



Americans Want To Make Themselves Feel Better More than Japanese Do: Cultural Differences in Prohedonic Emotion Regulation Goals in Daily Life

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Abstract

Emotion regulation is initiated when a goal to influence emotions is activated. The goals people pursue when regulating their emotions, however, may differ across cultures. We tested whether individuals from the United States and Japan differ in the goals they pursue in emotion regulation in daily life. In a preregistered ecological momentary assessments study ($N=221$), we examined how Americans and Japanese students felt and how they wanted to influence their feelings in daily life. As predicted, Americans were more motivated to decrease their unpleasant emotions and increase their pleasant emotions than Japanese were, even when controlling for differences in experienced emotions. These effects replicated across arousal levels, though their strength varied. The findings demonstrate that the degree to which people want to make themselves feel better when regulating their emotions in daily life varies across cultures.

Keywords Emotion regulation · Culture · Goals · Motivation · Ecological momentary assessment

Introduction

Emotion regulation, which involves attempts to influence emotions, can shape emotional experiences (Gross, 2015). How individuals engage in emotion regulation depends on the goals they pursue (Tamir et al., 2020). For instance, people more motivated to feel better worked harder to regulate emotions, and subsequently, felt better (Gutentag et al., 2024). The extent to which people want to make themselves feel better, however, may vary across cultures. Therefore, this investigation tested whether individuals from the US

and Japan differed in their motivation to make themselves feel better in daily life.

Culture and Motivated Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation goals refer to desired changes in emotions (e.g., “I want to increase my happiness”). The activation of such goals initiates emotion regulation (Gross, 2015). When regulating emotions, individuals are generally prohedonically motivated (Kaloerinos et al., 2017) – namely, they want to decrease unpleasant emotions and increase pleasant emotions. However, the extent to which people are prohedonically motivated may vary across cultures.

Members of Western countries may be more motivated than members of East Asian countries to regulate emotions prohedonically (Miyamoto et al., 2014), partly because pleasant emotions are valued more and unpleasant emotions are valued less in these countries (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011; Sims et al., 2015). These differences may be especially pronounced when comparing the US to Japan (Kaspi et al., 2025). In the US, feeling good is prioritized. First, in The US, an independent culture, people view emotions as important indicators of an individual’s state (Mesquita et al., 2014). Pleasant emotions signal that things are going

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well (e.g., success), whereas unpleasant emotions signal the opposite (e.g., failure, Kotchemidova, 2010). Second, the US is characterized by analytic thinking, such that pleasant and unpleasant emotions are viewed as contradictory (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Finally, happiness maximization (e.g., Krys et al., 2024) is a central directive in the US, highlighting the value of prohedonic regulation. Thus, people in the US may be particularly motivated to pursue prohedonic emotion regulation goals.

In Japan, feeling good may be less prioritized. First, in Japan, an interdependent culture, fitting in is prioritized over personal pleasure (Kitayama et al., 2022). Japanese are more attuned to potential costs of pleasant emotions and benefits of unpleasant emotions (Miyamoto et al., 2017). Second, Japanese culture is characterized by higher levels of dialectic thinking, such that pleasant and unpleasant emotions are viewed as complementary (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). Finally, Japanese culture is influenced by Buddhism, in which suffering is considered an inherent part of life (e.g., Chen, 2006; Wilken & Miyamoto, 2020). Thus, people in Japan (vs. US) may be less motivated to pursue prohedonic emotion regulation goals.

Cultural Differences in Motivated Emotion Regulation in Daily Life

Several studies tested whether people in the US and Japan differ in prohedonic motivation in emotion regulation, using one of two methods. One method involves examining reactions to specific events. For instance, European Americans were more motivated than Asians to feel better after failing an exam (Miyamoto et al., 2014). This method captures reactions to a personally-relevant event, but whether findings extend to other events is unclear. Another method involves cross-sectional surveys. For instance, individuals from the US (vs. Japan) reported greater motivation to decrease unpleasant emotions in the past week (Kaspi et al., 2025). This method captures perceived preferences across contexts, but whether findings reflect actual preferences in daily life remains unclear.

