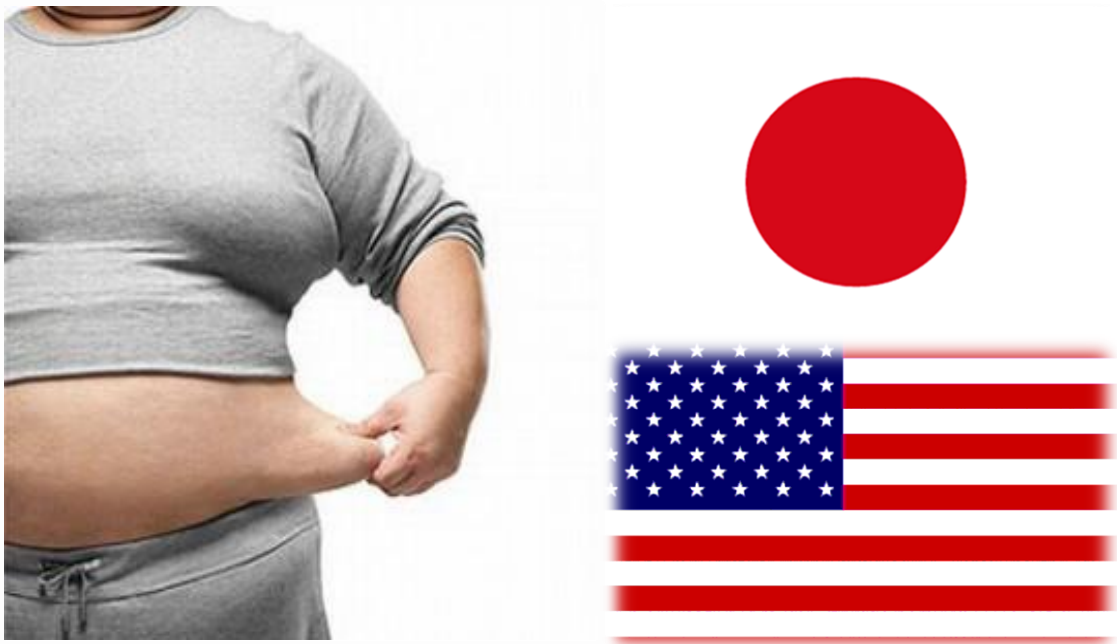


# Cultural Factors Leading To Overweight And Obesity: Cross-Cultural Analysis Of Japan And The United States of America



***Bachelor Thesis Marketing 2009-2010***

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## Summary

Overweight and obesity has become a global health problem, in which the numbers of obese and overweight people all over the world just keep on rising. There exist many contributors to the epidemic of overweight and obesity. One of the possible influences on the overweight and obesity rates in a specific country, are cultural factors. The central question answered in this thesis is which factors in an individualistic versus a collectivistic society, may contribute to the increase of overconsumption of food, leading to different rates of overweight and obesity, in America versus Japan. For this survey, literature is selected about the meaning and causes of overweight and obesity, the features of an individualistic society and the features of a collectivistic society. Literature showed that the most rapid increase of overweight and obesity was found in the individualistic society of the United States of America, where now 30,6% of the adult population is obese. In the collectivistic society of Japan, the worldwide increase seems to be less of a problem, with 3,2% of the adult population which suffers from overweight and obesity.

The basic cause of overweight and obesity is an imbalance between the calories consumed on the one hand, and calories expended on the other hand. Though there exist many more causes, for example the global shift in diet of energy-dense foods with high fat and sugar amounts, the underestimation of calories coupled with the increasing portion sizes and environmental factors which can increase the volume of food consumption.

Food provides different functions, which are going further than nutrition only. In a collectivistic society the rituals of cooking and eating are highly valued. By sharing food, people reduce social distances and strengthen the harmony within the group. Though, in individualistic societies, food can be seen as an object, which exchange can create distance and differentiation.

Furthermore people in a collectivistic society are able to keep close to their own feelings, and base food choices on their specific needs for nutritious elements. In comparison, people in an individualistic society extract in deliberate eating, in which they will eat without any specific feeling of hunger or nutritious needs. By not consuming to the specific needs and preferences of the body, people possibly consume too much, or in the wrong kind of diet, which may contribute to overweight and obesity.

# 1 Chapter 1: Introduction

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## 1.1 Introduction

Since 1970, the prevalence of obesity has increased substantially. The latest figures demonstrate that obesity has become a significant public health problem. Obesity has increased in every age, sex, race and smoking-status stratum of the population (Keith et al, 2006). The prevalence of illnesses related to modern diet and a more sedentary lifestyle has increased markedly in most Western countries over the last few decades. The most rapid increase of obesity and overweight was found in the U.S.A. where now 30,6% of the adult population is obese (Nation Master, 2010). A body mass index equal to or more than 25 is considered as overweight. People with obesity are those with a body mass index equal to or more than 30.

Although the causes of obesity are complex, researchers have pointed out two possible major causes, called the 'Big Two'. The 'Big Two' consist of a calorie intake, which is too high, combined with major reduction in physical activity. True the reductions in physical activity, too little calories are burned in comparison to the intake of them (Keith et al, 2006).

