

Running Head: CULTURE AND BRAND IDENTIFICATION

Cultural Influences on Brand Identification and Brand Defense

Jiaqi Yu

Advisor: Wendi Gardner

Northwestern University

Abstract

According to Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner (2012), a threat to a brand can elicit the same response as a threat to the self. The current research examined whether people react differently to brand threats as a function of East Asian versus North American culture and as a function of whether the source of the threat was a stranger or a close friend. In Study 1, 616 U.S. and East Asian participants were recruited to complete an online survey via Amazon's M Turk. Participants were asked to read a blog post that contains negative evaluations of two U.S. brands. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions, in which they were either told that the blog post was written by a close friend or by a stranger. After reading, participants' attitude change towards the brands was measured to reflect their defensiveness. Results show that there was no significant difference in defensiveness between East Asian and U.S. participants in either condition. Study 2 was then conducted to examine Chinese responses to Chinese brands assessed in their native language. In Study 2, 500 Chinese participants completed the study in Mandarin, and the survey included Chinese as well as American brands. Participants showed no significant difference in their defensiveness on brands from China versus the U.S. Overall, no evidence was found to support the cultural differences in consumers' defensiveness when a brand they identify with is threatened.

Keywords: culture, brand, self-brand connection

Cultural Influences on Brand Identification and Brand Defense

When one thinks about “self”, the classic psychological definition includes not only one’s own body and thought, but also “the sum of all that he can call his” (James, 1890). According to James, the self can be extended to include one’s close others and even material objects. While a certain amount of research supports the idea that social relationships can be an important part of one’s extended self (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996), how material objects, and even specific brands, are linked to the self has been relatively understudied in social psychology. The current study was conducted to explore the potential influences of culture on one’s brand identification. Examining this topic has the potential in the field of marketing to help businesses develop better localization strategies, provide insights for regional advertising, and improve global marketing performance. This study may also produce implications on the understanding of self and identity in cultural dimension.

Brand and Self-Brand Connection

Previous findings demonstrated that brands and materials could be included as a part of the extended self. Brand is defined as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller” (Kotler, 1991). Scientists have examined the concept of brand identification, also referred to as self-brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), generally showing that the more one favors a brand, the more one identifies with a brand, and therefore the more behavioral commitments one makes to that brand (Escalas, 2004). Specifically, when consumers perceive negative evaluations of a

brand, those with stronger self-brand connections tend to evaluate the brand less negatively than those with weaker self-brand connections (Einwiller, 2006; Einwiller & Kamins, 2008).

In a recent study done by Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner (2012), participants' level of self-brand connection on a commercial brand (e.g., Starbucks) was first measured. Next, they were asked to read an editorial that contains negative facts and evaluations about that brand. Participants' pre-reading attitudes and attitude changes toward this brand were measured to reflect their defensiveness, the dependent variable of the study. A more positive attitude change implies a more defensive response. The authors then applied different methodologies and replicated the same procedure across four studies and on two brands. All participants recruited were U.S. college students. The authors found that people with low implicit self-esteem and high self-brand connections would defend the brand "to preserve the integrity of the self" (Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner, 2012).

Brand and Self-Expression

The degree to which one identifies with a brand may also vary based on certain attributes of a brand, and the products they sell. Although almost all brands can serve as vehicles for self-expression (Escalas, 2004), some products may more easily lend themselves to self-brand connection. For example, mobile phones have been at the center of consumer psychological research in recent decades. Vincent (2005) has shown that mobile phone users have a strong emotional attachment to their phones. Besides, mobile phone possession also provides some people with identity and prestige in comparison with their peers (Lobet-Maris, 2003), and symbolizes personal autonomy among adolescents (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004).

Consumers' psychological connection to mobile phones can be linked to the need of self-expression. Studies have demonstrated that mobile phones can serve as major tools of self-expression (e.g., Carroll et al., 2002; Srivastava, 2005). Unlike many other products, mobile phones are both daily presences and highly personalized products. Although people change their clothes every day, their phones usually remain the same from day to day. This constant presence may lead to higher self-brand connection. In addition, mobile phone users have been reported to set up features including ring tone, display, wallpaper, to express their personal preferences, which symbolizes the intention of identity expression (Walsh & White, 2007). These findings resonate with Prentice's study (1987), which showed that possessions that can be individualized or used as a means of expression are more likely to be valued if they reflect a person's self-identity. The attributes of daily presence and self-expression may lead to the result that people are more likely to incorporate mobile phone brands into their extended-self than other brands. Although there exist other products that can also be used on a daily basis (e.g., toothpaste, shampoo), this type of products cannot be easily altered to be self-expressive. Whereas clothing and shoe styles can be self-expressive, it is rare that individuals wear the same items of clothing or shoes on a daily basis. Thus, mobile phones are somewhat unique in that they are carried or worn on the person on a daily basis, and can be tailored to express individual preferences.