Reactions to specific situations and global self-reports do not necessarily reflect emotion regulation in everyday life (Koval et al., 2023). Cultural differences in emotion regulation goals in daily life have not yet been tested. Nonetheless, one study suggested that European Americans preferred pleasant over unpleasant emotions in daily life more than Chinese did (Sims et al., 2015). Here, we sought to extend such research, by assessing the direction in which people wanted to influence their pleasant and unpleasant emotions (i.e., emotion regulation goals) in daily life, in the US and Japan.

The Current Investigation

We conducted a 7-day Ecological Momentary Assessments (EMA) study, in the US and Japan. We assessed prohedonic emotion regulation goals (i.e., motivation to decrease unpleasant emotions and motivation to increase pleasant emotions), as these are most common in daily life (Kalokerinos et al., 2017). Goals in emotion regulation are often consistent with current emotional experiences (Ford & Tamir, 2014), and cultures differ in emotional experiences (Kitayama et al., 2006). Therefore, to test whether differences are attributed to culture rather than current emotions, we controlled for emotional experiences. Our pre-registered hypothesis was that US (vs. Japanese) participants would be more motivated to decrease unpleasant emotions in daily life. To offer a comprehensive assessment of prohedonic emotion regulation goals, we also assessed the goal to increase pleasant emotions. We assessed emotions that varied by valence and arousal, representing each quadrant on the affect circumplex (Russell, 1980). Because cultural differences in how people want to influence their emotions may vary by both valence or arousal (Tsai et al., 2007), we tested whether findings pertain to valence were moderated by arousal.

Methods

Transparency and Openness

Data were collected as part of a larger project. Hypotheses, methods, and analyses were preregistered (<https://asprected.org/8d9n-my4n.pdf>). All deviations from the preregistered plan are reported in Table S2 in the Supplemental Materials. Study materials and analytical code using R (R Core Team, 2022) are available here: https://osf.io/zf4me/?view_only=c96a8e2e09c442dcb8efce0874ef87f9. Below, we describe sample size determination, exclusions, and relevant measures. This study was approved by local universities' ethics committees.

Participants and EMA Samples

Final samples included 128 students from the USA and 93 students from Japan. Groups were similar in age, but not in gender distribution (see Table 1 for demographics and EMA compliance by country). Eligible participants were at least 18 years old, native-born, local residents, and native speakers of the local language. Participants received up to ~\$56 or equivalent course credit for participating.

The sample size was determined based on the summary-statistics-based power analysis (Murayama et al., 2022).

Table 1 Demographics and EMA compliance

	USA	Japan	Group Difference
Age	$M=19.89$, $SD=1.49$,	$M=19.54$, $SD=1.16$	$p=.064$
Gender	• 104 females • 18 males • 3 other gender identities • 3 did not report gender	• 31 females • 61 males • 1 did not report gender	$p<.001$
EMA compliance	$M=63\%$, $SD=24\%$	$M=68\%$, $SD=22\%$	$p=.080$

Power analysis estimates were derived from a previous EMA study, testing group differences in emotion regulation goals ($b=0.09$; $t=1.94$, cluster size=41, Level-2 sample size=120, $\tau_{11}=0.03$). With 56 assessments per participant, at least 194 participants were needed ($\beta=0.80$, $\alpha=0.05$). We received 8,252 eligible EMA surveys, with no cultural differences in compliance. We excluded 237 EMA surveys where participants failed attention checks, had zero variance in responses, or submitted duplicate responses, resulting in 8,015 surveys.

Procedure

We created English and Japanese versions of the survey, by conducting independent iterations of translation and back-translation by bilinguals (Arnold & Smith, 2013). Participants completed the study in their native language. After consenting, participants learned the study examined emotional experiences and how people manage them. They received notifications for surveys on their mobile phone, through the SEMA3 app (O'Brien et al., 2024) programmed to prompt participants at random intervals of 60 ± 20 min between 10:00am–10:00pm daily, resulting in eight surveys per day, 56 in total. Surveys remained open for 20 min.

