calculated. For the ACT, the scores for six items (2, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 11)

were reversed so that higher mean scores indicated greater nonverbal expressivity. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the self-construal and ACT variables are displayed in Table 1. The table also reports inter-item reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the questionnaire variables.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the self-construal and ACT scores and their correlations in Study 1.

Variables	α	M	SD	1	2
all ($n = 556$)					
1 SS	0.90	3.51	1.24	—	
2 OS	0.80	3.60	0.89	-0.10 **	—
3 ACT	0.80	4.76	1.30	0.22 ***	0.19 ***
Japan ($n = 284$)					
1 SS	0.74	2.65	0.78	—	
2 OS	0.76	3.25	0.73	-0.60 ***	—
3 ACT	0.83	4.36	1.33	0.10	0.06
Korea ($n = 272$)					
1 SS	0.85	4.40	0.98	—	
2 OS	0.77	3.97	0.90	-0.59 ***	—
3 ACT	0.71	5.18	1.12	0.10	0.09

Note. SS = Subjective self; OS = Objective self; ACT = Affective Communication Test. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The three scores (subjective and objective self, and ACT) for the Japanese and Korean samples were compared using a one-way ANOVA. The analyses revealed that the Koreans scored significantly higher than the Japanese for the subjective self, $F(1, 554) = 550.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .50$, the objective self, $F(1, 554) = 106.96, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$, and the ACT, $F(1, 554) = 61.09, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .01$. While higher scores for the Koreans were anticipated for subjective self-construal and the ACT, an equally elevated score for objective self-construal was unexpected. However, when the subjective and objective self-scores were compared within each cultural group, the hypothesis that Koreans are more subjective-self-oriented and that Japanese are more objective-self-oriented is supported. Japanese participants showed higher objective-self scores than subjective-self scores, whereas Korean participants showed the opposite pattern. These differences were statistically significant.

A multiple regression analysis with the stepwise method was performed to examine whether participants' culture and the self-construal scores predict the ACT. The result for the Step 1 model showed $R^2 = .102$, which was statistically significant, $F(3, 552) = 21.97, p < .001$. The Step 2 model demonstrated an improved explanatory power with $R^2 = .113$, which was a statistically significant change, $\Delta R^2 = .013, F(5, 550) = 15.08, p < .05$. In the Step 2 model, the effect of culture, $\beta = .241, 95\% \text{ CI } [.17, .51], p < .01$, and the culture \times subjective-self interaction was significant, $\beta = .150, 95\% \text{ CI } [.07, .37], p < .01$. Other variables were not significant. All predictors' VIF values were below 5, indicating no multicollinearity. The interaction between culture and subjective self is plotted in Figure 1.

This interaction was further examined using simple slope analyses conducted separately for the Japanese and Korean data. The slope was insignificant for both cultures (Japanese, $b = -.170, p = .072$; Koreans, $b = .113, p = .141$).

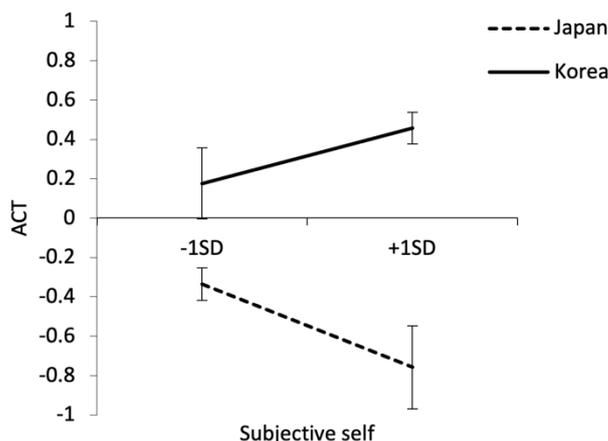


Figure 1: The interaction effect of culture and subjective self on ACT in Study 1.

7.2. Study 2

The same analyses as in Study 1 were conducted for Study 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the self-construal and ACT variables are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the self-construal and ACT scores and their correlations in Study 2.