Culture and Self-Expression

Potential cultural factors that may affect brand identification are less well-explored. It has been widely recognized that people in East Asian cultures hold more collectivistic values

than people in Western cultures. A collectivistic culture refers to a culture that emphasizes the fundamental connectedness of human beings with “a normative imperative to maintain interdependence among individuals” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In recent decades, international businesses have applied different advertising strategies targeting customers in different cultures (Kim & Markus, 1999). For example, Han and Shavitt (1994) have found that for the same products, such as automobiles, U.S. magazine advertisements tend to emphasize more on individual benefits and personal success, while Korean advertisements appeal more to in-group harmony and family integrity.

Collectivists are more likely than individualists to conform to social pressure. Studies have shown that collectivists’ opinions can be altered more easily than individualists’ opinions by in-group members (Triandis, 1989). In Confucian culture, a traditionally defined “good person” is expected to hide or put away his or her personal feelings, and instead put effort into smoothing social relationships and achieving group goals (Ahuvia & Wong, 1998).

Therefore, the importance of self-expression in East Asian cultures is probably less significant than it is in Western cultures. A study has shown that people’s tastes are less easily swayed by social pressure in Western countries than in East Asian countries (Kashima et al., 1995). In contrast, East Asians’ tastes are more easily swayed, because their material possessions reflect not only their personalities, but also the status of their families, relatives, and kinship clans (Hsu, 2015). This helps explain the popularity of Western luxuries among East Asian markets (Ahuvia & Wong, 1998). Additionally, people with a collectivistic mindset are more likely to think about information relationally, which means that their

attitudes are more likely to be affected by the relationship between a certain endorsement and the endorser rather than the endorsement itself (Kwon, Saluja, & Adaval, 2015).

Therefore, based on previous findings about East Asians' conformity to social pressure, we predicted that East Asians would be more likely than Western people to change their attitudes by the opinions from in-group members, such as their close friends. We predicted that East Asians would be less defensive than Americans when the brands they identify with are threatened by in-group members.

Purpose of the Current Study

Although the finding by Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner (2012) was significant, their studies were conducted only on U.S. college students, and only on two brands, Starbucks and Facebook. No evidence has been found to support these findings in a different cultural context or among different brand categories. Therefore, in the current study, we sought to investigate if the same results can be replicated in different brand categories, such as mobile phone brands, based on the finding that different brands can satisfy the need for self-expression to different extents. We also sought to explore the potential influence of in-group pressure on people's attitude changes in different cultures. Based on the finding about social pressure, we expected to see different behavioral patterns among East Asians and U.S. Americans when they perceive in-group pressure that threatens the brand they identify with.

Study 1

For Study 1, we hypothesized that participants from East Asian countries would be less defensive than participants from the U.S. when negative evaluation of a brand comes from a

close friend, but would show no significant difference from U.S. participants when this information comes from a stranger. We also hypothesized that participants would defend mobile phone brands more strongly than brands in other categories; for example, a clothing brand. In this study, we chose Apple iPhone as the mobile phone brand and Nike as the clothing brand, because of both brands' global popularity. We predicted that all participants would be more likely to defend Apple iPhone than they would do to Nike.

Method

In Study 1, we took a 2 (East Asians vs. U.S. Americans) x2 (Information agent: Close others vs. Strangers) x2 (Mobile phones vs. Clothing) design, with the first two measures between, and the last one within subjects.

Participants. Participants were 616 adults recruited from Amazon's M Turk who are citizens of and have lived in either the United States or an East Asian country (Mainland China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) for at least 10 years. All participants were compensated \$1 through their Amazon accounts. The recruitment page on M Turk stated that the study was conducted to explore how one's culture affects the way he or she identifies with a brand.

Procedure. All participants recruited from M Turk were invited to complete a survey study that can be finished in 15 minutes. After acquiring their consent on the first page of the survey, all participants were required to complete a pre-screening question, which asked them if they had experience using Apple iPhone and Nike products for more than one month before. Participants who answered "no" to this question were not allowed to proceed to the following questions, and they were thanked for participating in the study. Participants who

failed the pre-screening question were not compensated. After pre-screening, participants were measured on their self-brand connections and their initial attitudes toward Apple iPhone on the Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

Participants were then randomly assigned to a stranger condition or a close friend condition. In both conditions, participants were asked to read a short fabricated blog post with some negative evaluations of Apple iPhone, for example, “I think Apple never cares about their customers.” See Appendix A for samples of the blog posts. Before reading, participants were asked to rate on a 1-item 17-point scale to assess their general attitudes toward a brand. Participants read the blog post at their own pace. After reading, they were asked to indicate how their opinions toward Apple iPhone had changed on the same 1-item 17-point scale. All participants completed the same tasks for Nike.

