

Global markets: Chinese consumers respond to Western brands

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How do Chinese consumers really feel about Western brands? We often hear that magazines and billboards influence Chinese consumers to imitate Western lifestyles. Meanwhile, Chinese "patriots" are thought to reject Western brands as a symbolic gesture of loyalty to their country. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* paints a more complex picture.

"We set out to study the cultural meanings of Western brands to Chinese [consumers](#) and local understandings of nationalism from Chinese consumers' experiences," write authors Lily Dong (University of Alaska, Fairbanks) and Kelly Tian (University of Queensland). The researchers wondered whether it is paradoxical for Chinese consumers to buy Western brands and still hold strong nationalistic sentiments, a phenomenon that has been demonstrated previously.

In a series of surveys and in-depth interviews with Chinese consumers in rural and urban areas, the authors found that Chinese consumers attach political meanings to Western brands and connect those brands to important moments in Chinese history, like Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution or Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. Chinese consumers are finding ways to appropriate symbols and goods to create a new Chinese narrative, the authors found.

"We challenge popular explanations for Chinese consumers' responses to Western brands, arguing that they oversimplify the consumption motives of Chinese people. We show different ways that nationalism is

conceived and used by consumers to infuse Western brands with meaning, rendering them politically useful in articulating a reaction to the West, and realizing imaginings of the future Chinese nation," the authors write. For example, some respondents connected Western brands to the spread of capitalism and democratic freedoms, which can eventually liberate China from domination.

Chinese nationalism covers a full spectrum of ideas, the authors emphasize. "The assumption that Western brands are used to imitate Westerners denies people of nonwestern nations the creative capacity to take and use Western goods for their own purposes," the authors write. "At the same time, we question why the rejection of Western brands should be inherent in notions of nationalism, particularly for nation-states where reigning governments endorse participation in the global market economy."

More information: Lily Dong and Kelly Tian. "The Use of Western Brands in Asserting Chinese National Identity." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): October 2009.

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