"Seeing is being": Consumer culture and the positioning of premium cars in China

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A B S T R A C T

Researchers recognize the indispensable role of inwardly vs. outwardly-focused social identities as predictors of consumers' attitudes toward local vs. global brand positioning. Extant studies typically report symmetric assimilative identity effects, meaning that consumers high on national/ethnic identity favor brands with a local (vs. global) consumer culture positioning, and vice-versa for consumers high on an outward (e.g., cosmopolitan) identity disposition. Such identity outcomes may not be generalizable, but rather, be affected by the specific consumption context as well as the individual trait of consumer need for uniqueness (NFU). Focusing on the Chinese premium car market, our experimental study consistently supported assimilative effects for the role played by ethnic identity. For cosmopolitanism however, such effects only held for low NFU consumers, whereas contrastive identity effects emerged for high NFU consumers. These results challenge some findings reported in the literature. Implications of these asymmetric identity effects for marketing theory and practice are discussed.

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"Advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And do you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of a road that screams with re-assurance that whatever you're doing is OK." - Don Draper[1]

1. Introduction

Almost everywhere, the pace of societal change has immeasurably hastened due to technological advancements as well as intensified exposure to external cultural forces. Particularly in emerging markets, until very recently most consumers lived their lives in harmony with domestic values and fulfilling the behavioral expectations of their cultural in-group. Nowadays, global media enable people the world over to craft identities from a pastiche of social influences that are parochial (e.g., national, ethnic), world-minded (e.g., global, cosmopolitan) and perhaps even foreign (e.g., xenocentric) in origin (e.g., Cleveland, Papadopoulos, & Laroche, 2011b; Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016). The corollary for marketers of global brands is to comprehend how these identity dispositions predict consumer responses toward brands that are positioned through local or global communication appeals

(e.g., Tu, Khare, & Zhang, 2012; Westjohn, Singh, & Magnusson, 2012; Bartsch, Diamantopoulos, Paparoidamis, & Chumpitaz, 2016).

Global brand managers have typically emphasized one of two positioning approaches. When brand communication incorporates values and norms that resonate with the native population, and/or when the brand is actively depicted as appropriate for consumption by locals (using an in-group spokesperson, highlighting local manufacturing and history, etc.), the firm is employing a local consumer culture brand positioning (LCCP) strategy; conversely, global consumer culture brand positioning (GCCP) manifestly utilizes those symbols and themes (aesthetics and language elements, international spokespersons, etc.) readily associated with global consumer culture (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999). Most studies in the literature support assimilative identity effects, meaning that consumers high on ethnic identity prefer LCCP over GCCP, whereas consumers high on an outward (e.g., world minded, cosmopolitan) identity favor GCCP over LCCP (Gammoh, Koh, & Okoroafo, 2011; Nijssen & Douglas, 2011; Tu et al., 2012; Westjohn et al., 2012). We believe that the ability to generalize such assimilative identity effects is constrained by both individual differences in the motivation for differentiating the self via consumer goods, and the particular consumption context.

Drawing on Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory and Brewer's (1993) optimal distinctiveness theory we proffer novel conjectures about how the individual trait of need for uniqueness (hereafter, NFU: Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001) moderates the relationships between ethnic and cosmopolitan identity dispositions and consumers' attitudes toward LCCP and GCCP brands. We thereby address Chan, Berger, and

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Van Boven (2012) call for studies that offer additional insights into when consumers reconcile identity-signaling with uniqueness motives through brand and product choices. Our study focuses on high value-added premium car brands in China—a category that is currently characterized by an absence of domestic alternatives.

Our experimental results demonstrate both assimilative and contrastive identity effects in relation to Chinese consumers' attitudes toward foreign premium car brands. Assimilative effects consistently emerged in relation to Chinese ethnic identification. However for cosmopolitanism, we found assimilative effects only for those consumers scoring low on NFU, whereas for those high on NFU, contrastive effects evidenced. As we shall elaborate, such asymmetric identity effects have critical implications for marketing theory and practice.

2. Background

2.1. Research context: the Chinese premium car market

After many decades of enduring the material scarcity under Maoism, the Chinese "…are now hungry for material possessions, making up for lost time" (Yang & Stening, 2012, p. 449). In 2009, China surpassed the United States to become the world's largest automobile market (Ho, 2010). Projected to expand by a yearly rate of 12% through to the end of the decade, by 2020, the Chinese premium car market is forecast to total 3 million unit sales per annum (up from 1.25 million units in 2012, representing 9% of all passenger car sales in that country), compared against 2.3 and 1.1 million for America and Germany, the second and third largest premium car markets, respectively (Sha, Huang, & Gabardi, 2013). These phenomenal growth rates corroborate the rapidly rising incomes of urban Chinese. With roughly 2.4 million millionaires (in US$ terms), China ranks second-highest in the world, right behind the U.S. The premium auto sector is also sustained by a fast-rising middle class of roughly 250 million Chinese with significant purchasing power and great willingness to spend their money on luxury brands (Beardsley et al., 2014).