In the past years, much information is gathered about overconsumption and, external and internal factors that drive people to eat (much) more than is good for optimal health. One factor that possibly contributed to overconsumption is the increased package sizes during the past 20 years. "Supersizing" is believed to be a prime driver of the epidemic in obesity (Wansink, 1996). Also new food manufacturing methods, which lowered the time price of food consumption, led to increased quantity and variety of foods consumed (Culter, Glaeser, Shapiro, 2003). Furthermore, many other environmental factors, such as the shape of your plate, the amount of light while you are eating, the variety in your food consumption and the presence of other people can increase consumption volume far more than people possibly expect (Wansink, 2004).

Although much is known about the topic of obesity, overconsumption and the consequences for people's health, the number of overweight and obese people is still rising. The contributors to the epidemic of obesity I described before are probably only a selection of all the factors that contribute to obesity. That is why this thesis will research a new possible contributor. This thesis will give an overview of the cultural factors, which are probably contributing to the rising

numbers of overweight and obese people all over the world. The thesis will make a distinction between a society led by collectivism, and a society led by individualism, to see if these factors have a different effect on calorie intake of people, living in these two different societies. Therefore a comparison will be made between a more collectivistic country, like Japan, and a more individualistic country, like the United States of America (U.S.A.). Collectivism focuses on community and society, and is a term to describe the interdependence of every human in collective groups. Collectivism sets priority to group rights instead of individual rights. Individualism on the other hand stresses the moral worth of the individual. It promotes independence and self-reliance (Hofstede, 2001).

The worldwide increase of people with overweight and obesity seems to be less of a problem in the collectivistic society of Japan (Hermanussen, Molinari, Satake, 2007). Japan stands on the very bottom of the list with 3,2% of the population who suffer from obesity. Take this in comparison to the individualistic society the U.S.A. and we see a big difference, with a percentage of 30,2 obese people. Possibly the cultural differences, beyond other food and eating habits, between the two countries can partly account for the difference in overweight and obesity rates.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

### Problem definition

Overweight and obesity is considered as an important public health issue, and is identified as one of the ten leading health indicators. There is still no indication that the prevalence of obesity among adults and overweight among children is decreasing (Hedley, Ogden, Johnson, Carroll, Curtin, Flegal, 2004). Because of the big differences in obesity rates between countries, it becomes interesting to analyze the relationship between various societies and the differential impacts that are exerted on eating habits. For this thesis two countries are selected, in which there exists an extreme difference in obesity rates. These countries, America and Japan, will be further examined in this thesis together with the properties of obesity and overweight. The aim of this paper is to provide a clear understanding of how cultural factors may influence obesity and overweight rates in America and Japan.

## Problem statement

*Which factors of an individualistic versus a collectivistic society may contribute to the increase of overconsumption of food, leading to different rates of overweight and obesity, in America versus Japan?*

## Conceptual framework

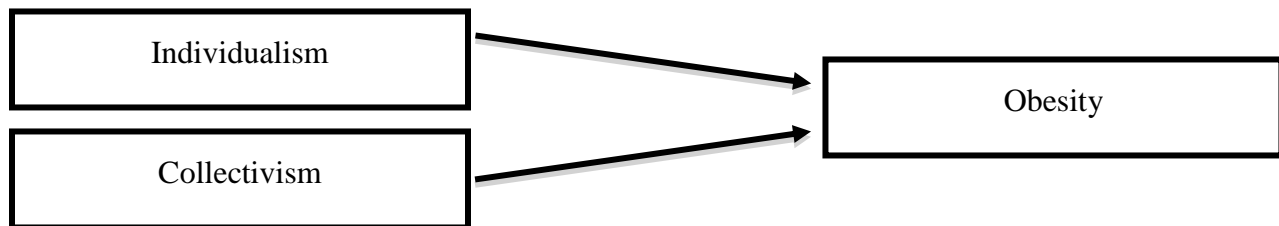


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

## Research Questions

1. How can overweight and obesity be defined?
2. What are the features of a collectivistic society?
3. What are the features of an individualistic society?
4. Which cultural factors may lead to overweight and obesity in America and Japan?

## **1.3 Relevance**

### Academic relevance

This thesis will hopefully provide new insights in the field of overconsumption of food. Current literature is still incomplete and there is little knowledge about the contribution of cultural factors. The distinction between collectivism and individualism will hopefully add a new insight to the existing literature of overconsumption and obesity.

### Managerial relevance

The information provided by this thesis will help companies and governments to better understand the choices that consumers make, leading to overconsumption. By exploring the cultural factors that influence people to over consume food, it will be easier to respond to those factors and influence them. This will hopefully lead to better governmental programs for

reducing overweight and obesity and specific marketing campaigns by companies for a healthy consumption of food.

