

Is Expressive Suppression Always Maladaptive? Literature Review in Cross-Cultural Analysis

Qurrota Aini¹, Zarina Akbar²

¹ Master of Psychological Science, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

² Master of Psychological Science, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

*e-mail: qurrota_1802822003@mhs.unj.ac.id

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Abstract: Previous research showed that expressive suppression is associated with poorer psychological health among samples in Western cultural values, while the relation between expressive suppression and psychological health is attenuated among samples with Eastern cultural values. However, culture is dynamic and constantly changing. This study aims to propose a more complete mapping of expressive suppression in cultural contexts. The method used was a literature review. Expressive suppression seems to have 4 various results; 1) expressive suppression is not proven to be different between two cultures, 2) expressive suppression has attenuated effects in interdependent cultures, 3) can be adaptive, and 4) can be maladaptive. The researchers advise to consider 4 important factors and its relation to culture that influence consequences of expressive suppression; context in which the strategy is used, the type of emotion suppressed, the level of emotional suppression one perceives, as well as the combination of emotion regulation strategies used. Further studies are needed to examine the use of expressive suppression and its impact on diverse cultural backgrounds, as most studies only sampled individuals with Asian (Chinese) and American/European cultures. More studies are also needed within the Asian group because there is a huge possibility of heterogeneity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Positive and negative emotions can be intentionally regulated to improve an individual's mental health. Emotion regulation primarily involves the selection and application of emotion regulation strategies. Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are the two types of regulation strategies that can help people effectively control their emotions; however, they differ in terms of their relationship to mental health. Cognitive reappraisal is generally considered to promote mental health, while expressive suppression can contribute to mental problems (Hu, et al. , 2014).

Cognitive reappraisal supposedly occurs prior to the emotional response when the emotion is not yet fully activated; thus, reappraisal can change the entire track of the emotional experience and even reduce the emotional expression. Expressive suppression (also known as emotion suppression), on the contrary, occurs after the generation of the full emotional experience; thus, suppression has a smaller effect on

the emotion and cannot change the existing emotional experience.

Expressive suppression involves actively inhibiting the observable expression of the emotional experience (Gross & Thompson, 2007). In expressive suppression, one regulates emotional expression by controlling or neutralizing emotional behavior (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008). Controlling the expression of emotions consumes a large amount of psychological resources, which may impose further adverse effects on the mind and body (Cheng, Yuan, He, & Li, 2009; Li, Zhang, & Lei, 2011, Hu, et al., 2014).

Over the last two decades, studies have examined the relationship between expressive suppression and mental health. However, the results have been inconsistent. Hu, et al. (2014) explained these inconsistencies in their review; for example, expressive suppression correlated negatively with positive affect in one study (Luo, et al., 2012) while another study reported a positive correlation between

expressive suppression and life satisfaction (Hong, 2011). Expressive suppression also correlated positively with negative affect (Gross & John, 2003), but correlated negatively with anxiety (Duan, 2005).

Many studies have shown that individuals with Asian heritage suppress their emotions more frequently than individuals with European heritage (e.g. Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee, & Minnick, 2011; Schouten, Boiger, Kirchner-Häusler, Uchida, & Mesquita, 2020; Sun & Nolan, 2021). Despite all of the inconsistencies, suppression has been cited as having different effects depending on culture. In a meta-analysis of 48 studies and 21,150 participants by Hu, et al. (2014), the association between expressive suppression and negative mental health was stronger among samples in Western (independent) cultures than in Eastern (interdependent) cultures.

In terms of the adaptability of emotion regulation, empirical research has largely supported the hypothesis that emotion suppression has fewer or no adverse effects in interdependent cultural contexts (Ford & Mauss, 2015). This is in line with a review by Tsai & Lu (2018) which revealed that expressive suppression is associated with poorer psychological health among samples in the Western cultural values, while the relation between expressive suppression and psychological health is attenuated among samples with Eastern cultural values. However, culture is dynamic and constantly changing. To propose a more complete mapping of expressive suppression in cultural contexts, a literature review of various articles is carried out.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

The method used in this research was literature review, as referred to searching previous literature for international publications using Google Scholar databases in the last 11 years (2011-2022). A preliminary search for articles resulted in obtaining 36,400 articles by using several keywords such as “emotion suppression”, “cultural differences”, and “across culture”, while 6,060 articles were obtained by using “expressive suppression”, “cultural differences”, and “across culture” keywords. The amount is then narrowed by selecting articles with at least 13 years old individuals as samples. The criteria of selection are based on the limitation of age because it relates to the types of emotion regulation discussed in this literature review—as children have different patterns of emotion regulation than teenagers and adults. After 31 articles being explored and filtered by researchers, 13 articles were considered relevant and used in this literature review.

