

Comparative Study of Realistic Optimism between India and Japan University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the differences in realistic optimism between Indian and Japanese university students using the realistic optimism scale. Indian students ($n = 361$; 193 males and 168 females) and Japanese students ($n = 390$; 172 males and 218 females) participated in the questionnaire survey. A t -test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to compare the realistic optimism between the two participant groups. The results of the t -test indicated significant differences between Indian and Japanese students regarding realistic optimism, with Indian students scoring higher in the flexibility and future orientation dimensions. No significant difference was observed in the will/courage dimension. The ANOVA results showed a significant difference between India's and Japan's male and female students regarding future orientation and flexibility. However, no significant difference was found in terms of will/courage between Indian and Japanese male students and between Indian and Japanese female students. The results also revealed that Indian students, male and female, scored higher on overall realistic optimism than Japanese male and female students. The findings are discussed in the context of cross-cultural studies. Indian students scored higher in flexibility resulting from a multicultural society that requires them to understand each other and be flexible. Indian students' higher scores in future orientation refer to a strong desire to realize their goals and dreams.

Keywords: comparative study, India, Japan, realistic optimism

Optimism is a broad concept that has attracted the focus of many scholars and researchers in recent times. Different researchers have defined it by focusing on its specific characteristics or perspectives (Carver et al., 2010; Scheier & Carver, 1987; Hanssen et al., 2014; Conversano et al., 2010). Furthermore, various researchers have introduced numerous concepts related to it. Some of the principal ones are dispositional optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985), explanatory style optimism (Seligman, 1991), realistic optimism (Schneider, 2001), strategic optimism and defensive pessimism (Norem & Canter, 1986), and unrealistic optimism (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Schneider (2001) defines *realistic optimism* as a realistic outlook toward the future that recognizes and accepts uncertain reality objectively. Schneider (2001) pointed out that the characteristics of realistic optimists are: (1) focusing on own favorable experiences in the past, (2) moving toward the future with hope while objectively recognizing and accepting reality, and (3) having the will and making efforts toward desired outcomes. Magari (2015) mentioned that the concept of resilience is at the center of realistic optimism.

As the optimism research pool has broadened, comparative studies between countries and cultures have also increased. Most comparative studies on optimism have been between countries, such as the United States and Canada, representing Western culture, and Japan, Korea, and China exemplifying Eastern culture (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002). Moreover, a comparison that has been done the most is between East and West. There are, however, very few comparative studies that investigated the differences and similarities in optimism between two or more Eastern countries. This dearth may be because of the assumption that individuals from a collectivist culture are not much different in this regard because of a lack of separation of self from others (Higgins & Bhatt, 2001). However, it is vital to understand that there are significant differences even among Eastern cultures (and among Western).

This study compares the idea of realistic optimism among citizens of Japan and India, both of which are Eastern countries and collectivistic societies. The author aims to explain that two Eastern cultures may have various broad similarities, yet their ideas and concepts related to optimism could be different.

Characteristics of Optimism in Indian People

There are few papers that address optimism among Indian people. The work of Bharti and Rangnekar (2019) and Prabhu (2016) refer to optimism primarily from a Vedic point of view. According to Bharti and Rangnekar (2019), the concept of optimism seems to have been part of the belief system in India since the time of the early Vedic philosophy. Then, people believed that everything was possible through prayer, magic, natural forces, and cooperation with the gods. While interpreting the Vedas, K. P. Rao reveals that the ancient scriptures of the Vedas offer a sense of optimism and hope (Prabhu, 2016). The Vedas—meaning “knowledge”—have long been considered one of the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism. The existence of the concept during the Vedic period suggests that religious ideals are closely related to optimism (Prabhu, 2016).

Bharti and Rangnekar (2019) also refer to the optimism of Indian youth and state that, in general, young Indian people are more optimistic about their future and that of their society compared to the youth in other countries. Their work cites India’s socioeconomic and technological growth and relatively stable political system as reasons for this.

In 2013, Joshi and Carter conducted a comparative study of the tendency toward unrealistic optimism among 200 middle-aged, middle-income Indians and 87 British citizens. They evaluated 11 favorable events, such as “winning the lottery” and “being healthy in old age,” and 11 adverse events, such as “committing suicide” and “getting divorced,” in terms of the likelihood of each event occurring in “their own life” and in the lives of “people like them.” According to the results, Indian people showed a higher level of optimism toward negative events (adverse events will not happen to them) than the British population. Moreover, in terms of positive events, Indians of higher socioeconomic status tended to be generally optimistic, while those of lower socioeconomic status tended to be more pessimistic.

Sinha et al. (2000) assessed dispositional optimism and other psychological factors among college students from India and Canada. Unlike Joshi and Carter’s (2013) results—and other similar studies—they find that Indian students were more pessimistic than their Canadian counterparts.