Foreign multinationals currently have a commanding lead in the Chinese premium car market (Smart Research Insights, 2016). Research carried out by McKinsey Consulting (Sha et al., 2013) reports two distinct positioning strategies utilized by foreign premium car brands in China: one emphasizing prototypical global appeals of ambition, cosmopolitan style and upward social mobility, and the other, evoking a brand personality that is drawn more from traditional Confucian values (e.g., reliability and quality, as well as heritage). These approaches closely intimate the GCCP and LCCP strategies proposed by Alden et al. (1999).

2.2. Brands and social self-identity

It is widely recognized that brands enable consumers to signal affiliation with (or exclusion from) social collectivities, and thereby convey a desired social identity (Belk, 1988; Chan et al., 2012; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). For example, Zhou and Belk's (2004) reader-response study of TV and print ads in China shows that consumers' reactions toward foreign brand advertisements are driven by the dialectic tensions between embracing local versus global appeals. Hence, when assessing a foreign premium car brand, an aspirational reference group (i.e., the desire to be seen as an affluent, modern and cosmopolitan consumer), as well as a membership reference group (the anticipated appraisal of national or ethnic in-group members) could be simultaneously salient. Indeed, theorists increasingly argue that there exists a false dichotomy between localized forms of identity (e.g., ethnic, national) versus an ecumenical identity for which the locus is external to the in-group (e.g., Arnett, 2002; Cleveland et al., 2011b). Consumers can alternate between several identities, and more than one identity could be simultaneously invoked. Evidence of this phenomenon consists of the joint impact of ethnic-local and cosmopolitan (outward worldview) identity

dispositions on consumers' brand preferences (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Cleveland et al., 2011b; Westjohn et al., 2012).

Accordingly, researchers widely acknowledge that consumers respond more favorably to brands that are consistent with their accessible social identity or identities, and tend to repudiate identity-inconsistent brands. For example, Gammoh et al. (2011) reported, for consumers from India and the US who evaluated a fictitious digital camera brand, that higher levels of identification with a global consumer culture enhanced attitudes toward GCCP (but not LCCP) brands. In another study with Dutch consumers who evaluated brands from various categories (food, air travel, etc.), Nijssen and Douglas (2011) documented that higher levels of consumer world-mindedness enhanced attitudes toward GCCP brands and decreased attitudes toward LCCP brands. Similarly, two experiments by Westjohn et al. (2012) examined American consumers' responses toward typical US brands that were positioned as LCCP or GCCP. They found a strong and positive impact of a consumers' global identity on attitudes toward GCCP brands, but an absence (study 1) or a considerably weaker (study 2) impact of global identity on attitudes toward LCCP brands. Westjohn et al.'s (2012) research also showed no impact of a consumers' national identity on attitudes toward GCCP brands, but a strong and positive impact of a national identity on attitudes toward LCCP brands. To summarize, the empirical evidence from these studies suggests a fairly coherent picture of symmetric assimilative identity effects: an ethnic or national identity is positively related to attitudes toward LCCP (but not GCCP) brands, whereas an outward or cosmopolitan orientation is positively related to attitudes toward GCCP (and to a lesser extent, LCCP) brands.

Herein we draw on Cleveland et al.'s (2011b) conceptualization of ethnic identity, representing the strength of an individual's affiliation with and desire to maintain his or her Chinese ethnic culture, and cosmopolitanism, reflecting the individual's openness to and affinity for cultural diversity and his or her proclivity to master it (Cleveland, Laroche, & Papadopoulos, 2009; Cleveland, Erdoğan, Arıkan, & Poyraz, 2011a). This conceptualization of cosmopolitanism does not capture globally-identified consumers or their willingness to seek identification with symbols of a global consumer culture, but rather embodies consumers' positive dispositions toward other cultures and peoples (cf., Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Riefler, Diamantopoulos, & Siguaw, 2012).

3. Hypotheses

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) posits that feelings of social belonging drive people to develop attitudes and engage in behaviors in favor of their social in-group(s), possibly at the expense of relevant out-groups. The general root cause of such in-group favoritism is grounded in the psychological need for positive distinctiveness, meaning that people strive to positively differentiate their in-group from out-groups (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004). Accordingly and in line with the previously resumed studies (Gammoh et al., 2011; Nijssen & Douglas, 2011; Westjohn et al., 2012) we presume an assimilative effect in relation to ethnic identity.

H1a: The relationship between ethnic identity and attitudes toward LCCP brands will be positively stronger than that between ethnic identity and attitudes toward GCCP brands.

The strength of the assimilative effect in relation to ethnic identity may be contingent on the consumer's psychological need to differentiate, as per optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1993). Following this theory, the diagnosticity of a salient social identity for explaining attitudes toward brands results from two opposing motivational forces: the desire to be inclusive with some social group (the need to assimilate), and the desire to be exclusive (the need to differentiate). The degree to which these motivational forces are acted upon in consumption settings is captured by the individual trait of NFU (Chan et al., 2012; Tian et al., 2001; Ruvio, Shoham, & Brencic, 2008). Consumers high on NFU tend to prefer counter-normative or unconventional options, and are particularly concerned with maintaining their distinctiveness, whereas

those low on NFU are more likely to favor options that assimilate with prevailing social norms.