Finally, demographic information, including a participant’s age, gender, and ethnic background, was collected. After completing the study, participants were debriefed and were told that the blog posts they read were fabricated.

Source manipulation. In the stranger condition, participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which a stranger has written down his or her user experience online, and the participant saw the blog post by chance. In the close friend condition, participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which a close friend of his or hers has written down his or her user experience, and the participants know the author of the blog post well.

Measures.

Brand identification. Participants indicated how much they identify with a brand on the 7-item 5-point Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; 1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) See Table 1 for a complete list of item of the this scale. The seven items were averaged to form one self-brand connection score per participant per brand ($\alpha = .92$).

Pre-reading attitude and attitude change. Before reading, participants were asked to rate on a 1-item 17-point scale (-8 = *very negative, dislike very much, don't identify with*; 8 = *very positive, like very much, identify with*) to assess their general attitudes toward a brand. After reading, Participants were asked to rate on a 1-item 17-point sliding scale (-8 = *more negative, dislike more, identify less with*; 8 = *more positive, like more, identify more with*) to assess their attitude changes toward a brand.

Level of defensiveness. By collecting participants' attitude change, we replicated the procedure as the study done by Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner (2012). According to previous studies, defensiveness can be reflected by a more positive evaluation after receiving negative information of a brand (Einwiller, 2006; Einwiller & Kamins, 2008). Therefore, in the current study, the level of defensiveness is measured by post-reading attitude change. A positive change symbolizes a defensive response.

Results

Demographics. A total of 156 East Asian and 346 U.S. participants passed the attention check question and completed the study. Among all participants, 266 reported as males, 233 reported as females, and 3 preferred not to answer. Participants had an age range from 18 to 65 years old ($M = 29.84$, $SD = 8.55$). Among 156 East Asian participants, 66 (42.3%)

identified as Mainland Chinese, 57 (36.5%) identified as Japanese, 27 (17.3%) identified as Korean, and 6 (3.8%) identified as Taiwanese.

Data analysis was performed using the ANOVA and t-tests through SPSS program. This analysis showed whether there was any main effect of culture (East Asian vs. USA), brand category (Phones vs. Clothing), and information agent (Stranger vs. Close friend) on level of defensiveness. The tests provided general results on whether culture, brand category, and information agents can significantly affect participants' level of defensiveness when a brand they identify with is threatened.

The ANOVA test results showed a significant main effect of brand category, $F(1, 494) = 6.26, p = .01$. This result indicates that participants demonstrated higher level of defensiveness for the phone brand ($M = .50, SD = .18$) than for the clothing brand ($M = .12, SD = .17$). Another significant main effect was found for culture, $F(1, 494) = 32.41, p < .01$. This result indicates that East Asian participants ($M = 1.21, SD = .26$) demonstrated higher level of defensiveness than U.S. participants ($M = -.59, SD = .18$). There was, however, no significant main effect found on information agent for the mobile phone brand $F(1, 494) = .60, p > .20$, and only a marginal effect found for the clothing brand, $F(1, 494) = 3.51, p = .06$. This result indicates that information agent, or whether information comes from a close friend or a stranger, does not have a significant effect on participants' defensiveness.

The hypothesized interaction of culture and information agent did not emerge as significant across both brands. However, a marginal interaction was found between culture and information agent for the clothing brand, $F(1, 494) = 3.12, p = .08$. Patterns of means

implied that when a clothing brand that participants identify with is threatened, East Asian participants showed a stronger defensive response when it is threatened by a stranger ($M = 1.59, SD = 3.99$) than when it is threatened by a close friend ($M = .52, SD = 3.64$); $t(154) = 1.75, p = .08$, but that U.S participants did not differ in their defensiveness as a function of information agent ($M_{stranger} = -1.02, SD = 3.39$; $M_{friend} = -.48, SD = 3.30$); $t(375) = -1.58, p > .10$. No other significant main effect or interaction was found among other variables, $p > .20$.

