

Integrating Chinese Elements into Luxury Brands: Multiple Pathways and Consumer Responses

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Abstract. In recent years, more and more international luxury brands have added Chinese elements to their products and marketing strategies. This trend is perhaps directly related to the rise in cultural self-confidence of and national identity among Chinese citizens. This is a well-planned initiative to increase brand competitiveness by attracting the local demand. However, inclusiveness in the cultural context does not imply any sort of consumer acceptance. The controversy over Dior's "horse face dress" in 2022 is a clear reminder that a tribute that is not well received can easily suck up to be a public relations disaster. The success of these designs hinges on a complex psychological consistency within the consumer. The aesthetics of a brand first has to match the expectations of consumers in a realistic manner. Beyond this visual threshold, the symbolic meaning of a brand should allow the individual to project his or her ideal self in the social context. Whether a brand is able to evoke strong emotional experiences is also a key issue. I employ the S-O-R framework to systematically analyse three parallel mediating paths including aesthetic appreciation, ideal self-congruity and emotional brand experience. In this study, I take these three subjective dimension into consideration as common mediating factors identified with aesthetic, social and emotional values of luxury goods. They are considered fundamental elements in the consumer journey. A more in-depth picture of this phenomenon can be obtained through the mixed-methods approach to research. The intention is to reveal the subtle psychological structures and meanings that consumers experience when engaging with luxury designs that are infused with culture. The achievement of this research should be contributing to an already existing theoretical knowledge on cultural marketing through more in-depth evidence. Ultimately, I hope to be able to offer differentiated market segmentation and strategic recommendations to practitioners.

Keywords: Luxury brands, Chinese elements, aesthetic appreciation, self-congruity, emotional brand experience

1. Introduction

With the revival and global dissemination of traditional Chinese culture, many international luxury brands have started integrating Chinese elements, such as traditional patterns, colour palettes, folk art, and cultural narratives, into their products, packaging, advertising, and in-store experiences, in order to increase their local relevance [1] and market appeal [2,3]. Although such practices are

widely adopted commercially, academic understanding of the internal psychological pathways by which cultural elements are accepted remains fragmented and inconclusive. Existing research has largely focused on variables such as brand authenticity, consumer ethnocentrism, or cultural identity [4,5], but relatively few studies have systematically examined the concurrent roles of intrinsic aesthetic attributes of luxury goods, consumers' desire to project an idealised self, and emotionally driven brand experiences within a single model.

The value of luxury goods isn't only based on their attributes as they are functional. The concept is also very strongly embedded into their aesthetic, social-symbolic and emotional value [6,7]. In line with this, recent academic work supports the idea that consumers are increasingly evaluating luxury brands along the lines of the hedonistic and symbolic considerations [8]. Therefore, the acceptance of culturally integrated luxury goods by consumers is dependent on the consistency of three important dimensions. They are aesthetic appreciation, ideal self-congruity and emotional brand experience. The empirical research in the Chinese luxury market confirms that successful cultural fusion strategies are important catalysts and causes of both brand attachment as well as long-term loyalty [9]. This research is guided by the "joint-effects" perspective [8]. It investigates three parallel psychological pathways, namely aesthetic appreciation, ideal self-congruity, and emotional brand experience. This approach describes how success and failure of luxury designs influenced by the cultural factor takes place, and possesses both theoretical and practical value.

To try to understand this phenomenon, I utilise the framework S-O-R. The use of Chinese elements in products, packaging and communications uses as the external stimulus (S). These stimuli influence the internal states of the organism (O), particularly their appreciation of beauty, self-perception and emotional engagement with a brand. These states then influence consumer behavior (R), which in this study is how likely they are to buy something. The S-O-R framework is especially appropriate for this study since it describes the processes by which environmental or symbolic stimuli are converted into consumer behaviour as a result of the integration of affective and cognitive processes [10].

