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# The Impact of Cultural Authenticity on Brand Uniqueness and Willingness to Try: The Case of Chinese Brands and US Consumers

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# The impact of cultural authenticity on brand uniqueness and willingness to try

## The case of Chinese brands and US consumers

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – In response to today’s marketplace in which many Asian brands are trying to expand their businesses into Western nations, this study investigated the strategic use of cultural authenticity that Asian brands may employ for their success. Although the benefits of using cultural heritage in brand strategies have been noted by past literature, the efficacies of how Asian brands can use brand logo designs to positively influence their brand success have not been studied. To fill this gap, the purpose of this paper is to examine how Chinese brands can increase willingness to try among US consumers by establishing brand uniqueness via culturally authentic brand logo designs.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The data from 289 respondents via online between-subjects factorial experimental research surveys were collected using a national US population as the sample frame. The Chinese brand logos communicating Asian heritage were created by manipulating the cultural authenticity of the brand logo mark and the language of the logotype.

**Findings** – The results suggested that the Asian-themed brand logo is an important tool in exuding a Chinese brand’s sense of cultural authenticity to US consumers. In turn, the perception of cultural authenticity for the Chinese brand positively influenced the US consumers’ perceptions of the brand’s uniqueness, which led to greater willingness to try the brand.

**Originality/value** – The research provides empirical insights into how “Asian-ness” can be manifested via brand logos to convey cultural authenticity as well as to build perceived brand uniqueness and the willingness to try among US consumers.

**Keywords** Asian brand, Brand logo, Brand uniqueness, Chinese brand, Cultural authenticity, Willingness to try

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Brands from Asia, and especially from China, are growing in number and presence around the world. Asian businesses are becoming major global players, contributing to 16 percent of the world’s total Foreign Direct Investment (Ernst and Young, 2012). Additionally, the number of Asian brands ranked within the top 100 global brands has doubled in the last decade, from six brands in 2004 to 11 in 2014 (Interbrand, 2015). However, Asian brands still need to overcome consumer perceptions often associated with the negative country-of-origin effect (Henderson *et al.*, 2003; Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013; Roll, 2006), and this poses huge challenges for the growth of Asian brands’ global power. One of these challenges is to persuade consumers in the West (e.g. Europe, the USA, or Canada) to try Asian brands.

To overcome this obstacle, some Chinese brands, such as Herborist, a Chinese cosmetic brand, Shanghai Tang, a Hong Kong-based fashion chain, and Shang Xia, a Chinese fashion chain, focus on creating their own unique brands built on their

cultural heritage. This kind of cultural incorporation into brand strategies has been found to build a unique competitive advantage for these brands (Ooi and Stober, 2008). Especially in today's highly competitive marketplace, it is important for Chinese brands to create such a unique competitive edge to enter into the USA and beyond because consumers in Western countries are less likely to accept "copycat" brands (Siegel and Chu, 2010).

For example, LiNing, a Chinese footwear company, has been trying to establish a Western brand image for US consumers by using US basketball stars, such as Dwyane Wade, to endorse the brand. However, many US consumers did not see a reason to purchase products from LiNing because it was too similar to Nike, a US footwear company, and therefore its business continues to struggle in the USA (Backaler, 2012). LiNing's Westernized brand image, which worked in China, no longer created a competitive advantage when moved to the US marketplace (Ben-Ur and Wang, 2008). Conversely, brands such as Panda Express, a Chinese fast food chain based in the US, Herborist, and Tsingtao Beer, China's second largest brewery, are successfully increasing market shares in the USA and other Western marketplaces using a unique Asian heritage appeal (Panda Express, 2015; Tsingtao Beer, 2015; Zhou, 2011). That is, Panda Express is prominently known for its fun Asian Panda logo and the Asian-themed restaurant design. Herborist is known for its Chinese medicinal properties in its cosmetics, and even uses the Ying and Yang design in its cosmetic bottles. Tsingtao Beer is best known for its entertaining ways in the sharing of the Chinese culture. These examples suggest that the uniqueness of a brand identity stemmed from cultural authenticity may be important for Western consumers who face new and unfamiliar Chinese brands.

The incorporation of cultural heritage into brand positioning can also present a comprehensive and personalized image for the brand. Asian brands have been unconsciously building up a global reputation as brands that mainly compete on price (Ben-Ur and Wang, 2008; Birnik *et al.*, 2010). In order to overcome this perception, researchers suggest it is important for Asian brands to humanize their brand images so that Western consumers could understand them based on who they are, rather than what they produce (Ben-Ur and Wang, 2008; Birnik *et al.*, 2010; Roll, 2006). This approach not only presents an opportunity for brands to present their own uniqueness, but also becomes an opportunity to represent their countries. After all, national images can be built as the result of the brands that have represented or are currently representing the countries (Ooi and Stober, 2008).