Variables	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4
all ($n = 388$)							
1 SS	0.89	3.46	1.21	—			
2 OS	0.75	4.31	0.98	-0.55 ***	—		
3 AS	0.74	3.80	0.81	0.17 **	-0.08	—	
4 ACT	0.74	4.62	1.16	0.27 ***	-0.08	0.10*	—

Variables	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Japan ($n = 189$)							
1 SS	0.73	2.71	0.77	—			
2 OS	0.58	4.77	0.84	-0.48 ***	—		
3 AS	0.75	3.53	0.71	0.05	-0.07	—	
4 ACT	0.74	4.35	1.07	-0.03	-0.04	0.10	—
Korea ($n = 199$)							
1 SS	0.87	4.18	1.12	—			
2 OS	0.79	3.89	0.90	-0.34 ***	—		
3 AS	0.70	4.06	0.82	-0.09	0.19 **	—	
4 ACT	0.72	4.87	1.18	0.28 ***	0.07	-0.02	—

Note. SS = Subjective self; OS = Objective self; AS = Autonomous self; ACT = Affective Communication Test. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Mean-level differences between Japanese and Korean participants were examined using one-way ANOVAs. Korean participants scored significantly higher than Japanese participants for all the measures: subjective self, $F(1, 386) = 226.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .37$; the objective self, $F(1, 386) = 98.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$; the autonomous self, $F(1, 386) = 45.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$; the ACT scores, $F(1, 386) = 21.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. However, as in Study 1, within-culture comparisons indicated that Korean participants were relatively more subjective-self oriented, whereas Japanese participants were relatively more objective-self oriented. A multiple regression analysis examined whether participants' culture and the self-construal scores predict the ACT. The analysis was identical to the previous study, except for the addition of the autonomous-self scores. The result for the Step 1 model showed $R^2 = .088$, which was statistically significant, $F(4, 383) = 9.219$, $p < .001$. The Step 2 model showed an improved explanatory power with $R^2 = .119$, and the change in R^2 was also significant, $\Delta R^2 = .031$, $F(7, 380) = 7.31$, $p < .01$. In the Step 2 model, culture significantly predicted ACT, $\beta = .163$, 95% CI [.04, .34], $p < .05$, and so did subjective self, $\beta = .145$, 95% CI [.00, .28], $p < .05$. For the interactions, one between culture and subjective self, $\beta = .192$, 95% CI [.09, .37], $p < .01$, and one between culture and objective self was significant, $\beta = .126$, 95% CI [.03, .31], $p < .01$. These results were reported in Figure 2 and Figure 3. No other variables significantly predicted the ACT. The VIF values for all predictors were below 5, indicating no multicollinearity.

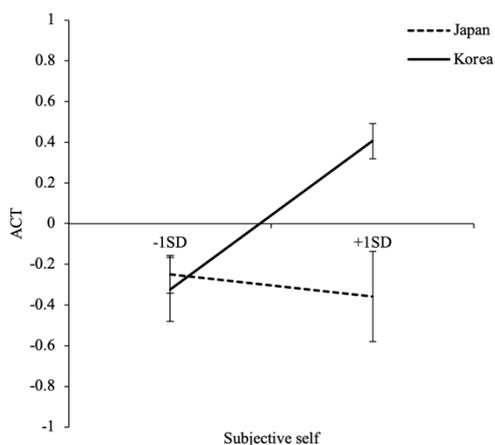


Figure 2: The interaction effect of culture and subjective self on ACT in Study 2.

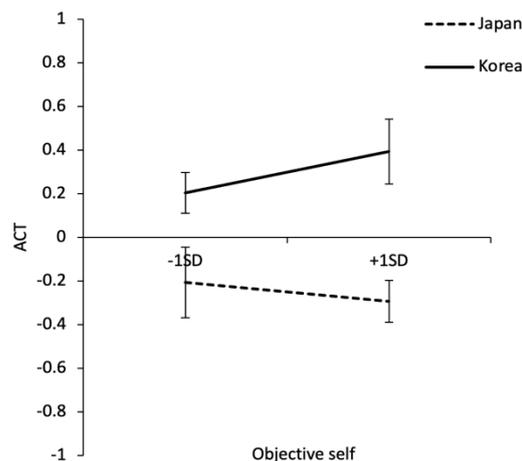


Figure 3: The interaction effect of culture and objective self on ACT in Study 2

Simple slope analyses were conducted for the two significant interactions. For subjective self, the slope was significant for Korean participants, indicating that higher subjective self-construal was associated with significantly higher ACT scores ($b = .301$, $p < .001$), whereas this association was not significant among Japanese participants ($b = -.044$, $p = .673$). Neither slope was significant for the objective self.