An important starting place is that of aesthetic appreciation, which is a basic dimension of luxury value. Recent research shows that distinctive aesthetic qualities found in luxury brands serve as important brand prestige and symbolism drivers [8]. When cultural elements are introduced in an aesthetically pleasing manner and suited to the style of the brand, they are often viewed as a sign of creativity or elegance. This, in turn, creates positive spillover effects in product evaluation. In contrast, when cultural elements are perceived to be artificial or unsuited, it may cause less attractiveness to the product and be regarded as insincere cheap decorations. Furthermore, when a visual presentation is not consistent with the culture of the brand, it can lead to cultural crisis and consumers becoming ambivalent of their brand as consumers do not find it appealing [1]. In this pathway, aesthetic appreciation happens to often have a significant impact as the critical factor provoking further cognitive and emotional processing.

Another important concept is that of ideal self-congruity. This highlights the wish of consumers within themselves to portray an idealised social image through symbols of the brand. The ideal self-congruity play a key role because the symbolic value associated with luxury goods aids consumers in constructing their ideal identities [8]. Luxury consumption is often used for social display as well as management of identity. Particularly in collectivist cultures, many people are extremely sensitive to other people's perceptions of them. When Chinese elements integrated in luxury brands are used to allow consumers to project a cultivated cultural identity or refined taste, the ideal self-congruity would improve the consumers' brand recognition and preference [11,12].

The third mediating factor is emotional brand experience which effectively translates the symbols into deep connections. Emotional brand experience can turn cultural symbols into deep bonds with consumers. Emotional storytelling and multi sensory brand interaction can play an important part in increasing the level of immersion and attachment of consumers to a brand [13]. Luxury brands may be diverse in their approach towards integrating Chinese aspects to achieve the same. For example, they can launch limited edition products, organise immersive exhibitions or develop brand stories to interact with the consumer. These experiences will make consumers feel proud or connected to the culture or ritualistic. These emotions are important as they are directly responsible for the development of emotional attachment.

These three different mediating factors are not independent from each other. Aesthetic appreciation serves the function of liking and acceptance while ideal self-congruity has the function of social meaning and identity value. Emotional brand experiences provide greater consumer recognition and loyalty by focusing on the emotional response and converting it into long-lasting emotional connections. Previous research has shown that emotional attachment or connection is a significant carrier of repurchase difficult behaviour, willingness to pay a premium and positive word-of-mouth recommendations [14,15]. Recent academia research has also established that it is not sufficient to rely only on a single mediating factor. I treat these three paths as concurrent mechanisms to look into the effect of these paths on purchase intention either individually, or both jointly through consumers emotional attachment.

At the same time, cultural involvement functions as a moderator in this process. It may be understood as an individual's level of interest, engagement and participation in the cultural domain. In this research, the focal domain is traditional Chinese culture. This level of engagement influences the depth and motivation of consumers' information processing. Higher involvement tends to encourage consumers to seek meaning and engage in narrative consumption. On the other hand, lower involvement is more inclined towards immediate aesthetic cues and superficial appeal [16,17]. This means that cultural involvement moderates the strength of each mediating pathway and alters their influence on consumers' emotional attachment and purchase intention.

2. Framework

This study aims to use the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework as a primary theoretical structure. It treats the incorporation of Chinese elements into luxury products, packaging, and communications as external stimuli (S). These stimuli have an impact on the consumers internal psychological states (O) such as aesthetic appreciation , ideal self-congruity and emotional brand experience and ultimately influence behavioural responses (R) such as purchase intention. The S-O-R framework is especially useful in explaining how both environmental and symbolic stimuli into consumer behaviour through affective and cognitive processes [10].

