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Understanding Cultural Influences on Ideal Emotions in South Asian and Americans Using Affect Valuation Theory

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Affect Valuation Theory (AVT) proposes that cultural factors influence how individuals ideally want to feel (ideal affect) and how they actually feel (actual affect). Prior research has examined differences in high-arousal positive (HAP) and low-arousal positive (LAP) as well as high-arousal negative (HAN) and low-arousal negative (LAN) affect, mostly between East Asian and American populations, demonstrating that cultural norms shape emotional preferences and experiences. The present study extends this line of research by investigating preferences for LAP and HAP emotions in South Asian and American populations. Participants included 75 Americans and 13 South Asians recruited from Denison University's "Introduction to Psychology" course and through word-of-mouth, as well as 145 participants aged 18 to 35 years from India (part of the South Asian group) recruited via Prolific. Mixed-model ANOVA was used with affect type as a within-subjects factor and culture as a between-subjects factor to analyze the data. The findings showed significance for both HAP and LAP in ideal affect among Americans and South Asians. This study aims to explore cross-cultural variations in affect valuation, focusing on how South Asians differ from previously studied groups in their ideal and actual affective states. Findings contribute to the broader understanding of cultural influences on emotion and expand the scope of AVT to include South Asian contexts.

Keywords: Affect valuation theory, ideal affect, actual affect, arousal

Human geographers have studied "emotional geographies" to highlight the relations among emotions, environments, and representation (Khan, 2015). Most of these emotion studies are Eurocentric and do not involve cultural considerations. Although most people report a desire to feel good (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), people do different things to achieve this. Some individuals may listen to music, play sports, or dance, while others may do community service, take narcotics, or socialize. Many cross-cultural studies of state emotion fail to measure these affective traits and therefore cannot rule out this possibility. Thus, the influence of cultural variables versus affective traits on emotion remains largely unexplored (Pernau, 2021). Taken together, this gap highlights the need for a framework that clearly distinguishes between what people actually feel and what they ideally want to feel across cultures.

Ideal Affect and Affect Valuation Theory

People have certain ideas about how they want to feel, similar to how people act in varying ways to feel good. These ideas depend on an individual's values, preferences, and how they ideally want to feel. *Ideal affect* refers to the emotional state that a person values and ideally wants to feel, essentially describing the desired feelings someone strives to experience, distinct from their actual emotions at any given time. Cultural factors often influence ideal affect and can impact how people respond to events and interact with others (Tsai, 2017). Affect valuation theory (AVT) highlights the importance of people's ideal affect in everyday life (Tsai, 2007, 2017). By "affect," Tsai refers to feeling states that vary along the dimensions of valence (from negative to positive) and arousal (from low to high; Kuppens et al., 2013). High-arousal positive states (HAP) include excitement, enthusiasm, and elation, while low-arousal positive states (LAP) include calm, peacefulness, and relaxation. In this way, AVT provides a structured model for understanding how cultural values shape emotional preferences.

AVT's first premise is that people's "actual affect," or how they actually want to feel, is different from their "ideal affect," or how they ideally want to feel. People's reactions to events or situations are referred to as their actual affect ("How do I feel now? How do I usually feel?"), Ideal affect is a desired state that helps in the interpretation of affective experiences for both individuals and others ("Does this feel right?"). Across various studies, it can be observed that people generally prefer to feel positive states over negative ones, and that people want to feel more positive (like HAP and LAP) and less negative (e.g., high arousal negative states [HAN] like nervousness and low arousal negative states [LAN] like dullness) than they actually feel, in several studies involving a range of cultures (Tsai et al., 2006).

The second premise of AVT is that cultural factors shape both actual and ideal affect. Sociocultural, political, economic, and individual factors shape individuals' experiences, beliefs, values, and attitudes across different societies. AVT also predicts that cultural factors shape ideal affect more than actual affect. In the same way that culture teaches people which behaviors are desirable, moral, and virtuous (Shweder, 2003), culture also teaches people which emotional states are de-

sirable, moral, and virtuous. Although culture shapes how people actually feel, people's temperament, regulatory abilities, and immediate circumstances strongly influence their actual affect (Diener et al., 2003). Thus, AVT predicts that culture shapes how people want to feel even more than how they actually feel.