Using this theory, Zhang and Khare (2009) conjectured that consumers who are driven by the need to assimilate (i.e., low NFU) will prefer brands that are coherent with the identity of their in-group (assimilative identity effect), but those who are driven by the need to differentiate (i.e., high NFU) will prefer brands that reflect an out-group identity (contrastive identity effect). Accordingly, they found that consumers who strongly identify with a local ethnic identity and who are driven by the need to differentiate tend to prefer a global version of an agricultural product over a local one (Zhang & Khare, 2009). This contrastive identity effect may not generalize to other consumption contexts, particularly not to luxury brands.

Embodying conspicuous consumption, consumers are highly sensitive to others' impressions of luxury goods (Yim, Sauer, Williams, Lee, & Macrury, 2014). Few products are as socially visible as premium cars and buying a luxury car, in and of itself, satisfies a given consumer's need to positively differentiate her social identity or identities. Zhan and He (2012, p. 1454) note that Chinese middle-class consumers "use luxury brands to establish their uniqueness because luxury products are scarce possessions in China." Moreover, as there are currently no domestic Chinese premium car brands, all available options are foreign (global) brands by definition (Sha et al., 2013). This situation is very different from the context of commodity products characterizing previous studies (Gammoh et al., 2011; Nijssen & Douglas, 2011; Westjohn et al., 2012), and in particular, Zhang and Khare's (2009) examination of an agricultural product. The particular context of premium cars in China leads us to develop alternative hypotheses about how the psychological drive to differentiate (NFU) interacts with ethnic identity and cosmopolitanism, to predict consumers' attitudes toward brands positioned as LCCP and GCCP.

One key tenet of optimal distinctiveness theory is that individuals strive to attain an optimal balance of inclusion and distinctiveness—within and between social groups—in order to maintain successful and self-satisfactory group membership (Brewer, 1993). Rather than a bipolar concept, the need for assimilation and differentiation are opposing processes, arrayed along separate continua. Optimal satisfaction or maximum positive self-concept is denoted by optimal distinctiveness; that is, "through identification with categories at that level of inclusiveness where the degrees of activation of the need for differentiation and of the need for assimilation are exactly equal" (Brewer, 1991, p. 478). Beyond which, too much group association (vs. personal distinction) precipitates motivation for personal differentiation (vs. subsumption in the collectivity), and vice-versa. For example, Chan et al. (2012) show that consumers can satisfy competing identity motives of assimilation and differentiation within a single choice context: they may chose brands that conform to their in-group on one dimension of choice, while differentiating on another. An optimal identity, therefore, satisfies both: the need for inclusion with the in-group, as well as the need for distinctiveness from that in-group (Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). Brewer (1991) argues that excessive distinctiveness can result in an adverse or undesirable self-concept. Hence, even high NFU consumers may rebuff advertising stimuli that project an identity that is too removed from their own ethnic identity.

To simultaneously fulfill the need to integrate and differentiate, buyers of foreign luxury products may prefer brands that resonate with their identity on one attribute (such as a brand employing LCCP and thus reflecting their Chinese ethnic identity), but that are unusual on another attribute (e.g., the scarcity of the [foreign] luxury brand), in order to project a desired or aspirational identity as an affluent consumer. Seen from this perspective, positioning an obviously foreign luxury car brand as LCCP is per se a contrastive form of advertising that may enable consumers to simultaneously satisfy inclusiveness and distinctiveness (e.g., "This ad emphasizes its closeness to the Chinese culture, but everybody knows that Mercedes-Benz is a global luxury brand"). Under such conditions, a potent Chinese ethnic identity may in fact be compatible with liking a foreign luxury brand positioned via LCCP, even in cases where consumers are driven by the need to differentiate (high NFU). Therefore, contradicting Zhang and Khare's (2009) conjectures, it is conceivable that Chinese consumers' need to optimally differentiate their ethnic identity will be satisfied when the foreign luxury brand is positioned as LCCP.

H1b: Higher (vs. lower) levels of NFU will enhance the relationship between ethnic identity and attitudes toward LCCP brands.

In keeping with Zhang and Khare's (2009) interpretation of social identity theory and optimal distinctivenss theory we posit, for consumers low on NFU, an assimilative identity effect in relation to cosmopolitanism.

H2a: For consumers low on NFU, the relationship between cosmopolitanism and attitudes toward GCCP brands will be positively stronger than that between cosmopolitanism and LCCP brands.

When a foreign luxury brand, presumed to be distributed globally, explicitly emphasizes this globalness via GCCP, the positioning strategy may be redundant. By failing to measurably raise the salience of the brand's uniqueness—at the same time as neglecting the opportunity to satisfy inclusiveness needs—the brand may not satisfy consumers' need to express their cosmopolitanism (e.g., "The ads emphasizes that Lexus is a global brand, just as all other luxury cars and the same for all consumers around the world"). Hence, although we espouse a different theoretical explanation, like Zhang and Khare (2009) we presume, for consumers high on NFU a contrastive identity effect in relation to cosmopolitanism.

H2b: For consumers high on NFU, the relationship between cosmopolitanism and attitudes toward LCCP brands will be positively stronger than that between cosmopolitanism and GCCP brands.