Meanwhile, there is a current effort by Asian brands to find a middle ground between highlighting their Asian heritage and communicating a more modern and Western image of the brand to cater to the global audience (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008). For example, the campaign for Tiger Beer, a Singaporean beer company, focusses on the "mystical and oriental Asian" for Western markets by providing a brand story revolving around the Asian Tiger, while its campaign for the Asian market involves the image of Asia as the center of influence. Thus, while there is a consensus that using Asian heritage themes in the brand can be a unique asset for Asian brands in enhancing their cultural authenticity, the effectiveness in the degree of this Asian-ness remains debatable. Indeed, as a vice president of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, like many other Asian brand executives, once inquired, "[T]o what extent is the Chinese-ness of this organization a hindrance or an advantage?" (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008, p. 224).

This is the question that this study attempts to address. While building a brand image based on cultural authenticity is currently practiced by Asian brands expanding

globally, the efficacy of the strategy is still largely unknown. Particularly, despite China's status as the largest market economy and one of the most powerful and influential cultures in Asia, little is known about the impact of the Asian-ness that Chinese brands may want to communicate. We should therefore ask: how can the cultural authenticity of Chinese brands be established and communicated? Do the different degrees of cultural authenticity for Chinese brands impact Western consumers' views on those brands' uniqueness? Furthermore, how does the cultural authenticity of a brand then ultimately provide a unique competitive edge to convince Western consumers to try these brands?

In order to answer these questions and provide empirical insights to other Asian brands, the study was designed to examine how the embodiment of Asian heritage manifested in the Chinese brand logo communicates cultural authenticity to US consumers. The brand logo specifically was used to communicate the cultural authenticity of the brand because it represents the brand's identity and therefore acts as the "the visual repositories of brand associations" (Pittard *et al.*, 2007, p. 458). It is typically what consumers first encounter with a brand and helps them form instant perceptions about the brand, even before they learn anything more about it (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Salciuviene *et al.*, 2010; Yorkston and Menon, 2004). In the past, two components of the brand logo in particular, the logo mark (visual) and the logotype (verbal), have been studied for their effects on global consumers' perceptions of the brand, though mostly for Western brands (Henderson *et al.*, 2003; Schmitt, 1996). However, little to no research is available on how US consumers perceive cultural authenticity when they are faced with Asian-themed brand logos. This creates a significant gap in our understanding, as US consumers are now encountering an increasing number of Chinese brands. Consequently, the study investigated the authentic Asian-ness communicated by the logos of Chinese brands, its impact on the brands' uniqueness, and consumers' willingness to try those brands in the US marketplace.

## **Literature review**

### *Effect of brand cultural authenticity on consumer perceptions*

Authenticity is the perception of what is genuine, real, or true (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Ooi and Stober, 2008). Thus, cultural authenticity communicates culturally genuine, real, or true ideas (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Ooi and Stober, 2008). Through cultural authenticity, Chinese brands may gain a competitive advantage by offering authentically "Chinese" experiences to the consumers of the world (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005). Especially in the case of global brands, consumers have been found to seek the culturally authentic in order to feel connected to other cultural traditions as a part of the global community (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010).

When seeking cultural authenticity, the researchers suggest that consumers use their own socially constructed meanings to interpret what is authentic (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Grayson and Martinec (2004) describe this phenomenon by describing the two forms of authenticity: indexical and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity considers the kinds of authenticity that is believed to be the "original" or the "real thing" (p. 297) while iconic authenticity refers to that which reflects and resembles the original form. A comparative example would be US consumers visiting Chinatown to discover a Chinese restaurant that serves the indexical authentic food as opposed to US consumers

dining at P.F. Chang's, an American restaurant chain with Asian-inspired cuisine, for an iconic authentic experience. In iconic authenticity, consumers look for the contrived elements of cultural authenticity even though they are aware that the original object might be fabricated or blend fact and fiction to authenticate objects (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005). For example, the historic residency of Sherlock Holmes on Baker Street in London is not real; however, people still feel authenticity through the fabricated residency displaying what it could have looked like. This is because consumers are able to find the desired elements of cultural authenticity rather than focussing on what is unreal or false (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005). Thus, like in the example with the Chinese food, US consumers use what they may be previously experienced with Chinese culture (i.e. the two horses in the front of the restaurant and the Chinese paintings), to interpret P.F. Chang as authentic, although they know that their experience is not the original Chinese experience. It is therefore generally accepted that cultural authenticity can be created via objects or messages, including brand logos that include certain elements of the cultural heritage. This study specifically examines the iconic authenticity as this kind of authenticity helps consumers to mediate between trying global brands and staying socially relevant.

#### *Brand logo and cultural authenticity*

For Chinese brands to appeal to Western, specifically US consumers who seek culturally authentic experiences, visual marketing research suggests using effective designs for brand logos (Henderson *et al.*, 2003; Schmitt, 1996). There is both theoretical and empirical support for how brand logos can create desired brand impressions. First, the classification theory in marketing context states that people tend to draw conclusions about a brand based on the brand's attributes (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2011; Berlyne 1971). Furthermore, the design processing theory proposes that design elements are perceived and compartmentalized into more complex components (Veryzer, 1999). Thus, these theories support the idea that brand logo design can be perceived and interpreted into brand perceptions. In addition, Orth and Malkewitz (2008) supported these theories empirically as they showed that there are different brand impressions created by different kinds of visual designs on the brand elements. For example, they showed that natural-themed package design creates more sincerity in the brand image, while the package design with high level of visual contrasts creates exciting brands. Therefore, the authors concluded that the use of the brand logos could help consumers classify certain brands as Asian (as opposed to Western), and thus, perceiving them to be authentically Asian.