#### **1.4 Thesis structure**

Chapter one introduces overweight and obesity, and the existing differences between the collectivistic society of Japan and the individualistic society of the United States of America. Furthermore, the problem statement and research questions are formulated, as well as the managerial and academic relevance. Chapter two provides an overview of the properties of overweight and obesity. The chapter is divided into four paragraphs, which define obesity and overweight, give some facts, and information about the causes and health consequences. In chapter three, the most important features of a collectivistic society are shown, which possibly influence the overweight and obesity rates in Japan. Chapter three will give the same overview, with as central topic an individualistic society. The final chapter, chapter five, will answer research question four, presenting cultural factors which possibly influence the obesity rates in America and Japan.

## **2 Chapter 2: Obesity and overweight**

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The aim of this chapter is to give a clear understanding of the properties of obesity and overweight. First, this chapter will start with the definition of obesity and overweight. Second, it will continue with some facts concerning obesity and overweight rates within the world, focusing on The United States of America and Japan. Third, some causes of obesity and overweight will be discussed. Finally, this chapter will give an overview of possible health consequences for obese and overweight people.

### **2.1 Definitions**

Obesity and overweight have become a global health problem. There exist many definitions of overweight and obesity. This thesis will use the definition of obesity and overweight set by the World Health Organization. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines overweight and obesity as an abnormal or excessive fat accumulation, which possibly influences health (World Health Organization, 2006).

To really specify overweight and obesity, the World Health Organization uses body mass index (BMI). The body mass index stands for the weight in kilograms divided over the height in squared meters ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ). The index does not only define the presence of obesity and overweight, but can also be used to classify people in different degrees of fatness. Because BMI does not correspond to the same degree of fatness in different individual people, it may only be used as a rough guideline (World Health Organization, 2006).

Overweight people have a BMI equal to or more than 25, and obese people have a BMI equal to or more than 30. This measurement can only be used for adult individuals. Because there is no standard definition of childhood obesity applied worldwide, measuring obesity by children is still a challenge.

### **2.2 Facts**

There is evidence that the obesity rates all over the world are going up. The latest projections of the WHO indicate that globally in the year 2005 approximately 1,6 billion adults (age 15+) were overweight and at least 400 million adults were obese. These numbers are still rising with a



projection of the WHO that by 2015, 2,3 billion adults will be overweight and more than 700 million people will be obese (World Health Organization, 2006).

In this thesis there is a specific interest for the overweight and obesity rates in U.S.A. and Japan. The histogram, showed below, describes the overweight and obesity rates of both countries in 2005 and gives an approximate for 2015.

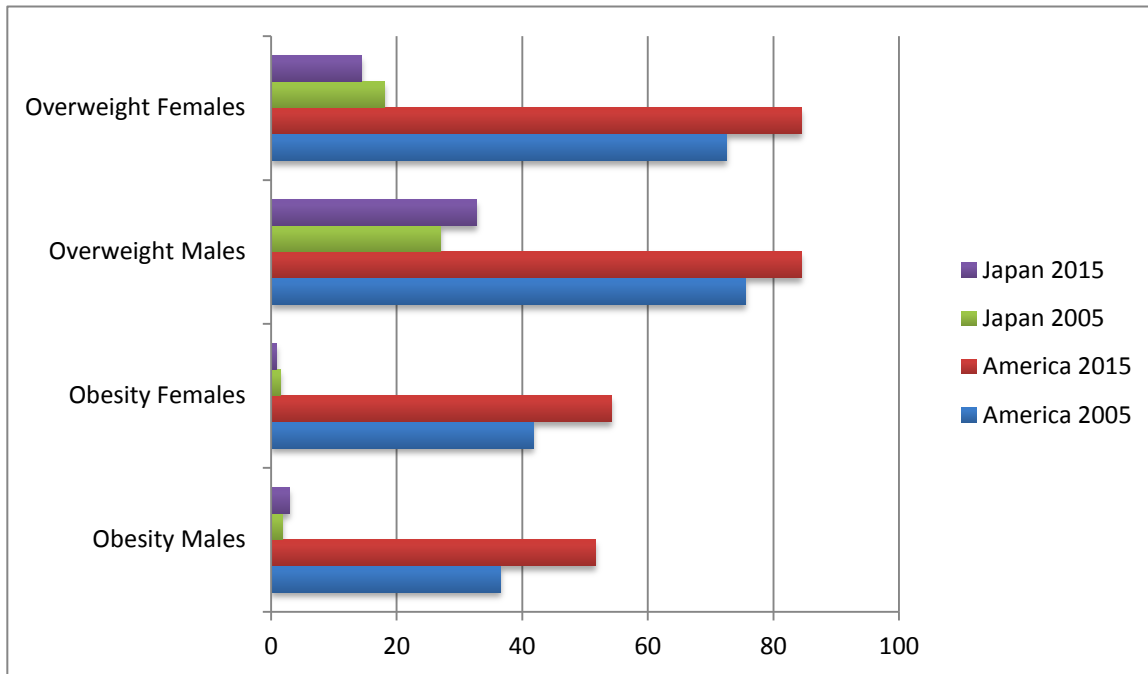


Figure 2: Overweight and obesity rates America versus Japan, 2005 and 2015 (World Health Organization, 2006)

These diagrams show that the overweight and obesity rates in America are higher than those of Japan. The largest differences can be found in the obesity rates. The American population is more obese than the Japanese population.