Finally, as a consequence of the main effects suggested with *H2a* and *H2b* we expect that elevated NFU enhances the relationship between cosmopolitanism and attitudes toward LCCP brands, while decreasing the relationship between cosmopolitanism and attitudes toward GCCP brands.

H2c: Higher (vs. lower) levels of NFU will enhance the relationship between cosmopolitanism and attitudes toward LCCP brands, and decrease the relationship between cosmopolitanism and attitudes toward GCCP brands.

4. Study

4.1. Experimental design and data collection

Based on McKinsey data (Sha et al., 2013), car brands from six countries currently serve the Chinese premium car market. Mock print advertisements (written in Chinese) were created to reflect LCCP and GCCP brand positioning strategies for brands from each of these six countries. To mitigate potential COO effects arising from a single country, one brand per country was included (Germany: Mercedes-Benz; Italy: Maserati; Japan: Lexus; Sweden: Volvo; UK: Land Rover; USA: Cadillac), resulting in 12 experimental stimuli[2]. The brand positioning manipulations varied in regards to the ethnicity of the displayed human models, the copy text, and the pictorial illustration (Table 1).

A pilot study involving 28 Chinese graduate students corroborated the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations. Participants were presented with the definitions of LCCP and GCCP positioning strategies and provided pertinent examples for each. They were then asked to state whether each of the 12 mock ads evoked a LCCP or GCCP strategy. The results showed that 97% of LCCP ads and 94% of GCCP ads were correctly classified.

Data for the main study were drawn from Chinese consumers. Four Chinese research assistants distributed an online questionnaire to non-student participants. They were briefed about the research purpose

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[2] Stimuli are available upon request.

Table 1
Description of experimental stimuli.

	LCCP	GCCP
Models	Typical ethnic Chinese	Ethnic diversity (Asian, Black, Caucasian)
Copy text	Emphasize Chinese consumers' appreciation of the brand (e.g., "Chinese enjoy the comfort and luxury offered by Lexus")	Emphasize consumers' global appreciation of the brand (e.g., "Consumers around the world enjoy the comfort and luxury offered by Volvo")
Pictorial illustration	Branded luxury car and typical Chinese references (e.g. Mercedes Benz & a picture of the Chinese Great Wall)	Branded luxury car & global references that are unrelated to a specific country (e.g., Cadillac and a picture of the globe)

and equipped with cover letters that included detailed protocols for data collection. The research assistants were instructed to post the questionnaire link on popular social media platforms like RenRen and WeChat. They also enlisted the help of putative study participants they knew personally (family, friends, co-workers), and who in turn were encouraged to recruit additional participants. This approach yielded a reasonably diffuse sample, suitable for testing construct relationships rather than absolute magnitudes (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981).

Following a short introduction that described the study's academic purpose and a confidentiality statement, participants were told that they would evaluate foreign premium car brands currently available in China. The brands were randomly assigned to the participants, such that each participant evaluated one LCCP and one GCCP brand. Previously validated multi-item measures were adapted to the context (Appendix 1). All measures underwent translation to Mandarin and independent back-translation to English, each with two native Chinese fluent in English. Seven-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) were used throughout. The questionnaire was pretested with eight Chinese graduate students. After measuring demographic variables (gender, age, and educational attainment), participants answered Ruvio et al.'s (2008) short NFU scale. This 12-item scale captures three conceptually related dimensions of NFU: creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity, and avoidance of similarity. Participants were then shown the experimental stimuli and asked to evaluate the brands they saw on two items that capture brand liking and brand connectedness (Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). This was followed by an evaluation of the participants' identity dispositions. Eleven items measured Chinese ethnic identification (EID), and 7 items measured cosmopolitanism (COS) (Cleveland et al., 2011b).

After eliminating incomplete surveys, the sample consisted of 462 respondents, of which 41% were female, 55% were aged 30 years or older, and 81% held undergraduate or graduate university degrees

Table 2
Sample characteristics.

Sample size	462
Gender	
Female	41.1%
Male	58.9%
Age	
<24 years old	9.7%
25–29 years old	35.1%
30–39 years old	40.3%
40 years or older	14.9%
Education	
Some high school	5.4%
Technical (vocational) school/diploma	13.4%
Undergraduate (bachelor's) university degree	59.3%
Graduate (master's or higher) university degree	21.9%

(Table 2). With these specific characteristics, the sample broadly represents typical Chinese premium car buyers who, according to the *Hurun Wealth Report* 2014 are on average, 33.5 years old and highly educated (Wei, 2014).