Brand logos are "the graphic design that a [brand] uses to identify itself" (Pittard *et al.*, 2007, p. 458), and have the ability to instantly influence the consumer's perception of the brand (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Salciuviene *et al.*, 2010; Yorkston and Menon, 2004). Moreover, brand logo is one of the key tangible ways to communicate the brand's cultural authenticity to Western consumers (Roll, 2006; Salciuviene *et al.*, 2010). For example, Herborist communicates its Chinese medicinal herb appeal through its brand logo by using both Chinese- and English-language characters in green font for their brand name and the phrase "The Chinese Beauty Remedy" to position itself as a high-end, authentic Chinese cosmetic brand (Herborist, 2015). This design element of the Herborist logo is known to help the brand stand out from other competing brands sold at Sephora Europe (Zhou, 2011). In this light, Siegel and Chu (2010) argued that other Asian brands may need to employ culturally authentic marketing strategies by adding "just enough [Asian] flavors so as not to alienate foreign [consumers]" (p. 6).

*Logo mark: visual design.* A brand logo has two components, visual and verbal, both of which can influence the consumer's perceptions (Saikawa and Onisawa, 2014). The brand mark is the visual component of the brand logo (Saikawa and Onisawa, 2014). The visual design aspect, such as the logo mark, has been considered by the past researchers to be a powerful tool in brand communication (Henderson *et al.*, 2003; Schmitt, 1996) and in building cultural authenticity (Alexander, 2009). Specifically, Alexander (2009) gives several examples of how design impacts cultural authenticity. He argues that the British luxury fashion chain Burberry, for example, uses the image of the Great War trench coat to create an association with British history, and that Gucci, an Italian fashion and leather goods brand, uses the red and green strap design on their products to exude an image of the noble saddle makers during medieval times.

Similarly, Asian brands also use heritage-themed visual designs to communicate their cultural authenticity. For instance, Amore Pacific (2015), a Korean cosmetic company that owns numerous product lines and brands, utilizes a variety of logo designs to create different perceptions of cultural authenticity for each of its brands. While some of the brands within Amore Pacific, such as Aesturam, Innisgree, and Verite, use brand logo marks that are Western inspired, other brands, such as Sulwhasoo, Hanyul, and Songyum, use specific logo marks that exhibit traditional Asian culture and an herbal medicinal appeal (Amore Pacific, 2015). Therefore, one can conclude that Amore Pacific purposefully uses different brand logo marks to exude different types of cultural authenticity in order to differentiate the positioning of its brands within the marketplace. Similar strategies can be used by Chinese brands. Therefore, the study hypothesized:

*H1.* The Asian-themed logo mark positively influences US consumers' perceptions of the Chinese brand's cultural authenticity.

*Logotype: language use.* Brand logotype, the "name that is set in a distinctive typeface but is devoid of secondary embellishments" (Doyle and Bottomley, 2006, p. 112), is another key tool in communicating the brand's cultural authenticity. Brand logotype is often presented to consumers as brand names. The effect of culturally authentic language on global brand names has been studied in the past (Larsen *et al.*, 2002; Marian and Neisser, 2000; Salciuviene *et al.*, 2010). For example, the use of foreign languages in brand names has been found to influence US consumers' perceptions of restaurant personality, and to provide culturally authentic social experiences in restaurant businesses (Magnini *et al.*, 2011). In the context of consumer perceptions of global brands, Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2011) found that UK consumers thought themselves able to identify a brand's country-of-origin based on inferences from its brand names. That is, when UK consumers were exposed to the brand names Hinari and Matsui, they identified the brands' origin as Japan, despite their true English origin.

Alexander (2009) thus suggested that brand names that connote brand origins may exude a distinctive brand aura that can lead to desirable brand associations. Supporting this, Salciuviene *et al.*'s (2010) study showed that, when examining US consumers' perceptions of English, French, and German brand names, the consumers thought that French brands presented in the French language would carry more decadent products than utilitarian products. In other words, to the US consumers, brand names in the French language were associated with the decadent nature they also associated with French culture. Therefore, the brand name's language is also important for suggesting the cultural authenticity of the brand as well (Alexander, 2009).

Likewise, when Gwen Stefani, a US singer and entrepreneur, created a new fragrance and clothing brand, she named it Harajuku Lovers (Gwenclothing.com, 2007). The brand name does not only sound like Japanese, but also includes the Japanese characters right next to the English script (Gwenclothing.com, 2007). Gwen Stefani took what is part of the authentic Japanese Harajuku culture and used it on her brand logotype in order to offer a culturally authentic Japanese experience for consumers in the USA and beyond (Gwenclothing.com, 2007). Therefore, it is expected that the language used in the brand logotype would also influence the cultural authenticity of Chinese brands. In this light, the study hypothesized:

*H2.* Chinese language use in the logotype positively influences US consumers' perceptions of the Chinese brand's cultural authenticity.