Brand identification. Two independent sample t-tests were performed to compare the effects of culture (East Asian vs. U.S.) on brand identification. The analysis showed that U.S participants reported higher level of brand identification than East Asian participants for both the phone brand ($M_{U.S.} = 2.76, SD_{U.S.} = .99$; $M_{Asian} = 2.13, SD_{Asian} = .92$), and the clothing brand ($M_{U.S.} = 3.34, SD_{U.S.} = .97$; $M_{Asian} = 2.64, SD_{Asian} = .96$). An exploratory correlation test was then conducted to explore if there exists any difference in the pattern that East Asian and U.S. participants respond to the Self-Brand Connection scale. However, no significant difference was found between the response patterns of East Asian and U.S. participants.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1. We hypothesized that, first, East Asian participants would be less defensive than U.S. participants when the negative evaluation of a brand came from a close friend. This hypothesis is unsupported across both brands, although the marginal interaction and pattern of means for the Nike brand is consistent with hypotheses. The results for Nike are consistent with previous research showing members of East Asian cultures have tastes

that may be more easily swayed by social pressure than people from Western cultures (Kashima et al., 1995). Additionally, the result that East Asians were less defensive to criticism of Nike from friends is consistent with the previous finding that people with collectivistic mindsets are more likely to be affected by the relationship between a certain endorsement and the endorser rather than the endorsement itself (Kwon, Saluja, & Adaval, 2015). However, since the interaction was marginal, it is difficult to ignore the possibility that this finding emerged by chance.

Hypothesis 2. The other hypothesis is that participants would defend mobile phone brands more strongly than clothing brands. This hypothesis is well supported by the ANOVA test results. The results indicate that mobile phones may more easily lend themselves to self-expression than clothes. This result can be explained by previous studies, that mobile phones can serve as major tools of self-expression (e.g., Carroll et al., 2002; Srivastava, 2005), and that mobile phone users have a unique and strong emotional attachment to their phones (Vincent, 2005). Thus, it can be implied that the attributes of emotional attachment, daily presence, and self-expression may all increase consumers' self-brand connection, and therefore make mobile phone brands more easily incorporated into one's extended-self.

Limitations

There were several limitations in the research that potentially weakened the findings and implications of this study. Because we recruited our sample from Amazon's M Turk and the study was completed in English, our East Asian sample might be non-representative of East Asians more generally. We made an improvement in study 2 by recruiting our participant

pool through a Mainland Chinese survey company, with a translated questionnaire for native Mandarin speakers. A second limitation involved the brands used. Study 1 only included two American brands, Apple and Nike. There exists a possibility that people may identify and defend domestic and foreign brands in different patterns. Therefore, the next study incorporated two more Chinese brands that are equally or even more well-known in the Chinese market: Li-Ning, a sport clothing brand, and Huawei, a mobile phone brand. See Appendix B for brief introductions to these two brands. We sought to find whether there exists a different pattern of defensiveness among the Chinese population when their domestic brand is threatened, as compared to when an American brand is threatened.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to overcome the limitations of Study 1, and to explore the potential difference in consumers' defensive responses for domestic and foreign brands. Specifically, in this study, we hypothesized that when Chinese participants' brand identification is threatened, they would more strongly defend 1) Chinese brands than American brands, 2) mobile phone brands than clothing brands, and 3) when evaluation comes from a stranger than when it comes from a close friend.

Method

Similar to study 1, the experiment took a 2 (Information agent: Close friend vs. Stranger) x 2 (Origin of a brand: Chinese vs. American) x 2 (Brand category: Mobile phones vs. Clothing) design, with the first two variables between and the last one within subjects. Participants answered all questions in Mandarin, and the questionnaire used was the same as

Study 1. The questionnaire was translated into Mandarin and then back into English to avoid misunderstandings.

Participants. We recruited 588 Mandarin-speaking adults who had lived in China for at least 10 years, with an age range from 18 to 65. All participants had experience using either both Apple iPhone and Nike, or both Huawei and Li-Ning products for at least one month. Participants completed this study on a computer, on the website of Baidu, a Chinese counterpart of Amazon's M Turk. The recruitment page on Baidu stated that the study was conducted to explore how one's culture affects the way he or she identifies with a brand.

