

#Nike Matters:
Brand Activism and Chinese Young People

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Abstract

As stepping into the era of globalization, the marketplace is increasingly multicultural and globalized, which leads to cultural complexity in the marketplace. Since the traditional approaches in consumer research merely rely on certain cultures, the cultural complexity results in the inefficiency of traditional approaches. For this reason, this thesis adopts a cultural approach to analyze the cultural complexity in the multicultural market to bridge the research gaps. China has been one of the largest markets for brands due to the increasing purchase power of consumers. To stand out in the Chinese market and meet consumers' expectations, brands started to take stances on social issues, which is a marketing strategy called brand activism. There is a lot of research on brand activism in China. Nevertheless, there is a lack of cultural research on political activism from the perspective of the consumers. Therefore, contextualized in the Chinese market, this study explores why brand activism matters to Chinese young people through a lens of culture. Since consumers' opinions are highly dependent on contexts, this study selects Nike's engagement in Stop Asian Hate, Black Lives Matter (BLM), and Xinjiang cotton ban as cases. By conducting four focus groups, this study reveals that brand activism matters to Chinese young people largely due to the values they have. Influenced by global culture, Chinese young people agree with the value of racial equality. Therefore, they pay attention to and appreciate campaigns focusing on racial equality such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM, and brands that engage in such campaigns such as Nike. On the contrary, Chinese young people are concerned about hold negative opinions on campaigns involving political issues such as the Xinjiang cotton ban, and they, therefore, have negative opinions on brands that engage in the Xinjiang cotton ban such as Nike. Nevertheless, the contradiction between consumption and values suggests that consumption cannot fully reflect consumers' values. Moreover, by selecting some elements of the perception of reality and combining certain narratives, the media makes Chinese young people believe that the value of racial equality is the correct value, and allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang are rumors, thereby influencing their opinions on campaigns and Nike.

Based on findings, this study suggests that within the Chinese market, brands should engage in campaigns focusing on social responsibility such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM and avoid engaging in campaigns involving political issues such as the Xinjiang cotton ban. If brands get involved in controversial campaigns, they need to take a stance that is consistent

with the local stance. Otherwise, they might face backlash and boycotts. Once brands face backlash and boycott, any communication strategies do not work in the Chinese market. Only the product can mediate the negative influence of backlash and boycott to some extent.

KEYWORDS: *Brand activism, Globalization, Agency, Cultural Discourses, Political Consumerism, Thematic Analysis*

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1. Introduction

In August 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee while playing the national anthem at the start of NFL games to protest racial injustice and police violence. Two years later, Nike launched its 30th anniversary "Just Do it" campaign featuring Kaepernick to call for racial equality. The campaign attracted a number of followers and likes for Nike on social media, and Nike's stock price hit a new high on account of this campaign (Hale, 2019; Kim et al., 2020).

Nike's marketing strategy of taking a stance on social issues is called brand activism (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020). To stand out in the fragmented markets, brands historically have marketed themselves based on performance characteristics. However, the positioning is no longer enough for brands to stand out in the market due to the intensified market competition and high expectations from consumers (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Lerro et al., 2018). In this sense, brands started to take stances on social issues, which is called brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Sarkar and Kotler (2018) argue that brand activism is a natural evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR), thus the differences between CSR and brand activism are significant to understand the nature of brand activism. CSR is a concept usually examined with brand activism. CSR is a multidimensional concept that highlights firms' response to the expectations and demands of various stakeholders including society, individuals, and the environment (Lu et al. 2020). By addressing social, environmental, and political issues through advertising, CSR helps firms to differentiate themselves in the marketplace (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Although the ultimate goal of CSR is societal good, CSR is guided by market trends and customer needs. Due to the marketing-driven nature, the focal issues of CSR are widely favored and there is a high societal consensus to those issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Nalick et al., 2016).

Different from CSR, brand activism helps firms to stand out in the marketplace by addressing much more border issues and brand activism strives to combine activist messages, value, and purpose with prosocial corporate activities (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Furthermore, brand activism attempts to impact political issues beyond the immediate economic interests, thus it is driven by purpose and values (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). More importantly, the focal issues in brand activism lack societal consensus since the political issues in brand activism do not have shared "correct" norms and responses (Nalick et al., 2016; Bhagwat et al., 2020). In

some cases, brand activism is involved in issues that are not considered problems needed to be solved (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) argue that brand activism is a natural evolution of CSR.

The existing literature examines brand activism from both the perspective of brands and consumers. From the perspective of brands, Moorman (2020) summarizes six perspectives that brands can use to guide decisions on whether or not they should engage in brand activism. Vredenburg et al. (2020) examine how brands are able to ensure the brand activism is authentic and therefore building brand equity and nudging social change. By presenting the relationship between consumers' perceptions of brand misconduct and anti-brand actions and the moderating role of empathy, Romani et al. (2015) provide brands with means of understanding and handling anti-brand actions.

From the perspective of consumers, the predominant focuses are the consumers' reactions and perceptions of brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, prior works are mainly quantitative research, which ignores the social contexts in which brand activism is embedded. It has been suggested that consumers are actively constructing the meanings of marketing messages in different ways in different contexts (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Bakker & Jane, 2016). In the same vein, Hove (2020) argues that people have different moral judgments under different situations based on different orders of worth. With different moral judgments, consumers will hold different opinions on brand activism (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Therefore, the context in which brand activism is of vital importance when examining brand activism from the perspective of consumers.

As we step into the era of globalization, the world is becoming more homogeneous and people are sharing a common set of values (Jin, 2019). In the meantime, the process of appropriation and re-elaboration is very much alive, especially on the part of cultures that are outside the Western world and have a vital need to express and enhance their diversity (Zhang, 2020; Kim & Jin, 2019). In this sense, the Eastern consumer opinions on brand activism based on their local cultures and values leave room for further studies.

1.1 Aim and Research question

With more than 1,300 million population, China has become the world's largest economy in terms of purchasing-power-parity as early as 2014. It is estimated that China's private consumption will reach \$12.7 trillion by 2030, which will increase 126 percent compared to 2019 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019; Morgan Stanley, 2021). Due to a large population

with great development potential, many foreign brands have begun to enter the Chinese market (Froese et al., 2019). In the meantime, local brands are growing rapidly. Consequently, the competition in the Chinese market is increasingly serious. Furthermore, a survey released by We RedBridge (2019) demonstrates that 83 percent of Chinese respondents expect brands to take a stance on important issues, which is higher than the global average. Under this situation, more and more brands started to take a stance on social issues in the Chinese market, such as Li-Ning in political activism, China Everbright Environment Group Limited in environmental activism, and SK-II in gender activism.

In the meantime, many scholars strive to understand various brand activism in China. For instance, Shen and Wallis (2018) argue that the impact of gender activism in China is limited since Chinese consumers are considered as consumer subjects rather than consumer citizens in the context of neo-liberal China. Luo et al. (2016) examine how Chinese citizens utilize Internet to contribute to the good community in the 2008 earthquake in the Sichuan Province of China. Furthermore, Yu (2021) explores how Chinese consumers adopt short videos on social media platforms to protect their rights and the influence of such video activism. While there has been much research on brand activism in China, few researchers examine consumers' opinions on brand activism from a cultural perspective. Therefore, analyzing Nike's engagement in Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban as cases, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

Why does brand activism matter to Chinese young people?

Following the prior research, two sub-questions are formulated. According to Moisander and Valtone (2016), when people are able to think and act freely and are subject to cultural discourse, they are able to construct the meaning of the marketplace actively based on their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in order to examine how Chinese young people actively construct the meaning of the marketplace within their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds, the first sub-question is *what opinions do Chinese young people have on brand activism?*

It has been suggested that consumers' interpretations of marketing messages are highly dependent on contexts. The categorization and the term "difference" and "otherness" are two crucial conceptual tools to capture social contexts in which consumers' interpretations are embedded (Moisander and Valtonen, 2016) and the concept of social identity is regarding the question of categorization and "difference" and "otherness" (Bakker & Jane, 2016; Tajfel &

Turner, 1979). In this sense, the following sub-question is formulated: *What social identities and values do Chinese young people have as consumers under globalization?*

1.2 The Research Methods in brief

The research method used in this study is thematic analysis. Majumdar (2018) argues that thematic analysis allows researchers to grasp the denotation and connotation of the dataset, identify core themes or general patterns across the dataset and interpret data with core themes. This thesis aims at understanding why brand activism matters to Chinese young people. To answer this question, this study needs to organize a large number of interviewee transcripts into certain categories, identify core themes, and interpret data with themes. Based on the core themes and the interpretation of data, the thesis is able to answer the research questions and build theoretical relevance between data and theories. Therefore, thematic analysis is chosen as the research method. Furthermore, to guarantee the accuracy of the study, the thesis combines both inductive thematic analysis and deductive thematic analysis. The study first develops the main themes in light of the theoretical framework and adjusts the sub-categories according to the dataset.

1.3 Relevance

Scientific Relevance

The major existing research on brand activism from the perspective of consumers is quantitative research, which draws a general picture of brand activism. However, it has been suggested that consumers' opinions and interpretation on marketplace are dynamic. It is influenced by different contexts (Moisander & Valtonen, 2016; Hove, 2020). In this sense, through contextualizing the Chinese market, this thesis highlights the significant role social contexts play in consumers' opinions on brand activism. Contextualized in China, this thesis points out that influenced by global culture, Chinese young people hold positive opinions on Nike's engagement in Stop Asian Hate and BLM. However, on account of local values, Chinese young people boycotts Nike due to its engagement in the Xinjiang cotton ban. The polarizing opinions on Nike in the Chinese market indicates that consumers are affected by different social contexts and cultures in the local market, therefore interpreting marketing messages in different ways and holding different opinions on brand activism. Therefore, the social contexts should be taken into consideration when examining brand activism. Furthermore, Demangeot et al. (2015) argue that one of the research gaps in consumer

research is the cultural complexity in the multicultural market, which requires cultural approaches to bridge the gap. Through the lens of culture, this thesis analyses the entanglement of global culture and local culture in the Chinese market and how such an entanglement makes Chinese young people have polarizing opinions on different brand activism, thereby holding polarizing opinions on the same brand, which fills in the research gap in consumer research.