4.2. Measurement evaluation

The dimensionality, and convergent and discriminant validity were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We specified a measurement model in which NFU entered as a three-dimensional, second-order construct. The first CFA run revealed weak factor loadings and high error variances for one item apiece for EID and NFU constructs, which were dropped from subsequent analyses. The CFA revealed good model fit (RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.96, χ^2/df = 1.90) on the retained items. All loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and loaded strongly ($\lambda > 0.63$) on their respective target factor (Appendix 1). All composite reliabilities were high ($\rho > 0.70$). Moreover, the combined reliability for the 11 retained NFU items, computed by using Nunnally's (1978) formula for the reliability of linear combinations, was quite high (0.90). Supporting convergent validity (Table 3) the average variances extracted (AVEs) exceeded 0.50 for all latent variables. Supporting discriminant validity the square roots of the AVEs for all constructs were greater than the construct inter-correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

4.3. Hypothesis testing

Following Cheema and Kaikati (2010), we computed a composite NFU score and conducted a median split to characterize respondents as low or high in NFU. We then specified a multi-group structural equation model (high vs. low NFU) to assess the hypothesized relationships. We verified that gender, age and education were not significantly related to the dependent variables (cf., Bartsch et al., 2016). The baseline multi-group model yielded a good fit of the theoretical model to the data (RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.93, $\chi^2_{(476)}$ = 948.66, χ^2/df = 1.99). Path coefficients are shown in Table 4.

To test hypotheses about the relationships between identity dispositions and attitudes toward LCCP brands (ATT_{LCCP}) and attitudes toward GCCP brands (ATT_{GCCP}), we successively constrained relevant paths to equality (within or across the two NFU groups) and compared the significance of the χ^2 difference between the constrained and freely estimated (unconstrained) baseline model (Table 5). The relationship between EID and ATT_{LCCP} was strong and positive, for both consumers low and high on NFU. Moreover, the size of these coefficients indicated for both groups that the relationship between EID and ATT_{LCCP} (β_{low} = 0.37; β_{high} = 0.52) was respectively stronger than the relationship between EID and ATT_{GCCP} (β_{low} = 0.08; β_{high} = 0.11). The χ^2 difference test showed that the effect size difference was significant for consumers low on NFU ($\Delta\chi^2$/df = 4.88, $p < 0.05$), and for consumers high on NFU ($\Delta\chi^2$/df = 15.72, $p < 0.01$). Hence, the pattern of findings was consistent with the predicted assimilative identity effect in relation to EID, in support of *H1a*. Next, the coefficients indicating the strength of the

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, AVEs, and construct correlations.

Constructs	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Ethnic identity (EID)	*0.81*				
2. Cosmopolitanism (COS)	0.35	*0.81*			
3. Need for uniqueness (NFU)	−0.01	0.14	*0.91*		
4. Brand attitude LCCP	0.49	0.44	0.09	*0.80*	
5. Brand attitude GCCP	0.22	0.41	0.20	0.39	*0.76*
Average variance extracted (AVE)	0.65	0.66	0.83	0.64	0.58
Composite reliability	0.94	0.93	0.94	0.78	0.73
Mean	5.55	5.35	3.67	4.55	4.32
Standard deviation	1.22	1.19	1.11	1.62	1.43

Correlations are below diagonal; square roots of AVEs are reported on diagonal in italics.

Table 4
SEM results.

			Low NFU		High NFU	
Hypothesized paths			Unstandardized path coefficients	Standardized path coefficients	Unstandardized path coefficients	Standardized path coefficients
EID	→	Attitude	0.37***	0.32***	0.52***	0.43***
COS	→	LCCP	0.26***	0.29***	0.41***	0.31***
Gender (1 = female)	→		−0.03	−0.01	0.06	0.02
Age	→		−0.06	−0.05	−0.09	−0.05
Education	→		0.08	0.06	0.0	0.00
EID	→	Attitude	0.08	0.07	0.11*	0.15*
COS	→	GCCP	0.45***	0.48***	0.16**	0.20***
Gender (1 = female)	→		−0.09	−0.04	0.05	0.02
Age	→		−0.03	−0.02	−0.01	−0.01
Education	→		0.03	0.02	0.14	0.12

EID = ethnic identification, COS = cosmopolitanism, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index.
* $p < 0.1$.
** $p < 0.05$.
*** $p < 0.01$.

relationship between EID and ATT_{LCCP} was greater in size for consumers high on NFU ($\beta_{high} = 0.52$) vs. low on NFU ($\beta_{low} = 0.37$). However, the χ^2 difference test wasn't statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2/df = 1.36$, $p > 0.1$). Hence, although the results are in the predicted direction, we must conclude that NFU does not moderate the relationship between EID and attitudes toward LCCP brands, leading us to reject *H1b*.

We predicted, for consumers low on NFU, that the relationship between COS and ATT_{GCCP} will be positively stronger than the relationship between COS and ATT_{LCCP}. The results showed significant positive relationships between COS and ATT_{LCCP} ($\beta = 0.26$) and between COS and ATT_{GCCP} ($\beta = 0.45$). The χ^2 difference test showed a (marginally) significant effect size difference ($\Delta\chi^2/df = 3.63$, $p < 0.1$), thereby supporting the assimilative identity effect in relation to cosmopolitanism predicted by *H2a*.

We assumed, for consumers high on NFU, that the relationship between COS and ATT_{LCCP}, will be positively stronger than the relationship between COS and ATT_{GCCP}. Accordingly, the results showed a significant positive relationship between COS and ATT_{LCCP} ($\beta = 0.41$), and considerably weaker relationship between COS and ATT_{GCCP} ($\beta = 0.16$). The χ^2 difference test confirmed a significant effect size difference ($\Delta\chi^2/df = 4.50$, $p < 0.05$), supporting the assumed contrastive identity effect for consumers high on NFU. Hence, *H2b* is supported.