Across several studies, Tsai and colleagues (2006; 2007) found that European Americans want to feel HAP more than East Asians, while East Asians want to feel LAP more than European Americans. Moreover, these cultural differences are reflected in the popular media of those cultures, with American media containing more open-mouthed, toothy "excited" smiles and fewer close-mouthed "calm" smiles than Chinese media–including children's storybooks, women's magazines, Facebook photos, and most recently, the official photos of leaders in government, business, and academia (Huang & Park, 2013; Tsai, 2007; Tsai et al., 2007; Tsai et al., 2015; Tsai et al., 2016).

In one of the studies, Tsai et al. (2016) compared the smiles of top-ranked American and Chinese leaders in their official photos to see if their smiles valued excitement and other high-arousal positive states, or if they valued calm and other low-arousal positive states, which reflected cultural differences in Ideal Affect. The photos were taken from the official websites and coded using the Facial Action Coding System (FACS; Ekman & Friesen, 1976), a system used to measure minute facial muscle movement, or action units (AUs), and the occurrence of a smile (excited or calm). The results showed that cultural differences in ideal affect are reflected in the official photos of leaders, where American public leaders showed more excited smiles than Chinese public leaders (Tsai et al., 2016).

In another study, Tsai et al. (2007) looked into children's literature to see if the cultural differences in ideal affect emerge early in life and are acquired through exposure to storybooks. Researchers identified the top 10 best-selling storybooks for children between 4 and 8 years of age in both the United States and Taiwan and compared the characters' faces using the FACS. Results showed a cultural difference in their illustrations; American best-selling storybooks had more excited (vs. calm) expressions, wider smiles, and more emotionally arousing activities (Tsai et al., 2007).

Universality of Affect Valuation Theory

There have been studies comparing Americans and East Asians in ideal affect, but none have examined the South Asian population. A lack of attention has been paid to South Asian Americans or Americans of South Asian heritage (e.g., India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka; Perera et al., 2015). Similarly, there have not been studies done on the South Asian population as a whole. Studying the South Asian population is important because it represents a major gap in understanding how cultural influences shape emotional ideals across a diverse global demographic. Differences among Asian-American subgroups that fall within the same broader ethnic group have received virtually no attention. While there are similarities between East and South Asian cultures, which are both collectivistic cultures, we might see a difference in religious practices, children's upbringing, and interpersonal communication (Chadda, 2013). Seven factors influence the ideal affect: (a) interpersonal communication; (b) parent-child interaction; (c) peer interaction; (d) religion; (e) popular media; (f) magazines; and (g) children's literature (Tsai, 2007). According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), cultural ideas are instantiated by prevalent practices, institutions, and artifacts. Through exposure to or engagement in these cultural representations, people begin to internalize the cultural ideas they reflect. Research on South Asians can test the universality or specificity of AVT and other cross-cultural frameworks. It can help determine whether current models adequately describe all collectivistic cultures or require adaptation to account for regional differences.

Indian culture emphasizes interpersonal relationships in a much more formal way than the informal and spontaneous form found in the U.S. culture (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988). Affection, particularly between opposite genders, is not openly displayed. Politeness, which includes good manners, quiet speech, a pleasant smile, gracefulness, and modest dressing, is expected. Social relations and closeness highly depend on one's status in the family, sex, and roles performed in society (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988). Similarly, the form of collectivism present in East Asian cultures dictates that individuals control and subdue their emotional expressions to maintain harmonious relationships as opposed to imposing their personal feelings on others (Heine et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It follows the notion that people in East Asian contexts would place more value on subdued, low-arousal positive affect than on expressive, high-arousal positive affect. As with most of the stud-

ies conducted within cultural psychology, research on ideal affect has focused exclusively on those with East Asian and Euro-American cultural orientations.

Tsai et al.'s (2016) study showed how cultural differences are reflected in popular media, with American content containing more expressivity of positive and negative emotions than Chinese content, which was more neutral and calm. It is widely known that South Asian media, such as Bollywood movies and music videos, are expressive and display a range of emotions (Ganti, 2012). Children's storybooks like the famous "Mahabharata" are very expressive in terms of their facial expressions. South Asians have started using emotions in television commercials, movies, and literature more than they have in the past (Pernau, 2021). This may suggest that South Asians have high arousal positive emotions, as media plays a big part in people's lives, and can be a major influence on how people would ideally want to feel.