Practical Relevance

A critical question for brands is whether they should engage in brand activism. The findings in this study can help brands to make this decision. The findings suggest that Chinese young people expect brands to engage in campaigns focusing on social responsibility such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM since they believe it is a way for brands to fulfill their social responsibilities. On the contrary, Chinese young people consider campaigns focusing on political issues such as the Xinjiang cotton ban as extra marketing for brands and they might face a dilemma of personal consumption and political values, thus they do not expect brands to engage in campaigns focusing on political issues. That being said, if brands participate in campaigns focusing on political issues, brands need to investigate the social and cultural contexts of the Chinese market carefully and take a stance that is consistent with the Chinese market. Otherwise, brands will face backlash or even boycotts. When brands face backlash or boycott in the Chinese market, any communication strategies such as the apology will not reduce the negative influence. The only solution for brands to reduce the negative influence is to develop products.

1.4 Overview of the chapters

The first chapter introduces the brand activism in China as backdrops. Furthermore, the chapter elaborates on the research questions of this thesis and the relevance of the study.

The second chapter introduces the theoretical framework. The chapter first reviews the existing literature regarding consumer research as well as globalization and the role of media. Then the concepts of agency, social identity, and political consumerism are highlighted as conceptual frameworks to understand the active role consumers play in the marketplace.

The third chapter elaborates on the methodology of the study. The study adopts the focus group as the data collection method to collect Chinese young people's values and opinions on brands. In terms of the data analysis, the study selects thematic analysis to analyze the data.

The fourth chapter presents the results of the analysis, in which Agencies, Global China, and Political consumerism are presented as core themes.

The final chapter discusses the main findings from the analysis of why brand activism matters to Chinese young people on account of their universal values and local values. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the theoretical and practical implications as well as the limitations of the study. Finally, the chapter sheds a light on further research.

2. Theoretical Literature and Conceptual Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation of consumers' opinions on brand activism based on social identities and values. The literature of this study primarily stems from the media and communication field, with the main focus on marketing and consumer behavior. The first section identifies the research gap in consumer research and introduces a new approach to fill in the gap, namely the analytics of the cultural approach. In light of the analytics of the cultural approach, the second section introduces the concepts of agency, social identity, and political consumerism as the conceptual framework to explain how consumers understand and construct the marketplace actively.

2.1 Theoretical Literature

According to Holbrook (1987), consumer research is a discipline that refers to the study of consumption in many fields. In the field of sociology, the social context in which consumption activities are embedded is the main focus (Holbrook, 1987). For instance, the social stratification theory underlines the influence of social classes in the acceptance of innovative products and the concept of reference group which examines the individual social role in consumption. Those theories reveals the crucial role the social context plays in consumer research (Foxall, 1974).

As stepping into the era of globalization, the marketplace is increasingly multicultural and globalized, which constitutes a new field for consumer research (Moisander & Valtonen, 2016; Demangeot et al., 2015). According to Demangeot et al. (2015), under globalization, different cultures are interacting and influencing each other in the globalized market environment, which leads to cultural complexity. Since the traditional approaches in the field of consumer research rely on certain cultures, the emergence of cultural complexity makes the traditional approaches ineffective (Demangeot et al., 2015). In this sense, the cultural

approach is introduced to capture and analyze the cultural complexity of the marketplace, thereby bridging research gaps in consumer research (Demangeot et al., 2015; Moisander & Valtonen, 2016).

Within the cultural approach, the marketplace is defined as a joint cultural production produced by both markets and consumers. Culture refers to the systems of representation which consumers use to understand their daily life and guide their behavior. In the meantime, it is produced through consumers' daily communication and interaction (Moisander & Valtonen, 2016).

There are many strands in the cultural approach and this thesis adopts analytics of cultural practice (ACP) as an approach to conduct the analysis. ACP focuses on the ways in which social reality is represented through daily practices and highlights the interplay between the cultural discourses and discursive practices (Moisander & Valtonen, 2016).

In terms of conceptual foundations, ACP is based on an informed analysis of everyday discursive practices and analysis of culturally standardized. The former focuses on the ways in which consumers use systems of representations to make sense of their life and the latter pays attention to the ways in which those systems of representations are constructed through discursive practices. In terms of methodological foundations, ACP adopts the discursive approach which argues that the language provides consumers certain versions of reality and reflects the process by which consumers understand the world. In the meantime, as free agencies, consumers have a certain degree of freedom to think and construct cultural discourses through various tools (Moisander & Valtonen, 2016).

ACP is a theoretical approach that might be useful to analyze the entanglement of global culture and national culture in the multicultural market under globalization. According to Zhang (2008), globalization is a process of exchanging experiences between different cultures. In the process of exchanging experiences between different cultures, people tend to use the same language to communicate, eat the same food, and drive the same car. These phenomena eventually result in the emergence of global culture, which indicates that the world is becoming more homogeneous. Influenced by global culture, people have a sense of belonging to the global community and they are sharing a common set of values, which guide their behavior and understanding of the world (Jin, 2019).

Nevertheless, national culture still remains in power and plays a crucial role in people's values (Stevenson, 1997; Pastina & Staubhaar, 2005; Wang, 2008). For instance, Stevenson (1997) points out that since the national government plays a decisive role in media reporting in the British and European countries, national cultures still remain a structural dominance

over public spheres at both macro and micro levels in those countries. Influenced by national culture, people are intended to reinterpret objects based on their local values as well. For instance, the cultural proximity theory argues that rather than passively consuming media messages, audiences tend to consume media products that are similar to their cultural background and interpret media messages within their local culture (Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Similarly, the Uses and Gratification Research claims that audiences actively interpret media messages within their personal backgrounds (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). These studies showcase that under globalization, the global culture and local culture are intertwined in the local market, and the entanglement of global culture and local culture influence consumers' values.

Following this perspective, the media is deemed as one of the driving forces behind global culture (Wang, 2008; Bird & Stevens, 2003). According to prior works (Entman, 2007; Slater, 2007), the media is able to shape audiences' opinions through framing. Framing refers to the process of selecting some elements of the perception of reality and combining the narrative to highlight the connection between them to promote the process of specific interpretation (Entman, 2007). By adopting the strategy of framing, media is able to shape audiences' interpretations and preferences of certain issues (Entman, 2007; Slater, 2007). By consuming similar media messages, audiences tend to share the similar values and cultures. Therefore, the media is deemed as one of the driving forces behind global culture (Wang, 2008; Bird & Stevens, 2003; Jin, 2019).

Although there is a trend of national priority movements such as Brexit since around mid-2000s, Jin (2019) argues that globalization and global culture are still alive on account of the rise of new media. In the era of digital platforms, new media such as YouTube and Facebook are growing rapidly. Those new media, on the one hand, play a vital role in cultural production. On the other hand, they are functioning as cultural distributors to distribute various cultural values. The rise of new media continues to facilitate cultural exchange and increase the interdependence between countries, thus globalization is still alive. Furthermore, Jin (2019) points out that the majority of new media are still under the control of minority countries and are utilized as a tool for them to spread certain cultural values. In this sense, the cultural trend of homogenization still exists (Jin, 2019).

However, it does not mean that the national culture and national identity are in decline. Instead, the new media promotes national culture and national identity as well, especially in Eastern countries. For instance, by analyzing 500 posts regarding China's National Day on Weibo, one of the largest social platforms in China, Zhang (2020) pointed out that new media

provides Chinese netizens with a platform to interact and spread national culture, which strengthens their national identities and lead to the rise of digital nationalism in China. In the same vein, embarked on the notion of cultural diplomacy, the Korean government utilizes the new media to export their cultural products, thereby promoting the national culture and national identity (Kim & Jin, 2019). These studies showcase that the new media, on the one hand, blur the boundaries between cultures, leading to the emergency of global culture and global identity. On the other hand, it promotes national culture and national identity.

Facing brand activism, consumers' opinions on brands are influenced by both global culture and local cultures as well. However, few researchers focus on this cultural complexity and examine how the entanglement of global culture and local culture influence consumer opinions on brand activism. Therefore, in light of ACP, this thesis examines why brand activism matters to Chinese young people on account of their universal values and local values.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

This section presents a conceptual framework on the concept regarding the consumer. First, the section elaborates the concept of agency, highlighting the consumer's active role in understanding and constructing the marketplace. Then the concept of social identity is introduced as a conceptual tool to capture the social contexts in which consumers' values are embedded. Finally, the concept of political consumerism is introduced to understand how consumers behave based on their values.

Consumer Agency and Resistance

Cultural studies generally accept that the subject is constructed by society and culture. According to Foucault (1989), a subject is the product of discourse. Discourse refers to the production of knowledge through language that gives meaning to material objects and social practices (Bakker & Jane, 2016). Foucault (1989) argues that discourses provide the subject with certain ways of thinking and practicing. Therefore, the subject is a product of discourse. However, since the discourses are produced by certain social and cultural conditions, the subject is generally considered to be subject to culture and society (Bakker & Jane, 2016). Instead of regarding the subject as a product of discourses, this thesis adopts the general view which argues that the subject is subject to culture and society.

Because people will be subject to culture and society, scholars argue that people with similar cultural backgrounds will have intersubjectivity (Saari, 2010; Chiu et al., 2010).

Intersubjectivity refers to the shared understanding between individuals in communication. Prior works suggest that intersubjective knowledge plays a significant role in communication and behavior. As a crucial part of intersubjectivity, culture has an impact on communication and behavior as well. Saari (2010) argues that culture, on the one hand, is regarded as a meaning system created by the interaction between individuals. On another hand, it is defined as the shared understanding that people use to guide their daily practice. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2010) point out culture provides people a frame to identify themselves and behave in a certain way.

Although the subject is constructed by society and culture, they have different degrees of freedom to think and act in different contexts with different subject positions, which is called subjectivity. Foucault argues that the discourse provides individuals certain ways of thinking, speaking, and practicing, thus individuals are subject to certain rules of those discourses, which is called the subject position. When people are assigned to different subject positions, they will choose different discourses to make the most sense of the social reality and act based on their understanding (Bakker & Jene, 2016; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Thus, the subject is regarded as a free agency (Bakker & Jane, 2016). In addition, the subject can have a pragmatic impact on culture and society. For instance, the structuration theory argues that the subject is able to produce and reproduce social structure through their actions (Giddens, 1984). Similarly, Foucault points out the subject can produce and reproduce discourses through their daily practice (Bakker & Jane, 2016). In this sense, the subject can be regarded as the free agency that is able to influence society and culture.