Firstly, aesthetics is a fundamental dimension of luxury value. Recent research into reinterpreting traditional culture has shown that successfully combining traditional cultural elements with contemporary styles can positively impact the performance of luxury brands [18]. When cultural elements are presented in an aesthetically elevated manner, they are better received. If these elements can be perfectly integrated into the brand's style, consumers may see it as an expression of artistry or delicacy. This then results in positive spillover effects in product evaluation. On the contrary, if cultural elements appear too forceful or discordant, they may reduce the attractiveness of the product. Research shows that consumers' perceived product fit and cultural consistency are key factors. These factors are key determinants of consumers' attitudes towards culturally mixed products. They directly influence the probability of a purchase [19]. Therefore, aesthetics often serve

as a starting point. It triggers subsequent cognitive and emotional processing in the cultural incorporation pathway.

Secondly, the concept of ideal self-congruity shows how consumers use brand symbols to present their idealised social image. According to self-congruity theory, a conceptual distinction exists between an individual's actual self-concept and their ideal self-concept [10]. In the context of luxury goods, recent research has confirmed that brand symbolism has become the main driving force for consumer love by satisfying the needs of self-expression and social image enhancement. Luxury consumption also often serves the functions of social display and management of identity, especially in collectivist cultures where people are highly sensitive to others' evaluations. When luxury brands with Chinese elements enable consumers to demonstrate cultural literacy, status or taste in social contexts, ideal self-congruity strengthens consumer identification with and preference for the brand [11,12].

Emotional brand experience describes the feelings that are evoked by the brands, either through narrative or emotions that are experienced through experiences and context. Specifically, Brakus et al. defines brand experience as to be 'sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli, including design, packaging, communications, and environments' [20]. Building on this, recent research finds that emotionally immersive forms of cultural storytelling and multisensory interactions play a critical role in a more engaged consumer, thus producing long-term brand attachment [13]. When luxury brands embed cultural symbols into high touch experiences, such as limited edition themes, immersive exhibitions or narrative driven communications, consumers are more likely to feel pride, resonance or ritual-like importance. These emotions are important precursors for emotional attachment.

These three pathways are functionally complementary. Aesthetic appreciation leads to the basis of being liked and accepted, and the ideal self-congruity renders social meaning and the value of identity. Emotional brand experience enhances recognition by intensifying emotions, triggering cognitive and social response that transforms into emotional bonds. Previous studies have found that emotional attachment is a good predictor of repeat purchases, willingness to pay a premium, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations [14,15]. This attachment is explicitly conceptualised by Thomson et al as having three dimensions - affection, passion and connection. Added together these dimensions capture the intensity of the consumer-brand bond [14]. Therefore, these three paths are considered as concurrent mechanisms in the present study, in which the impact of these three paths, either individually or jointly, on the purchase intention of consumers is examined based on consumer's emotional attachment.

Cultural involvement is presented as a moderating variable. It shows the degree of interest, attention and involvement people have with an area of culture, for example indigenous traditional culture, and influences how information is processed in depth and motivation is affected. Zaichkowsky defines involvement as 'a person's feeling of relevance of the object in terms of their inherent needs, values and interests' [21]. According to Elaboration Likelihood Model people who have a high level of involvement will expect to invest more cognitive resources and engage in deeper processing. In contrast, people with a low level of involvement are likely to rely on cues of a superficial nature, like visual appearance [16,17]. Thus, cultural involvement is modelled as a moderator with impacts on how each mediating path can be translated into emotional attachment and purchase intention.

3. Research objectives

Based on the above framework, this study aims to:

1. Clarify the impact of integrating Chinese elements into luxury brands on consumers' purchase intentions.
2. Investigate the mediating roles of aesthetic appreciation, self-congruity, and emotional brand experience in shaping consumer emotional attachment and purchase intention when Chinese elements are integrated into luxury products.
3. Analyse how cultural involvement moderates the above processes across different consumer groups.

4. Methodology

This research is conducted with a mixed method approach, which aims to find the correct balance of the aspects of theory depth and cause and effects. I took an exploratory sequential design. Before testing the causal relationships in the quantitative experimental phase, the initial qualitative phase is used for refining the concepts and measurement tools [22]. This particular order ensures that the structure of experiments and research are relevant to the culture and based in the target context.