### 2.3 Causes

Overweight and obesity have several causes. The basic problem causing overweight and obesity is an imbalance between the calories consumed on the one hand, and calories expended on the other hand, known as the ‘Big Two’ (World Health Organization, 2006). Though the global increase of overweight and obese people is caused by a number of factors. The aim of this paragraph is to give a clear overview of some possible causes of global increase of overweight and obesity.

The WHO states that the reduced physical activities are due to the nature of many forms of work, changing modes of transportation, and an increasing urbanization (World Health Organization, 2006). Another possible cause is the global shift in diet, found by the WHO, which manifest in an increased intake of energy-dense foods with high fat and sugar amounts but a low rate of vitamins and minerals (World Health Organization, 2006).

Also calorie underestimation, coupled with increasing portion sizes, is believed to be a driver of the obesity epidemic (Wansink, Chandon, 2006). The research shows that overweight and normal weight persons are likely to underestimate their food intake. The underestimation is dependent on the meal sizes, not body size, in which overweight persons have a greater underestimation of calorie intake, because of their tendency to consume larger meals (Wansink, Chandon, 2006).

The final causes this thesis will treat are the environmental factors, which can increase the volume of food consumption (Wansink, 2004). The environment can be subdivided into the eating environment and the food environment. The eating environment refers to “the ambient factors associated with eating of food, but that are independent of food, such as atmospherics, the effort of obtaining food, the social interactions that occur, and the distractions that may be taking place”. In contrast, the food environment refers to “factors that directly relate to the way food is provided or presented, such as its salience, structure, package or portion size, and how it is served” (Wansink, 2004). Both factors can directly influence the consumption volume, but they can also indirectly contribute to consumption norms and inhibiting consumption monitoring (Wansink, 2004).

## **2.4 Health consequences**

When BMI rises, the health risks and consequences are rising with it. There are several diseases coupled to the rise of one’s BMI. People with overweight and obesity have a higher risk to develop chronicle diseases. The first is cardiovascular disease, which stands for heart disease and strokes, and is already the world’s number one cause of death for 17 million people each year (Word Health Organization, 2006). Second comes diabetes, WHO projects that death by diabetes will increase with 50% the next 10 years because of the increase in overweight and obese people.

Last there is the rise of musculoskeletal disorders, with a rise in osteoarthritis and some cancers (World Health Organization, 2006).

### **3 Chapter 3: Features of a collectivistic society**

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Individualism is the third dimension of natural culture set by Hofstede, as opposed to collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). The dimension describes the relationship between the individual and the collectivity in a given society (Hofstede, 2001). The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of general features of a collectivistic society, which possibly influence obesity rates in a collectivistic country like Japan. Features of a collectivistic society that could be of influence for obesity rates are family-structure, general behavior in the society, eating and consumer behavior and how people look at health and disability. This chapter will answer research question two: “What are the features of a collectivistic society?”

#### **3.1 Definitions**

Hofstede defines collectivism as “a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”. Hofstede found, with regard to the self, that group membership is a central aspect of the identity. The properties of an individual reflect the goals of the in-group. In a collectivistic society, maintaining the well being of the group is the best guarantee for an individual (Hofstede, 2001).

#### **3.2 The collectivity**

When children are born in a collectivistic society, they will automatically become part of a family or clan, which is a part of a bigger in-group, a larger social unit. It is expected that they will stay loyal to their in-group for the rest of their life. When the children grow up, the in-group will be a major source of their identity, in which they will learn to think in terms of “we”, instead of “I”. Most children grow up in collectivistic societies, among a number of people who are living together, so next to their parents and other children, the group consist of an extended family, with grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and sometimes neighbors, housemates, co-villagers, and lords or servants (Hofstede, 2001).

In the in-group, the biological family is the smallest unit possible. People stay close to their parents, grandparents and other elders as long as they are alive and they expect their offspring and juniors to do the same (Hofstede, 2001). This caring possibly comes from the capability of people to put the needs, goals and views of others above their own. In the family and the in-

group, people feel interdependent with each other, share resources when necessary and are involved with each other's lives (Trandis, 1989).

Proper communication is also a very important part of the in-group (Hofstede, 2001). Direct confrontation of another person is considered to be very rude. Children learn, already in their younger years, that a personal opinion does not exist (Hofstede, 2001) and it is very important that they can endure unsatisfactory arrangements with a minimum of open conflicts (Pike, Borovoy, 2004). This way the harmony with one's social environment can be kept, which is a key goal in the life of a true collectivist. Possibly the need for harmony is the reason why the words yes and no have a different meaning in the collectivistic societies. Hofstede found that the word no is seldom used. "The word yes should not necessarily be seen as an approval; rather it may be used to maintain the communication line" (Hofstede, 2001).