In the field of consumer research, Moisander and Valtonen (2006) argue that cultural discourses create a set of systems of representation where meaning is produced through language and signifying practices within the marketplace. These systems consist of the words, concepts, ideas, images, norms, and values, which enables consumers to make sense of their life and construct their identities. Furthermore, with the various interpretations and values, consumers from different cultural backgrounds will have different patterns of consumption behavior (Shaw & Clarke, 1998; Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). For instance, Zhang and Neelankavil (1997) point out that due to the cultural differences regarding individualism and collectivism, the advertisements emphasizing collectivistic benefits are more effective in China than those in the USA.

In the meantime, consumers position themselves in certain cultural representation systems to make the most sense of cultural discourses, which provides them certain ways to consume (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Holbrook (1999b) argues that every consumption is involved

in an interaction between a subject and an object. The former refers to the consumer and the latter refers to the product. Holbrook (1999b) points out that on the one hand, consumption is influenced by the object features of a product. On the other hand, the subjective responses from the subject play a role in consumption as well. Therefore, Addis and Holbrook (2001) propose a term called the explosion of subjectivity to highlight the trend that individual subjectivity plays an increasingly significant role in consumption. In other words, although being subject to cultural structures, consumers have the ability to construct meanings and change cultural discourses within the marketplace (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

Consumer Identities in a Globalised Landscape

One's subjectivity and intersubjectivity are highly dependent on social contexts (Moisander and Valtonen, 2016). Thus, understanding social contexts is of vital importance. Prior works suggest that the categorization and the term "difference" and "otherness" are two crucial conceptual tools to capture social contexts in which subjectivity and intersubjectivity are embedded (Moisander and Valtonen, 2016) and the concept of social identity is regarding the question of categorization and "difference" and "otherness" (Bakker & Jane, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this sense, the concept of social identity is elaborated as a conceptual tool to further examine how consumers interpret marketing messages in different social contexts.

According to social identity theory, the groups that people belong to can provide people a sense of belonging to society and this sense of belonging is the so-called social identity (Tajfel, 1978). Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that there are three processes for people to form a social identity, namely social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. In the stage of social categorization, people will categorize the objects based on certain criteria to make sense of those objects and identify them. Then they will divide groups into the groups they belong to which are called the in-groups and the group they do not belong to which are the out-groups (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Once they assign themselves to certain groups, their value systems are bound to that group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Smith, 2007). Finally, people will keep comparing the in-groups and out-groups and perceive the world and behave guided by norms of in-groups to maintain their esteem and enhance their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000). In other words, people form their social identity by categorizing themselves and assigning themselves to certain groups. Consequently, their value system and behavior are consistent with the norms reflected by their social identity.

Multiple Social Identities under globalization

Under globalization, one's social identity is influenced by both national culture and global culture. On the one hand, as increasingly encountering cultural out-groups that transcend borders, people realize the cultural differences between in-groups and out-groups, which reinforces their national identities (Cleveland et al, 2016). On the other hand, different cultures exchange and eventually form the global consumer culture. The emergence of global consumer culture is redefining the notions of geographical boundaries, thereby contributing to individuals' global identities (Alden et al, 1999; Cleveland et al, 2016). Therefore, under globalization, many individual's social identities are assumed not only rooted in national cultures but also influenced by global consumer culture (Cleveland et al, 2016).

National Identity and Local Values

National identity refers to the national belonging and the subjective significance of the internal connection with the nation (Blank & Schmidt, 2003). It indicates the degree to which people recognize and have a positive sense of belonging to the country and the importance they attach to this feeling (Feather, 1981; Tajfel, 1978). In the context of globalization, the home country is usually regarded as the in-groups, while foreign countries are viewed as the out-groups (Shankarmahesh, 2006). Since this study is contextualized in China, thus the national identity in this thesis specifically refers to the Chinese identity.

In the marketplace, material objects are viewed as a means by individuals to achieve self-extension, reflect and construct their identities (Belk, 1988), and consumption is used to satisfy people's needs for self-definition (Lury, 1996). As such, influenced by collective national identities and nationalist beliefs, consumers form certain value systems and tend to support or reject products from other countries, which is the so-called consumer nationalism. According to Castelló and Mihelj (2018), there are two primary types of consumer nationalism, namely political consumer nationalism and symbolic consumer nationalism. This thesis examines the consumers' opinions on brands in political activism, thus this thesis focuses on political consumer nationalism.

In political consumer nationalism, consumers are driven by national belonging and used for political objectives, thus political consumer nationalism is defined as the collectivization of consumers' private choices (Holzer, 2006). There are various activities in political consumer nationalism and the boycotts and the boycotts are two primary forms. The former leads to the purchases of domestic goods at the expense of foreign goods and the latter results in a refusal to buy products related to certain nations (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018).

Cosmopolitanism and Universal values

Contrary to nationalism, cosmopolitanism is a term that refers to a sense of belonging to the world and cosmopolitanism refers to people who position themselves as the citizens of the world (Schueth & O'loughlin, 2008). Molz (2006) argues that world citizenship in cosmopolitanism is imagined through a sense of tolerance, flexibility, and openness toward otherness. A cosmopolitan is imaged as a cultural figure who is willing to experience other cultures and appreciates the plurality of cultures. However, this does not mean that cosmopolitans abandon their local identities. Instead, cosmopolitans know their local identities and use the values, norms, and practices from their home country in their daily life (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999).

In the marketplace, due to the increasing competition within the market and rapid development of global communication technology, consumers gradually become cosmopolitan consumers (Yeprak & Cannon, 2002). From the perspective of marketing, there is no universal definition of cosmopolitan consumers. For instance, Beckmann (2001) defines the cosmopolitan consumers as consumers who believe themselves as citizens of the world, while Thompson and Tambyah (1999) view the cosmopolitan consumers as consumers who are intended to engage in other cultures and retain their own culture at the same time. Nevertheless, prior works generally suggest that compared to national consumers, cosmopolitan consumers are more open to new ideas (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009). They are able to understand and appreciate cultural differences and tend to engage in "other" cultures by purchasing and using goods and services related to other cultures (Parzer & Aistleithner, 2018, Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). In the meantime, they know their in-groups and use principles from their home country in their consumption. Thus, consumer cosmopolitanism can be regarded as a structure of pro-out groups (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015).

Political consumerism

Consumption is deemed as a way for consumers to express their identities and values (Sirgy, 1982; Dolfma, 1999; Matos et al., 2017) and the rise of political consumerism is a good showcase. Matos et al. (2017) point out that by taking a stance on political issues, brands are striving to distinguish themselves from their competitors and strike a collective chord with their consumers via social and political messages. Furthermore, due to fundamental social changes, such as the transition from an industrial economy to a post-

industrial economic system, citizens began to seek other ways such as lifestyle instead of engaging in the political process to participate in politics (Copeland, 2014). Under this situation, consumers are increasingly linking their political opinion to the brands and utilize consumption to engage in politics, which is called political consumerism (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021).

Political consumerism refers to the phenomenon that consumers avoid or seek consumption of a certain product for political or moral reasons (Baek, 2010). Since the 1980s, political consumerism has been on the rise. With the development of online media, consumers receive more political information and have more access to political communication, thereby increasingly acting as political consumers and engaging in political consumerism (Kelm & Dohle, 2018). According to Micheletti and Boström (2014), there are four forms of political consumerism, namely the lifestyle political consumerism, discursive political consumerism, boycotting, and buycotting and this thesis mainly focuses on boycotting and buycotting. Boycotting and buycotting are two traditional forms of political consumers (Micheletti and Boström, 2014). The former refers to people resisting the brands to force them to change their undesirable behavior. The latter refers to people deliberately buying specific products to reward brands' desirable behavior (Baek, 2010; Copeland, 2014).

Prior works suggest that boycotting and buycotting are distinctive in three ways. First of all, participants in boycotting and buycotting demonstrate different features. For instance, consumers who are highly educated are more likely to participate in boycotting (Baek, 2010). Moreover, female consumers are more likely to participate in boycotting (Neilson, 2010). Secondly, since the aim of boycotting is resisting the brands to force them to change their undesirable behavior, the nature of boycotting is punishment-oriented. On the contrary, consumer buycott of certain brands can be regarded as a reward for the brands' desirable behavior, thus the nature of buycotting is reward-oriented (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Copeland, 2014). Furthermore, boycotting is considered an individually motivated action in political consumerism, while buycotting is deemed as a collective form of political consumerism (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021). Thirdly, Copeland (2014) argues that the citizenship norms in boycotting and buycotting are different as well. The citizenship norms refer to people's perception of being a good citizen. The citizenship norms are divided into dutiful norms and engaged norms. The former underlines the obligation and loyalty to the state and the latter highlights the voluntary activity. It has been suggested that inspired by the engaged citizenship norms, citizens are more likely to participate in institutional activities, while the citizens with dutiful norms are intended to engage in political processes. In the case

of political consumers, since the boycotting is punishment-oriented and has some features which are similar to electoral politics, the boycotting is more related to the dutiful citizenship norms. On the contrary, the buycotting is rewarded-oriented and more similar to the civil engagement, the buycotting is more associated with the engagement citizenship norms (Copeland, 2014).

Chapter summary

The literature suggests that the multicultural and globalized market environment is posing new challenges such as the complexity of cultural identity for consumer research. Therefore, consumer research needs to adopt a new approach, namely, a culture approach, to understand cultural complexity in the marketplace. The cultural approach regards the marketplace as a joint cultural product constructed by both marketers and consumers. In this respect, the active role of consumers in the market has received more and more attention. Consumers, on the one hand, are regarded as free agencies, who are able to think and act freely. They, therefore, have subjectivity. On the other hand, they are subject to cultural discourses, thus consumers who have similar cultural backgrounds share the intersubjectivity. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity allow consumers to consume marketing messages proactively. Since both subjectivity and intersubjectivity are highly dependent on social contexts, the concept of social identity is introduced to capture how consumers interpret marketing messages in different contexts. Furthermore, the prior works suggest that with different interpretations, consumers behave in different ways, which leads to the rise of political consumerism.

