**Contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities:**

**Cobrand personalities and dialectical thinking among bicultural consumers**

**This study examines whether dialectical thinkers, who can hold contradictory, inconsistent and ambiguous self-views, respond positively to a cobrand with a contradictory, inconsistent and/or ambiguous brand personality. Using an experimental design, the results show clear differences between low and high dialectic thinkers’ evaluations of an inconsistent cobrand personality – low dialectic thinkers respond more favorably to inconsistent cobranding – but no clear differences with consistent cobrand personalities. These results extend previous research concerning tolerance for contradiction among biculturals, but further research is needed to determine whether the results hold for globalization-based as well as immigration-based biculturals.**

*Keywords: cobranding, bicultural consumers, dialectic thinking*

*Track: International and cross-cultural marketing*

**1. Introduction**

Cobranding is a popular strategy employed by many of today’s leading brands. Brands may have the opportunity of collaborating with other brands that have a different type of personality. For example, Apple makes an iPod with NIKE, Samsung offers a mobile phone with Armani design, and Asus teamed up with Lamborghini to launch the Asus-Lamborghini laptop. In each case the two parent brands needed to make a decision on whether the cobranded product should inherit from one parent brand or both parent brands. Cobrands can have a single-personality when both parents’ brands have strong traits associated with the same personality dimension. Alternatively dual-personality cobrands occur when the parent brands have traits associated with different personalities.

As cobranding potentially enables parent brands to access to each other’s markets, organizations aim to design the cobrand personality in a way that is consistent with consumers’ concept of self. Dual-personality cobrands are more favorably perceived by consumers in a high self-referencing condition (e.g. for a limited time only, *you* can purchase a prepaid clothing card for less than face value) than a low self-referencing condition (e.g. for a limited time only, purchase a prepaid clothing card for less than face value) (Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007). Moreover, dialecticism captures East-West differences in conceptualising the self. Westerners present a more consistent and stable pattern of self-concept across situations, whereas East Asians possess a more variable and contextualized self-view (e.g. English & Chen, 2007; Choi & Choi, 2002). It seems reasonable to believe that bicultural consumers would favour brand personalities that reflect their unique cultural experiences. The equally well-developed independent self and interdependent self may lead East Asian biculturals to favour dual or even multiple brand personalities. However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has pinpointed the mechanism driving such attitudinal responses toward the different types of cobrands personality. Filling this gap is important, both in relation to theory and practice. Our experiment findings suggest that one’s dialectical self causes variations in East Asian bicultural consumers’ attitudes towards cobrands with dual personalities. Knowledge of the dialectical self could facilitate marketing scholars design of more appropriate brand personalities that are appealing to East Asian bicultural consumers.

This study has two aims. First, we propose that low (high) dialectical East Asian biculturals are more (less) likely to favor dual-personality cobrands. Second, we posit that cobrand personality type does make a difference when examining East Asian biculturals’ attitudes towards cobrands.

**2.Theoretical Framework**

*2.1 Brand personality*

Brand tend to identify consumers as “who they are” and to reflect “who they are not”. Prior branding literature has mainly assumed that consumers evaluate cobrands on the basis of how it fits with fitness it is to the parent brands. East Asian consumers as generally holistic thinkers tend to perceive higher brand extension fit than do Western consumers who are characterized as analytical thinking (Monga & John, 2007). Single-personality cobrands tend to indicate the fit between the two parents’ brand images, which may lead to favorable attitudes. With the increasing phenomenon of biculturalism, the concept of bicultural self has received a lack of attention in the cobranding literature. Yet the brand personality literature has demonstrated the vital role of the self in influencing brand preferences (Aaker, 1999; Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007). For example, consumers with a complex and multifaceted self tend to prefer dual-personality cobrands (Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007). Lau-Gesk’s (2003) work demonstrates that some Chinese Americans with two equally well-developed interdependent and independent selves prefer dual-focused advertising appeals which emphasizing both East and West cultural values over single-focused appeals that depict only one cultural value. Would East Asian bicultural consumers favor dual-personality cobrands as they are more comfortable with contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities? This question underpins the aim of this research.