Characteristics of Optimism in Japanese People

Research on optimism has been conducted mainly from unrealistic optimism and positive illusion perspectives in Japan. *Positive illusion* is defined as “a belief about oneself that is pleasant or positive, and that is held regardless of its truth” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). For example, Markus and Kitayama (1991) find that the “self-enhancing bias” that is thought to underlie unrealistic optimism—in other words, the idea that one is better than others—is not universal. In cultures with a mutually cooperative view of self, such as Japan, self-enhancement bias is far less prevalent. Heine and Lehman (1995) studied unrealistic optimism in Canada and Japan; they found that Canadian university students showed high optimism in positive and negative items when tested using relative and absolute methods. Japanese university students showed unrealistic optimism only when asked about adverse events when tested using relative methods.

Studies point out that evidence of unwarranted optimism, or optimism bias, has also been found in Japan. Chang et al. (2001) found that optimism bias was present in the responses of both Japanese and European-Americans regarding the possibility of everyday adverse events. In addition, European-Americans hold an optimistic bias toward positive events, while Japanese have a pessimism bias toward positive events.

In Chang and Asakawa’s (2003) study, respondents were asked about the possibility of experiencing an atypical event, compared to a sibling who is close to them, rather than other people or peers (e.g., classmate or colleague). The results show that European-Americans tend to have optimism bias toward positive and negative events. However, Japanese people tend to have no bias in either direction regarding positive events, while they tend to have a pessimistic bias toward adverse events.

Studies in Europe and the United States show that positive illusions are linked to good mental health (Shedler et al., 1993). However, studies on positive illusions in Japan do not show the same results; on the contrary, self-deprecation bias tended to be observed among Japanese people (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002).

Ito’s (1999) study finds that, compared to others, Japanese people tend to overestimate themselves in terms of characteristics such as “kindness” and “seriousness.”

According to Toyama and Sakurai (2001), Japanese people tend to be self-critical and self-enhancing. The reason for these different tendencies is that Japanese people's concept of self-differs depending on the nature of the situation or the characteristics of the people involved. Specifically, both positive and negative illusions are found in Japanese people. For example, positive illusions are found in aspects such as harmony and honesty. Conversely, negative illusions are found in ability, talent, sociability, and appearance, among other aspects.

All the studies mentioned above suggest that, in general, Japanese people tend to be less optimistic in comparison to western countries.

Research Methodology

The survey was conducted after obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University, where the researcher was a student. After obtaining the participants' written and informed consent, the hard copy of the survey questionnaire was distributed to them in person.

Implementation of the Realistic Optimism Scale

The study used the realistic optimism scale, which was developed by Nishaat (2021). The realistic optimism scale consists of three factors: "future orientation," "flexibility," and "will/courage," and 12 items (Table 1). *Future orientation* can be defined as "the ability to step forward with a bright outlook for the future even when encountering difficulties." *Flexibility* can be defined as "the ability to change one's mind flexibly from various perspectives even when encountering difficulties. Furthermore, "will/courage" can be defined as "the ability to face difficulties head-on." These three factors are considered interrelated, influencing, and interacting with each other in a way that strengthens each factor. The scale was developed based on the idea of realistic optimism presented by Magari (2013). Magari (2013) defines *realistic optimism* as a way of thinking and living that allows one to have a positive outlook on the future, even when encountering various difficulties. The first factor, "future orientation ($\alpha = .83$)," and the second factor, "flexibility ($\alpha = .86$)" showed high internal consistency. The third factor, "will/courage ($\alpha = .60$)," also showed a certain level of internal consistency. The respondents of the survey were asked to answer on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "Quite Applicable" (5 points) to "Not Applicable" (1 point).

Table 1
Realistic Optimism Scale

I Future orientation.
I am living with goals for the future.
I am living with a dream.
There is hope in my life.
I think difficulties or hardships are rewarding for self.
I step up for things by myself.
II Flexibility.
Even if I fail, I am quick to recover from it.
Even if I had an unpleasant experience, I move on immediately.
I am not worried about small things.
I am positive about everything.
III Will/ Courage.
I feel anxious and frightened even for small things. (R)
I often tend to think about the past. (R)
If one thing goes wrong, I think that it will happen to other things as well. (R)

(R): Reverse-scored item

Survey participants

In India, 392 students (199 males and 193 females) from three universities in West Bengal, India, participated in this study. After responses that were incomplete or incorrectly completed were excluded, the completed questionnaires of 361 students (193 males and 168 females) were included in the analysis. The participant age range was 18–22 years.

In Japan, 423 students (191 males and 232 females) at three universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area participated in the survey. Of these, 390 students' (172 males and 218 females) completed questionnaires were included in the analysis, after incomplete or incorrectly completed responses were excluded. Participants were all between 18–22 years old.