3. Methodology

This chapter elaborates the methodology of this study, which aims at defining a methodology for examining why brand activism matters to Chinese young people. The first section of this chapter briefly introduces the research design and the justification of the selected methods. In the second chapter, the sampling and data collection are elaborated in detail. The third section recaps the key concepts and explains how the key concepts are operationalized. Finally, the credibility of the study is examined from the perspective of validity and reliability.

3.1 Study design and Justification of Method

The research method selected for this study is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach for analyzing, identifying, describing, and interpreting themes of data (Fereday & Muir- Cochrane, 2006). By conducting thematic analysis, researchers are able to organize data in certain patterns, identify core themes or general patterns across the dataset and eventually interpret data with core themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, the thematic analysis can be conducted at both semantic and latent levels. The former focuses on the denotation of the text and the latter emphasizes the connotation of the text (Majumdar, 2018). Thus, by conducting thematic analysis at different levels, researchers can have a comprehensive understanding of the text. This thesis aims at understanding why brand activism matters to Chinese young people on account of their universal and local values. To answer this research question, this study needs to organize a large number of interviewee transcripts into certain categories, identify core themes, and interpret data with themes. Based on the core themes and the interpretation of data, the thesis is able to answer the research questions and build theoretical relevance between data and theories. Therefore, the thematic analysis is chosen as the methodology.

Thematic analysis can be conducted in both inductive and deductive ways. The inductive thematic analysis is data-driven, which means that the themes in inductive thematic analysis derive from the dataset. Since the inductive method is data-driven, it does not need to fit any theoretical frame. In this sense, it can reflect the data accurately and provide researchers with a rich description of the whole dataset (Fereday & Muir- Cochrane, 2006; Majumdar, 2018). Contrary to inductive thematic analysis, deductive thematic analysis is theoretical-driven, which means the themes are identified based on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Since the deductive method is driven by certain theoretical frameworks, it is able to provide researchers with a more thorough analysis of certain aspects of the data (Fereday & Muir- Cochrane, 2006; Majumdar, 2018). In order to reflect both theories and data accurately, this thesis combines both inductive and deductive thematic analysis. In this study, the main themes are identified based on the aforementioned conceptual framework, namely agency, social identity, and political consumerism. In the meantime, the subcategories are developed based on both datasets and theories. By doing so, the study strives to reflect both theories and data accurately and build the theoretical relevance between data and theories.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Focus Group

The research adopts the focus group as the data collection method. The focus group is a qualitative method for collecting data and insights within an interactive group (Morgan, 1997). Morgan (1997) argues that by gathering a group of people together and triggering discussion regarding collective attitudes and beliefs of the participants, the focus groups allow researchers to understand the motivation and subconscious areas of human psychology (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, the focus group is a suitable method to explore the reasons or motivations behind the participants' behavior and perception. Moreover, the interaction between participants in the focus groups, on the one hand, will inspire participants' implicit perspectives, providing researchers valuable insights and innovative ideas. On the other hand, the similar opinions between participants indicate general patterns of behavior and perceptions within a certain group of people (Morgan, 1997).

In the field of marketing, focus groups are largely used to assess the attitudes and cognition topics regarding a certain group of consumers. By providing a general understanding of marketing phenomenon and information from consumers, focus groups allow researchers to investigate unexplored or new topics and go beyond the individual thoughts (Threlfall, 1999).

As this thesis only targets the Chinese young people and the goal of this thesis is understanding why brand activism matters to Chinese young people, thus the focus group is adopted as the data collection method. Since it is estimated that four to six participants in one group can achieve a satisfying level of interaction and produce valuable data (Morgan, 1997), this research regards a group of five participants as a unit and analyses four groups in total.

However, focus groups have relatively high demands on the researcher conducting the interview. If the researcher does not act as the moderator well, the group discussion often finds its own agenda and eventually lacks valuable data for the research (Threlfall, 1999). Colucci (2007) argues that one way to solve this problem is by designing some activity-oriented questions or exercises regarding the research topic to guide the interview. The common activity-oriented questions include picture sort, ranking, and pile sorting (Colucci, 2007). In this sense, this research selects Nike's engagement in Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban as cases in the interview and invites participants to share their opinions and discuss based on three cases. By doing so, participants can have a better understanding of research topics and they can use those concrete cases to discuss and share their opinions. In the meantime, the researcher ensures that the interview has a clear agenda and all insights shared by participants are valuable for the research.

Sampling Methods

Purposeful sampling is adopted as the sampling method in the research, which is a common sampling method in qualitative research for seeking out valuable cases (Etikan, 2016). Purposive sampling is also known as judgment sampling. As a type of non-probability sampling, purposive sampling does not require underlying theories or a certain number of participants. Instead, researchers will select participants based on their judgments. The selection includes many factors, but usually, it refers to the identification of individuals or groups with certain characteristics (Sarstedt et al., 2018; Etikan, 2016). Therefore, instead of including a wide range of participants, purposeful sampling focuses on certain groups of people with certain characteristics (Etikan, 2016). In this sense, purposeful sampling allows researchers to gain insights from certain groups of people, thereby facilitating relevant research (Emmel, 2013).

This thesis is qualitative research and focuses on Chinese young people. Moreover, this research aims at conducting in-depth research on Chinese young people's opinions on brand activism and the reasons behind those opinions rather than a wide range of perspectives. Thus, purposive sampling is an ideal sampling method. In this study, I first selected participants from my personal network and those participants were asked to refer to other potential participants. Among twenty participants, thirteen of them are my friends and seven participants are referred by friends. Eleven of them are female and nine of them are male. Since this study is related to marketing and marketing strategy, fifteen participants major in marketing or relevant majors such as media studies and the economy. Moreover, the approach adopted in this study is a cultural approach and the research topic is political activism. Therefore, in order to collect insights from cultural and political perspectives, I selected three participants who studied International Politics, one participant who studied Area Studies, and one participant who is studying the History of Art.

As one of the non-probability sampling methods, the data collected by purposive sampling is criticized as not being representative, thus the results of the research cannot be generalized in a large population (Sarstedt et al., 2018). In this sense, prior works suggest that one way to generalize the result is by means of replication studies. This recommendation advocates more duplication in marketing research to verify and promote the knowledge base in the scientific field (Sarstedt et al., 2018). However, as Pertti Alasuutari (1995) argues, cultural research is about the understanding of rules and conventions in certain historic backgrounds and cultural contexts. Those rules, conventions, and practices are shared by the members within a culture. Therefore, generalization within certain cultural contexts is not a problem in cultural studies

(Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). This thesis examines the Chinese young people's opinions on brand active within the Chinese culture. Although there will be differences between Chinese young people on account of subjectivity, there is intersubjectivity between individuals which can be shared within the Chinese culture. Therefore, the result of the analysis is able to be generalized within China to a certain extent.

Sampling Criteria

According to Palinkas et al. (2015), efficient and effective sampling needs to be consistent, thus participants in this study have to meet several criteria.

First of all, this thesis examines why brand activism matters to Chinese young people, thus the nationality of participants must be Chinese.

Secondly, the participants need to be young people aged between 20 to 30 years old. According to the statistics, compared to old generations, consumers who were born between 1996 and 1981 have higher purchasing power and they are influential in affecting their parents' purchase decisions (Twenge, 2006; Fromm & Garton, 2013). Moreover, compared to old generations, this group of consumers is more civic and responsible for the societal good, thus they increasingly push brands to take a stance on social and political issues (Steckstor, 2012). In China, there were 434.1 million people aged from 18-30 years by 2016. Due to the large number and high purchase power, this group of consumers is considered the biggest consumer group and one of the most important segments in China (Su et al., 2019). Therefore, this thesis focuses on Chinese young people aged between 20 and 30 years old.

Finally, participants need to hold a bachelor's degree or above. Cultural capital refers to the education a person receives and parents' education (Chen, 2020). According to Chen (2020), Chinese consumers who are less well-educated are active in political activism. On the contrary, since Chinese consumers who are well-educated understand political activism in a more critical way, they are less likely to hold politically extreme views. Consequently, they are moderate in political activism (Chen, 2020). However, according to Moisander and Valtonen (2006), since the ultimate goal of cultural studies is drawing a complete picture of the social phenomena rather than presenting an indisputable fact, a wide range of critical insights of the social phenomena are more valuable than extreme views. In the case of China, well-educated young people are able to understand brand activism in a critical way, thus they are assumed to provide more valuable and diverse insights compared to less well-educated young people, which allows researchers to draw a complete picture of brand activism from the perspective of Chinese young people. Therefore, although well-educated young people

are not active in political activism, participants in this study are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree.

Based on the three criteria above, twenty participants in this study are all Chinese aged between 20 and 30 years old. Seventeen participants hold a Master's degree and three participants hold Bachelor's degrees. Table 3.1 provides a description of the focus group participants in terms of age, nationality, and education. A more detailed overview of the focus group participants can be found in Appendix A. Nevertheless, in order to protect the privacy of participants, participants are anonymous.

Age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	23	7	35.0	35.0
	24	8	40.0	75.0
	25	2	10.0	85.0
	26	3	15.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0		

Nationality

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Chinese	20	100.0	100.0	100.0

Education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Bachelor	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
Master	17	85.0	85.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.1 An description of the focus group participants

3.3 Operationalization

This thesis aims to investigate why brand activism matters to Chinese young people and ultimately reflects the active role that consumers play in constructing meaning in the marketplace. To approach the research questions, two sub-questions are developed. According to Moisander and Valtone (2016), when people are able to think and act freely and are subject to cultural discourse, they are able to construct the meaning of the marketplace actively based on their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in order to examine how Chinese young people actively construct the meaning of the marketplace within their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds, the first sub-question is *what opinions do Chinese young people have on brand activism?*. Secondly, consumers' interpretations are highly dependent on social contexts (Moisander & Valtone, 2016; Bakker & Janes, 2016). Therefore, in order to capture the social context in which their opinions are embedded, the questions of *what social identities and values do Chinese young people have as consumers under globalization* is developed. Based on two sub-questions, this thesis eventually examines why brand activism matters to Chinese young people on account of their universal values and local values.