*Interaction effects between logo mark and logotype.* In communication scholarship, much research has been conducted on the interaction effects of the visual (i.e. logo mark) and verbal (i.e. logotype) components of the brand logo. Past marketing literature supports that using both visual and verbal components, instead of just using either visual or verbal, has a stronger influence on consumer perceptions (Mitchell, 1986; Rettie and Brewer, 2000; Smith, 1991; Sojka and Giese, 2006), particularly in the use of brand logos (Bottomley and Doyle, 2006). For example, Bottomley and Doyle (2006) found that both the verbal (brand descriptions) and visual (the interplay of color) components of the brand logo together made it possible for consumers to make the most accurate judgment about a brand image. Consequently, the study hypothesized the interaction effect of brand logo mark and logotype on cultural authenticity:

*H3.* The effect of Asian-themed logo mark on cultural authenticity is stronger when the brand logotype is written as a blend of English and Chinese language than when it is written in only English, and vice versa.

#### *Brand cultural authenticity and brand uniqueness*

The brand uniqueness refers to the extent to which a consumer regards the brand as different from other brands (Franke and Schreier, 2008; Tian *et al.*, 2001). It is a favorable brand attribute that brands strive to attain (Keller, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) because it offers an edge over their competitors (Hakala, 2011; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Ooi and Stober, 2008). One method through which brand uniqueness can be created is by forming the brand's cultural authenticity (Beverland, 2005; Gundlach and Neville, 2012). That is, when a consumer senses that a brand is culturally authentic, he or she can also perceive that the brand is unique (Littrell *et al.*, 1993; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Munoz *et al.*, 2006). At the same time, when consumers are asked to define what is culturally authentic, they tend to describe one of its traits as being unique (Littrell *et al.*, 1993; Munoz *et al.*, 2006). Thus, cultural authenticity is known to contribute to the "uniqueness of the spiritual [brand] experience" (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010, p. 656), offer a "unique selling point" (Kuznesof *et al.*, 1997, p. 206), and create "a unique, power [brand] identity" (Munoz *et al.*, 2006, p. 223). Similar effects are expected for culturally authentic Chinese brands. Therefore, the study hypothesized:

*H4.* A Chinese brand's cultural authenticity positively influences US consumers' perceptions of the brand's uniqueness.

### *Brand uniqueness and willingness to try*

The willingness to try a brand refers to consumers' willingness to use the product without previous experiences with the brand (Martenson, 2007). Because convincing consumers to try something new as opposed to something they are already used to is challenging, focussing on building the brand's uniqueness is an important means to encourage consumers to consider new products or services (Fiore *et al.*, 2001; Knight and Kim, 2007; Van Kleef *et al.*, 2002). For example, Van Kleef *et al.* (2002) found that during the early stages of food development, emphasizing the importance of what is "new and different" in the eyes of the consumer is critical to encourage consumers' willingness to try new food products (p. 96).

Similarly, in the fashion and luxury marketing literature, Fiore *et al.* (2001) found that the unique design component of fashion mass customization was an appealing factor for consumers' willingness to try or use mass customization fashion options. That is, a unique brand experience helps consumers to try something that they never used before. Knight and Kim (2007) also stressed the importance of the consumers' need for uniqueness, where the authors found that the uniqueness elicited Japanese consumers' positive perceptions of the brand, leading to their willingness to purchase from it. Similar effects are expected for culturally authentic Chinese brands. Consequently, the study hypothesized:

- H5.* A Chinese brand's uniqueness positively influences US consumers' willingness to try the brand. Therefore, by virtue of the relationships described in *H4* and *H5*, brand uniqueness is a partial mediator between cultural authenticity and willingness to try.

### *Brand cultural authenticity and willingness to try*

The literature also suggests that the brand's cultural authenticity encourages consumers to try a new or unfamiliar brand. Much of the brand cultural authenticity literature seems to conclude that culturally authentic experiences for consumers are important for the success of the tourism industry (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Ooi and Stober, 2008; Waitt, 2000). Ooi and Stober (2008) specifically discussed how the governments from Singapore and Berlin strived to strategically craft culturally authentic experiences for their potential visitors. For example, the authors stated that when the Singaporean government wanted to re-brand itself as a travel/vacation destination, it desired to move away from the prevalent "cultural desert" image and re-establish itself as a "promising" country by promoting Malaysian authenticity, while still incorporating the sense of "efficiency" to make the country still relevant to the world (p. 10). Likewise, the authors continued, Berlin's city government had a similar goal, to detract from the past negative connotations associated with the "power center of Nazi Germany" or the "cold war" and to build a more "culturally vibrant" and "trendy" city (p. 7). Under this initiative, Berlin successfully created desirable cultural authenticity by promoting their contemporary art, music, and fashion industries internationally. The goal in both efforts was to become "world players that draw attention and exert economic, political and cultural powers in the world" (p. 14). In other words, they wanted the world to give them a try as cultural destinations over other cities.