Procedure. All participants recruited from Baidu were invited to complete a 15-minute survey study. After acquiring their consent on the first page of the survey, a pre-screening question was placed at the beginning of the study to test participants' Mandarin proficiency. Any participant who failed to answer this question correctly would be unable to access the rest of the questionnaire. Participants then answered a question that was designed to activate their self-concepts: they were asked to describe their personality traits using three adjectives. This question was intended to shift participants' attention from the outside environment to their own minds (Schwinghammer, Stapel, & Blanton, 2006).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to two conditions based on the origin of the brands. In the Chinese brand condition, participants only answered questions related to Huawei and Li-Ning; in the American brand condition, participants only answered questions related to iPhone and Nike. Participants were first asked to rate on a 1-item 17-point scale (-8 = *very negative, dislike very much*; 8 = *very positive, like very much*) to assess their general

attitudes toward the brand that they were assigned. Participants then indicated how much they identify with this brand on the Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

Afterwards, participants were provided with a fabricated blog post about the brand. The blog post contained the same negative evaluation about the brand as in Study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to imagine the author of the blog post to be either a close friend of theirs or a stranger. After reading, participants indicated how their opinion towards the brand had changed on the same 1-item 17-point scale ($-8 = \textit{more negative, dislike more, identify less with}$; $8 = \textit{more positive, like more, identify more with}$). All participants completed the same tasks for the two brands they were assigned. At last, demographic information was collected. After completing the study, participants were debriefed and told that the blog posts they read were fabricated.

Measures. Study 2 included the same measures as in Study 1. Brand identification was measured by the same 7-item 5-point Self-Brand Connection scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003) that was translated into Mandarin. The seven items were averaged to form one self-brand connection score per participant per brand ($\alpha = .86$). Pre-reading attitude, attitude change, and level of defensiveness were also collected.

Results

Demographics. Among 588 participants recruited, 500 Chinese participants passed the attention check question and completed the study. Participants had an age range from 18 to 65 ($M = 29.89$, $SD = 6.86$). Among the 500 participants, 257 (51.4%) reported as males, and 243 (48.6%) reported as females.

Data Analysis was performed via the ANOVA test on SPSS. The ANOVA test showed whether there was any main effect of brand origin (Chinese vs USA), brand category (Phones vs Clothing), information agent (Stranger vs Close friend), and level of brand identification (High vs Low) on defensiveness. Participants in Study 2 were divided into two groups by their level of brand identification, because the data was not normally distributed. The ANOVA test provided general results on whether the origin of a brand, brand category, information agents, and the level of brand identification can significantly affect consumers' level of defensiveness.

The ANOVA test result showed a significant main effect of brand category, $F(1, 484) = 14.07, p < .01$. This result indicates that participants demonstrated higher level of defensives for the phone brand ($M = 2.50, SD = .26$) than for the clothing brand ($M = 1.06, SD = .29$).

The ANOVA test also revealed a significant main effect of level of brand identification, $F(1, 499) = 41.24, p < .01$. This result indicates that participants with higher brand identification demonstrated stronger defensive response ($M = 3.02, SD = .27$) than those with lower brand identification ($M = .55, SD = .28$). However, no main effect was found for brand origin or information agent, $p > .20$. Brand origin and information agent do not have significant impact on Chinese participants' defensive response.

No significant interaction was found among all four variables (brand origin, information agent, level of brand identification, and brand category), $F(1, 499) = .43, p > .20$. An unexpected significant three-way interaction was found among brand origin, brand category, and brand identification, $F(1, 499) = 4.58, p = .03$. This interaction implies that participants

were defensive for phone brands except for the situation in which they had low brand identification and that the brand was a U.S. brand. Participants were not defensive for clothing brands except for the situation in which they had high brand identification and that the brand was a Chinese brand. See Figure 1 and Figure 2 for graphs of the three-way interactions. No other significant main effect or interaction was found among other variables, $p > .20$.

Discussion

Study 2 examined the effects of brand origin, information agent, and brand category on Chinese participants' brand defensiveness. Overall, results did not support what was predicted in Study 2. Results draw conclusions for the following three hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Chinese participants would be more defensive for Chinese brands than American brands. Data from Study 2 does not support this hypothesis. Unlike what was predicted, there is no main effect of brand origin on defensiveness. Thus, Chinese consumers show no difference in their defensive response towards Chinese brands or U.S. brands.

Hypothesis 2. Chinese participants would be more defensive for mobile phone brands than for clothing brands. This hypothesis is well supported by the result, which resonates with the finding on brand category in Study 1. The results support the previous research finding that mobile phone brands are more likely to be included in one's extended-self than clothing brands.

Hypothesis 3. Chinese participants would more strongly defend a brand when evaluation comes from a stranger than when it comes from a close friend. Data from Study 2 does not

support this hypothesis. Unlike what was predicted, for Chinese participants, there is no main effect of information agent on defensiveness. The result implies that no matter whether a brand that participants identify with is threatened by a friend or a stranger, Chinese consumers show no difference in their defensive response.