The members of a collectivistic family are kept together through loyalty combined with the threat of shame. Hofstede found that collectivistic societies are shame cultures. Shame comes to the members of the in-group when a misdeed has been committed. The feeling of shame has a social nature, which is the contrary of guilt, which has an individual nature. Whether an individual feels ashamed in the in-group depends on the knowledge of other members of the group and if they know about the misdeed, which is committed (Hofstede, 2001). When individuals in the in-group do not succeed to meet essential requirements placed upon them, face is lost. For a member of the in-group it is very important to not lose his/her face in front of other members of the group. Hofstede describes that in a collectivistic society "the proper relationship with one's environment, is as essential to a person as the front part of his or her head".

When a child grows up in a collectivistic society, this leads to a difference in modal personality characteristics and behavioral patterns, in comparison to other societies. As we saw in this paragraph earlier, there exists a high need for harmony in collectivistic societies, which is achieved by avoiding confrontations. Hofstede found that the less individualistic the society, the higher the need for harmony by avoiding confrontation.

Attitudes toward other people depend on their membership by an in-group. With regard to the expression of emotion, it is known that in collectivistic countries women express themselves less strongly than do men (Hofstede, 2001). Men and women also differ in lifestyles, in which

women's live with and are dependent of relatives and in-laws. Men on the other hand, spend more time outdoors, working and socializing with other people of the in- and out-group. Because the value of social harmony in these cultures, women learn to suppress their emotions. It is hard for them to tolerate the expression of anger and fear, which can possibly disturb the social harmony. Possibly that is why the collectivistic cultures discourage the expression of happiness, and encourage the expression of showing sadness (Hofstede, 2001).

### **3.3 Eating and consumer behavior**

People in a collectivistic society spent more time in activities which are dictated by role or context, like resting, cooking, tending animals, gardening, being outdoors, sleeping and eating (Hofstede, 2001).

Researchers found that between cultures, there exist different motivations for the activity of cooking and eating. Rozin found that, in the evaluation of culture, food comes to serve functions other than nutrition. Food can become a social vehicle, in which people can make social distinctions and establish social linkages, for example, by sharing food (Rozin, 2005). In a collectivistic society, food exchange reduces social distance and solidifies relationships (Counihan, 1992). People in a collectivistic society are usually triggered to eat based on physical and environmental motivations. Physical eating occurs in response to hunger cues, such as a growling stomach or the feeling of dizziness. Environmental eating is triggered by something in the surroundings, like the hearing of the lunch bell, the smell of food, or check-out stands. People in a collectivistic society are less triggered to eat on basis of an emotional status (Hawks, Madanat, Merrill, Goudy, Miyagawa, 2003).

When we take the collectivistic society of Japan for example, we can describe it as a society which places strong emphasis on conformity to social norms, which makes the Japanese more sensitive to other's evaluation of themselves, in comparison to individualistic western societies (Mukai, Kambara, Sasaki, 1998). Research states that Japanese women are more likely to perceive themselves as overweight and report greater body dissatisfaction, in comparison to the individualistic society of the United States of America. Because of the greater need for social approval, it is possible that the Japanese have a greater motivation to seek favorable evaluations from others (Mukai, Kambara, Sasaki, 1998).

Most of the people, living in a collectivistic society, live in flats or apartments. It is very rare that one person is living alone, so he or she usually shares his/her living area and resources with other human companions, which are members of the same in-group (Hofstede, 2001). Wansink found that the presence and behavior of others have a great influence on people's eating behavior. In which people model the intake level of their eating partners, eating as much, or as little as, their eating partner (Wansink, 2008).

### **3.4 Health and disability**

There are many differences between societies, in what is considered abnormal and unhealthy, which is the mirror imago for what is considered normal and healthy. For example, Hofstede found that "obesity in many African societies is considered beautiful; in many European countries it is considered pathological and a reason for a treatment". The preference of males for female body weight follows a consistent cross-cultural pattern. Cultures with scarce resources have a higher preference for heavier woman, whereas cultures with abundant resources, thinner woman are preferred (Nelson, Morrison, 2005).

The way normally health people cope with stressful situations, difference with culture. Olah (1995) reported that people from a collectivistic society usually report more emotionally-focused coping, as opposed to more problem-focused coping. When even though, people in a collectivistic society, get depressed, they are often good capable of functioning in their normal environment. This has to do with their social network, which makes decisions for them, so the social harmony can be kept (Hofstede, 2001).

## **4 Chapter 4: Features of a individualistic society**

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The counterpart of collectivism is individualism. The dimension of individualism describes the relationship between the individual and the collectivity in a given society (Hofstede, 2001). The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of general features of an individualistic society, that possibly influence the obesity rates in a individualistic country such as the United States of America. This chapter is divided into the following paragraphs: the importance of family, eating and consumer behavior, health and disability. This chapter will answer research question three: “What are the features of a individualistic society?”.

### **4.1 Definition**

Historically, individualism is a product of the ideology of liberalism (Kemmelmeier et al, 2003). The emphasis on civil liberties and freedom emerged in opposition to authoritarian oppression during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kemmelmeier et al, 2003). The central idea of these politic movements was “the recognition of individual self-determination, individual human rights, and the limitation of state control over the individual” (Kemmelmeier et al, 2003). Usually, researchers conceptualize individualism as the opposite of collectivism. The most important element of individualism is that individuals are independent of others (Oyserman, Coon, Kemmelmeir, 2002).