Finally, *H2c* predicted a moderating role of NFU, such that higher (vs. lower) levels of NFU will enhance the relationship between COS and ATT_{LCCP}, and decrease the relationship between COS and ATT_{GCCP}. In line with these predictions, the results suggest a stronger relationship between COS and ATT_{LCCP} for consumers high on NFU ($\beta_{high} = 0.41$) than for consumers low on NFU ($\beta_{low} = 0.26$); however, the χ^2 difference tests revealed no significant effect size difference ($\Delta\chi^2/df = 1.64$, $p > 0.1$). In contrast, for the COS and ATT_{GCCP} link, we find a considerably stronger relationship for consumers low on NFU than for consumers high on NFU ($\beta_{low} = 0.45$ vs. $\beta_{high} = 0.16$), and the χ^2 difference test showed the effect size difference was statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2/$

df = 7.45, $p < 0.01$). In summary, although the pattern of results aligns with the predictions, the statistical tests support a moderating role of NFU only for the relationship between COS and ATT_{GCCP}. *H2c* thus receives partial support.

Although conceptually related, the two indicators of our dependent variable (brand liking and brand connectedness) measure different reactions (Thomson et al., 2005). We, therefore, re-estimated the structural model once with brand liking, and once with brand connectedness as dependent variables. The resulting patterns of effects were, in each case, virtually similar to the previously discussed findings, confirming the robustness of the results.

5. Conclusions and discussion

Consumer culture brand positioning is at the center of much marketing practice, and researchers widely agree about the crucial importance of considering consumers' ethnic and cosmopolitan identity dispositions as antecedents of attitudes toward brands with a culturally sensitive positioning (Zhang & Khare, 2009; Gammoh et al., 2011; Nijssen & Douglas, 2011; Tu et al., 2012; Westjohn et al., 2012). However, there is a paucity of knowledge about the boundary conditions of such identity effects. Most studies in the literature report symmetric assimilative identity effects, meaning that an ethnic identity enhances attitudes toward LCCP (but not GCCP) brands, whereas a cosmopolitan identity enhances attitudes toward GCCP (but not LCCP) brands. Drawing on Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory we conjectured that these effects are shaped by the individual trait of NFU, as well as by the nature of the consumption situation. The results from our experimental study of Chinese consumers' responses toward foreign premium car brands confirmed most of our hypotheses, at least directionally. We found both assimilative and contrastive identity effects, which paints a somewhat different picture from that described in the extant literature. In particular, we found assimilative identity effects in relation to ethnic

Table 5
Effect size comparisons.

	NFU	Constrained relationships Baseline model	χ^2 (df)	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	RMSEA	CFI	Equality?
		Baseline model	948.66 (476)	–	0.05	0.93	–
H1a	Low	EID → Att-LCCP vs. EID → Att-GCCP	953.54 (477)	4.88 (1)	0.05	0.93	no**
H1a	High	EID → Att-LCCP vs. EID → Att-GCCP	964.38 (477)	15.72 (1)	0.05	0.93	no***
H1b	Low vs. high	EID → Att-LCCP	950.02 (477)	1.36 (1)	0.05	0.93	yes
H2a	Low	COS → Att-GCCP vs. COS → Att-LCCP	952.29 (477)	3.63 (1)	0.05	0.93	no*
H2b	High	COS → Att-GCCP vs. COS → Att-LCCP	953.16 (477)	4.50 (1)	0.05	0.93	no**
H2c	Low vs. high	COS → Att-LCCP	950.30 (477)	1.64 (1)	0.05	0.93	yes
H2c	Low vs. high	COS → Att-GCCP	956.12 (477)	7.45 (1)	0.05	0.93	no***

* $p < 0.1$.
** $p < 0.05$.
*** $p < 0.01$.

identity independent of consumers' level of NFU. Higher levels of Chinese identity enhanced attitudes toward LCCP brands, and (although non-significant) higher levels of NFU tended to strengthen this effect. For cosmopolitanism, an assimilative identity effect was observed only for consumers low on NFU, whereas a contrastive effect was observed for consumers high on NFU. In other words, highly cosmopolitan Chinese low on NFU tended to prefer brands with a GCCP positioning, whereas those high on NFU favored brands with a LCCP positioning. These asymmetries have important implications for marketing theory and practice.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our results suggest the importance of considering consumers' optimal identity rather than merely symmetric linear identity effects as implied by some previous studies' findings. Chinese consumers' preferences for premium brands are likely driven not only by their social identity dispositions but also by their apprehension of losing face (Liao & Wang, 2009), a concern that encompasses reputation from both individual and community perspectives. The individual perspective pertains to feelings of prestige and superiority based on individual accomplishments, whereas the community perspective pertains to the respect or admiration individuals are compelled to give to others based on their status. We believe that for Chinese consumers that feel impelled to differentiate themselves from others (high NFU), these dual perspectives could manifest by way of preferring foreign-luxury brands that are imbued with Chinese cultural messages (i.e., LCCP). Such brands may help these individuals gain prestige and express status as an affluent cosmopolitan person (individual perspective) while upholding deference toward their Chinese ethnicity and traditions (community perspective). Our results align with such an interpretation.