There are similarities between South Asians and East Asians, especially considering how both cultures lean towards a collectivist perspective, directly contrasting with Americans, who are more individualistic in terms of their culture. Whereas individualists aim to influence (i.e., have an impact on, change, improve) their environments to fit their own needs, collectivists aim to adjust (i.e., modify, alter, subvert) their own needs to fit those of their environments (Morling et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995; Weisz et al., 1984). Indeed, Schwartz (1992) and Oishi et al. (1998) found that individualists value influence goals (e.g., stimulation, self-direction, power, and achievement) more than collectivists, whereas collectivists value adjustment goals (e.g., conformity and tradition) more than individualists. Few studies have explored whether people from different cultures behave similarly. Collectivist cultures also value interpersonal communication, which brings us to a comparative study between Indian and U.S. participants (Crowe et al., 2012). A higher proportion of Indian than U.S. participants reported motives for controlling their emotions that focused on maintaining interpersonal harmony and others' well-being (i.e., prosocial concerns, or maintenance of social norms). In contrast, a higher proportion of U.S. than Indian participants reported self-focused motives (i.e., desire for privacy or desire to avoid discomfort for self).

With respect to motives for emotional expression, a higher proportion of Indian participants in comparison with those from the U.S.reported relationship-focused motives (e.g., desire to maintain a relationship). Contrary to expectations, a higher proportion of Indian participants also reported a self-focused motive (i.e., expectation of instrumental assistance; Crowe et al., 2012). Yet few studies have explored whether people from different collectivistic cultures think and behave similarly to each other. In this article, I examined preferences for ideal affect among the South Asian population in comparison to two different cultures: Americans and East Asians. We hypothesize that South Asians would display a different pattern of HAP/LAP preference than East Asians and Americans. More specifically, South Asians would seek HAP experiences more when compared to East Asians, but less than Americans.

Method

Participants

Two hundred thirty nine participants were part of our study, of whom 75 were Americans, and 13 were South Asian. Participants were students in the "Introduction to Psychology" course as well as those recruited through campus organizations and email outreach. South Asian participants were recruited via word-of-mouth (i.e., peer referrals), consistent with a snowball sampling approach. These methods were used complementarily to broaden participation, particularly among South Asian students, given their relatively small representation within the Denison University student population. One hundred forty five participants, aged between 18 and 35 years old, who were from India, were recruited through Prolific. All participants spoke English fluently, and there were no significant group differences in age or education.

Six participants who identified as East Asian participated in the study, but due to a small East Asian student population, meaningful statistical comparisons with this group were not possible. Therefore, we focused our primary analyses on South Asian and American participants.

Instruments

To measure ideal affect, participants were asked "how much you would *ideally* [emphasis added] like to feel" the emotions contained in the Affect Valuation Index "on average" on a scale from 1 (*very slightly, not at all*) to 5 (*very much, all of the time*; Tsai et al., 2006). To measure actual affect, participants completed a parallel version of the ideal affect measure, in

which they rated how much they "*typically* feel each of the following items on average". HAP was calculated from participant ratings for "excited," "enthusiastic," and "elated" (α = 0.70 for ideal affect and α = 0.66 for actual affect); LAP from "calm," "at rest," and "serene" (α = 0.79 for ideal affect and α = 0.81 for actual affect). Prolific only included the participants who spoke fluent English for the survey. We had two manipulation check questions in the Prolific survey.

Ethics

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Denison University (SP25#15). All the procedures and data collection were in a manner consistent with the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct.

Procedure

All participants were given an informed consent form before they completed the study. The participants were then given the Affect Valuation Index (Tsai et al., 2006). After completing the assessment, participants were asked demographic questions and given a debriefing form that included details about the study and its goals. Upon returning the survey, Denison students were given 1 SONA credit, and Prolific participants were compensated monetarily ($2 for an 8-10 minute survey). To investigate whether there were cultural differences in ideal affect, we conducted a 2 (Arousal Type: High-Arousal Positive [HAP] vs. Low-Arousal Positive [LAP]) × 2 (Culture: American vs. South Asian) mixed-model ANOVA, with Affect Type as a within-subjects factor and culture as a between-subjects factor.

Results

A 2 (Arousal Type: High-Arousal Positive [HAP] vs. Low-Arousal Positive [LAP]) × 2 (Nationality: American vs. South Asian) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted on ideal affect ratings, with Arousal Type as a within-subjects factor and Nationality as a between-subjects factor.

Main Effects

There was a significant main effect of Arousal Type, $F(1, 231) = 76.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta = .249$, indicating that participants reported significantly different levels of HAP and LAP overall. Across participants, LAP ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.84$) was rated higher than HAP ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.78$).