3 RESULT & DISCUSSIONS

Most articles (10 articles) recruited university students as the research respondents. Only 3 studies conducted research in populations other than university students. Several variables emerged besides expressive suppression (henceforth ES, in the table below), namely: psychological well-being, psychophysiological responses, psychosocial adjustment, depressive symptoms, positive and negative affect, physiological measurement, racial-ethnic discrimination, anxiety during job interviews, emotional eating, subjective psychological distress, intrusive memory, perceived stress, and so on.

Table 1: Results of Literature Review.

No	Author, year	Sample	Another variable	Results
1	Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee, Minnick (2011)	European American (EA) (N = 71) & Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) college students (N = 100), average age 20 years	Psychological Functioning	In HKC, ES is not associated with adverse psychological functioning, unlike in EA. ES did not associated with positive psychological functioning among HKC; it was unrelated.
2	Su, Lee, Oishi (2013)	172 European American/EA undergraduates (N = 172), Chinese Singaporean/CS undergraduates (N =	Socially Disengaging Emotions, Socially Engaging Emotions, Depressive Symptoms	ES involving positive socially disengaging emotions (but not ES involving positive socially engaging emotions), was associated with greater

No	Author, year	Sample	Another variable	Results
		151), age between 18-26		depressive symptoms among EA college students. ES was unrelated to depressive symptoms for CS college students whether the emotions were socially engaging or disengaging.
3	Su, Wei, Tsai (2014)	European-American/EA (N = 224) & Chinese/CH college students (N = 190)	Experiential avoidance, Belief in emotional self-control	The association between experiential avoidance and ES was significantly positive among EAs but weak and statistically non-significant among CH. In CH culture, there is little correlation between experiential avoidance and beliefs in emotional self-control and ES, because emotional self-control is commonly practiced.
4	Yuan, Liu, Ding (2014)	Undergraduate students in China (N = 64) assigned to 3 conditions: no-regulation, acceptance, & ES, age between 18-24	Positive and Negative Physiological measurement	Affect, ES was effective in reducing the depressive experience and its physiological arousal (SCR), while acceptance did not yield positive effects at both subjective and physiological levels
5	Juang, Moffitt, Kim, Lee, Soto, Hurley, Weisskirch, Blozis, Castillo, Huynh, Whitbourne (2016)	College students (N = 1279) consists of: Latino (N = 489) and Asian-heritage (N = 790), age between 18-25	Racial-ethnic Discrimination, Adjustment	The relationship between two types of discrimination, emotion regulation strategies, and their interactions was similar for Latino and Asian students. A higher level of ES plus a higher rate of reappraisal is effective in reducing the negative effects of discrimination, while a higher level of ES without reappraisal is ineffective.
6	Gong, Li, Zhang & Rost (2016)	Chinese undergraduates (N = 82), age between 18-22	Anxiety during job interviews	Compared to students who were instructed to use reappraisal and acceptance strategies, students who used ES reported a greater increase in anxiety during the three phases of the job interview simulation (anticipation, interview, recovery phase)

No	Author, year	Sample	Another variable	Results
7	Lu, Tao, Hou, Zhang, Ren (2016)	Chinese urban students, grades 7 and 10 (N = 5003)	Emotional Eating	Higher levels of ES may place adolescents at risk of emotional eating
8	Sun & Lau (2018)	Undergraduates (N = 278), consist of: U.S.-born Asian Americans, foreign-born Asian Americans & European Americans	Interdependent Construal, Self-Emotion Recognition Ability	The 3 groups did not differ in terms of interdependent self-construal, habitual emotion ES, and full-channel emotion recognition ability; there was no evidence of cultural differences in the link between habitual ES and emotion recognition
9	Kwon & Kim (2018)	American (N = 196), Chinese (N = 213)	Perceived Emotion ES, Psychological Well-Being	Cross-culturally consistent negative effect (America & Hong Kong China) of perceived emotional ES
10	Nagulendran, <u>Norton</u> , <u>Jobson</u> (2020)	Australians of European heritage & East Asian Australian university students (N = 82)	Subjective Psychological Distress, Psychophysiological Responses, Intrusive Memory	Across all groups, subjective negative affect increased and positive affect decreased after watching a traumatic film. The ES group, regardless of cultural background, reported significantly fewer distractions than the control group. This study found no evidence that culture and ES interact in terms of subjective psychological distress when watching traumatic film
11	Schouten, Boiger, Kirchner-Häusler, Uchida, and Mesquita (2020)	Belgian (N = 58) and Japanese (N = 80) couples, age between 30-50	Negative Socially Disengaging Emotions, Negative Socially Engaging Emotions, Interaction Outcomes: Conflict Resolution	High levels of ES are associated with low conflict resolution in Belgian partners, but not in Japanese partners. ES is more common in Japanese partners than Belgian partners, but did not reach conventional significant levels, possibly because this study included engaging emotions, in addition to disengaging emotions. Japanese participants reported more ES than their Belgian counterparts, but cultural difference was more pronounced when participants experienced more socially disengaging