8.1. Key findings

The present research investigated the relationship between self-construal (subjective, objective, and autonomous) and nonverbal expressivity in two cultures, Japan and Korea. Four hypotheses were set, which were (H1) Koreans will exhibit higher levels of nonverbal expressivity than Japanese individuals, (H2) Koreans will score higher on subjective self-construal, whereas Japanese individuals will score higher on objective self-construal, (H3) Individuals with higher subjective self-construal will show greater nonverbal expressivity, whereas those with higher objective self-construal will show less nonverbal expressivity, and (H4) the association between subjective self-construal and nonverbal expressivity will differ across cultures.

Regarding H1, the mean ACT scores were higher for the Koreans. It was also supported by the regression analyses of the two studies, which showed a significant effect of culture. Thus, H1 was supported. For H2, Korean participants reported higher mean scores for the three types of construal than Japanese participants. Although it was expected that Japanese responses would exceed Korean responses for the object self-construal scores, this was not observed. Importantly, however, comparisons of subjective- and objective-self scores within individuals confirmed that Koreans tend to be more subjective-self-oriented, whereas Japanese are more objective-self-oriented. Therefore, H2 was supported at the individual level, not at the group mean level. We suggest that some response bias may underlie the generally higher scores of Koreans, which we further discussed in Section 8.3.

On H3 and H4, a key finding of the multiple regression analysis was that culture and subjective self-construal interacted to influence nonverbal expressiveness. No strong impact of objective self-construal was found. It was anticipated that a higher

level of subjective self would be associated with greater expressiveness, as individuals with high subjective self typically perceive themselves as socially influential and are motivated to express their internal emotions during interpersonal interactions. However, both studies showed significant culture \times subject-self interaction. The interactive effects apparent in Figures 1 and 2 suggest that H3 for subjective self was supported only among the Korean participants, whereas a reversed pattern was observed among the Japanese.

As previous research has shown, the Japanese prefer modest, restrained nonverbal communication (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2016; Nakai, 2002) and are especially cautious about physical contact (Choi, 2024). Thus, the results for Japanese individuals indicate that those with a higher subjective self are more strongly conforming to Japanese social norms than those with a lower subjective self. It may be because individuals with a strong subjective self wish to exert social influence on others, and following social norms is the best way to do so. In Japan, people prefer to be influenced by those working towards group harmony; thus, individuals with a high subjective self may carefully regulate their emotional expression styles to follow social norms. This control is likely to result in lower overall ACT scores among people with high subjective self than among those with low subjective self, who do not strongly wish to influence others.

In contrast to the Japanese, Koreans prefer more open and exaggerated nonverbal expressions, which they regard as crucial for optimal social interaction. Thus, Korean individuals with a higher subjective self would follow such social norms more diligently than those with a lower subjective self, resulting in a pattern opposite to that observed in the Japanese data. The statistical evidence for opposite directions between Japanese and Koreans was not particularly strong in the present research, as not all simple slope analyses in the two studies reached statistical significance (the Japanese slope was marginally significant in Study 1, and the Korean slope was significant in Study 2). However, the significant interaction was observed consistently across the two studies, supporting H4 for subjective self.

Regarding objective self-construal, a similar but less prominent interaction pattern was found in Study 2. Surprisingly, the pattern for the objective-self is identical to that for the subjective-self. This result suggests that high objective-self Koreans and low objective-self Japanese are more conforming to social norms regarding emotional expression than their counterparts are. However, neither slope was significant, and this effect was not observed in Study 1. Also, inter-item reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the Japanese objective self (.58) was below the acceptable level (.70). Thus, the validity of this relationship is questionable.

8.2. Culturally endorsed leadership prototypes (CLTs) and subjective self-construal

The interactional effect of culture and self-construal found in the present research can be further explored from the perspective of appropriate nonverbal expressiveness for leaders. Notably, ideal leadership characteristics are reported to differ markedly between Japan and Korea. According to culturally endorsed leadership prototypes (CLTs), Japanese leadership ideals emphasize modesty, interpersonal warmth, and relational harmony, reflecting a culturally preferred form of restrained, self-effacing leadership (House et al., 2004; Hirai & Suzuki, 2016). In contrast, Korean leadership prototypes highlight charisma, decisiveness, and expressive relational engagement, who are often perceived as emotionally dynamic and relationally influential (House et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2017). The GLOBE study by House et al. (2004), which examined the characteristics of highly valued leadership in 62 countries, confirmed that leaders who matched the CLTs were highly evaluated by members of each culture.