Measures

Measures were rated on a 1 (= *Not at all*) to 9 (= *Very much*) scale. Because individual emotion terms can differ in meaning across languages, even when using standard translation procedures (Jackson et al., 2019; Majid, 2019), we followed recommended practices and used two emotion labels (e.g., sadness or boredom) to capture core dimensions of valence and arousal that underlie cultural differences in emotional experience (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992) and to represent broader regions of the affect circumplex (e.g., using ‘sadness or boredom’ to assess low-arousal unpleasant emotions). Reliability indices are reported by country in the Supplementary Materials.

Emotional Experiences

Participants rated how much they currently felt: sad or bored (low-arousal unpleasant), anxious or angry (high-arousal unpleasant), joyful or enthusiastic (high-arousal pleasant), and calm or relaxed (low-arousal pleasant). To assess overall unpleasant emotional experiences, we averaged across the two unpleasant items. To assess pleasant emotional experiences, we averaged across the two pleasant items.

Emotion Regulation Goals

Participants rated how much they wanted to decrease their anxiety or anger, and their sadness or boredom, since the last assessment. Goals for regulating unpleasant emotions were assessed by averaging across these two items. Participants also rated how much they wanted to increase their joy or enthusiasm, and calmness or relaxation. Pleasant emotion regulation goals were assessed by averaging across these items.

Response Bias

Given that our emotion regulation goal measures included fewer than three items, we could not test measurement equivalence (Raubenheimer, 2004). Nonetheless, we examined between-country differences in response styles, by counting instances where participants selected an endpoint of the scale (Harzing, 2006) and testing whether this tendency varied by culture. There was no evidence of cultural response biases in EMA assessments, $p=.612$.

Results

Descriptives and correlations are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

We tested whether unpleasant or pleasant emotion regulation goals differed by country, using multilevel models with the lme4 package in R (Bates et al., 2015), controlling for gender, age, compliance rates, and experienced emotions. Per our preregistration, we also controlled for emotion regulation goals in the previous assessment to isolate effects of group differences, by reducing bias from autocorrelation (Hamaker et al., 2021). Analyses without these covariates yielded similar results. As predicted, US participants were more motivated than Japanese to decrease their unpleasant emotions ($b=1.04$, $SE=0.28$, $p<.001$, $CI_{.95}$ [0.48, 1.60], $R^2=0.10$), and more motivated to increase their pleasant emotions ($b=0.62$, $SE=0.23$, $p=.008$, $CI_{.95}$ [0.16, 1.09], $R^2=0.05$).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of key variables by country

	Japan				USA			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i> _{within-person}	<i>SD</i> _{between-person}	ICC	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i> _{within-person}	<i>SD</i> _{between-person}	ICC
ER goal (high-arousal, unpleasant)	4.94	1.48	2.05	0.64	5.88	1.63	1.85	0.50
ER goal (low-arousal, unpleasant)	5.01	1.42	2.03	0.66	5.67	1.62	1.87	0.51
ER goal (high-arousal, pleasant)	5.97	1.33	1.50	0.53	6.32	1.35	1.44	0.47
ER goal (low-arousal, pleasant)	5.98	1.32	1.48	0.53	6.63	1.35	1.43	0.45
Experienced emotion (high-arousal, unpleasant)	3.23	1.53	1.50	0.41	3.66	1.70	1.26	0.31
Experienced emotion (low-arousal, unpleasant)	3.29	1.56	1.36	0.39	3.51	1.67	1.23	0.29
Experienced emotion (high-arousal, pleasant)	5.22	1.84	1.16	0.24	5.01	1.76	1.21	0.30
Experienced emotion (low-arousal, pleasant)	5.49	1.81	1.07	0.19	5.36	1.64	1.20	0.29