No	Author, year	Sample	Another variable	Results
12	Sun & Nolan, (2021)	Irish college students (N = 74), Chinese international college students (N = 96), age between 18-36	Perceived Stress	emotions than when they experienced more socially engaging emotions. Chinese students report more frequent use of expressive ES than Irish students. There was a significant positive relationship between the habitual use of expressive ES and levels of stress in Irish students, whereas this relationship was absent in Chinese students. Emotions are actually regulated more quickly through ES than reappraisal for Chinese individuals; ES is an effective stress strategy for Chinese students
13	Cui, Tang, Miner (2022)	Sample 1; Chinese college undergraduates (N = 431), age between 17-22, Sample 2; Chinese college undergraduates (N = 477) age between 17-25	Confucian Zhong Yong Thinking, Psychosocial Adjustment	ES is negatively related to psychosocial well-being and positively related to adjustment problems (negative affect). ZY thinking appears to be positively related to various indicators of psychosocial adjustment and reduces the negative effects of ES. ZY thinking weakens the relationship between ES and perceived social support and negative affect. The use of ES can be negative for today's Chinese

Based on this literature review, expressive suppression seems to have 4 various results; 1) expressive suppression is not proven to be different between two cultures, 2) expressive suppression has attenuated effects in interdependent cultures, 3) expressive suppression can also be adaptive in interdependent cultures, and surprisingly, 4) expressive suppression can be maladaptive in interdependent cultures.

3.1 Expressive Suppression is Not Proven to be Different between Two Cultures

The effect of emotional suppression does not always depend on culture. A study by Sun & Lau (2018) found that there was no evidence of cultural

differences in the relationship between emotional suppression habits and recognition of other people's emotions in 3 cultural groups; Asian Americans born in the US, Asian Americans born abroad, and Americans. Nagulendran, Norton, & Jobson (2020) also found that in all groups (European Australia & East Asia Australia), there is no evidence that culture and suppression interact in terms of subjective psychological distress; in both cultural groups, subjective negative affect increased and subjective positive affect decreased after watching traumatic films.

3.2 Expressive Suppression has Attenuated Effects in Interdependent Cultures

Four studies confirm the idea that the adverse effects of emotional suppression tend to be attenuated in interdependent cultures. The study by Soto, et al. (2011) states that in cultures where the use of emotion suppression is more normative (e.g., Hong Kong China), the tendency to suppress emotions is not associated with adverse psychological functioning—unlike in other cultures where expressiveness is common (e.g., European-American). However, this study also did not find that emotional suppression was associated with positive psychological functioning among Hong Kong Chinese, rather it was unrelated.

Cultural context can also change the relationship between experiential avoidance and suppression. Experiential avoidance was significantly associated with greater use of suppression among the European-American sample, but not in the Chinese sample. In the context of Chinese culture, the relationship between suppression and experiential avoidance tends to be weak, because emotional self-control is commonly practiced (Su, Wei, Tsai, 2014).

A study on Japanese and Belgian couples (Schouten, et al., 2020) showed that in Belgian couples, high levels of suppression are associated with low conflict resolution, but not in Japanese partners. However, the study also showed that cultural differences in suppression of emotions occur when socially disengaging emotions (e.g., giving up, upset, alone, and hurt) predominate, but not when socially engaging emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, fear of hurting a partner, and feeling worried) dominates.

Both types of emotions are derived from Markus and Kitayama (1991); they drew an important distinction between emotions that focus on the separateness and independence of self from social relationships and emotions that focus on relational embeddedness and social interdependence. Emotions in the first category (separateness and independence) are called socially disengaging emotions. Because the experience of these emotions tends to emphasize one's own personal attributes and to separate or disengage the self from social relationships, they tend to foster and reinforce the independent sense of self. Examples of socially disengaging emotions include anger, pride, and frustration. Emotions in the second category (relational embeddedness and social interdependence) are called socially engaging emotions, because the experience of these emotions tends to promote an interdependent orientation and to assimilate or engage the self in social relationships.

Examples of socially engaging emotions include empathy, feeling connected with someone, and shame. Although emotional suppression is generally valued more in Asian (Japanese) culture than in Western (Belgian) culture, engaging emotional expression may support Japanese interdependent culture; therefore, engaging emotions are not too suppressed. The implications of this study suggest that the type of emotion must also be considered when describing cultural differences in emotional suppression.

This is in line with the study by Su, Lee, & Oishi (2013), that emotional suppression has different effects depending on the type of emotion suppressed; emotional suppression involving positive socially disengaging emotions (e.g., pride) was associated with greater depressive symptoms among European American students, while emotional suppression was not associated with depressive symptoms for Chinese Singaporean students, regardless of whether the emotion was socially disengaging or socially engaging.