Although Japan and Korea are both collectivistic cultures that emphasize group harmony, the pathways to achieving it differ, and the ideal leadership prototypes appear to signify such contrasting pathways. As noted by Kikutani et al. (2024), Koreans tend to pursue cohesion through mutual trust and honest emotional exchange, whereas Japanese collectivism emphasizes self-restraint and role-based coordination. These culturally distinct routes to harmony shape how emotional expression is valued and interpreted within each society. In Korean interpersonal culture, being open and emotionally transparent is often equated with sincerity and moral integrity (Kim et al., 2010). Expressive gestures and facial cues are not seen as excessive but rather as essential signals of trustworthiness and psychological closeness (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2016). Accordingly, high expressivity helps maintain social bonds and reinforces the sense of Jeong—a deep emotional attachment that underpins relational solidarity. In contrast, Japanese collectivism values humility, self-criticism, and restraint, discouraging overt self-assertion and promoting subtle, context-sensitive communication (Heine et al., 1999; Triandis et al., 1995; Heine, 2020).

Among the three types of self-construal used in the present research, the subjective self is most relevant to leadership, since it reflects individuals' tendencies to take initiative in interpersonal relationships and exert influence on others. These leadership ideals are likely to mirror the broader cultural preferences for emotional expression styles observed in the present research. Accordingly, individuals with a strong subjective self would likely regulate their expressivity to align with these cultural prototypes, amplifying in Korea and downregulating in Japan, to maximize their chances of influencing others.

This logic also provides insights into the reason why the objective and autonomous self did not consistently predict expressivity. Objective self-construal emphasizes conformity and sensitivity to others' expectations but lacks the motivational drive to exert influence. The autonomous self emphasizes internal autonomy but is not strongly tied to interpersonal engagement. Therefore, it is likely that the influence-seeking nature of the subjective self, moderated by cultural norms for appropriate expression, yields the strongest intercultural differentiation. This framework highlights that emotional expressivity in collectivistic societies is not a fixed cultural trait, but a contextually regulated communication strategy governed by shared cultural ideals.

8.3. Limitations

The present research has several methodological and conceptual limitations that should be addressed in future work. First, nonverbal expressivity was measured exclusively using the self-report ACT. Although ACT scores capture individuals' subjective assessments of their expressive tendencies, they do not indicate whether others perceive these tendencies similarly. This reliance on a single method limits the robustness of inferences about actual expressive behavior. Incorporating behavioral or observer-rated indicators—such as video-based coding of facial action units, gesture amplitude, or vocal tone, would substantially enhance the ecological validity of cross-cultural assessments of expressive behavior (Friedman et al., 1980).

Second, culture in the present study was operationalized solely through self-construal. Although self-construal provides a theoretically rich account of culturally shaped psychological orientations, relying on a single cultural index constrains interpretation. Additional cultural variables that capture nuances within East Asian contexts should be examined. One particularly relevant construct is relational mobility, the degree to which individuals have opportunities to form, maintain, or leave interpersonal relationships (Yuki et al., 2007; Thomson et al., 2018). Because relational mobility meaningfully differs between Japan and Korea and predicts patterns of emotional exchange, trust-building, and interpersonal communication, integrating this construct may clarify why subjective self-construal predicts expressive amplification among Koreans but expressive restraint among Japanese.

Third, culturally patterned response biases were not statistically controlled. Japanese respondents tend to prefer midpoint responses and avoid extreme categories (Harzing, 2006; Takahashi et al., 2002), whereas Koreans more frequently choose extreme responses (Kim & Sohn, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Sohn, 2016). These tendencies complicate comparisons of psychological scales at the mean level across cultures. Such bias can occur in any questionnaire, so the bias observed in the present research does not diminish the reliability of the self-construal scale or the ACT in particular. However, future research should apply analytic methods such as within-person standardization and ipsatization, and add extra procedures to questionnaires, such as anchoring vignettes to minimize response-style heterogeneity and strengthen the cross-cultural validity of statistical inferences.