Survey Period

The study period was from August 2019 to January 2020 in Japan and India.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26.0 was used for data analysis. An independent samples *t*-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted.

Results

An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the realistic optimism of Indian and Japanese students. Table 2 (with the graph presented in Figure 1) shows a significant difference between Indian and Japanese students in terms of the future orientation and flexibility factors

of realistic optimism and the overall realistic optimism score. Indian students had higher mean scores than Japanese students in future orientation ($t = 10.98$; $p < .001$) and flexibility ($t = 7.95$; $p < .001$). There was no significant difference in will/courage ($t = .10$) between Indian and Japanese students. There was also a significant difference between Indian and Japanese students in the overall score of realistic optimism, which tended to be higher among Indian students ($t = 9.74$; $p < .001$).

Table 2

T-test Results for Realistic Optimism Scores of Indian and Japanese Students

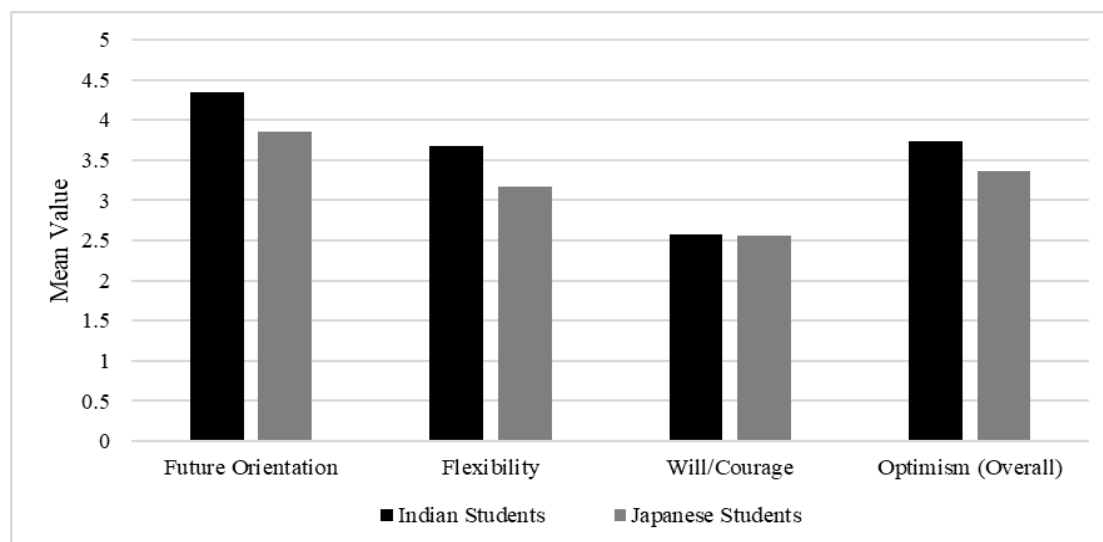
	Indian Students ($N = 361$)		Japanese Students ($N = 390$)		t -value ($df = 749$)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Future Orientation	4.35	.51	3.86	.70	10.98***
Flexibility	3.68	.81	3.17	.94	7.95***
Will/Courage	2.57	.92	2.56	.79	.10
Realistic Optimism (Overall)	3.74	.45	3.36	.59	9.74***

*** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

SD: Standard Deviation

Figure 1

Average Score of Realistic Optimism Between Indian and Japanese Students



A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted comparing students in the two countries by gender. Table 3 shows that there is a significant difference between the male and female students in India and Japan in terms of future orientation ($F = 40.64$; $p < .001$) and flexibility ($F = 23.81$; $p < .001$). There was also a significant difference in overall realistic optimism ($F = 32.49$; $p < .001$). There were no significant differences in will/courage between Indian and Japanese male students or between Indian and Japanese female students.

In terms of future orientation, the results showed that Indian males and females scored higher

than Japanese males and females (IF/IM>JM/JF, Mean: 4.40, 4.32, 3.83, 3.88, Mean difference: IF and JM: .55, IF and JF: .50, IM and JM: .49, IM and JF: .44, $p < .001$). In terms of flexibility, significant differences were found among all groups, with Indian male students having the highest scores and Japanese male students having the lowest scores. (IM>IF>JF>JM, Mean: 3.80, 3.54, 3.19, 3.13 Mean difference: IM and IF: .25, IM and JF: .60, IM and JM: .65, IF and JF: .35, IF and JM: .40, $p < .001$).

In terms of overall realistic optimism, the scores of Indian male and female students were higher than those of Japanese male and female students. Moreover, the Japanese female students' score was significantly higher than that of Japanese male students (IM/IF>JF>JM, Mean: 3.78, 3.69, 3.37, 3.36 Mean Difference: IM and JF: .41, IM and JM: .42, IF and JF: .32, IF and JM: .33, $p < .001$).