3.3 Expressive Suppression can be Adaptive in Interdependent Cultures

Expressive suppression also has benefits, as in Nagulendran, Norton, & Jobson's (2020) study. Even though there is no evidence that culture and suppression interact in terms of subjective psychological distress, the suppression group—regardless of cultural background (European Australia & East Asia Australia)—reported significantly less disturbance than the control group within 5 minutes of viewing the film. This is in line with a study by Yuan, Liu, Ding, and Yang (2014) who examined the effects of suppression and acceptance on depressive moods due to frustrating arithmetic tasks in a Chinese sample. Suppression was found to be effective in reducing the experience of depressive emotions and the physiological activities associated with depression—conversely, acceptance did not produce a similar regulatory effect in reducing the experience of depressive emotions.

Expressive suppression has also been shown to be adaptive in a recent 2021 study by Sun & Nolan; even though Chinese students reported more frequent use of expressive suppression than Irish students, there was a significant positive relationship between the habitual use of expressive suppression and levels of stress in Irish students, whereas this relationship was absent in Chinese students. Emotions are actually regulated more quickly through suppression than

reappraisal for Chinese individuals, thus, suppression is an effective stress strategy for Chinese students.

In addition, the study by Juang, Moffitt, Kim, Lee, Soto, et al. (2016) found that a combination of strategies is what matters for dealing with negative emotions—rather than focusing on one strategy individually. Emotion regulation strategies can act as protective factors or vulnerability factors, depending on the combination of emotion regulation strategies an individual uses. In dealing with discrimination against Latino and Asian students, a higher level of suppression and reappraisal is effective in reducing the negative effects of discrimination, while a higher level of suppression without reappraisal is not effective.

One reason to explain these results is to consider the context in which suppression is used. Three studies showing the benefits of emotional suppression were seen in a 1) traumatic movie viewing task, 2) frustrating arithmetic task, and 3) perceived stress by Chinese abroad students. Suppression also reduced the negative effects of racial discrimination when reappraisal strategy is added, thus, a combination of emotion regulation might be effective in explaining this finding.

3.4 Expressive Suppression can be Maladaptive in Interdependent Cultures

Contrary to the above studies which describe the benefits of suppression, several recent studies show different things; the use of expressive suppression can be negative for the psychosocial well-being of contemporary Chinese individuals (Cui, Tang, & Huang, 2022); higher levels of emotional suppression may place Chinese adolescents at risk of emotional eating (Lu, Tao, Hou, Zhang, & Ren, 2016); and students using expressive suppression reported greater increases in anxiety during simulated job interviews (Gong, Li, Zhang, & Rost, 2016). Furthermore, Kwon & Kim (2018) showed a cross-culturally consistent negative effect (America & Hong Kong China) of expressive suppression; once a person feels that they have suppressed their emotions, they go through a similar psychological process and feel less satisfied with their lives, regardless of cultural background.

The first reason that might explain these findings is that globalization and high exposure to Western culture have led to changes in cultural values among Chinese people (Lu, et al., 2016). The second reason is associated with one study with psychological well-being variables, in which the researchers used

“perceived emotion suppression” as opposed to more widely used “emotion suppression”. Researchers (Kwon & Kim, 2018) argued that the inconsistent past findings stem from levels of uncontrolled perception of how much participants have suppressed their emotions. According to both, the findings could be mixed by differences in the degree to which people “perceive” themselves to be suppressing emotions. To test whether the negative effects of emotional suppression are consistent across cultures, it is necessary to investigate the effects of emotional suppression when the level of perceived emotion suppression is at the same level across cultures, or “perceived emotion suppression”. These results emphasize the importance of cultural background; as many cross-cultural studies have shown, culture has the power to withstand the universally negative effects of emotional suppression and focuses specifically on matching levels of emotional suppression felt across cultures, while recognizing that the absolute amount of emotional suppression will vary across cultures.

4 CONCLUSION

Based on this literature review, the consequences of expressive suppression appear to remain inconsistent across cultures; not proven to be different between two cultures, have attenuated effects in interdependent cultures, can be adaptive, and maladaptive in interdependent cultures.

The researchers advise to consider 4 important factors and its relation to culture that influence consequences of expressive suppression; 1) context in which the strategy is used, 2) the type of emotion suppressed (socially engaging and socially disengaging emotions), the level of emotional suppression one perceives (perceived emotion suppression), as well as 4) the combination of emotion regulation strategies used.

Further studies are needed to examine the use of expressive suppression and its impact on diverse cultural backgrounds, as most studies only sampled individuals with Asian (Chinese) and American/European culture. Especially, more studies are needed within the Asian group (e.g., Indonesia, Philippines, Korea), because there is a huge possibility of heterogeneity.

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