Limitations

Several limitations of the study should be noted. First, in the beginning of Study 2, all Chinese participants were informed that the study was done by researchers at a prestigious American university. Previous studies have shown that because of globalization, people have started to build bicultural identities, which has increased their sense of belonging, and their awareness of the events, practices, styles, and information that are part of the global culture (Arnett, 2002). Consequently, to increase the sense of belonging, participants may switch their identity, and thus respond in different ways according to their existing knowledge of the investigator. For example, participants may display more individualistic parts of their identity when they learn that the researchers are from an American university. Future studies may be improved by hiding this information in the consent process, and then debriefing the participants at the end of the study.

Second, though the U.S. brands chosen were well-known, it is also known that many products from these brands were made or assembled in China. Studies have shown that consumers may express different attitudes to products made in different countries and regions. A product that was known to be “made in China” can be stigmatized in the consumer market (Schniederjans, Cao, & Olson, 2004). Therefore, participants who believed, or who

were informed that the products of the U.S. brands were “made in China” may have exhibited different attitudes and defensive responses from those who do not hold the same belief or knowledge.

General Discussion

The more one identifies with a brand, the more behavioral commitments one would make to that brand (Escalas, 2004). Specifically, consumers with high self-brand connections tend to defend a brand “to preserve the integrity of the self” (Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner 2012).

Guided by these previous findings and the culture and self-expression theories (Kashima et al., 1995; Kwon, Saluja, & Adaval, 2015), the current studies examined the impact of culture and information agent (friend vs stranger) on consumers’ brand identification and defense pattern. The primary contribution of the current studies on existing literature is that they replicated the finding by Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner (2012), supported the theory that consumers with high self-brand connection would defend the brand to “preserve the integrity of the self” in the East Asian cultural context. This finding is also consistent with the well-known theories of extended-self (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

In addition, the current studies shed light on the relationship between certain brand attributes and self-brand connection. Specifically, mobile phone brands, which have products that can be carried or worn on a daily basis and be tailored to express individual preferences, are more easily connected to one’s extended-self. This finding resonates with the existing literature on mobile phone brands, emphasizing its nature of personalization and self-expression (e.g., Carroll et al., 2002; Srivastava, 2005).

Study 1 also explored a potential interaction between culture and information agent, based on the previous finding that people's tastes are less easily swayed by social pressure in Western countries than in East Asian countries (Kashima et al., 1995), and collectivists' attitudes are more likely to be affected by the relationship between a certain endorsement and the endorser rather than the endorsement itself (Kwon, Saluja, & Adaval, 2015). Therefore, in Study 1, by conducting experiments on different brands, we expected to see East Asians show a lower defensive response towards a threat from a close friend compared to a stranger. Study 1 results partially supported this assumption, with East Asian participants showing less defensiveness from friends critiquing the clothing brand, but not for the mobile phone brand.

Since the East Asian participants in Study 1 were potentially non-representative given the familiarity with Amazon's M Turk, the English language, and American brands, Study 2 was conducted in Mandarin for Chinese participants only, comparing the difference in their defensive response between domestic brands and foreign brands. However, results imply that brand origin makes no significant impact on Chinese consumers' defensiveness. In addition, the findings in Study 2 did not support any difference in defensiveness as a function of information agent. This result implies that the marginal interaction in Study 1 emerged by chance, or could have been caused by the limitation of survey language or non-representative nature of the East Asian participants in Study 1.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations in the research design that may have affected the results. For example, in the survey, the participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which they

are reading a blog post written either by a close friend or by a stranger. It is possible that this method was too impoverished to assess how participants would truly respond to a stranger versus a friend criticizing a brand. Future studies could be conducted in a lab setting with participants who hear people talk about a brand face-to-face, with either a friend or a stranger. This type of study would be difficult, as it would require recruiting friend pairs and making one of each pair a confederate to give scripted critical brand evaluations, but it would be more reflective of the experiences people may have hearing brand critiques in everyday life.

A second limitation of this study was the choice of products and brands. Mobile phones and clothes are both considered as self-expressive products that have functions in satisfying individual preferences. These products can be individualistic in their nature, compared to material possessions that reflect the status of consumers' families, relatives, and even kinship clans, such as a family home. On the one hand, the self-expressive nature may make them more likely to be incorporated as part of the self. On the other hand, participants may exhibit relatively individualistic mindsets when evaluating mobile phones and clothes, attenuating any potential effect of individualistic versus collectivistic culture. Further studies may be directed towards brands and products that are less individualistic in their nature, and that can better reflect one's social relationships and family status.