To answer the research question and sub-questions, Nike's engagement in Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban are selected as cases. Consumers' opinions on brand activism are closely associated with their moral judgment (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). According to the sociology of critiques, people face situational tensions when making moral judgments, which highlights the relationship between moral judgments and specific features of social situations (Hove, 2020). In this sense, the case study is adopted in the study to examine Chinese young people's opinions on brand activism and the moral judgment behind the opinions. Racism is deemed as one of the classic examples which fails to satisfy the universal concept of justice from the normative perspective (Hove, 2020). Thus, the thesis selects brand activism regarding racism as cases. BLM, Stop Asian Hate and Xinjiang cotton ban are three movements that both focus on racism. BLM calls for racial equality for the black community, Stop Asian Hate calls for racial equality for the Asian community and the Xinjiang cotton ban focuses on equality for Uyghur, which is an ethnic minority in China. By comparing three cases, this study can demonstrate what universal and local values do Chinese young people have in different situations. According to the sociology of critiques, people will build different orders of worth in different situations to identify the common good. With the higher common good, people will evaluate others and their actions based on the efforts they make to achieve the common good (Hove, 2020). Chinese young people are assumed to have

different identities and values in BLM, Stop Asian Hate, and Xinjiang cotton ban. Thus they have different orders of worth and make moral judgments differently, which eventually influences their different opinions on brand activism. Lastly, in order to eliminate the influence of brands on people’s opinions on brand activism, the study chose Nike’s engagement in three cases to examine Chinese young people’s opinions on brand activism.

The goal of the focus group is to examine why brand activism matters to Chinese young people on account of their universal values and local values by analyzing Nike’s engagement in BLM, Stop Asian Hate, and Xinjiang cotton ban as cases. The theoretical framework leads to the understanding of the active role of consumers in the marketplaces, which reflects three main terms, namely agency, social identity and values, and political consumerism. Table 3.2 provides an overview of key concepts and definitions.

Concepts	Definition	Operational Definition
Agency	<p>The subject is generally considered to be subject to culture and society (Bakker & Jane, 2016).</p> <p>The subject have different degrees of the ability to think and act in different contexts with different subject positions (Bakker & Jene, 2016; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What similar opinions do interviewees share on brand activism? • What different opinions do interviewees have on brand activism?
Social identity	<p>The groups that people belong to can provide people a sense of belonging to society and this sense of belonging is the so-called social identity (Tajfel, 1979)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do interviewees categorize themselves in different contexts? • What values do interviewees have based on their social identities?
Political consumerism	<p>Consumers are increasingly linking their political opinion to the brands and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do interviewees behave based on their



supporting or turning away from the brands, which is called political consumerism (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021).

social identities and values?

Table 3.2 An overview of key concepts and definitions

In this sense, a series of questions are developed revolving around three concepts. The concept of agency is related to Chinese young people's opinions on brand activism. These questions are introductory and used to break the ice. In the meantime, those questions underline how Chinese young people consume marketing messages actively based on their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Secondly, another set of questions are formulated to examine opinions Chinese young people have on Stop Asian Hate, BLM and Xinjiang cotton ban, which reflects their social identities and values in different contexts. Finally, regarding the concept of political consumerism, a set of questions is developed to explore how Chinese young people behave based on their values.

3.4 Analysis framework and process

To conduct the thematic analysis, this study follows the instruction proposed by Boeije (2010). According to Boeije (2010), thematic analysis has three phases, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding refers to the processes of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data. In this phase, researchers are required to read the data carefully, break data into fragments and identify, name and compare fragments. Then in the phase of the axial coding, researchers need to identify dominant fragments and less important fragments. Finally, researchers need to reflect on the relationship between the dominant themes and identify core themes (Boeije, 2010).

Following this instruction, the analysis identified three main themes, namely Agency, Global China, and Political consumerism. The subcategories for Agency are Brand Agency, Market Agency, Consumer Agency, and Moral Agency. The subcategories for Global China are Universal Values, Local Values, and Us vs Them. The subcategories for Political Consumerism include Boycotting and Boycotting. A detailed coding frame can be found in Appendix D.

3.5 Credibility

Validity

The validity is one of the significant measurements for the quality of qualitative research. The validity refers to the accuracy of the data that are able to answer the research questions (Matthews & Ross, 2010). In terms of cultural approach, Moisander and Valtonen (2006) argue that cultural research is based on the understanding of social reality, which is culturally constructed, the understanding and the accuracy of understanding are subject to negotiation. Therefore, the aim of validity in cultural research is not discovering indisputable facts about social phenomena. Instead, the validity in cultural research aims at providing a more complete picture regarding the social phenomena (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In terms of methodology, thematic analysis is adopted as the methodology to analyze the data. This methodology is flexible with theories, research questions, sampling size, and data collection method (Nowell et al., 2015). This flexibility can result in incoherence when identifying themes from the dataset, which decreases the validity of the research (Nowell et al., 2017). In this sense, in order to ensure validity, systematic methods are needed to analyze data and assess the impact of contexts (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

In order to ensure the validity of the cultural approach, this research includes Chinese young people who study different majors to collect different insights. In the meantime, instead of conducting in-depth interviews, this study conducts focus groups to encourage participants to interact and maximally inspire participants' implicit perspectives to gain innovative insights and draw the complete picture of brand activism from the perspective of Chinese young people. However, Moisander and Valtonen (2006) argue that the context is of vital importance when drawing the complete picture of the social phenomena. Therefore, this thesis selects Nike's engagement in Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban as specific cases to study Chinese young people's changing opinions on brand activism. In terms of the validity of the thematic analysis, this thesis follows the instruction proposed by Boeije (2010) to conduct a thematic analysis in three phases and data within the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2.

Reliability

Another crucial measurement of the quality of the research is reliability, which highlights the replicability of the research. Moisander and Valtonen (2006) suggest that the key to ensuring the reliability of cultural research is transparency. First of all, the methodologies in the research should be transparent. Since cultural research is highly dependent on contexts, the methodologies such as the data production process, the process of interpretation, and the process of analysis are all needed to be clarified. Secondly, theoretical transparency is of vital

importance as well. Different theoretical frames will approach the questions from different perspectives and eventually produce different outcomes. Thus, the theoretical framework used in the research should be transparent. Finally, the research needs to be conducted in a systematic and transparent manner (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

To ensure the reliability of the research, this thesis first conducts the research strictly in accordance with the guidance of the focus group and thematic analysis and describes all steps in detail. Secondly, the thesis introduces the concepts of agency, social identity, and political consumerism as the conceptual framework to analyze data, which ensures theoretical transparency. Finally, all focus groups are carefully recorded and transcribed. In addition to the transcription of the interview, the results of the thematic analysis regarding the interview are available in the appendix. Since interviews are conducted in Chinese, all transcripts are needed to translate from Chinese to English. According to Filep (2009), the translation of the interview in multilingual and multicultural settings is not only about language but also involved in the culture. Since I grew up in China, Chinese is my native language and I know Chinese culture well. In this sense, I can understand what participants shared with me and translated those insights precisely. Thus, the translation does not decrease the reliability of the research.

Chapter summary

In order to examine why brand activism matters to Chinese young people, this thesis adopts focus groups as the data collection method. By conducting four focus groups, this study collects in-depth insights regarding Chinese young people's opinions on brands in different situations. The thematic analysis is selected as the methodology to analyze the dataset. This study combines inductive thematic analysis and deductive thematic analysis to ensure the accuracy of data and build the theoretical relevance between data and theories. Furthermore, this thesis follows the instruction proposed by Boeije (2010) to conduct the analysis, interpret data within the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, and record and translate all focus groups to ensure credibility.

4. Result

The chapter is divided into three sections to present the findings. The first section elaborates on interviewees' opinions regarding brand activism, which highlights the active role Chinese young people play in constructing the meaning of the marketplace. The second section goes further to explore what social identities and values interviewees have to interpret

marketing messages in certain contexts by analyzing Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban. The third section presents how interviewees behave based on the aforementioned values as well as the contradictions between their behavior and those values.

4.1 Agency

Interviewees demonstrate a wide range of preferences of brands, varying from car to clothing. Nevertheless, the rationales behind their preference are mainly three. According to interviewees, the primary rationale behind their preference is the product. When the products are well-designed, cost-effective or they can meet their requirements, they will buy the products and therefore follow the brand of the product. Moreover, personal interest is another reason why interviewees have a preference for a particular brand. Interviewees claim that they will pay attention to some brands that are more outstanding in their areas of interest. Lastly, interviewees find that marketing is of vital importance as well. According to interviewees, excellent marketing can attract the attention of customers and shorten the distance between the brand and customers, so that customers can pay attention to a specific brand. Thus, marketing is one of the rationales behind their preference for certain brands.

However, interviewees have different concerns in certain social and political contexts, which influence their opinions on the brand. There is a large consensus that brands have social responsibilities to spread correct social values such as gender equality and animal protection. According to interviewees, “brands benefit from society”, therefore they have a social responsibility to the society in which they operate (Interviewee 19, 4: 91). In this sense, brands are expected to engage in campaigns focusing on social responsibility to spread shared values, fulfill social responsibilities and eventually make a contribution to society. Although the interviewees emphasized that the fulfillment of social responsibilities is of vital importance for brands, they state that they would not follow certain brands because of their participation in social activities. This is because interviewees believe that the fulfillment of social responsibility “is what he (brands) should do” (Interviewee 7, 2: 523). However, they also emphasized that if the brand fails to fulfill its social responsibilities well, their brand favourability for the brand will decrease significantly or even boycott the brand.

In addition, one interviewee mentions that the brands are able to use their marketing power to guide and move consumers in a direction that is better for society and eventually make contributions to society. She notes that the brand’s participation in brand activism is not only a way to express their own stances and values, but also encourages their consumers to express

themselves. Thus, she is positive about brand activism and she claims that brands should engage in brand activism.