*2.2 Dialectical thinking*

Dialectical thinking reflects one’s cognitive tendency to expect change and the associated tolerance for contradiction. Peng and Nisbett (1999) pioneered research on dialecticism. Individuals who hold dialectical lay beliefs often expect change and tolerate contradictions, conflicts and cultural differences that have broad implications for behavior, emotion and cognition (Cheng, 2009; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009; Spencer-Rodgers and Peng, 2004; Nisbett et al., 2001). Naïve dialecticism provides people with guidance when individuals confront incompatible information, therefore, it is expected that the effects of naïve dialecticism is particularly pronounced in tasks or situations that involve perceptions of contradiction, inconsistencies and ambiguities. A significant amount of cross-cultural research has shown East/West differences in conceptualizing self (Heine & Lehman, 1997). Westerners conceptualize self on the basis of Aristotelian formal logic (Lewin, 1951), with emphasis on coherence and stability, and resolve contradictions and conflicts through synthesis and integration (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). For Westerners, culture influences individuals, and they define self in a clear, coherent and stable way. Conversely, East Asians conceptualize self on the basis of East Asian folk epistemologies and lay beliefs, which emphasize the concept of change and contradiction. As a result, East Asians’ definition of self is often less clear and lacks cross-situational stability and internal consistencies (English & Chen, 2007; Choi & Choi, 2002). The literature suggests that Chinese, Japanese and Koreans tend to show less self-congruence and cross-situational self-consistency than do North Americans (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009). This dialectical culture facilitates an acknowledgement of the transience of all things and acceptance of the opposing self-concepts. In this research, dialectical thinking in domain of self-perception is the key focus.

*2.3 Significance of dialectical self*

Dialecticism, as an important individual difference variable, has accounted for East-West differences in the domains of self-perception (Boucher, 2010; Spencer-Rogers et al., 2009), cognitive processes (Nisbett et al., 2001), psychological well-being (Spencer-Rogers et al., 2004), creativity and ethnicity (Paletz & Peng, 2009), and attitudes and evaluations (Spencer-Rogers et al., 2010). For example, in self-other comparison, Choi and Choi (2002) propose that Koreans report more inconsistent patterns of relative standing than Americans. Members of dialectical cultures not only describe themselves differently, depending on the context (Kanagawa et al., 2001), but they are also more likely to adjust their self-judgments when their prevailing self-beliefs are challenged (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009). East Asians tend to have lower self-esteem and they also report poorer life satisfaction, greater anxiety, depression and pessimism than do Westerners (e.g. Kitayama et al., 2000). Therefore, it could be argued that constantly adjusting one’s behavior to accommodate situational demands could be psychologically taxing, which explains the negative impacts of dialectical thinking on individuals’ well-being, especially in demanding acculturative contexts (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Dialecticism has attracted attention from bicultural researchers. The recognition that dialectical thinkers are tolerant to contradictions and conflicts, lead to the proposition that Chinese biculturals (as dialectical thinkers) would be better at dealing with cultural conflicts than non-dialectical thinkers. However, Chen et al. (2013) revealed that dialecticism is negatively related to Bicultural Identity Integration. In other words, people with higher levels of dialecticism have no tendency to integrate the seeming inconsistencies and conflicts.