ER=emotion regulation. ICC=intraclass correlation coefficient, which indicates the proportion of variance at the between-person level. Descriptives were computed using the psych package in R (statsBy function; Revelle & Revelle, 2015)

Table 3 Correlations among key variables by country

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Japan								
1. ER goal (high-arousal, unpleasant)	-	0.46***	0.24***	0.23***	0.24***	0.11***	-0.01	0.00
2. ER goal (low-arousal, unpleasant)	0.99***	-	0.23***	0.22***	0.18***	0.19***	-0.02	-0.01
3. ER goal (high-arousal, pleasant)	0.74***	0.78***	-	0.31***	0.07***	0.00	0.23***	0.05**
4. ER goal (low-arousal, pleasant)	0.73***	0.77***	0.96***	-	0.07***	0.05**	0.05**	0.18***
5. Experienced emotion (high-arousal, unpleasant)	0.58***	0.57***	0.33**	0.31**	-	0.41***	-0.20***	-0.30***
6. Experienced emotion (low-arousal, unpleasant)	0.62***	0.62***	0.39***	0.34***	0.93***	-	-0.32***	-0.19***
7. Experienced emotion (high-arousal, pleasant)	0.42***	0.46***	0.64***	0.61***	0.30**	0.28**	-	0.28***
8. Experienced emotion (low-arousal, pleasant)	0.49***	0.52***	0.67***	0.69***	0.18	0.22*	0.80***	-
USA								
1. ER goal (high-arousal, unpleasant)	-	0.43***	0.31***	0.37***	0.25***	0.12***	-0.14***	-0.17***
2. ER goal (low-arousal, unpleasant)	0.94***	-	0.32***	0.28***	0.13***	0.24***	-0.12***	-0.09***
3. ER goal (high-arousal, pleasant)	0.80***	0.86***	-	0.40***	0.05***	0.04**	0.09***	-0.04**
4. ER goal (low-arousal, pleasant)	0.80***	0.81***	0.87***	-	0.15***	0.10***	-0.10***	-0.08***
5. Experienced emotion (high-arousal, unpleasant)	0.54***	0.44***	0.26**	0.24**	-	0.35***	-0.39***	-0.52***
6. Experienced emotion (low-arousal, unpleasant)	0.39***	0.48***	0.30***	0.19*	0.63***	-	-0.46***	-0.30***
7. Experienced emotion (high-arousal, pleasant)	0.05	0.07	0.31***	0.15	-0.29***	-0.32***	-	0.42***
8. Experienced emotion (low-arousal, pleasant)	-0.16	-0.10	0.13	0.11	-0.54***	-0.36***	0.66***	-

Correlations were computed using the psych package in R (statsBy function; Revelle & Revelle, 2015). Numbers below the diagonal are between-person correlations. Numbers above the diagonal are within-person correlations. * $p \leq 0.05$. ** $p \leq 0.01$. *** $p \leq 0.001$

Next, we tested whether cultural differences varied as a function of valence and arousal, predicting regulation goals from country, valence, arousal, and their interactions. We found a three-way interaction, $p < .001$ (see Table 4) and probed simple effects using the *emmeans* package in R (see Table 5). As Fig. 1 shows, there were significant Country $\times$ Arousal interactions when predicting unpleasant and pleasant emotion regulation goals, $ps < .001$. With respect to unpleasant emotions, US participants were more motivated than Japanese to decrease both high-arousal and low-arousal unpleasant emotions, $p \leq .001$, but country differences were larger for high-arousal than low-arousal unpleasant emotions. With respect to pleasant emotions, US participants were also more motivated than Japanese to increase both low-arousal and high-arousal pleasant emotions, $p \leq .014$. However, this time, country differences were larger for low-arousal than high-arousal pleasant emotions. The main effect of Country was significant ($p = .001$), such that US participants were more prohedonically motivated than Japanese were. The main effect of valence was also significant, $p < .001$, such that participants were more motivated to increase pleasant (vs. decrease unpleasant) emotions. The main effect of arousal was not significant ($p = .137$).