Ooi and Stober (2008) concluded that "culture and place are ceaselessly reconstructed" (p. 14), and thus cultural authenticity can also be transformed over time through brand vision (Ooi and Stober, 2008). Today, Singapore is the seventh most

visited destination for international overnight visitors and is also the fifth largest spending destination for overnight visitors in the world in 2015 (Hedrick-Wong and Choong, 2015). Similarly, Berlin is the fifth fastest growing destination city in Europe by international overnight visitors from 2009 to 2015, and it is also the 20th largest spending city in the world for overnight visitors in 2015 (Hedrick-Wong and Choong, 2015). In this light, a Chinese brand's cultural authenticity can likewise encourage a Western consumer's willingness to try unfamiliar brands. Consequently, the study hypothesized the following and the study's hypothesis model is presented in Figure 1:

*H6.* A Chinese brand's cultural authenticity positively influences US consumers' willingness to try the brand.

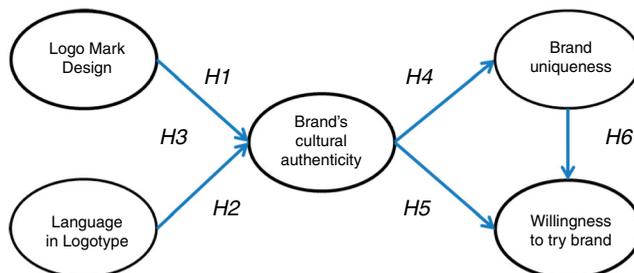
## Research methods

A 2 (logo mark: Asian-themed vs Western-themed) by 2 (logotype: English only vs a blend of English and Chinese language) between-subjects factorial experimental research was designed (Appendix). Experimental research is an effective method to observe casual relationships among independent and dependent variables, as well as to predict the respondents' perceptions or behaviors in a specific context (Grabe and Westley, 2003). Since the objective of the study was to examine the predictive perceptions of US consumers, the experimental research design was deemed appropriate.

### Stimuli development

The past literature and industry practices suggest that Asian brands tend to use a continental, or Asian, image of the brand rather than an image specific to the country of the brand's origin. For example, although Tiger Beer is a Singaporean company, it has been focussing on a "mystical and oriental Asian" image for Western markets instead of concentrating on the unique nature of Singapore (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008). For example, the brand still refers to its beer as the "Asian lager Tiger Beer" on its main US website, and even promotes the Chinese New Year (Tigerbeer.com). This is also supported in Magnusson *et al.*'s (2011) article, where the researchers found that US consumers could not distinguish between brands from Korea and other Asian countries. Therefore, the study was targeted to create stimuli manipulating the brand logo mark and the logotype to generate Asian-themed and Western-themed logos of Chinese brands.

As a result, two Asian-themed and two Western-themed logo marks were created (Appendix). Multiple logo marks per theme were created to introduce message variability as message variability helps increase generalizability beyond a single message that may be presented to the respondents (Thorson *et al.*, 2012). The Asian design elements included the colors red and black, the lotus flower, and a traditional



**Figure 1.**  
The study hypothesis model

Asian coin with geometric motives. That is because the colors red and black are often used in combination by Asian brands, these colors have been associated with Asian cultures in past literature (Jacobs *et al.*, 1991), and they are preferred by the Asian audience (Madden *et al.*, 2000). In addition, the Asian audience is known to prefer rounded shapes (Zhang *et al.*, 2006). For the two Western-themed brand logos, the designs included the colors blue and black and the star with circle and diamond motives, as the Western audience is known to prefer the use of blue and black (Madden *et al.*, 2000) and more angular shapes (Zhang *et al.*, 2006).

In order to ensure that the logo design itself does not become a confounding factor (Thorson *et al.*, 2012), 16 logo marks were first developed using a variety of color and shape combinations. These logo marks were exposed to a group of 23 students from a Midwestern University in the USA to assess which specific national heritage they would be associated with. From this, four brand logo mark designs were selected, as they drew the most consensus in the potential cultures that each logo mark is supposed to represent (two for Asian-themed and two for Western-themed). That is, almost all students thought that they were able to associate the given logos marks as having either Asian or Western heritage.

For the logotype, the use of both English and Chinese language was compared to the use of English alone to examine its impact on the cultural authenticity that the Chinese brand logo was designed to communicate (Appendix). This again is a common strategy practiced by Asian brands (i.e. Herborist, or Shanghai Tang), but its effectiveness has not been researched. Fictitious Chinese brand names were used to avoid any existing brand associations that the respondents may have. Initially, ten fictitious brand names without specific meaning, yet naturally pronounceable in Chinese were made up. After conducting a pilot test using 23 undergraduate students in a US Midwestern university, the three potential Chinese brand names were chosen: Ami, Nici, and Dila. Bodoni MT was the font used for the visual aspect of the logotype manipulations. It is the fifth most widely used font by professionals in graphic design and is a widely available font in publishing programs (i.e. Microsoft Word). As a result, with the use of four logo marks (two Asian-themed and two Western-themed), three logotypes (brand names Ami, Dila, and Nici), and two language usages (a blend of English and Chinese and the use of English only), a total of 24 brand logos were designed (see Appendix for the complete breakdown of brand logos used in this study).