When to emphasize what brand positioning theme—and therefore, determining the appropriate mixture of global vs. local communication elements—evidently depends greatly on situational factors; here, the focal country, the product category and associated symbolism, as well as the brand consideration set. The specific contexts of agricultural products (Zhang & Khare, 2009) or commodity products (Gammoh et al., 2011; Nijssen & Douglas, 2011; Westjohn et al., 2012) employed in previous research is clearly very different from that of luxury car brands, since for consumers, the latter are powerful mechanisms to satisfy one's need to stand out from the crowd.

5.2. Managerial implications

Considering ethnic identity and cosmopolitanism as antecedents of consumers' brand preferences is critical for determining effective market segmentation and positioning strategies (Cleveland et al., 2011b). Using these identity bases, marketers should first pinpoint those segments responding most favorably either to LCCP or to GCCP approaches for a given product category, and then develop the appropriate communication appeals in order to convey the optimal level of positive distinctiveness. Rising discretionary income empowers Chinese consumers to more freely express their identity, and the marketing activities of global brands encourage these individuals to embrace global consumer culture; yet at the same time these articulations of social identity are fashioned by or form in reaction to value systems which may draw from entrenched ethnic traditions.

Indeed, our findings intimate that global brand managers must avoid assuming that motivations and tastes for luxury brands are inexorably becoming standardized. This reasoning is consistent with the three strategies for achieving positive self-concept posited by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), as determined by the particular contextual factors (e.g., cultural norms operant in a given consumption situation), which in turn affect the compromises people make to achieve conciliation between desires emanating from their personal characteristics (e.g., NFU) and those stemming from their social category memberships. Global

firms face the challenge of designing compelling positioning strategies across a gamut of cultures, yet for managers that can successfully gain insights into the dynamic playing out between individual and social components of self-concept, this information sets the stage for differentiating their brands from competing brands. Brand managers seeking to appeal to cosmopolitan consumers' yearning for distinction (high NFU) could incorporate appeals that emphasize product scarcity and exclusivity (Tian et al., 2001) while still maintaining overarching themes that connote how the brand is congruent with ethnic societal norms, as testified by our findings for LCCP. Given these consumers' apparent preferences for LCCP, marketers should depict how their unique brand helps the owner acquire respect and admiration from the in-group (Ruvio et al., 2008). Cosmopolitan consumers low on NFU expressed a clear preference for GCCP. However, managers should bear in mind that an inflection point probably exists, after which too much differentiation, i.e., degree of departure from in-group identity and associated norms—imperative considerations in a highly collectivist environment—is counterproductive for consumer-based brand equity.

5.3. Limitations and directions for further research

One caveat that luxury brand managers must bear in mind when targeting emerging market consumers with LCCP and GCCP positioning strategies is that the ground underlying contextual effects may shift quite rapidly. This poses ramifications for marketing theory and practice. Indeed, at the time of the present study, no Chinese premium car brand was available and foreign brands were presumably still viewed as scarce possessions. However, perceptions of the relative novelty and rarity of foreign premium car brands could quickly disperse as the number of Chinese driving such vehicles rises rapidly, or in the event that home-grown (Chinese) premium car brands emerge. Since either possibility may affect how ethnic and cosmopolitan identity dispositions inform attitudes toward foreign premium brands, future studies should probe the applicability of our findings in other categories. As such, whether our results carry over in other categories may depend on the extent to which local brands occupy LCCP or GCCP positions. For example, Shanghai Tang or Shang Xia are recognized as Chinese lifestyle luxury brands (e.g., for fashion, accessories, and jewelry) that promote distinct aspects of Chinese aesthetics, culture, and values in their marketing and retail strategy (Schroeder, Borgerson, & Wu, 2015). This may challenge foreign competitors' ability to credibly communicate a LCCP brand position. Relatedly, consumers' perceptions of the consistency of the brand with a certain positioning option (e.g., a brand that is normally known as GCCP and that is for the first time seen as LCCP) may shape how social identity dispositions affect brand attitudes. Future studies should control for such consistency effects.

Future studies should also consider foreign consumer culture positioning (FCCP) as a third brand positioning strategy. We elected to focus on LCCP and GCCP given that Alden et al. (1999) found that only 4% of the advertisements considered used an FCCP strategy. Brand country-of-origin (COO) is an increasingly nebulous concept due to widespread foreign investments, acquisitions and joint ventures, and global supply chains. Consumers nevertheless continue to draw considerable meaning from a perceived brand's COO (e.g., Wang & Yang, 2008). As such, the effects of ethnic and cosmopolitan identity-dispositions in relation to FCCP brands may be contingent on the specific foreign countries (and evaluations thereof) invoked by the brand consideration set (e.g., premium cars from Germany, fashion and perfumes from France).