There was also a significant main effect of nationality, $F(1, 231) = 11.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta = .046$. Americans ($M = 4.00$, $SE = 0.08$) reported higher overall affect ratings than Indians ($M = 3.67$, $SE = 0.06$).

Interaction Effect

The interaction between arousal and nationality was not significant, $F(1, 231) = 2.29$, $p = .132$, $\eta = .010$, suggesting that the difference between HAP and LAP ratings did not significantly vary by nationality.

Follow-up Comparisons

Descriptive statistics indicated that Americans reported higher ratings than Indians in both conditions. For HAP, Americans ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.67$) scored higher than Indians ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.80$). Similarly, for LAP, Americans ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.64$) scored higher than Indians ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.91$; see Table 1). However, given the non-significant interaction, these differences should be interpreted cautiously and not as evidence of differential effects of arousal across nationalities.

Discussion

This study is among the first to examine South Asians through the lens of Affect Valuation Theory (AVT), extending the framework beyond the commonly studied American and East Asian populations. Consistent with our hypothesis, South Asians ideally seek to feel fewer high-arousal positive (HAP) emotions, such as excitement and elation, more than Americans ($M = 3.4$ vs 3.8, $p < .001$, $SD = 0.80$). This supports previous AVT research showing that Western cultures, which emphasize individuality and influence, prioritize HAP states (Tsai et al., 2007). In contrast, collectivist cultures such as those in Asia tend to value emotional moderation and social harmony, which are more aligned with low-arousal positive (LAP) states like calm and peace. Because of a small number of East Asian participants, we could not compare East Asians' and South Asians' Ideal Affect.

Contrary to expectations, however, based on AVT, Americans in our study also reported a significantly greater preference for LAP than South Asians ($M = 4.2$ vs. 3.9, $p = .035$, $SD = 0.64$). This finding diverges from prior research suggesting that East Asians (and by extension, other collectivist cultures) value LAP more than Americans (Tsai et al., 2007).

A meta-analysis on AVT comparing European Americans and East Asians showed that some of the more recent studies suggest that there has been an

increase in LAP preference among European Americans (Tsai et al., 2025). An informal comparison of the means suggested that this was driven by increases in European American ideal LAP, perhaps due to particularly stressful events that have occurred in the United States since 2001–2002, when the first ideal affect data were collected–including the 9/11 attacks, financial crises, gun violence, political polarization, and the spread of negative affect on social media (Knutson et al., 2024; Tsai et al., 2025). This interpretation supports the results of our study on preference for higher LAP than HAP among Americans. Another possible explanation the authors talked about was that, over the past 2 decades, European Americans have had greater exposure to meditation and other practices that have increased their valuation of LAP (Davies et al., 2024). For example, Koopmann-Holm et al. (2013) found that novices in an 8-week meditation program increased the degree to which they ideally wanted to feel calm (and less excited), even though their momentary emotions did not change. In other words, practising Buddhist-inspired meditation made participants see calm as more desirable. This reflects a broader trend: popular mindfulness apps and stress-reduction programs explicitly train people to cultivate LAP states (e.g., calm breathing, body scans). Such practices are now widely offered on U.S. college campuses and in healthcare settings to prevent anxiety and burnout (Aibar-Almazán et al., 2023).

College students in particular have embraced these LAP-oriented wellness practices. The growing cultural emphasis in the U.S. on mindfulness, relaxation, and emotional regulation among college students may increase the desirability of LAP emotions, even among Americans (Borreca et al., 2025). There are workshops offered in schools that focus on mindfulness-based relaxation to decrease stress. Our sample size also consisted primarily of college students, who may be experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety. In a fast-paced and uncertain environment, even American students may increasingly idealize feelings of calm and peace. Recent findings on student mental health and emotion regulation preferences could help contextualize this shift (Aibar-Almazán et al., 2023). Meanwhile, South Asians may still associate LAP with passivity or lack of productivity, especially in achievement-oriented contexts. Our results also show no significant cultural differences in actual affect, aligning with AVT's prediction that ideal affect is influenced by cultural values, while actual affect is shaped by temperament and daily experience. This distinction emphasizes the value of measuring both constructs when assessing emotions across cultures.