Similarly, studies have shown that many well-known brands in the U.S., such as Campbell's and Kellogg's, have been treated as cultural icons that represent American values and culture (Chiu & Cheng, 2007). The presence of a cultural icon can bring spontaneous

activation of its associated cultural representation (Hong et al., 2000). Although the current study selected American brands widely considered as international, and added Chinese brands in Study 2, future studies can be directed towards a more diverse range of brands, including brands thought to be iconic of American vs Chinese culture. It is possible that individuals may react differently to culturally iconic brands.

Future studies may also explore the defense pattern of other East Asian groups. Study 2 only focused on Chinese participants, and therefore is limited in its generalizability. The majority of East Asian participants in Study 1 also identified as mainland Chinese, and the sample was too small to look for differences among East Asian identities. It is possible that other Asian groups may exhibit different patterns in defensiveness.

The current studies also suggest a possibility of identity globalization. According to Arnett (2002), Japanese and Chinese culture are becoming increasingly individualized as the market economy booms in both countries. The increased individualism among the younger population is even viewed and decried as materialism, hedonism, and selfishness by their elders (Stevenson & Zusho, 2002). Therefore, since consumer behavior is closely tied to market economy, the consumption culture among the Chinese participants may be more individualized than researchers have expected. Further studies can be done in exploring the psychology of globalization and its potential effect on identity and consumer behavior in East Asian countries.

Conclusion

These research studies investigated the cultural influences on consumers' defensiveness when a brand they identify with is threatened by different information agents. The study replicated the finding of Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner (2012) in the Chinese cultural context, such that individuals with higher brand identification defended the brand after criticism, supporting the potential cultural generalizability of this finding. Results of the current research did not support the notion that responses differ when a threat to the brand is carried by friends versus strangers, nor that this difference might be moderated by culture. Taken as a whole, these findings imply that culture may not have as strong an impact on brand identification and brand defense as we expected. There were also several limitations in the study, such as the demographic representativeness of the sample, the relatively impoverished manipulation of information source, and the nature of the brands selected, all of which limited the inferences that could be drawn from the current results. Further studies should be directed toward the psychological impact of globalization on identity, culture, and consumer behavior.

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Table 1

Self-Brand Connection Scale Items

1. Brand X reflects who I am.
 2. I can identify with Brand X.
 3. I feel a personal connection to Brand X.
 4. I (can) use Brand X to communicate who I am to other people.
 5. I think Brand X (could) help(s) me become the type of person I wanted to be.
 6. I consider Brand X to be “me” (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).
 7. Brand X suits me well.
-

Note. Scale source: Escalas & Bettman (2003).

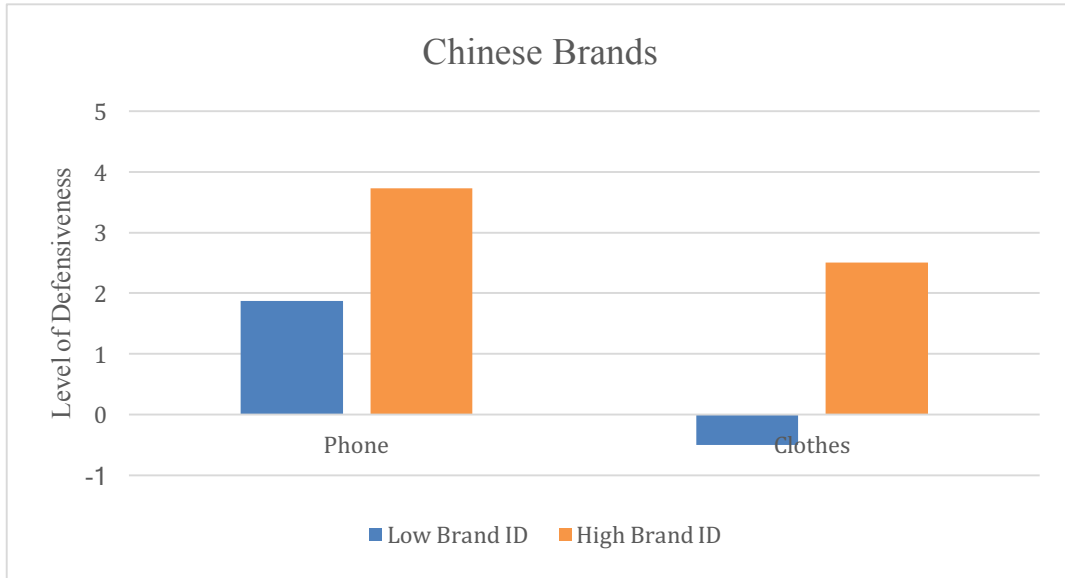


Figure 1. Study 2 shows means of level of defensiveness by condition and brand identification for Chinese brands, $*p < .05$.