*2.4 Dialecticism: unresolved questions?*

Biculturals pose both theoretical and practical challenges to traditional cross-cultural branding research as well as psychological research. Dialectical thinking explains cultural differences at a group level. However, little is known about whether it differentiates one Chinese bicultural from others. Chinese biculturals inevitably experience cultural conflicts (e.g. values, norms, food, language and thinking style). Their bicultural experiences may contribute to their self-concept (in) consistencies, which are captured by one’s degree of dialecticism. As bicultural consumers are dealing with cultural conflicts, inconsistencies and ambiguities on a regular basis, does this lead to their acceptance of conflicting, inconsistent and ambiguous dual-personality cobrands? We propose that activation of dialectical self leads bicultural consumers to avoid complex cobrand personalities. Tolerance for contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities does not mean acceptance. East Asians cultural orientation inconsistencies and emotion complexity may evoke discomfort and anxiety as their tendency to “find the bad in the good” may lower their overall judgment about dual-personality cobrands.

In this research, Chinese consumers have been selected to represent dialectical thinkers for three reasons. First, Chinese are well known for being dialectical thinkers (Peng and Nisbett, 1999). Consequently, using Chinese participants enables the study of dialectical thinking theory in the marketing context. Secondly, many psychologists have recruited Chinese and Americans to study East-West differences (Brewer and Chen, 2007; Hong et al., 2001; Gardner et al., 1999). A significant amount of work on bicultural consumers has used Chinese Americans to study bicultural consumers’ behaviors (Zhang, 2010, Mok and Morris, 2010; Zhang, 2009; Monga and Lau-Gesk, 2007; Lau-Gesk, 2003). Using Chinese participants to study dialectical thinkers allows this research to contribute to the existing psychology theories and marketing theories on Chinese bicultural consumers. Third, with the recognition of the increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants to Western countries such as the UK and US, marketers cannot afford to ignore this marketing segment. Overall studying Chinese biculturals enables the examination of how variations in one’s self-concept consistencies, which is captured by dialectical thinking, influence attitudes towards dual-personality cobrands.

**3. Method: Experiment**

One hundred and thirty two Chinese students from a British university participated in the study. The objective of this experiment is to test the basic premise that low dialectical Chinese biculturals will favour dual-personality cobrands. A 2 (high/low dialectical biculturals) × 3 (Cobrands personality types: excitement-excitement, sophistication-sophistication, sophistication-excitement) between-subject experimental design was used. Sophistication and excitement were chosen for the brand personalities for three reasons. First, in a pretest, 39 participants disclosed their attitudes towards five brand personality dimensions (i.e., sophistication, excitement, competence, ruggedness, and sincerity). It was found that excitement and sophistication were equally appealing (Mexcitement = 4.96, Msophistication =5.05; F<1). Therefore, the differences in brand personality preferences should not influence the attitudes of cobrands personality. Second, excitement and sophistication were found to be equally persuasive in previous studies (e.g. Monga and Lau-Gesk, 2007). Third, excitement and sophistication are culturally universal brand personality dimensions, and should be equally accessible and familiar to participants with different cultural backgrounds. Participants in the dual-personality-cobrand condition read the following advertisement: “*Two leading fashion brands are committed to developing a new clothing line, which blends the glamour and elegance of one brand with the chic and excitement of the other. The clothing line promises to be all the rage in one month when it is finally unveiled for everyone to see, touch, feel and wear”.* Except the sentence,the advertisements for the single-personality cobrand conditions were the same. The first sentence for the excitement-excitement cobrand advertisement replaced “glamour and elegance” with “coolness and exhilaration”. For the sophistication-sophistication condition, “chic and excitement” in the first line has been replaced with “charm and good looks”. All participants were told that an advertising agency was testing some advertisement copies for their products. They were randomly assigned to either excitement-excitement, sophistication-sophistication or excitement-sophistication condition.

Participants answered attitudinal questions towards the cobrands, using seven-point scales anchored by “ like/dislike”, “good/bad”, favorable/unfavorable”, and “positive/negative”. They also completed questions about the perceived fit between the parent brands (Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007). Spencer-Rogers’s et al. (2010) dialectical self scale was included to measure each individuals’ degree of dialecticism in the domain of self-perception. Additionally, Singelis’ (1994) self-construal scale and Luna and Peracchio’s (2001) language proficiency scale were included as manipulation checks for the bicultural individuals. Lastly, participants were asked to provide demographic data (e.g. age, gender and education level).