This thesis will use the definition of individualism, set by Hofstede. Hofstede (2001) defines individualism as “a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family only. It focuses on rights above duties, an emphasis on personal autonomy and self-fulfillment, and the basing of one’s identity on one’s personal accomplishments”.

When looking at the self-concept, individualism states that a human endeavor is found in creating and maintaining a positive sense of the self. Also feeling good about oneself, having unique personal attitudes and personal successes are high valued attributes (Oyserman, Coon, Kemmerlmeir. 2002).

### **4.2 The individual**

In people’s lives, the first group is the family into which they are born. The learning’s of a specific culture always starts in the family, in which families are a small model of a society, to



which children learn to adapt (Hofstede, 2001). In comparison to collectivism, the smallest unit possible for a person living in an individualistic society is the individual (instead of the family). This can be explained by a specific feature of individualism, in which the interest of the individual prevails over the interest of the group (Hofstede, 2001). When children are born in an individualistic society, they usually become part of a nuclear family. Nuclear families can be defined as families which just consist of parents, and possibly other children. The other relatives usually live elsewhere, and are rarely seen. In individualistic societies, an increasing share of children is growing up in one-parent families (Hofstede, 2001).

Children in an individualistic society learn to think in terms of “I” instead of “we”. This “I” is a personal identity, distinct from other people, which are classified according to their individual characteristics. For children, the society enables them to make choices based on their personal preferences. They are educated with the purpose of learning to stand on their own two feet, so they can leave the parental home as soon as possible. This means that children must get independent, and learn to make their own way in life (Hofstede, 2001).

After children leaving their parents home, they are not necessarily maintaining contact with their family. The parents and grandparents live on their own, and are supposed to provide in their own needs. When they become infirm, they are usually moved to homes, where they are taken care of by special personnel.

In comparison to a collectivistic society, speaking one’s mind is considered normal. The meaning of a sincere and honest person is a person, who will tell the truth about how he/she feels. Individualism implies that speaking one’s mind with open emotion expression, are important sources of well-being and life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995). Coping with conflicts is considered as a normal part of living together as a family. When a confrontation between two individuals arises, it is believed that it can lead them to a higher truth. In an individualistic society, children are told that they should always tell the truth, even if it hurts and that direct feedback can help them to get better, to come closer to their personal goals (Hofstede, 2001).

In an individualistic society, parents are usually proud if their children take small jobs at an early age, in order to earn pocket money for their own, which the children can spend according to their own decisions. A family, relationship or friendship is perceived to attain self-relevant goals

(Oyserman, 1993). Oyserman states “individualists apply equity norms to balance their relationship’s cost and benefits, leaving the relationships and groups when the costs of participation exceed the benefits and creating new relationships as personal goals shift”.

In comparison to the collectivistic so-called “shame-cultures”, a child growing up in an individualistic society learns to feel guilt. The child develops the feeling of guilt, ridden by a conscience that functions as a private inner plot. The counterpart of guilt is well known as self-respect. Again, we can see a characteristic, formulated from the point of view of the individual. Whereas the counterpart of “shame”, which can be described as losing face, is defined from the point of view of the social environment (Hofstede, 2001).

With regard to expression of emotions, it is known that woman express emotions, like guilt, joy, shame and disgust, more than do men. In these cultures, the expression of happiness is encouraged, and the expression of individual heavy emotions is easily recognized and identified by others (Hofstede, 2001).

### **4.3 Eating and consumer behavior**

People in an individualistic society are guided by a more active self-concept. They spend more time watching TV, shopping, as members of voluntary organizations, in personal care, in religious activities, and reading papers (Hofstede, 2001). Also they tend to have a high work- and walk speed (Hofstede, 2001). All of those activities are possibly the result of the need for physical expression of their self-concept. In which the people in individualistic societies tend to focus more on themselves, and are more active in trying to get somewhere (Hofstede, 2001).

In an individualistic society, food is an object, whose exchange can create distance and differentiation (Counihan, 1992). Because not everyone has the control over access to food, food becomes a vehicle of power. The ability for an individualist to determine his/her own food consumption, manifest in his/her ability to be autonomous and independent. The individual choice of food, involves determining what foods are acceptable and which ones are not. Self-control is a big part of these choices, which Counihan describes as “the ability to deny appetite, suffer hunger, and deny themselves foods they like but believe are fattening” (Counihan, 1992). To express their individualism and independence, people often define their own “good” diet (Counihan, 1992). In which they believe that “good” and “bad” are simply what you make them

to be. By composing the diet, they are most concerned with their behavior towards the food, in which personal expression is very important in terms of willpower and release of control. The individualist values the exercise of restraint in eating, because of the believe that it is a path to personal attractiveness, moral superiority, high status, and dominance (Counihan, 1992).