Contrary to campaigns focusing on social responsibility, interviewees claim that it is unnecessary for brands to engage in campaigns involving political issues. Not one of them claims that the ultimate goal for brands to engage in campaigns involving political issues is for profits. However, in this kind of campaign, consumers still pay more attention to the products rather than the engagement of political issues. In this sense, there is no need for brands to “*participate in political issues to do extra marketing or gain profits*” (Interviewee 10, 2: 149). Instead, brands “*just do what you should do, like products*” are enough (Interviewee 20, 4: 86).

Furthermore, interviewees point out that if the political stances brands take are opposite to their own political stances, they are likely to face a dilemma of political values and their own consumption choices, which negatively influences their daily life. Thus, to avoid such a dilemma, interviewees show their reluctance to brands’ participants in campaigns focusing on political issues. For instance, one interviewee describes this:

But as a consumer, I don't want companies to participate in politics, because I think if companies participate in politics, politics will affect the company, and then the company will affect my daily life, such as Uniqlo. But what should I do? I can't find other substitutes, but I can't stop buying clothes (from those brands). But if I buy those clothes (from those brands), someone will say that I don't love my country or like my political views are wrong. So I certainly hope that companies will not participate in politics. (3: 230)

In addition to the waste of resources and the dilemma between political values and consumption, one interviewee mentions the possible negative impact of brand participation in brand activism. Taking gun violence in America as an example, he argues that “when business and politics are intertwined, it is difficult to regulate both the company and the government”. Moreover, the brands' involvement in campaigns involving political issues may lead to “corruption” (Interviewee 4, 1: 135). Therefore, brands should not engage in campaigns involving political issues.

In addition, some Chinese young people claim that their opinions on brand activism depend on the authenticity that brands express in brand activism. According to interviewees, the form of the participant is a key to authenticity. When brands have “actual action”, they

are more likely to link the authenticity to the brand and have positive opinions on brands. On the contrary, if the brands just “put the statement in their Instagram story”, they tend to regard it as “very speculative behavior” and therefore do not support the brand (Interviewee 3, 1: 124).

In addition to the form of participation, the consistency of brand culture and brand activism is highlighted in authentic activism as well. When discussing Nike in BLM, one interviewee notes that the reason why she has positive opinions on Nike in BLM is that “the value of equality is consistent with the culture and values of Nike” and she further states that “if you change a brand, it might not have the same effect” (Interviewee 5, 1: 279). This statement underlines the importance of the consistency of brand culture and brand activism in authentic activism.

Lastly, interviewees emphasize the role of local context in brand activism, especially in campaigns involving political issues. According to interviewees, the political situations vary from country to country, therefore consumers from different markets might hold different political stances. In this sense, brands need to fully consider local conditions and “must be in line with the local stances” before participating in brand activism. Only by doing so, brands can make themselves authentic and stand out in the local market through brand activism (Interviewee 10, 2: 162). Otherwise, brand activism might elicit a negative response from the local market.

Despite different opinions on brand activism, interviewees share some common values in certain contexts. The next section will explore what values do they have exactly in the case of Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban.

4.2 Global China

Interviewees are concerned about anti-racist activism and demonstrate a positive attitude towards this kind of activism in light of the universal value of racial equality, evidenced by the Stop Asian Hate and BLM. In the case of Stop Asian Hate, interviewees argue that “all races should be treated equally” (Interviewee 12, 3:314). However, in some countries such as the United States, although Asians are also plagued by racial discrimination, black discrimination has received far more attention than Asian discrimination. Nonetheless, it does not mean that Asian discrimination is not a serious social problem in those countries. Instead, Asian discrimination is a serious social problem as well. Moreover, the outbreak of the epidemic makes this social problem even worse. Under this situation, interviewees agree that

“there should have been this kind of movement for Asians in terms of racial equality” (Interviewee 6, 2: 299). The rise of Stop Asian Hate has brought Asian discrimination under the spotlight, which helps to solve the issues of racial discrimination, more precisely the issue of Asian discrimination. Therefore, interviewees are concerned to Stop Asian Hate and they appreciate Stop Asian Hate. Moreover, as Chinese, the interviewees define themselves as “a part of Asian”, thus they believe that they have responsibilities to participate in activities related to their community. Thus, they pay attention to this movement and support this movement to make contributions to racial equality. Finally, some interviewees mention that the importance of Stop Asian Hate is not limited to racial equality, but lies in the equality of all disadvantaged groups. They claim that Stop Asian Hate brings the issues of equality in minority groups under the spotlight and “people can be called to pay attention to the minority groups”, which is a very crucial step in solving the issues of discrimination (Interviewee 7, 2: 308). Therefore, they are concerned about this movement.

In addition to Stop Asian Hate, BLM received a lot of attention in China as well on account of three main reasons. In the case of BLM, interviewees mention that the value of racial equality is a value that should be shared among countries. They agree with the value of racial equality as well. In this sense, although BLM leads to “some extreme forms of protests, and the protest brings bad effects”, “the core value of this movement itself is correct”. Thus, they pay attention to BLM and they “support the BLM” (Interviewee 3, 1:202). Moreover, one interviewee points out that racial inequality is a common problem facing all societies and everyone is related to this problem. Therefore, although Chinese are distant spectators in the case of BLM, they care about the black community, feel empathy for the black community and they are supporting BLM:

I think it means that we humans are an inseparable group, no matter who it is, it must be ours. . . . That is, the development of the entire human society is closely related. Although BLM is in the United States, we cannot ignore a distant suffering, because he always comes to China and it is also related to us (Interviewee 11, 3: 364).

Another reason the interviewees mention for paying attention to BLM is that they can resonate with the black community. They argue that the Asian is a group which suffers from discrimination. The death of Floyd makes them think about “what about us Asians?”, they “will extend the racial discrimination in the United States to himself.... just like the reflection on Asians ”. Therefore, BLM “arouses attention” in China (Interviewee 2, 1: 232).

Furthermore, not one of the interviewees mentions that discrimination is not only racial discrimination, there are many different types and levels of discrimination. Although these discriminations are different in some respects, the essence of discrimination is the same, the harm it brings to the discriminated person is the same, and the negative impact it brings to society is the same. Therefore, although Chinese do not belong to the black community and some Chinese have not experienced racial discrimination, people can always feel the harm caused by discrimination, resonate with the black community, agree with the value of racial equality and support anti-racist activism such as BLM:

I think that although we are not black, many people are not black, and there is no way to empathize, but I think when it comes to empathy, if each of us thinks about ourselves in this society, you. . . You go to switch your context. You always will. . . There will always be a context where you can feel that you are a disadvantaged group. At least you will feel the pressure or discrimination from being a part of disadvantaged groups. At this time, I think you feel the same, and you should support this movement. It's not that you have to become black to feel the same way. There are many kinds of discrimination, but I think the essence is the same (Interviewee 15, 3: 310).

Lastly, one interviewee mentions that a lot of Chinese pay attention to the movement because the movement demonstrates the huge negative impact of racial discrimination on society directly. According to interviewees, since China is not a “multiracial society”, racial issues are not very acute social issues in China. However, China “still has this social problem” (Interviewee 5, 1: 233). Although Chinese media have reported many cases of racial discrimination, many Chinese people are still not sensitive to racial discrimination. The outbreak of BLM brought the social problem of racial discrimination into the Chinese people's field of vision, and intuitively demonstrated the negative social impact of racial discrimination. Therefore, people began to “pay attention to this movement and feel sympathy for the black community and what they are suffering”(Interviewee 1, 1: 219).

Although interviewees have the universal value of racial equality, they demonstrate their local value as well, evidenced by the Xinjiang cotton ban. As several reports detail how Uighurs and other Muslims were held in detention camps and forced to work in inhumane conditions, many brands, such as Nike, state that they refused to use cotton or other raw

materials from Xinjiang in response to allegations of forced labor in the region, which is called the Xinjiang cotton ban (Westcott & He, 2021; Ravi & Teitelbaum, 2021).

The Xinjiang cotton ban attracts a lot of attention within China since Chinese young people disagree with the allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang. According to interviewees, the allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang are “rumors” (Interviewee 12, 3: 61) and “an insult to China” (Interviewee 6, 2: 292). Interviewees argue that the definition of human rights is ambiguous. Different countries have different social contexts, the definition of human rights, therefore, varies from country to county. In other words, the definition of human rights in the United States does not apply to China. Therefore, the allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang are invalid. Moreover, there is no clear evidence that workers in Xinjiang were forced during their work and worked under extremely harsh conditions, thus the allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang are “rumors”.

Rather than protecting human rights in the Xinjiang region, the interviewees defined the Xinjiang cotton ban more as a “political game between the United State and China” (Interviewee 11, 3: 67). Interviewees point out that China is currently in a stage of rapid development. China's development will inevitably affect the interests of some major powers negatively. Therefore, from a political point of view, the United States has selected the textile industry, which “is close to people’s lives”, as a breakthrough point, and fabricated a series of rumors (Interviewee 15, 3: 86). The purpose is to discredit China, make China a target of public criticism in the world and eventually protect their own political interests. Therefore, it can be regarded as a “political game between the United States and China”.

For China, rapid development has brought many benefits to China on the one hand. On the other hand, China’s rapid development will negatively influence the interests of some countries in a negative way, which makes more and more countries have begun to target China and try to attack China. However, these slanders are inevitable on the road of rapid development for China. In this sense, some interviewees define the Xinjiang cotton ban as “a dilemma facing the rise of great power” (Interviewee 11, 3: 67).

In addition to the political reasons, interviewees mention the economic interests as well. One interviewee notes that “the United States still attaches great importance to the textile industry.... and we happen to really threaten him in the textile industry because Xinjiang’s cotton production is large” (Interviewee 15, 3: 81). Thus, the United State launched the Xinjiang cotton ban to protect their textile industry.

It has been suggested that consumption is a way for consumers to express their identities and values (Sirgy, 1982; Dolfmsa, 1999; Matos et al., 2017). Embarked on this proposition,

the following section presents how interviewees behave as consumers based on the value of racial equality and local values.

