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**Diffusion of Self-Gift Consumer
Behavior in Interdependent Cultures:
The Case of Self-Reward Consumption
Practice in Japan**

Executive Summary



Satoko Suzuki

**DBA Candidate
Graduate School of International Corporate Strategy
Hitotsubashi University**

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In today's competitive environment, the firms are increasingly challenged to expand their businesses by creating new consumption practices that may not be compatible with the existing cultural values. But, how can the firms involve consumers to take actions that may not be appropriate in their cultures?

This dissertation draws on the case of self-reward consumption practice in Japan to explore the above managerial question. The self-reward consumption is a huge phenomenon today in Japan and the self-reward segment is one of the few growing segments in many of the stagnated/shrinking industries such as jewelry, hotel, department stores, and beer. However, the emergence of self-reward phenomenon in Japan is somewhat peculiar. The self-reward behavior has not fit Japanese traditional values which have emphasized the interdependence with others (Hamaguchi, 1985; Kondo, 1990; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and criticized focus on the self and egocentricity (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Literatures on self-gifts (e.g., Mick & DeMoss, 1990a) have also suggested that the self-gifting behavior including self-rewarding may depend on an individually-centered view of self, and questioned the existence of such behavior in cultures dominant with a group-centered view of self.

This dissertation explores how the self-reward consumption behavior has become to be accepted in the Japanese society despite the cultural hindrance. The author carefully examines the history of self-reward consumption practice and the communication contents about self-reward consumption. This dissertation is comprised of the three studies that adopt various research methods. First study is an historical analysis (Golder, 2000) of self-reward consumption practice in Japan that illustrates the consumers' attitudinal change towards the self-reward consumption. The author evaluates 2,094 articles about the self-reward consumption from 1988 to 2009. Second and third studies are the thorough content analyses of communications that endorse the self-reward consumption. By adopting multiple methods including the qualitative content analysis (Altheide, 1987), interpretive analysis (Hirschman, 1990; Mick & DeMoss, 1990a; Zhao & Belk, 2008), and quantitative content analyses (Humphreys, 2010a; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2007), the author carefully assesses the significance of rhetoric in changing the consumer attitudes towards self-reward consumption. For second study, the author evaluates 284 print advertisements and press releases that endorsed the self-reward consumption from 1994 to 2009. For third study,

the author evaluates 515 female magazine articles about the self-reward consumption from 1990 to 2009.

The findings illustrate the significance of rhetoric in changing the consumer attitudes towards the self-reward consumption. The findings also show the social dynamics of self-reward consumption practice diffusion in interdependent cultures; there has been a concurrence of actions by multiple systems (e.g., industry-system and media-system) in diffusing the self-reward consumption practice in Japan. From the findings, the author proposes the conceptual model of 'rhetorical negotiation' (Figure 1), a semi-circular process model that illustrates the negotiation between actor(s) (e.g., firm(s) and media) and socio-cognition. The model shows how actors can strategically use rhetoric to change the socio-cognitive schema that shapes consumers' understandings which influences the consumers' attitudes and also their behaviors.

As a theoretical contribution, this dissertation has clarified the process of self-gift consumer behavior diffusion in cultures that hinder such act; whereas the previous self-gift researches has examined the behavior in cultures that enhance such act. The model of 'rhetorical negotiation' contributes to our understanding of self-gift consumer behavior by highlighting the role of rhetoric to involve consumers with the self-gift consumer behavior in cultures where such act is incompatible. The model also contributes to our understanding of consumer attitude change not only by introducing the significant role of rhetoric but also by indicating the influence of concurrence among the multiple actors to cause the change.