Between cultures, there also exist different motivations for the activity of cooking and eating (Hofstede, 2001). Researchers found that people in a highly individualistic society, usually are triggered to eat in response to emotional states and environmental motivations. Environmental eating, as described in paragraph 3.3 is triggered by something in the surroundings, like the smell of food, or the confrontation with an advertisement. People in an individualistic society get triggered to eat, by watching TV or movies and out of boredom. This develops itself in deliberate eating, without specific feelings of hunger or nutritional needs (Hawks, Madanat, Merrill, Goudy, Miyagawa, 2003).

Rozin studied the meaning of food in people's life, comparing the individualistic Americans with the French. He found that Americans tend to focus more on the consequences of eating, in comparison to the French, who experience less stress and more pleasure in relation to eating (Rozin, 2005). In the United States, food portions and food containers tend to be larger, the Americans tend to eat faster and include less sociality and conversation with meals, they tend to snack more, partly because there are more opportunities to snack (Rozin, 2005). It seems ironic that the Americans tend to worry most about their diet, modify their diet in a direction that they perceive as healthy, but consider themselves least as "healthy eaters". Rozin suggest that "it is conceivable that American worries and obsessions about healthy foods may be counter-productive, producing substantial reductions in the quality of life, and perhaps having no or even negative effects on the length of life" (Rozin, 1999).

Most of the people, living in an individualistic society, live in detached houses with private gardens (Hofstede, 2001). The homes have separate own motor homes, in which they can store all kind of goods and supplies. For example, people in the individualistic society of the U.S.A., tend to spend a lot of money making their lives easier and minimizing exercise or effort. The economist Tibor Scitovsky calls these expenditures "comforts", like microwaves, air conditioners, power windows, and driving to a store only a few blocks way (Ronzin, 2005).

The most occurring pets are cats and/or dogs, which live in the houses of the pet owner. They live a self-supporting lifestyle, in which they protect themselves by home and life insurances. As main source of information, they use books, computers and answering machines, in which we can conclude that media is their main source of information (Hofstede, 2001). Media can have a great influence on the eating behavior of individuals. Wansink found that people generally acknowledge that external elements, such as media and advertisements, influence others, but they strongly deny the influence of these elements on their own behavior (Wansink, 2008).

#### **4.4 Health and disability**

What is considered abnormal and unhealthy contains an evident cultural component (Hofstede, 2001). For example, in the high individualistic country the United States of America, obesity is considered as a fact of life, that should not lead to discrimination, in comparison to many European countries, in which obesity is considered pathological and a reason for medical treatment (Hofstede, 2001).

Also in the way normally healthy cope with stressful situations exist differences between cultures. In individualistic cultures, people cope with stressful situations by trying to change the environment to their own benefits, which can be defined as problem-focused coping, in comparison to emotionally focused coping. Frequencies, intensities, and treatments of abnormal behavior vary across the world. In individualistic societies, when a person gets depressed, he/she is often unable to overcome the stress of personal decisions, and feels a great amount of guilt. What is why they are often unable to continuing functioning (Hofstede, 2001). To prevent feelings of depression people in individualist cultures invest a great amount in their individual health, because they are responsible for their own health and disabilities (Hofstede, 2001).

## 5 Chapter 5: Conclusions, discussion and recommendations

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In this chapter, the conclusion, discussion and recommendations for further research will be described. The first paragraph will answer the central research question of this study, by displaying the main conclusions from the literature study. The second paragraph will discuss different issues that occurred during the literature review together with recommendations for future research.

### 5.1 Conclusions

This paragraph will answer the central question of this study: *Which factors of an individualistic versus a collectivistic society may contribute to the increase of overconsumption of food, leading to different rates of overweight and obesity, in America versus Japan?*

Individualism is the third of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, as opposed to collectivism. The aim of previous chapters was to get specific information about individualism and collectivism, which possibly may influence the overweight and obesity rates in collectivistic societies, like Japan, compared to individualistic societies, like the United States of America.

#### 5.1.1 Collectivism, overweight and obesity

The World Health Organization defines overweight and obesity as an abnormal or excessive fat accumulation, which possibly influences health. Figure two in chapter two shows that the overweight and obesity rates in collectivistic societies, like Japan, are quite low, in comparison to the high rates in individualistic societies, like the United States of America.

The important activities in collectivistic societies are resting, being outdoors, cooking and eating. Research shows that people can have different motivations for cooking and eating, and food can serve all kinds of functions, going further than nutrition only. For example food can become a social vehicle, which can reduce social distinctions and establish social linkages. By sharing food, people in a collectivistic society can reduce social distances and strengthen relationships. In collectivistic societies, people live in a role, which is dictated by others. When children are born, they automatically become a part of a family or clan, in which it is expected that they will stay loyal for the rest of their lives. The key goal of a true collectivist is to keep harmony in one's social environment. Exchanging and sharing food is a very important ritual of the collectivist. It

can reduce social distances and strengthen the harmony within the group. Possibly that is an explanation for the main activities of a collectivist, where cooking and eating are highly valued.