4.3 Political Consumerism

In the case of Stop Asian Hate, there is a large consensus that Nike's advertisement for Stop Asian Hate is "perfunctory" (Interviewee 5, 1: 444). According to interviewees, Nike's advertisement for Stop Asian Hate uses a black background and white words to make the tone of the entire advertisement very serious, which is in line with the feeling that the topic of racism brings to audiences. Nonetheless, there are no creative elements in the advertisement, and the cost of the advertisement is very low. In terms of content, interviewees feel the strong distinction between "us" and "them". Interviewees mention that Nike's advertisement frequently uses words such as "we", "you" and "Asian community" when calling for Asian equality, creating two communities for the audiences, namely the Asian community and the non-Asian community. When interviewees watch the advertisement, they assign themselves to the Asian community and Nike to the non-Asian community. The clear distinction between "us" and "them" makes interviewees feel that Nike is discussing Asian equality from "the perspective of God" (Interviewee 13, 3: 468), which makes them "uncomfortable" (Interviewee 5, 1: 437). In this sense, one interviewee notes that "the goal of this advertisement was achieved, but the effect was very poor" (Interviewee 3, 1: 461).

Nonetheless, interviewees still have a positive opinion of Nike and this advertisement. According to interviewees, although the advertisement Nike made is perfunctory, the value advertised is correct, and Nike is willing to "use his public relations team and resources to call for Asian equality, even if it was such a short advertisement", interviewees think "it was a bonus" (3: 507) and they will support Nike more than before on account of Stop Asian Hate.

In the same vein, interviewees appreciate Nike's advertisement for BLM and Nike due to the value of racial equality. Similar to the advertisement for Stop Asian Hate, Nike's advertisement for BLM uses a black background and white words to set a serious tone for the advertisement. In terms of the advertising slogan, interviewees mention that " "Don't do" at the beginning, which is in contrast with his slogan "just do it". And they repeated it again and again, which makes it look more powerful." (Interviewee 3, 1: 265). More importantly, the advertising slogan "uses a lot of words like "we" and "our" to create a sense of belonging to the global community (Interviewee 4, 1: 281), which makes interviewees feel that they are one community and they "do have the responsibility to know this movement and support it "

(Interviewee 6, 2: 259). Nevertheless, interviewees agree that this advertisement is “cheap”, the slogan is “general” and lacks creativity in general (Interviewee 12, 3: 366). The main reason they are moved and they have positive opinions on this advertisement and Nike is due to “the context of BLM” (Interviewee 12, 3: 369). For instance, one interviewee notes:

I think the reason for my positive evaluation of this advertisement is not the brand itself or the advertisement, and it is in the context of BLM.And to be honest, I think advertisement is very cheap and very general. It is mainly because it looks more valuable in the context of BLM (Interviewee 12, 3: 389).

That being said, interviewees expressing a positive opinion does not mean they will definitely buy Nike products. They claim that as consumers, the product is still the most important criterion for them to choose a brand. Facing similar products, interviewees are intended to buy products from Nike on account of positive opinions. However, if Nike's products are not as good as other brands, they will choose other brands:

And to be honest, even though I am touched by the advertisement and I feel like that I am a part of the global community. But I mean.... I mean that is not enough. But... But definitely, if the products are similar, I will choose Nike maybe. But if their products are not good, I think I will go for other brands (Interviewee 15, 3: 402).

Contrary to the positive attitude towards Nike participating in BLM and Stop Asian Hate, the interviewees demonstrate a very negative opinion on Nike participating in the Xinjiang cotton ban. Interviewees argue that Nike's participation in the Xinjiang cotton ban is not the brand's original intention. Instead, Nike's involvement in Xinjiang's cotton ban is largely to cater to “the political correctness” in the United States (Interviewee 17, 4: 78). They argue that since the US government promotes human rights and requires American brands not to import cotton and raw materials from Xinjiang, Nike issued a statement stating that it would never import cotton from Xinjiang and would actively support the investigation and protection of human rights in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, according to interviewees, no matter what purpose Nike participates in the cotton ban, “China's attitude is very clear”, but Nike still “still take the opposite stance and do not apologize”, which makes interviewees feel very “angry” (Interviewee 6, 2: 46). In this sense, among twenty interviewees, seven of them

clearly claim that they would boycott brands such as Nike on account of the Xinjiang cotton ban. One interviewee claims:

I will boycott those brands, because I think they are just like what Interviewee 9 said. These brands make money from the Chinese on the one hand, and then they say that China is not good. I think this is very unbearable behaviour, and I haven't gone to these brand stores to buy clothes anyway (Interviewee 7, 2:66).

In addition, although some brands such as H&M and Hugo Boss issued statements or apologies, stating that they respect Chinese consumers and will continue to use Xinjiang cotton, the interviewees believe that these statements are not true. They believe that the reason for the brand apologizing is to protect their own interests in the Chinese market rather than truly agreeing that there is no forced labor in China. Therefore, although the brand issued a statement or apologized for the Xinjiang cotton ban, the interviewees claim that their negative opinions on the brands would not change.

That being said, most interviewees claim that it is unrealistic to boycott brands such as Nike completely. According to interviewees, Nike's participation in the Xinjiang cotton ban will give them a negative impression of the brand. They, therefore, want to completely boycott those brands as well. However, brands such as Nike produce daily necessities such as shoes and clothes. Therefore, interviewees think it is difficult to stop buying these products unless they can find substitutes to replace:

... If I can find a substitute brand, I might use a substitute. But if I can't find it, I might still buy some products from these brands occasionally (Interviewee 12, 3: 160).

The contradiction between personal consumption and political values makes interviewees “find it difficult to choose between nationalism and personal consumption” (Interviewee 3, 1:76). In this sense, in order to balance these two things, interviewees agree that they might boycott the brands participating in the Xinjiang cotton ban “for a while” (Interviewee 9, 2:78), and then purchase these brands appropriately according to their personal consumption needs in the future. In the meantime, they will actively seek alternatives to these products, thereby slowly reducing their purchases. However, they also emphasize that if they cannot find any substitutes, they will continue buying products from Nike:

I may not buy those brands at this moment, but I will definitely buy them after a while (Interviewee 9, 2: 85).

I . . . I think that I will consciously avoid buying a lot of clothes from these brands, if I can... . . . If I can find a substitute brand, I might use a substitute. But if I can't find it, I might still buy some products from these brands occasionally (Interviewee 12, 3: 159).

Table 4.1 summarizes the categories and subcategories presented in this chapter.

Main categories	Subcategories	Example
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brand Agency 	<p>“Yeah, I think the brand should still participate in this type of event, because I feel that the brand has a sense of social responsibility. I think they benefit from society, so they should still contribute to society.” (Interviewee 19, 4: 101)</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market Agency 	<p>“I should be able to say that I am just optimistic, I will feel that this is correct, I think it is necessary for the brand to participate in such events, and then I hope that the brand can encourage their consumers. To express their views on any issues.” (Interviewee 5, 1: 336)</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consumer Agency 	<p>“I also don't want brands to participate in politics. Because I think for consumers, the product is still the first. If the brand spends too much resources to participate in political and social events, some</p>



**Global
China**

**Political
consumerism**

consumers might have a positive perception of those brands, but I think most of them are still rational. ”
(Interviewee 14, 3: 272)

- Moral Agency “But it may be more important to me whether the brand’s participation in this event is authentic”
(Interviewee 3, 1: 147)

- Universal Value “I mean every race should be treated equally. There should not be any hierarchy between races. This is not fair. Every race is equal in nature.” (Interviewee 12, 3: 336)

- Local Value “Because I also asked my classmates from Xinjiang whether the human right violation in Xinjiang is true, my classmates said no. This is something out of nothing.” (Interviewee 12, 3: 61)

- US vs Them if “We” and “You” appear in the slogan, I feel more disgusted. Because as we said before, racial discrimination is a problem for all mankind. Why are there such things as you and we? (Interviewee 14, 3: 475)

- Boycotting “ I feel like no matter for what purpose did Nike make this video, I think it can have a certain positive impact on Asian groups and Asian equality. For this kind of thing, I think we should support it”
(Interviewee 20, 4: 416)



- **Boycotting** “ I will boycott those brands, because I think they are just like what Interviewee 9 said. These brands make money from the Chinese on the one hand, and then they say that China is not good.” (Interviewee 10, 2: 69)

Chapter summary

The thematic analysis enables three main themes to be identified in the study, namely the Agency, Global China, and Political Consumerism. With three themes, the findings reveal that Chinese young people interpret marketing messages actively based on their shared values and local values in certain contexts, and their consumption is linked to those values. In the meantime, the conditions between personal consumption and political values in the findings suggest that the consumption cannot reflect their values and identities completely. Moreover, the media plays a crucial role in their values. The findings will be further discussed in the next chapter to explain why brand activism matters to Chinese young people and how it influence their consumption.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the main findings of the analysis for the reasons why brand activism matters to Chinese young people. The findings suggest that under globalization, Chinese young people hold both a cosmopolitan identity and national identity. They also hold universal values and local values. In light of value of the value of racial equality, they appreciate Nike in Stop Asian Hate and BLM. Driven by local values, they have negative opinions on Nike in Xinjiang cotton ban. Furthermore, this chapter discusses how the findings of this study contribute to the academic literature and marketing practices. Finally, the chapter presents the limitations of this study and sheds light on further research.

5.1 Why Brand Activism matters

This study examines why brand activism matters to Chinese young people by analyzing Nike's engagement in Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban as cases. By conducting four focus groups, the analysis points out that products and marketing are the primary factors affecting Chinese young people's opinions on brands. However, when it comes to certain social and political contexts, Chinese young people have different concerns. The findings suggest that there is a large consensus that brands have a social responsibility for those issues and social responsibility is more significant than products and marketing. Thus, Chinese young people do have an expectation for brands to engage in campaigns focusing on universal values such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM. On the contrary, the majority of them do not expect brands to engage in brand activism such as the Xinjiang cotton ban, since they claim that the campaigns involving political issues are beyond social responsibility. Furthermore, when brands take opposite political stances from them, they are in a dilemma between personal consumption and political values, which influences their daily life negatively. Therefore, they do not expect brands to participate in campaigns involving political issues. Chinese young people's opinions on brand activism indicates that instead of consuming marketing messages passively, Chinese young people are interpreting marketplace and marketing messages actively based on their personal backgrounds and cultural backgrounds.