Table 3

One-Way ANOVA for Indian and Japanese Male/Female Students (Realistic Optimism)

		India		Japan		<i>F</i> (<i>df</i> =3,747)	Post-hoc Bonferroni test
		Male (<i>N</i> =193)	Female (<i>N</i> =168)	Male (<i>N</i> =172)	Female (<i>N</i> =218)		
Future Orientation	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	4.32 (.55)	4.40 (.45)	3.83 (.77)	3.88 (.65)	40.64***	IF/IM>JM/JF
Flexibility	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	3.80 (.77)	3.54 (.84)	3.13 (.93)	3.19 (.94)	23.81***	IM>IF>JF>JM
Will/Courage	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.68 (.91)	2.45 (.91)	2.53 (.76)	2.52 (.76)	2.42 <i>n.s.</i>	
Realistic Optimism (Overall)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	3.78 (.45)	3.69 (.44)	3.36 (.60)	3.37 (.59)	32.49***	IM/IF>JF>JM

Note: IM: Indian Male; IF: Indian Female; JM: Japanese Male; JF: Japanese Female

*** $p < .001$

Discussion and Conclusion

The Japan versus India comparison of realistic optimism showed that the mean value for the factor of future orientation among Japanese students was significantly lower than among Indian students. A one-way ANOVA test by gender showed the same result. Both male and female Japanese students scored lower than male and female Indian students in the future orientation factor. Genda (2016) conducted a comparative study on hope in Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He found that there was a significant difference in the level of hope. Most people in the United States and the United Kingdom want to achieve something in the future, while only about half of individuals in Japan held a feasible hope. These results are similar to those of the present study.

India is experiencing rapid, ongoing technological development. Young people, including students, desire to realize their goals and dreams. Japan, however, is already a developed country, with employment opportunities for almost everyone. It is a society where one can afford to live without having any particular goals or dreams. These differences may have been reflected in the mean differences in future orientation between the two countries.

Furthermore, the mean value of flexibility is higher among Indian students than Japanese students. Indians, who live in a country that is still in the process of development, must quickly adapt to various aspects of technological change in everyday life. This pressure may have led to a high level of flexibility. Furthermore, India is a multicultural country where people of different religions and cultures live in the same society. Therefore, it is essential to accept and understand each other's way of thinking to live in harmony in such a society (Sahgal et al., 2021).

This study showed that Japanese students had lower levels of overall realistic optimism than their Indian counterparts. This result is consistent with the results of previous studies. Japan was one of the ten countries with the lowest levels of optimism or positive expectations about the future, according to Gallagher et al. (2013). They examined the levels of optimism in 142 countries. In addition, a study comparing optimism levels in 22 countries shows that Japan had the lowest average level of optimism (Fischer & Chalmers, 2008). Similarly, a comparative study of optimism bias between Japan and other countries suggests lower optimism bias in Japan (Chang et al., 2001). In contrast, Joshi and Carter (2013) showed that Indian students had a higher tendency toward optimism, similar to the results of this study.

Compared with India, Japan is a developed country in terms of economy and society, and people accept this as the norm. So current status of economic development fails to create any enthusiasm or optimism in Japan. However, India is still in the process of development. Recently, Indians are gaining more confidence in themselves, as India is experiencing rapid economic development and improvement in their international status. These factors are likely to energize the seemingly underprivileged Indians and strengthen their optimism. Identical results have been published by the Pew Research Center, stating that developing countries are more optimistic than rich countries (2014).

In Japan, the percentage of students who attend higher education institutions (universities, colleges, and vocational schools) is 83.5% (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2020). In contrast, the percentage of students who pursue higher education in India is only 27.1% in the 18–23 years age group (Department of Higher Education, 2020). Indian students take pride in having earned the opportunity to pursue higher education through fierce competition. This pride may be reflected by their higher levels of optimism compared to Japanese students.

There was no significant difference between Indian male students and Indian female students. However, at the same time, there was a significant difference between Japanese male students and Japanese female students, with female students tending to have higher levels of realistic optimism. This difference may be related to the mental strength of Japanese female students, who, while facing the harsh reality of male dominance in employment, are more future-oriented and hopeful about the future. However, further research is required to understand difference in optimism related to gender in Japan.

Future studies may address the limitation of the study. In this study, the target age group is the major limitation. The study collected data only from university students. However, to get a broader understanding of optimism in India and Japan, it will be necessary to collect data from other people at different stages of life, such as working people, retired people, and others, from both countries. Furthermore, the findings of this study call for a more extensive cross-cultural examination of both countries to get a complete picture of the optimism in both countries.

This research expands our understanding of the inherent differences in optimism among Eastern cultures. It will also help to clarify the reasons behind these differences.

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