### *Manipulation check*

A pretest ( $n = 75$ , general US sample) was conducted to check the manipulation of the 24 stimuli designed in this study. In order to assess the overall cultural authenticity of each stimuli, the pretest respondents were asked to rate each stimulus from 1 to 7. There was a statistically significant mean difference in how the respondents perceived the cultural authenticity of the study stimuli ( $F(1, 74) = 5.55; p < 0.05$ ). As a result, the two most effective Asian-themed and two most effective Western-themed logos were selected for the main experiment. On a scale of 1 to 7, on average, the two Asian-themed brand logos had a mean of 4.53 ( $SD = 1.52$ ), while the two Western-themed brand logos had a mean of 3.93 ( $SD = 1.59$ ).

### *Instrument development*

All items were adapted from the existing literature with appropriate reliabilities and all had seven-point Likert-type scales. Cultural authenticity was measured using five

items from Napoli *et al.*'s (2014) study ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ), with a higher score indicating a higher level of authenticity (i.e. the brand reinforces and builds on long-held traditions). Brand uniqueness was measured using the three items adapted from Franke and Schreier's (2008) study ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), where a higher score indicated higher brand uniqueness (i.e. I think this brand is one of a kind). Four items were adapted for willingness to try the brand from Huotilainen *et al.*'s (2006) and Barcellos *et al.*'s (2009) studies on trying and consuming new foods. A higher score indicates a greater willingness to try the brand.

### Data collection

A random sampling technique was used to recruit nationwide consumers in the USA through a survey agency, Qualtrics, in summer of 2015. Qualtrics has a lengthy track record of working with large companies such as Six Flags, Harry, and David, as well as Saks Fifth Avenue to help collect data from relevant customers around the world (Qualtrics.com, 2015). Any adults over 18 years of age in the USA were considered. Initially, e-mail invitations with a URL link to the survey website was sent to the potential respondents. The survey website automatically randomized different brand logo designs. As they clicked the link, the participants were exposed to one of the four randomly assigned treatment conditions, and a set of dependent measures and demographic questions followed.

Table I illustrates the complete descriptions of the respondents' age, gender, and primary regions. A total of 289 responses were collected with a mean age of 47 (SD = 16.79), ranging from 18 to 80 within two weeks of the data collection time. No missing data were found, as Qualtrics ensured complete responses. Most of the participants were Caucasian (81 percent), followed by African-American (11 percent), Hispanic (4 percent), and Asian (6 percent). Approximately 52 percent were women and 37 percent of them resided in the South region of the USA.

Variable	Category	Freq.	Percent
Age	18-24	38	13.15
	25-44	97	33.56
	45-64	100	34.6
	65+	54	18.69
	Total	289	100
Region	Midwest	63	21.8
	Northeast	52	17.99
	South	108	37.37
	West	66	22.84
	Total	289	100
Gender	Male	140	48.44
	Female	149	51.56
	Total	289	100
Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	235	81.31
	African-American	31	10.73
	Hispanic	11	3.81
	Asian	6	2.08
	Native American	1	0.35
	Pacific Islander	0	0.00
	Other	5	1.73
	Total	289	100

**Table I.**  
Demographic profile  
of participants

## Results

### *Reliability*

The internal reliability of the scale items was analyzed using Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . All items had high reliabilities: 0.97 for cultural authenticity, 0.95 for perceived uniqueness, and 0.97 for willingness to try. The mean scores were as follows: cultural authenticity ( $M = 4.17$ ;  $SD = 1.36$ ), perceived uniqueness ( $M = 4.35$ ;  $SD = 1.46$ ), perceived quality ( $M = 4.45$ ;  $SD = 1.37$ ), and willingness to try ( $M = 4.71$ ;  $SD = 1.50$ ).

### *H1-H3*

ANOVA was conducted using Stata 13 in order to test the main effects for brand logo design and cultural authenticity. The results of ANOVA revealed a statistically significant main effect for the brand logo design ( $F(1, 288) = 9.59, p < 0.01$ ). The Asian-themed logo marks were perceived to have higher cultural authenticity ( $M = 4.42$ ;  $SD = 1.33$ ) than the Western-themed logo designs ( $M = 3.93$ ;  $SD = 1.36$ ). Thus, *H1* was supported in that logo marks influence cultural authenticity. However, there was no statistically significant main effect between the language use of the brand logotype and cultural authenticity ( $p = .33$ ), thus *H2* was not supported. Furthermore, the interaction effect between the logo mark and logotype on cultural authenticity was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.84$ ), failing to support *H3*. This suggested that perhaps logo marks mattered more than the language use in the logotype, which may have had little influence on the cultural authenticity of Asian brands. However, the impact of the Asian-themed logo marks seemed to be sufficient enough to create overall differences between consumers' perceived cultural authenticity of the Asian-themed and the Western-themed brand logos used in the study, allowing us to assess the next hypotheses.

### *H4-H6*

Stata 13 was used to assess confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation model (SEM) fit. Maximum likelihood estimation was used to analyze all available information in the data set. In regards to model fit, the following cut-off criteria were used: comparative fit index (CFI)  $\geq 0.95$ , non-normed fit index (also known as TLI)  $\geq 0.95$ , root mean square error approximation (RMSEA)  $\leq 0.06$ , and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)  $\leq 0.08$  (Hu and Bentler, 1999). In addition, the  $\chi^2$  difference test was not used to indicate good fit as it yields inconsistent results based on sample size (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

The results of CFA showed an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2(47) = 76.71, p < 0.01, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.02$ ). Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) of each latent construct was higher than 0.50, in which the cut-off criterion was 0.50 or higher (Hair *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the AVE of each latent construct was higher than the construct's highest squared correlation with any other latent construct, thus discriminant validity was established (Hair *et al.*, 2011).