Another point that deserves attention is that respondents' reactions may not be independent of their familiarity with the brands that they evaluate. It is well known that "familiarity breeds liking" (Bornstein, 1989); familiarity may also affect how consumers see the effectiveness of a particular brand in signaling a desired social identity. We attempted to mitigate familiarity effects by having respondents evaluate various brands and by analyzing the data not on the brand - but on the brand-positioning level (GCCP vs. LCCP); however, we cannot rule out the

possibility that survey respondents were more familiar with some brands than with others. We, therefore, recommend that future studies should additionally control for familiarity.

The GCCP manipulation showed a crowd of culturally diverse models, whereas the LCCP manipulation only showed a single Chinese person (Table 1). This may suggest alternative explanations for some of the study's results, such that the number of people may explain some of the reported effect differences. However, provided that we manipulated LCCP/GCCP brand positions by various means (models, text and pictures) and the pre-tests clearly confirmed the effectiveness of these manipulations we don't believe that our results could be reliably explained by the variation of the number of people shown in the mock ads.

Our experimental manipulation, after all, consisted in first assessing respondents' NFU which was followed by assessing their identity dispositions. In doing so we may have situationally primed respondents' NFU and assessed their chronical identities. Although previous studies show that situationally primed and chronically assessed self-construals in terms of local/global identity dispositions (Zhang & Khare, 2009) or NFU (Chan et al., 2012) produce very similar effects, we suggest that future studies should re-test our hypotheses with situationally primed identity dispositions and chronical assessed NFU.

One aspect of social identity theory omitted from the current study is the idea that people may increase the positivity of their self-image by enhancing the status of the group to which they belong, and by discriminating or finding negative aspects about the out-group (Tajfel, 1982). Future research should, therefore, incorporate attitudinal measures for pertinent out-group(s), in this case, referencing the countries of brand origin.

To conclude, global consumer culture is increasingly recognized to be infiltrated with local cultural elements, disqualifying Levitt's (1983) conjecture of eventual cultural convergence. For managers of global status brands, the challenge is to prolong consumer desire in a multitude of countries where the connotations and therefore, desirability of relative globalness (vs. localness) will often be dissimilar. Researchers should recognize that there may be several global cultures, unique in the sense that each is infused to varying degrees by the local cultural narrative.

Appendix 1. Construct measures

Ethnic identification		λ
EID1	Participating in Chinese holidays and events is very important to me.	0.75
EID2	The Chinese culture has the most positive impact on my life.	0.79
EID3	If I was to live elsewhere, I would still want to retain my Chinese culture.	0.79
EID4	The acquisition of Chinese family values is desirable.	0.76
EID5	I feel very proud to identify with the Chinese culture.	0.83
EID6	I feel very much a part of the Chinese culture.	0.80
EID7	I consider it very important to maintain my Chinese culture.	0.87
EID8	I am very attached to all aspects of the Chinese culture. [dropped]	–
EID9	I believe that it is very important for children to learn the values of Chinese culture.	0.85
EID10	It is very important for me to remain close to the Chinese culture.	0.77
EID11	Although I believe that I might acquire some elements of another culture(s), it is important for me to hold on to my Chinese culture.	0.86
Cosmopolitanism		λ
COS1	I enjoy being with people from other countries to learn about their views and approaches.	0.82
COS2	I like to observe people of other cultures, to see what I can learn from them.	0.79
COS3	I find people from other cultures stimulating.	0.82
COS4	I enjoy exchanging ideas with people from other cultures or countries.	0.85
COS5	I am interested in learning more about people who live in other countries.	0.80

(continued)

Ethnic identification		λ
COS6	I like to learn about other ways of life.	0.84
COS7	Coming into contact with people of other cultures has greatly benefited me.	0.77
Need for uniqueness		λ
Creative choice counter-conformity (first-order factor)		0.93
NFU1	I often combine possessions in such a way that I create a personal image that cannot be duplicated. [dropped]	–
NFU2	I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original.	0.64
NFU3	I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands.	0.79
NFU4	Having an eye for products that are interesting and unusual assists me in establishing a distinctive image.	0.61
Unpopular choice counter-conformity (first-order factor)		0.96
NFU5	When it comes to the products I buy and the situations in which I use them, I have broken customs and rules.	0.74
NFU6	I have often violated the understood rules of my social group regarding what to buy or own.	0.73
NFU7	I have often gone against the understood rules of my social group regarding when and how certain products are properly used.	0.69
NFU8	I enjoy challenging the prevailing taste of people I know by buying something they would not seem to accept.	0.65
Avoidance of similarity (first-order factor)		0.85
NFU9	When a product I own becomes popular among the general population, I begin to use it less.	0.68
NFU10	I often try to avoid products or brands that I know are bought by the general population.	0.73
NFU11	As a rule, I dislike products or brands that are customarily bought by everyone.	0.79
NFU12	The more commonplace a product or brand is among the general population, the less interested I am in buying it.	0.73
Attitude toward LCCP brands[a]		λ
ATT_L1	I like this brand.	0.78
ATT_L2	I feel connected to this brand.	0.83
Attitude toward GCCP brands[a]		λ
ATT_G1	I like this brand.	0.71
ATT_G2	I feel connected to this brand.	0.81

λ = standardized factor loadings.
[a] Because there were only two items, error variances were constrained to equality (cf., Alden, Kelley, Riefler, Lee, & Soutar, 2013).

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