The qualitative phase of the study was constituted of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with the aim of getting the foundation insights. I have drawn up a basic interview guide to discuss the most important issues, such as understanding participants of Chinese design elements and aesthetic evaluations. This guide covers the topic of self congruity as well and how people emotionally respond to the brand experience. In these meetings, I used flexible exploratory and follow up questions to draw out deeper responses. This technique is responsible for collecting rich and context based data [23]. The application of this method can allow the research to uncover the subliminal meaning manufacturing process that makes the consumer respond to the design infused into culture. I then used the information gained in this stage to develop realistic experimental stimuli and refine the questionnaire items.

Once qualitative phase is over, the quantitative phase takes an experimental design among subjects to test the causal effects on presentation styles of Chinese elements. In response to the early qualitative findings, I will produce experimental stimuli, to validate them through pilot Studies ensuring the success of manipulation checks. These manipulations may consist of what is clearly a traditional symbolism condition, but also subtle cultures as cue condition and a control group without Chinese objects. Participants were randomly assigned to these different responses to projects relating to aesthetic appreciation, self-congruity and emotional experience of brands. I have also measured emotional attachment and purchase intention. The reason for selecting this inter subject design is that it reduces the demand artifacts and for legacy effects as much as possible, which ultimately increases the internal validity of the study [24].

In regard to the sampling strategy, the qualitative interviews will utilize purposive sampling to recruit the informants who have direct and relevant experience. The group of participants will include designers of luxury brands, marketing or brand management staff in fashion companies, independent designers who integrate Chinese elements to their work and fashion or design students. Purposeful sampling is important in selecting information-rich cases [25]. Therefore, recruiting participants with such specific expertise ensures that the data manifests informed perspectives regarding making design decisions and market reception. Participants in the quantitative experiment will be recruited via online panels or the University, and screening questions will ensure familiarity with luxury brands as well as these common symbols used in Chinese culture. The sample size for the experiment will be based on conducting a priori power analysis to ensure that there is sufficient statistical power to detect the expected effect sizes [26].

Data collection will occur in two stages. For the qualitative interviews, and after informed consent has been sought, each of the qualitative interviews will be conducted in an online setting through a software such as Tencent Meeting. The session will be fully audio recorded and the recording transcribed word-for-word. The transcripts will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns and semantic themes which will inform the further experimental design [23]. In the quantitative experiment, data will be collected either online experimental platform or survey tool. The data collected will be analysed by using the statistical method known as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for testing main effects followed by other advanced techniques in Multivariate analysis like Mediation and Moderation analyses to test the proposed indirect and conditional pathways [27].

Overall, the use of mixed research method increases the effectiveness of the content and the rigour through which causal relationships are achieved. By combining these various sources of different research, the research findings I have collected are able to give important insight to those research on a theoretical level and give practical solutions to practitioners in the industry.

5. Expected results

The results of the study are expected to demonstrate the correctness of the proposed framework through confirming the role of three subjective dimensions and testing the interaction and regulatory mechanisms. One of the major expectations is that aesthetic appreciation will tremendously make a positive impact on initial preferences and emotional attachment driving the purchase intention. I expect that for low cultural involvement consumers, this aesthetic effect will be enhanced. They are likely to consider the appearance of things, putting greater emphasis on immediate visual presentation and aesthetic clues [17,28].

Ideal self-congruity should play a more prominent mediating role among consumers who view brands as symbols of social identity. This influence may be more pronounced among groups with a high level of cultural involvement who place a high value on social display motivation. Research on luxury brands supports the view that when brand symbolism aligns with the ideal self-concept, it is the fundamental driving force behind consumers' strong liking and purchasing outcomes [8,11].