Following the CFA, the hypothesized structural model tested the relationships among cultural authenticity, perceived uniqueness, and willingness to try for the study *H4-H6* by observing the variance-covariance matrices. SEM was conducted and the results suggested a good fit for the model ( $\chi^2(47) = 76.71, p < 0.01, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.02$ ). Standardized parameter estimates ( $\beta$ ) and unstandardized parameter estimates (B) are provided in Table II.

The results for SEM statistically supported that cultural authenticity has a positive influence on perceived brand uniqueness ( $\beta = 0.82, z = 35.46, p < 0.001$ ) and

willingness to try ( $\beta = 0.29, z = 3.00, p < 0.01$ ), supporting the study *H4* and *H6*. The perceived brand uniqueness also had a positive impact on consumers' willingness to try ( $\beta = 0.59, z = 7.06, p < 0.001$ ), supporting the study *H5*. Consequently, the study findings from the decomposition effects showed the mediated effect of brand uniqueness between the brand's cultural authenticity created by brand logo marks and consumers' willingness to try the brand (Table III). In fact, the parameter estimates show that the indirect effect of cultural authenticity ( $\beta = 0.45, z = 6.22, p < 0.001$ ) via brand uniqueness is much stronger than the direct effect of cultural authenticity ( $\beta = 0.24, z = 2.97, p < 0.01$ ) on willingness to try. This suggested that the strong impact of cultural authenticity on the brands' perceived uniqueness is critical in today's marketplace to differentiate from competition.

## Conclusions

In response to today's marketplace in which many Chinese brands are trying to expand their businesses not only within the Asian regions, but also into Western nations, this study investigated the strategic use of cultural authenticity that Chinese brands may employ when introducing themselves to Western consumers. Although the benefits of using cultural heritage in brand strategies have been noted by several scholars in the past (Ooi and Stober, 2008; Roll, 2006; Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013), the efficacies of how Asian brands can use brand logo designs to positively influence their brand success have not been studied. To fill this gap, this study was designed to examine how Chinese brands can increase willingness to try among Western, specifically US consumers by establishing brand uniqueness via culturally authentic brand logo designs.

The results of the 289 online surveys using a national US population as a sample frame suggested that the Asian-themed brand logo is an important tool in exuding a sense of cultural authenticity to US consumers. The perception of the Chinese brand's cultural authenticity positively influenced the consumer's perceptions of the brand's uniqueness, which ultimately led to a greater willingness to try. In particular, the findings showed a strong indirect effect of the Chinese brand's uniqueness between cultural authenticity and the willingness to try. These observations allow for some theoretical and managerial implications and suggestions.

Hypothesis	Path	B	SE	$\beta$	$z$
<i>H4</i>	Cultural authenticity → brand uniqueness	0.91***	0.05	0.82***	35.5
<i>H5</i>	Brand uniqueness → willingness to try	0.59***	0.09	0.55***	7.06
<i>H6</i>	Cultural authenticity → willingness to try	0.29***	0.10	0.24**	3.00

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table II.**  
Unstandardized coefficients, estimated standard errors, and standardized coefficients

Dependent variable	Predictor variable	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Uniqueness	Cultural authenticity	0.82 (0.02)***		0.82 (0.05)***
Willingness to try	Uniqueness	0.55 (0.08)***		0.55 (0.08)***
	Cultural authenticity	0.24 (0.08)**	0.45 (0.08)***	0.69 (0.06)***

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table III.**  
Decomposition of direct, indirect, and total effects for the hypothesized model (standardized)

First, the use of Asian-themed brand logo marks was found to be effective in creating cultural authenticity for Chinese brands. There was a difference in the consumers' perceptions of the cultural authenticity of the Asian- and Western-themed logo mark designs. This shows that the logo mark could be used as a powerful tool to communicate the message of cultural authenticity to consumers. Chinese brands may want to take a careful consideration to include Asian-themed visual components to the brand logo to communicate cultural authenticity when entering into the Western market.

Second, there was no statistically significant difference in the cultural authenticity related to whether or not the original Chinese characters were included in the brand logotype. In addition, the study hypothesized that the combination of an Asian-themed logo mark and the mixed language use of Chinese and English in the logotype would have a greater impact on cultural authenticity than the brand name with the English language alone. However, the study findings showed statistically insignificant difference in US consumers' perceptions of the cultural authenticity of the brand. That is, the different extremities between enhancing and suppressing the Asian cultural authenticity in the logotype did not necessarily equate to more or less cultural authenticity. Perhaps, the English version of Chinese language was sufficient enough for the consumers to recognize that brand as Chinese. Therefore, having authentic Chinese language in addition to the English version of the brand name seems unnecessary, especially when the logo mark clearly communicates Asian authenticity. Therefore, as long as the English version of the brand name suggests the cultural authenticity of the brand, the actual use of the Chinese language in a brand name does not seem to add additional values in this study.