One limitation of this study is that while Prolific provided a diverse Indian sample, cultural variability within India–such as regional, linguistic, and religious differences–may also influence ideal and actual affect. Future work could explore how these internal cultural distinctions affect emotional preferences. Another potential limitation of the study is sample bias, as participants were primarily recruited from a university population, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the use of course credit or monetary compensation may have introduced beneficial bias, as external incentives could have influenced participants' motivation, level of engagement, or response patterns. Moreover, our study has a small number of East Asian participants, which limits our ability to explore cultural differences in affect valuation between South Asians and East Asians. Future research should aim for more balanced and representative samples across cultural groups to better understand these nuanced differences. Future studies could examine the rise in LAP preference among Americans and the factors that lead to the change in preference. It would be interesting to see how the political and social changes in the world play a role in the preference for the ideal emotional state among different demographics.

Conclusion

The present study aims to understand the role culture plays in how people want to feel, using Affect Valuation Theory. Culture plays an important role in shaping ideal affect, yet psychological theories and interventions have historically centered on Western populations. In this paper, I have focused on expanding the study to include South Asian populations, with the ultimate goal of representing and serving a broader range of cultures. By broadening the cultural lens of affective science, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of emotional well-being across diverse communities. The goal is to integrate culturally informed perspectives into theory and practice to ensure that psychological frameworks and interventions are both equitable and globally relevant.

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Table 1.

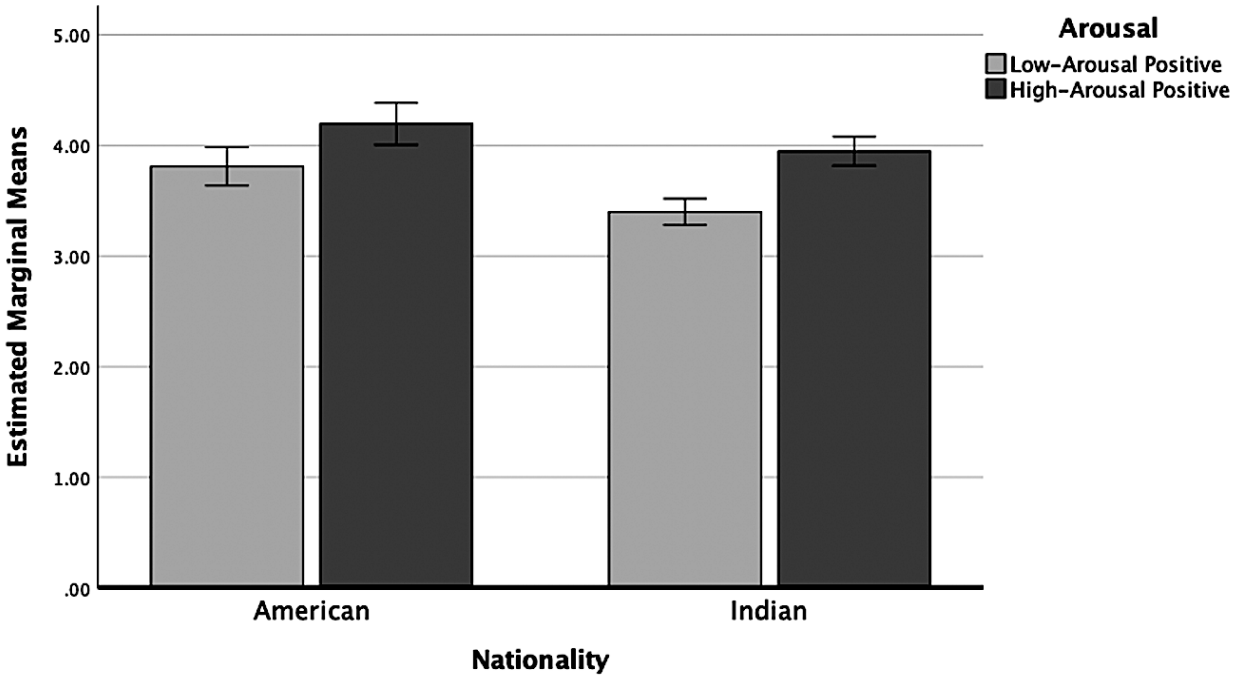
Mean, Standard Deviation, and Mixed-model ANOVA Results for HAPID and LAPID Scores by Nationality

Affect Type	Nationality	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*p*
HAPID (Enthusiastic,	American	3.81	0.67	75	<.001***
Excited, Elated)	South Asian	3.40	0.80	158	<.001***
LAPID (Calm, At rest,	American	4.2	0.64	75	.035*
Serene)	South Asian	3.95	0.91	158	.035*

$^{*}p < .05.$ $^{***}p < .001$

Figure 1.

Graph of South Asians and Americans' Ideal HAP and LAP Emotions



Note. Error bars: 95% *CI*