Discussion

Compared to Japanese, US participants were more motivated to decrease unpleasant emotions and increase pleasant emotions in daily life. These findings show that in daily life, Americans want to regulate their emotions to feel better more than Japanese do. These effects could not be explained by cultural differences in emotional experiences.

Culture and Emotion Regulation

When people feel bad, whether and how they try to influence their emotions depend on how much they want to feel better (Tamir, 2021). If such motivation varies by cultural context, these differences could have downstream implications regarding what people do and how they ultimately feel. Our study extends previous research on prohedonic goals in the US compared to East Asian countries (Miyamoto et al., 2014). First, we found cultural differences in goals to decrease unpleasant emotions and in goals to increase pleasant emotions. Although they are typically inversely related, unpleasant and pleasant emotions are distinct, and the strength of their association differs by culture (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Scollon et al., 2009). Evidence for cultural

Table 4 Fixed effects from multilevel models predicting emotion regulation goals by country, valence and arousal

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²
Country	0.75	0.23	.001	[0.29, 1.21]	0.02
Arousal	−0.06	0.04	.137	[−0.15, 0.02]	0.00
Valence	0.45	0.05	< .001	[0.35, 0.54]	0.01
Country $\times$ Arousal	0.24	0.06	< .001	[0.13, 0.36]	0.00
Country $\times$ Valence	0.08	0.06	.232	[−0.05, 0.20]	0.00
Arousal $\times$ Valence	0.09	0.06	.144	[−0.03, 0.21]	0.00
Country $\times$ Valence $\times$ Arousal	−0.51	0.08	< .001	[−0.68, −0.35]	0.00

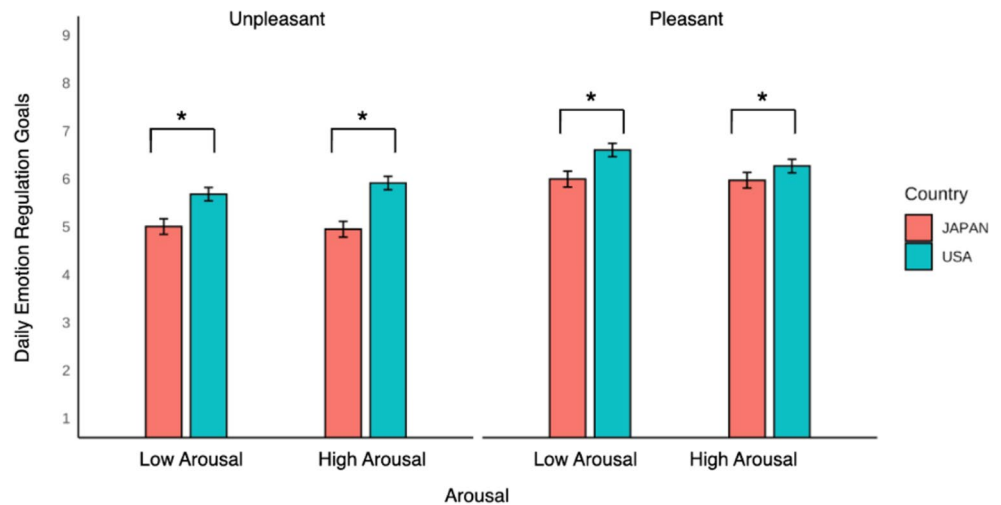
The reports focus on the key effects of interest, which is the interaction between country, valence, and arousal. However, the models also controlled for additional covariates, including experienced emotions, age, gender, compliance rates, and lagged emotion regulation goals. For Level 1 predictors, the model included random intercepts and slopes, person-mean centered. We calculated effect sizes for fixed effects as adjusted *R*², using the *r2glmm* package (Jaeger, 2017). Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals were obtained with the *confint()* function. Parameter estimation was conducted using maximum likelihood. Country was coded as Japan = −1 and USA = 1, valence was coded as unpleasant = −1 and pleasant = 1, and arousal was coded as low-arousal = −1 and high-arousal = 1