Third, brand uniqueness can be sought in many different ways by Asian brands. For example, when entering into the USA, Uniqlo, a Japanese clothing chain, did not necessarily enter into the global marketplace by changing their brand image via enhancing its Japanese heritage. Its main uniqueness came from the retail store experience with its fun store layout and its own technology-based apparel and products with licensed characters (i.e. from Disney© and Peanuts®). However, cultural authenticity was used in this study to enhance the Asian brands' perceived uniqueness. Furthermore, the findings showed that brand logo marks had a critical role in establishing such cultural authenticity for Chinese brands.

This finding thus has an implication for other Chinese brands who want to create the perception of brand uniqueness to consider building cultural authenticity for their brands.

Fourth, it is important for brand uniqueness to translate into consumers' willingness to try in the potential market. Given that Chinese brands are fairly new to US consumers, appealing to the US consumers and influencing their willingness to try is one of the necessary steps toward the brands' success. In this study, the perception of brand uniqueness for the Chinese brands led to a higher willingness to try for US consumers. If US consumers do not perceive that the Chinese brands have something unique and different, they may not want to try new Chinese brands. Therefore, the study results reassure that it is important for Chinese brands to have a clear idea of their unique brand identity as well as attractive brand offerings in order to create a consistently unique and culturally authentic message throughout their brands.

Fifth, the study findings showed that brand uniqueness has a partial mediating effect between brand's cultural authenticity and willingness to try. Although the total effect of cultural authenticity through brand uniqueness was substantial, the results also showed that there may be other possible effects of cultural authenticity on willingness to try. Some possible mediating factors may include brand trust

(Eggers *et al.*, 2013), brand credibility (Napoli *et al.*, 2014), and brand quality (Beverland, 2005), which can all be consequences of brand authenticity. Future studies are recommended to examine such mediating factors.

Finally, the study findings offer theoretical implications as to how cultural authenticity and the uniqueness of Chinese brands can be built and established via visual components of the brand logo. More importantly, the findings raise new questions as we knew little about how consumers perceive the brand logo to be Asian. More specifically, the study findings call for new research to answer to questions, such as “what triggers such perceptions of the Asian brand logos?” and “what types of role does the language itself plays in creating perceived Asian-ness in the consumers’ minds?”

As in other studies, this study has limitations and therefore opportunities for future research. First, the study examined US consumers’ perceptions of the Chinese brands. Although US consumers are a good starting point as a potential consumer segment for Chinese brands, the study findings cannot be generalized to other Western consumers. Future studies may consider examining the same study with other Western consumers. On the flipside, the study specifically examined the strategic model using Chinese brands. Therefore, future studies can also be conducted for other Asian brands to see if the results are generalizable.

Second, a follow up study would be fruitful to discover why the language use in the brand logo was not a determinant of cultural authenticity. Thus, it would be interesting to examine if it is because the respondents were familiar with seeing the Chinese written language, or if the use of Asian language itself truly does not have any impact on creating authenticity. Third, this study examined how brand logos impact cultural authenticity, thus the findings cannot be generalizable to the impact of cultural authenticity on the brand’s products. Although examining brand logos was a helpful starting point, other components of the brand, such as the brand product, the store design, and brand websites should also be examined to understand how these other components can impact the brand’s cultural authenticity.

Lastly, the sample population had a slightly higher percentage of participants from Caucasian segments than the US general population. Although examining the predominantly Caucasian segment is helpful to examine the perception of US consumers, Kumar and Steenkamp (2013) suggest that another viable entry route for Asian brands is to first target emigrants (i.e. Chinese immigrants in the USA) as potential customers in Western nations, and then to eventually expand into the mainstream population. It would therefore be helpful to examine if the impact of cultural authenticity also stays the same for Chinese Americans or, more generally, other segments of Asian Americans or Asian immigrants in other Western countries.

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### **Further reading**

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

**Appendix.**

The brand logos for the manipulation: four logo marks (two Asian-themed in red and black and two Western-themed in blue and black), three logotypes (brand names Ami, Dila, and Nici), and two language usages (a blend of English and Chinese and the use of English only)

4 Logo marks:

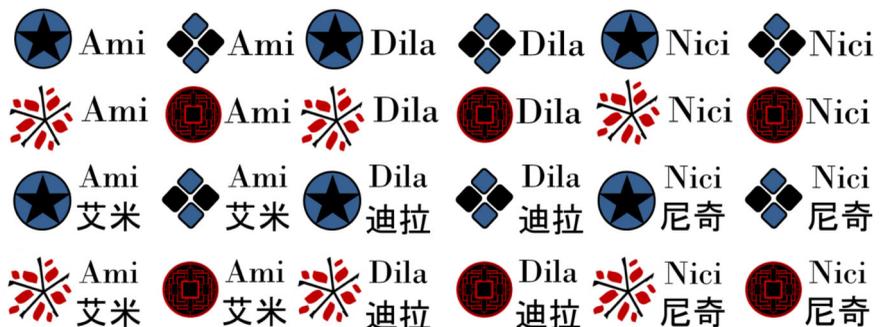


3 Logotypes and 2 Language usages:

Ami Dila Nici

Ami Dila Nici  
艾米 迪拉 尼奇

24 Brand Logos:



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