Another motivation for collectivists to eat is in response to hunger and environmental cues. For example, their motivation is stimulated when they are feeling dizziness or smelling food from a food stand on the corner of the street. Collectivists are less triggered to eat on the basis of an emotional status. The global shift in diet, causing an increased intake of energy-dense foods with high fat and sugar amounts, but a low rate of vitamins and minerals, is one of the causes of overweight and obesity in different societies. By eating in response to hunger and environmental cues, literature shows that people in a collectivistic society are able to keep close to their own feelings, and base their food choices on their own needs for specific nutritious elements. Possibly, by keeping close to their own feelings, people in collectivistic societies are less influenced by the global shift in diet, and are able to keep on eating healthy.

The properties of an individual living in a collectivistic society reflect the goals of the in-group. As said before, the key goal in life of a true collectivist is maintaining the harmony of one's social environment. In one's group, people feel interdependent with each other, share resources and are involved with each other's lives. Although, to maintain harmony, group members need to meet essential requirements. When they do not succeed, face is lost in front of other members of the group, and the harmony gets disturbed. People in a collectivistic society, have a greater need for social approval, and seek favorable evaluation from others, for example on their weight and appearance. Possibly that is why Japanese women, living in a collectivistic society, by constantly comparing themselves with other members, are more likely to perceive themselves as overweight and report greater body dissatisfaction. Also, when a member of a collectivistic group becomes overweight or obese, it is possible that it does not only harm the individual, but influences the whole in-group. The individual can feel deeply ashamed of him or herself, and can lose the proper relationship with his/her environment.

### **5.1.2 Individualism, overweight and obesity**

There is evidence that the number of obese and overweight people all over the world is still rising. In 2015 more than 50% of the people living in an individualistic society, like the United

States of America, are either overweight or obese. Obesity and overweight have become a global health problem. The question here is what is causing these high overweight and obesity rates?

Literature states that the most important element of individualism is that individuals are independent of others. High valued attributes are feeling good about oneself, having unique personal attitudes and personal successes. In trying to get somewhere, a true individualist thinks in terms of “I” instead of “we”. This “I” becomes a personal identity, which can stand on his/her own feet, and makes choices based on his/her own preferences. There are different factors leading to food consumption in individualistic societies versus collectivistic societies. Food can serve all kinds of functions, going further than nutrition only. One way to reach the goal of being autonomous and independent in an individualistic society is by consuming food. Food is an object, whose exchange can create distance and differentiation. Because not every individual has the same control over the access of food, it can become a vehicle of power.

In the individual choice of food, self-control becomes very important. To express their independence and individualism, true individualists define their own “good” diet, in which they state that “good” or “bad” are just what you make them to be. By composing their own diet, they are not really interested in the specific nutritional function the food can fulfil. Moreover they become distracted by their concerns over their behaviour towards the food, in which personal expression becomes very important. For example, people in the individualistic society of the United States of America tend to focus more on the consequences of eating, in comparison to other societies in which people are able to experience more pleasure. It is ironic that they modify their diets in a direction that they perceive as healthy, but consider themselves least as “healthy eaters”. This way, the American worries and obsessions about healthy foods, can be counter-productive. People in an individualistic society are triggered to eat based on emotional status and environmental motivations, in comparison to people in collectivistic societies who are only triggered by hunger and environmental cues.

One of the environmental cues is media. Media can have a great influence on the life and eating styles of people in individualistic societies. The main activities of a true individualist are watching TV, shopping and reading papers. Media is their main source of information and can have a great influence on the eating behaviour of individuals. By watching TV or movies, people

in an individualistic society get triggered to eat. But most importantly, people in an individualistic society acknowledge that external elements, like advertisements and media, influence others, but they strongly deny the influence of these elements on their own behaviour.

By eating in response to emotional status and environmental cues, people in an individualistic society eat without specific feelings of hunger or nutritional needs, which is called deliberate eating. Instead they use the exchange of food as a vehicle of power, to feel good about oneself, show personal attitudes and reach personal successes. Possibly, by deliberate eating, people no longer only eat in response to their bodies needs, but consume all kind of foods, resulting in higher weight and fat rates.

## **5.2 Discussion and recommendations**

Individual motivations for eating, influenced by specific community features, are variables that can give more insight in the global health problem of overweight and obesity. This thesis only provides information about the link between collectivistic and individualistic societies and the global health problem of overweight and obesity. Though, there exist many more cultural dimensions which can contribute to the global health problem of overweight and obesity, and possibly influence the conclusions as stated in this thesis. Also, this thesis does not treat any moderating or mediating variable, which can possibly influence the link between the cultural dimensions and the global health problem of overweight and obesity. For future research, above remarks can be taking into account, and can be formed into new research questions, to research new areas and contribute to the existing literature and complete or when necessary revise the conclusions as stated in this thesis.

The existing literature contains no empirical research on the relationship between the cultural dimension individualism/collectivism and overweight and obesity rates. That is why it was necessary, to use a broad interpretation of the existing literature, in which the settings were different. For future research, I would recommend to use empirical research, to study the links between the cultural dimension individualism/collectivism and the obesity rates in, for example, Japan and the United States of America, as stated in the conclusion of this thesis.



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