Furthermore, the increased recognition based both on aesthetic appreciation and self-congruity response should increase emotional attachment via the medium of emotional brand experience. This is especially pronounced among groups who have a high level of cultural involvement. Meanwhile, consumer participation in the emotionally immersive brand experience and knowledge of the rich story of the brand culture can boost consumer engagement and brand attachment [13,29].

In addition, the three mediating paths are not independent of each other but may interact, that is, they may work as substitutes. For example, consumers can raise their willingness to participate in cultural narratives through high aesthetic appreciation. This can thereby aid the creation of ideal self-congruity, as well as emotional experiences. At the same time, a strong emotional brand experience can provide consumers with greater social and emotional significance of aesthetic symbols to achieve greater ideal self-congruity. Previous research provides arguments about the need for comprehensive brand quality management. It implies that different brand-related characteristics rarely do not act in isolation. Instead complex and joint effects are often required to drive consumer commitment strongly [8].

When comparing different product or brand samples, if the product category itself is very dependent on the appearance, design effect will be greater. Similarly, if a product's cultural relevance or social display function, such as limited collaboration, festival collections, etc., then the pathway of ideal self-congruity and emotional brand experience should be more obvious. This

product salience and motivation expectation is consistent with recent findings on the pivotal role of product design dimensions, particularly aesthetic design, in shaping consumer behavior [30].

Overall, this article expects that all three mediating factors that are operated concurrently will have a positive impact on the purchase intention. However, it is the involvement of cultures that will define what pathways different groups of consumers rely on. These three mediating factors are expected to jointly and interactively amplify emotional attachment, which has an impact on purchase intention. These findings will give valuable theoretical contributions for the study of brand culture embedding and actionable segmentation and design strategies for practitioners.

6. Conclusion

The major theoretical contribution from this research is the construction of a new and comprehensive S-S-O-R model [10]. While I see the importance of the individual factors from the existing literature on culturally infused design [18], this paper responds to a need for a more holistic understanding. This is done by making aesthetic appreciation, ideal self-congruity and emotional brand experience three concurrent and non-substitutable mediators. This coherent framework is in line with the theoretical appeal to consider the interaction of different brand qualities from a holistic standpoint to generate strong consumer commitment [8].

Moreover, the research is a part of the cultural marketing literature. It does so by testing as an empirical matter the importance of cultural involvement as a key boundary condition. This testing is a vital step. Previous studies have shown that the power of aesthetic cues is highly dependent on the level of involvement of consumers [17]. This study provides a detailed and evidence-based segmentation logic by demonstrating the different impacts of three intermediary channels on consumers.

My research further extends the literature on brand experience from the perspective of emotional brand experience showing it as a separate and transformative mediator. This emphasis is crucial as the emotional component of brand experience is a potent mechanism that has been found to be instrumental in creating strong emotional attachment in a luxury environment [13]. I clarify how the symbols of a culture are transformed into intensely personalized and affective experiences which strengthen the consumer-brand bond.

My findings make significant and actionable contributions to brands in very practical terms. Given the rising strategic importance of cultural integration strategies in the Chinese luxury goods market [9], I have differentiated market segmentation strategies according to empirical evidences. So I linked cultural involvement with certain psychological pathways. This article proposes to prioritize the aesthetic quality of the low involvement groups, and show attention to the narrative depth, self symbolism, and immersive experience of the high involvement consumers. These operational recommendations can directly give information for product line development, flagship store plan, and better cultural brands.

Finally, the limitation of focusing the study on specific subjective constructs (aesthetic appreciation, ideal self-congruity, and emotional brand experience) has an exploratory theoretical value. It does this by actually going past deterministic variables of the form 'perceived authenticity'. Prior research has shown consistently that psychological processes in the field of aesthetics and brand commitment are complex and often need to be modeled as joint effects [8, 28]. This study has aimed to explore in depth consumers' reactions to cultural elements, as mediated by these factors.

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