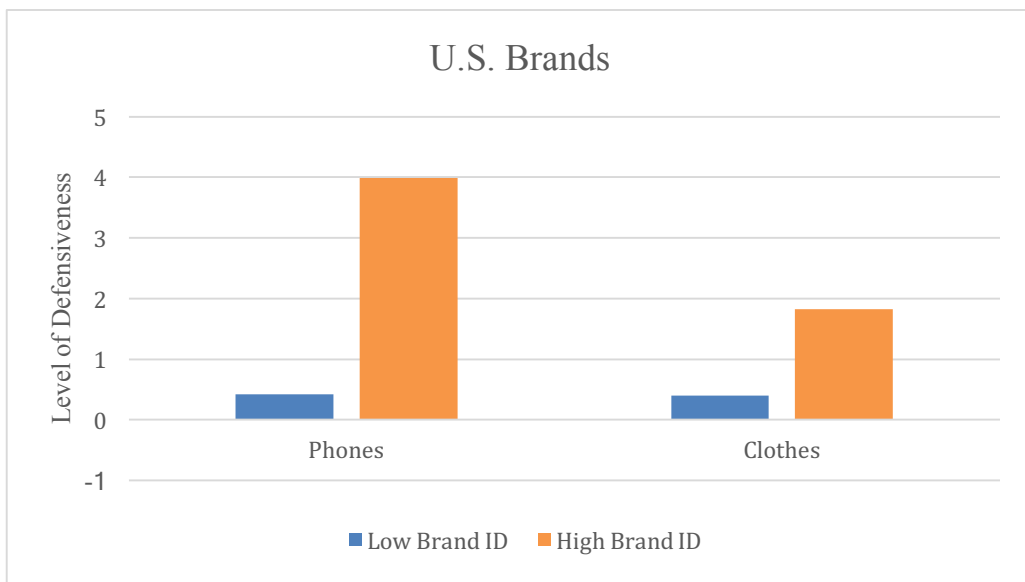


Figure 2. Study 2 shows means of level of defensiveness by condition and brand identification for U.S. brands, $*p < .05$.

Appendix A
Sample Blog Post

Brand: Nike

Condition: Close Friend

"I have been a Nike customers for many years, but I have finally decided to no longer spend my money on their products. I decided to call their corporate office due to the fact that my most recent Nike sneakers purchases have been very poor in quality. They told me that not only do I have to return all the sneakers, but I have to pay for the shipment. Customer satisfaction is not guaranteed with this company.

Another recently purchased canvas shoe has hole in it due to poor quality. The worst of them all which made me call them is a sneaker that I purchased for my brother for Christmas, yes I said Christmas, and he hasn't worn them yet. I paid over \$100 for this shoe. This sneaker has a pic on the back of the sneaker, that is already showing signs of damage, and he did not wear it yet. The rep told me that they have to examine and decide the sneaker, so they can decide whether or not I can get a replacement. I will not be purchasing another shoe from their company."

Brand: Apple

Condition: Stranger

"Apple's service and product quality has been deteriorating. Based on my personal experience they don't care about anyone because they believe hardcore fans will remain loyal even if they are treated with no respect. Recently an app I downloaded from the App store keeps crashing but Apple would not rectify the issue. They just cite the user agreement and did not even bother to contact me to gain a better understanding of the issue. I also have a Mac and its CAP lock doesn't work. Again, Apple didn't want to help but only to cite their warranty terms and conditions which I already know.

Recently I also found out that certain apps are higher priced in Apple's app store vs Google play because Apple charges higher fees to developers and hence the higher cost. Why would I want to pay more for the same thing? Bottom line is Apple just doesn't care about its users and they believe adamantly that they are better than everyone else. Keep that thinking that way and I hope meet their doom. I am counting on it as history has proven that no company will thrive forever on bad service. Eight years of buying Apple products and bad service is all what I get. I am done with them -- switching to Android this year. I will NOT continue using Apple products after being a loyal Apple customer for 8 years."

Appendix B
Introduction to Chinese brands

Huawei

Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd. is a Chinese multinational networking and telecommunications equipment and services company headquartered in Shenzhen, Guangdong. It is the largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer in the world, having overtaken Ericsson in 2012.

Its products and services have been deployed in more than 140 countries and it currently serves 45 of the world's 50 largest telecoms operators.

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huawei>

Li-Ning

Li-Ning Company Limited is a Chinese company which makes athletic shoes and sporting goods. The company endorses a number of athletes and teams, both in China and around the world.

Indian Olympic Association had signed a sponsorship deal with Li-Ning for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li-Ning#cite_note-7