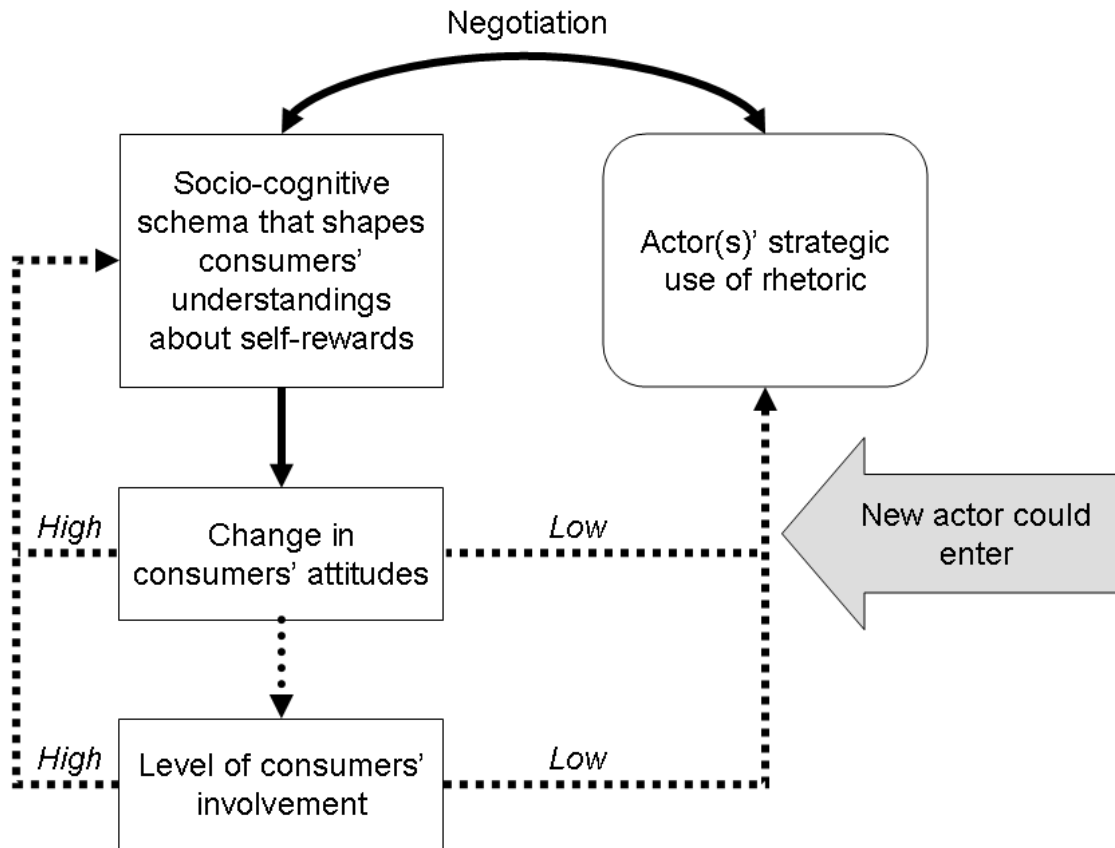
As for managerial contribution, this dissertation provides strategic insights for creating and sustaining new consumption practices in any culture. The creation of consumption practice is often assumed to be complex; however, the managers can influence the practice development by using rhetoric strategically. The 'rhetorical negotiation' model shows managers to develop and deploy rhetoric that are effective in negotiating with the existing socio-cognitive schema in order to achieve a specific objective such as involving more consumers. The dissertation also calls for the meso-level cooperation when diffusing new consumption practices. The findings suggest that the diffusion of new consumption practices, particularly the ones that face the cultural hindrance, may require multiple negotiations until the society finally accepts the culturally disruptive practice. These negotiations may need to be conducted by the different industries, as this study shows. Finally, these insights may aid managers not only to create new consumption practices but also to manage other innovations that require change in the socio-cognitive schema.

Related with the main weakness and limitation, although the dissertation clearly

shows the consumer change at the attitude level, it does not show the occurrence of change at the behavioral level. To strengthen the dissertation's argument, additional researches that supplement this dissertation are necessary such as the macroeconomic analysis of Japanese consumption pattern change over the past 20 years and the influence of self-reward consumer behavior, or the experimental studies testing the relationships between the cultural variables and self-reward consumer behavior.

Today, the economies of the world are being increasingly integrated and the firms need to be internationally competitive. For a successful international marketing, it is essential to understand the differences in consumer attitudes and behaviors deriving from cultural values and to plan/implement the strategy to overcome the socio-cultural barriers. It is my hope that this dissertation will stimulate the managers to think about the marketing strategies in different cultures.

Figure 1
The Conceptual Model of 'Rhetorical Negotiation'



Note: Circle-dotted arrow from consumers' attitudes to behavior is suggested in the findings; however, not clearly identified.