Table 5 Probing the country by arousal by valence interaction, predicting emotion regulation goals in daily life

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Unpleasant emotion regulation goals				
Country $\times$ Arousal	0.24	0.06	< 0.001	[0.13, 0.36]
US – Japan: high-arousal	−0.99	0.23	< 0.001	[−1.44, −0.55]
US – Japan: low-arousal	−0.75	0.23	0.001	[−1.20, −0.30]
Pleasant emotion regulation goals				
Country $\times$ Arousal	−0.27	0.06	< 0.001	[−0.39, −0.15]
US – Japan: high-arousal	−0.56	0.23	0.014	[−1.00, −0.12]
US – Japan: low-arousal	−0.83	0.23	< 0.001	[−1.27, −0.39]

Culture was coded as Japan = −1 and USA = 1 and arousal was coded as low-arousal = −1 and high-arousal = 1

Fig. 1 Daily Emotion Regulation Goals Predicted by Country, Valence and Arousal. *Note.* Scores are adjusted means accounting for all model predictors. * indicates a significant cultural difference



Note. Scores are adjusted means accounting for all model predictors. * indicates a significant cultural difference.

differences in both unpleasant and pleasant emotion regulation goals reinforces the robustness of cultural variation in prohedonic motivation.

Second, we examined emotion regulation goals across cultures in daily life. Building on Sims et al. (2015), who observed cultural differences in momentary desired emotions, we found cultural differences in goals to influence emotions in prohedonic ways. Americans may not only prefer more intense pleasant (vs. unpleasant) emotions, they are also more motivated to influence their emotions by decreasing unpleasant emotions and increasing pleasant ones. Cultural differences in these goals were not explained by experienced emotions. These findings align with research suggesting that culture informs which emotions are considered appropriate and how people should influence them (Mesquita et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Directions

First, we found consistent cultural differences in goals to decrease unpleasant emotions and increase pleasant emotions, providing further evidence for cultural differences in prohedonic emotion regulation (Kaspi et al., 2025; Miyamoto et al., 2014; Sims et al., 2015). Although further research is needed to confirm this, such findings may be driven by interdependence, dialectic worldviews, Buddhism, or combinations of them. Second, country differences in emotion regulation goals were moderated by arousal. Americans were more motivated to decrease all unpleasant emotions, but high-arousal ones, in particular, and to increase all pleasant emotions, but low-arousal ones, in particular. Thus, college students in the US (vs. Japan) may be more motivated to increase pleasure and decrease arousal (see also, Cachia et al., 2025). Further research is

needed to better understand these moderations by arousal. Third, current findings may carry implications for emotion regulation and psychological health. Future research could test how cultural differences in emotion regulation goals are linked to psychological health across cultures. Finally, this study compared emotion regulation goals in the USA and Japan. Whether or not such differences extend to other Asian contexts is unclear (Kaspi et al., 2025), and could be tested in future studies.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-026-00358-9>.

Additional Information

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Availability of Data and Material All study materials, data, and R codes are available at the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/zf4me/?view_only=c96a8e2e09c442dcb8efce0874ef87f9 (https://osf.io/zf4me/view_only=c96a8e2e09c442dcb8efce0874ef87f9).

Authors' Contributions Conceptualization: LK, DH, YM, YCD, MT-Methodology: LK, DH, YM, YCD, MTInvestigation: LK, DH, YM, TO, YCD, MTVisualization: LK, DH, MTFunding acquisition: YM, MTProject administration: LK, DH, YM, TO, YCD, MTSupervision: MTWriting – original draft: LK, DH, MTWriting – review & editing: LK, DH, YM, TO, YCD, MT.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate The study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Boards of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Hitotsubashi University, and Georgetown University.

All participants gave their informed consent to participate.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

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