Fourth, the research sample was limited to university students. There are merits to targeting them as described in Section 5.1, but their age or lifestyles may also influence self-construal. Therefore, generalization of the present study requires caution. It is important to establish whether the cultural tendency of self-construal (e.g., Japanese are more objective-self-oriented while Koreans are more subjective-self-oriented) is consistent across people's age and occupation. The quality and purpose of interpersonal communication can differ depending on whether the person is a student or a worker, and this may affect the extent of a particular self-construal. For example, subjective self-construal is generally higher among the working population than among students, because work-related interpersonal relationships require greater initiative. Therefore, the present research needs to be replicated across different populations to strengthen its claim.

8.4. Future research

Future research addressing the above limitations will be fruitful. Also, it will be beneficial to pay more attention to generational and contextual factors that can alter the salience of cultural norms. Generational factors, such as globalization, urbanization, and exposure to digital communication, may reshape display norms, especially for younger cohorts, potentially reducing traditional Japan–Korea gaps. Relational context between the expressors and others (e.g., equal or hierarchical relationship) is likely to alter the tendency for high subject-self individuals to follow social norms. The open communication style is likely to be most strongly enhanced in peer or low-power interactions among Koreans. In contrast, the restrained style of Japanese should be intensified in formal or hierarchical contexts. Finally, norm importance can be highlighted or degraded by experimental manipulations. For example, explicitly conveying expectations about whether to follow (or not to follow) social norms may alter the expressivity of high subject-self individuals.

8.5. Practical implications for intercultural communication

Findings of the present research should contribute to intercultural communication, not only between Japanese and Korean individuals, but also between members of other cultures, especially those in East Asia that were not targeted in this research. The findings that the distribution of the three types of self-construal (subjective self, objective self, and autonomous self) varies across cultures, and nonverbal communication style is related to self-construal, suggest that it is possible to estimate preferred communication styles within a culture based on its dominant self-construal. The opposite is also true: estimating dominant self-construal in the culture from a preferred nonverbal communication style. Such an estimate can provide helpful guidance on appropriate communication for people moving to or traveling to another culture. A large number of people move within an individualistic/collectivistic sphere to increase cross-cultural communication within that sphere. In Japan and Korea, a significant number of individuals migrate between the two countries (see Statistics Bureau of Japan, <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/index.html>), making communication between Japanese and Koreans common. Misaligned expectations about appropriate nonverbal expressivity can lead to tension, misjudgments of sincerity, and reduced rapport, even between people from neighboring East Asian cultures. Findings of this research should help such communication.

The findings that people who hope to influence others tend to choose communication styles that strictly follow cultural norms can also have several practical implications for intercultural communication. People with bosses from different cultures can better understand their leadership strategies by considering their bosses' cultural norms. Those who are to be leaders in an international context need to realize that culturally specific strategies are not always effective. These are examples from the workplace, but the principles should also apply to interpersonal relationships in educational and healthcare settings, such as those between teachers and students or doctors and patients. It is important to understand that differences in communication styles exist even among neighboring cultures, such as Japan and Korea, which share historical, linguistic, and ethnological features.

9. Conclusion

The present research advances an intercultural account of nonverbal expressivity by demonstrating that subjective self-construal functions as a culture-contingent regulator of emotional display. Across two studies, higher subjective self-construal predicted amplified expressivity among Koreans but attenuated expressivity among Japanese. These findings challenge the view that collectivistic cultures uniformly suppress emotion, instead revealing meaningful intra-collectivistic diversity. The findings also have the potential to contribute to intercultural communication. Overall, the research provided a unique framework for understanding how culturally grounded self-views regulate nonverbal expressivity in Japan and Korea.

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About the author



Youngsun Yuk is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Human and Socio-Environmental Studies, Kanazawa University, Japan. Her research focuses on emotion recognition and cross-cultural psychology. She is particularly interested in cultural differences in emotional suppression and emotional expressivity, as well as how these cultural dynamics influence emotional communication and perception.



Mariko Kikutani is an associate professor at the Institute of Liberal Arts and Science, Kanazawa University, Japan. She was awarded her PhD in 2009 from the University of Essex, UK, and worked there as a postdoctoral researcher funded by the Economic and Social Council (2009 – 2010). She has also worked at Doshisha University in Kyoto (2013-2018) and Toyo University in Tokyo (2018-2019). Her research focuses on face perception, emotion recognition, the psychology of language, and cross-cultural psychology. She is particularly interested in comparing emotion concepts across cultures.