**4. Results**

*4.1 Manipulation checks*

The Singeli (1994)’s self-construal scale was combined to yield two measures: interdependent and independent scores. Interdependent self, and independent self, scored M= 4.76 and M=4.48 respectively. Participants had a similar level of proficiency in both Chinese (M=4.71) and English (M=4.61). Therefore, the participants recruited for this study can be considered biculturals.

*4.2 Main findings*

A 2 × 3 ANOVA on the evaluation index (Cronbach α=0.90) yielded an interaction effect between dialecticism and cobrands personality type, F (1,126)=6.74, ρ< 0.01. No other effects were significant. The two-way interaction suggested that the effects of one’s degree of dialecticism on cobrands attitudes differ between personality types. For excitement-sophistication cobrands, low dialectical biculturals (M=5.35) reacted more favorably toward dual-personality cobrands than high dialectical biculturals (M=4.18). For excitement-excitement cobrands, more dialectical biculturals (M=5.04) reacted in a similar way to less dialectical biculturals (M=4.52), F (1, 45) = 3.089, ρ>0.05. For sophistication-sophistication cobrands, there is no significant attitudinal difference between low dialectical (M=4.84) and high dialectical (M=4.67), F<1. Moreover, one’s dialectical self plays a significant role in the dual-personality condition only.

**5. Conclusion and Future Research Direction**

East Asian biculturals’ degree of dialecticism deserves attention in the cobranding literature. Peng and Nisbett (1999) claimed that dialectical thinkers tend to tolerate contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies. Dual-personality cobrands contain inconsistent personalities. Intuitively, it would seems plausible to presume that high dialectical consumers are likely to evaluate dual-personality cobrands more positively than low dialectical consumers. However, our findings suggest the opposite conclusion. There is a negative relationship between one’s degree of dialecticism and the evaluation of dual-personality cobrands. The experiment shows that East Asian biculturals who are more tolerant to contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities are less likely to favour dual-personality cobrands. This result is consistent with Chen et al.’s (2012) study that tolerance for contradiction among Chinese Americans does not necessarily mean better integration of competing cultural orientations. Chinese philosophy embraces contradiction, and dialectical folk beliefs acknowledge ambivalence (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). The self constitutes both positive and negative sides, opposites can coexist within an entity, and Chinese can be “good” and “bad” at the same time (Boucher et al., 2009). Chinese with higher levels of dialecticism tend to see both the upside and the downside of their bicultural experiences without the need for reconciliation of inconsistencies and/or cultural conflicts. Chinese biculturals have to acculturate in order to function adequately in a Western culture. Such involuntary acculturation experience does not decrease the contradictions and inconsistencies captured by dialecticism. Therefore, they tend not to favour dual-personality cobrands that may evoke discomfort and anxiety as their tendency to “find the bad in the good” may lower their overall judgment about dual-personality cobrands.

This study considered individuals who acculturated as a result of physical relocation to a new cultural context. However, individuals are able to acculturate as a result of immigration or globalization (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Unlike immigration-based biculturals, individuals who acculturate as a result of globalization develop a distinct bicultural identity without physically relocating themselves from their ethnic culture to a new culture (Chen et al., 2008). Globalization-based biculturals voluntarily select elements of social institutions and cultural practices from both local and global culture that are congruent with their own ideals, values and beliefs (Chen et al., 2013). It is believed that such a voluntary process contributes to globalization-based biculturals’ self-concept consistency, since the perception of the new identity is harmonious and integrated with their ethnic culture. Therefore, dialectical thinking may play a different role among globalization-based biculturals. Future study should investigate whether dialectical thinking predicts globalization-based biculturals’ attitudinal preferences toward dual-personality cobrands in a similar way as immigration-based biculturals.

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