This study further explored what social identities and values do Chinese young people have in certain contexts to interpret brand activism. By analyzing Stop Asian Hate and BLM, this study reveals that Chinese young people hold both a cosmopolitan identity and national identity. In spite of different identities, they share the value of racial equality. In light of the value of racial equality, they hold positive opinions on Stop Asian Hate and BLM. In the case of the Xinjiang cotton ban, driven by national identity, they are sensitive to campaigns involving political issues regarding China. They do not agree with the allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang. Instead, they believe that the allegations of forced labor are rumors, which influences China's reputation negatively. Therefore, they express negative opinions on anti-China activism such as the Xinjiang cotton ban.

It has been suggested that consumption is a way for consumers to express their identities and values (Sirgy, 1982; Dolfma, 1999; Matos et al., 2017). Therefore, the thesis further examines how Chinese young people behave based on their interpretation and values. In the case of Stop Asian Hate and BLM, interviewees agree with the value of racial equality. In light of the value of racial equality, although Nike's advertisements lack creativity, Chinese young people appreciate advertisements and Nike's engagement. They believe that

supporting Nike is a way to make contributions to racial equality, thus, they will be intended to buy products from Nike rather than other similar brands. However, since Chinese young people regard the Xinjiang cotton ban as a rumor that damages China's reputation, their positive opinions on Nike turn into negative opinions. In order to express their dissatisfaction with Nike, they try to avoid buying products from Nike.

To summarize, brand activism matters to Chinese young people on account of two primary reasons. First, Chinese young people believe that brands have a social responsibility to engage in brand activism and they believe that it is important for the brands, thus they are concerned about brand activism. More importantly, brand activism not only provides brands a way to express brand values but also provides Chinese young people a way to express their values. Influenced by global culture, Chinese young people agree with the value of racial equality, thus they appreciate movements such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM and Nike's engagement in those movements. Influenced by local culture, Chinese young people have negative interpretations of movements such as the Xinjiang cotton ban, they, therefore, boycott brands that engage in Xinjiang cotton ban such as Nike to express their values.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

First, the study verified that consumption is a way for consumers to express their values. In the case of Stop Asian Hate, interviewees agree with the values of racial equality and they believe they do have the responsibility to protect the Asian community. Therefore, although Nike's advertisement is perfunctory and the two communities created by the advertising slogan make them feel uncomfortable, they appreciate Stop Asian Hate and Nike participating in Stop Asian Hate. Similarly, in the case of BLM, interviewees have empathy and sympathy for the black community and they agree with the value of racial equality. In light of this value, although they think Nike's advertising lacks creativity and the advertising slogan is general, they have positive opinions on the BLM and Nike. On the contrary, in the case of the Xinjiang cotton ban, as Chinese, they do not argue with the allegations of forced labor in cotton production in Xinjiang. They claim that the Xinjiang cotton ban is a rumor fabricated by the United States. Therefore, they have negative opinions on the Xinjiang cotton ban and they, therefore, have negative opinions on brands that engage in the Xinjiang cotton ban.

The contradictions between personal consumption and values suggest that consumption cannot reflect consumers' values completely. In the case of Stop Asian Hate and BLM,

interviewees claim that they definitely have positive opinions on Nike on account of its engagement in Stop Asian Hate and BLM. That being said, when asked whether they would support Nike because of Stop Asian Hate or BLM, interviewees argued that they would still focus on products when choosing a brand. If the products are similar, they will be more inclined to choose Nike. However, if other brands' products are better than Nike's products, they will still choose other brands. A similar choice also occurred in the Xinjiang cotton ban. The interviewees admit that they would have a certain negative impression of Nike because of the Xinjiang cotton ban, and would try to avoid buying Nike products. However, if there is no way to find a substitute, they will not stop buying Nike products. Moreover, some interviewees claim that they disagree with Nike's stance on the Xinjiang cotton ban. Nevertheless, they will continue buying products from Nike because they think that they can choose other ways to express their political values rather than consumption. It can therefore be assumed that consumption cannot fully express consumer values.

Furthermore, the findings of the study show that the values that Chinese young people have been constructed by the media through packaging and presenting the information in a certain way. In the BLM, although the movement took place in the distant United States, many Chinese, as distant spectators, feel sympathy for the black community. This is because the media used a large amount of space to describe Floyd's tragic experience and described BLM as a political movement that contributed to human society. The negative consequences of racial discrimination in media reports make the Chinese believe that racial discrimination is negative, and the campaigns focusing on racial equality such as BLM are positive. Therefore, the Chinese have a positive impression of BLM and the brands participating in BLM. In the meantime, some interviewees mentioned that the reason why some Chinese people have a relatively negative attitude towards BLM is that some Chinese media describe BLM as social unrest in American society rather than a political movement calling for racial equality.

In the Xinjiang cotton ban, interviewees mentioned that the reason why the Xinjiang cotton ban elicits a boycott is due to the media reports. Media reports on the Xinjiang cotton ban claim that the ban is an insult to China, creates a negative impression on China's reputation, and directly harms China's interests, which is unbearable. Influenced by media reports, many Chinese believe that Xinjiang's cotton ban harmed the country's interests and therefore began to boycott brands participating in the Xinjiang cotton ban to express their dissatisfaction and protect national interests. This reveals that the media plays a crucial role in values Chinese young people have through framing.

To summarise, this thesis analyses the cultural complexity in the Chinese market and eventually fills in the research gap in the field of consumer research. The findings suggest that the global culture is penetrating the Chinese market and influencing Chinese young people's social identity and values. In this sense, they will have shared cultural practices in the marketplace. However, it does not mean that Chinese young people lose their local ties. Instead, the local culture is still alive and Chinese young people still use those local values and norms in their consumption. The entanglement of global culture and local culture in the Chinese market showcases the cultural complexity in the local market under globalization, underlines the importance of cultural research in the field of consumer research and, ultimately makes a contribution to further research.

5.3 Marketing implication

A critical question in the field of brand activism is whether brands should engage in brand activism. This paper can help brands to make this decision in the Chinese market from the perspective of consumers. Through Stop Asian Hate, BLM, and Xinjiang cotton ban, this study demonstrates that brand activism matters to Chinese young people on account of their universal values and local values have shared values and local values. Moreover, due to Stop Asian Hate and BLM, Chinese young people hold positive opinions on Nike. However, due to the Xinjiang cotton ban, their opinions on Nike have changed from positive to negative and their practice shifted from boycotting to boycotting. The key to the polarized attitude lies in the types of brand activism that brands get involved in and the stance that the brands take.

When discussing brand activism, there is a large consensus that brands do have social responsibilities to spread shared values and ultimately make contributions to society. According to the interviewees, campaigns focusing on social responsibility is a way for brands to fulfill their social responsibility. In this sense, brands are expected to engage in campaigns focusing on social responsibility to spread universal values and fulfill their social responsibility. In the case of Stop Asian Hate and BLM, Nike engages in two movements to call for racial equality, which is a universal value that interviewees agree with. Therefore, although Nike's advertisements for two movements lack creativity and perfunctory, interviewees hold positive opinions on Nike and two advertisements.

On the contrary, interviewees do not expect brands to engage in campaigns involving political issues since they believe it is an "extra marketing", which wastes brands' resources. More importantly, when brands take a stand contrary to them, they will face a dilemma

between personal consumption and political values, which negatively influence their life. Thus, they do not expect brands to engage in campaigns involving political issues. In the case of the Xinjiang cotton ban, interviewees define Xinjiang cotton ban as a political game between China and the United State rather than a protection of human rights in the Xinjiang region. In other words, engaging in Xinjiang's cotton ban is not a social responsibility that Nike needs to fulfill. In this sense, interviewees think that it is unnecessary for brands such as Nike to engage in the Xinjiang cotton ban. Moreover, participating in Xinjiang's cotton ban, on the one hand, caused Nike itself to lose the huge market in China. On the other hand, it causes Chinese consumers to face a dilemma between personal consumption and political values, which negatively influences their life. Therefore, their opinions on Nike shift from positive to negative.

In addition to the type of brand activism, the stance that brands take in brand activism is of vital importance, especially in campaigns involving political issues. According to interviewees, brands should take local contexts into consideration and take the same stance as the local market when engaging in brand activism. According to interviewees, only when the brands take a stance consistent with the local social and cultural contexts, can the brand stand out in the local market through brand activism. In the case of Stop Asian Hate and BLM, since interviewees agree with the value of racial equality, the advertisement promotes the value of racial equality and Nike calls for racial equality, interviewees have positive opinions on Nike and its advertisements.

On the contrary, in the case of the Xinjiang cotton ban, interviewees do not believe that Uyghurs in Xinjiang are forced to work or their working environment is extremely bad. Instead, they believe that the Xinjiang cotton ban is a rumor fabricated by the United States to combat China and protect its own political interests. In this case, Nike still chooses to engage in the Xinjiang cotton ban and takes the opposite stance of the interviewees. In this sense, the interviewees are very angry and change their opinions on Nike from positive to negative. In addition, although some brands such as H&M and Hugo Boss issued a statement and apology after the ban on cotton in Xinjiang, stating that the brand respects Chinese consumers and will continue to use Xinjiang banned cotton in the hope of regaining the huge Chinese market, Chinese consumers do not recognize the statement and they continue to boycott these brands.

Therefore, the lessons that brands can take from this study is that first, brands can engage in more campaigns focusing on universal values such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM. This kind of campaigns is able to help brands to increase brand favourability among Chinese

young people by fulfilling social responsibility. Moreover, it can mediate the negative impact of failed marketing strategies to a certain extent in the Chinese market. For Chinese young people, the value that the brand promotes is the core of the success of marketing. If the values advertised by the brand are correct, even if the marketing is flawed, Chinese young people will be very tolerant. They will still support the brand because of the correct values. On the contrary, if the marketing is excellent, but the values promoted in the marketing are not the correct values, Chinese young people will not support the brand. This is also the main reason why Nike's Stop Asian Hate and BLM advertisements can be successful in China despite the lack of creativity and the controversial advertising slogans. Therefore, brands can actively participate in campaigns focusing on universal values such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM to win support in the Chinese market.

Brands should try to avoid participating in campaigns involving political issues such as the Xinjiang cotton ban in the Chinese market. Because campaigns involving political issues are seen as extra marketing, which is not important for Chinese young people. In campaigns involving political issues, Chinese young people still pay more attention to products rather than participation in campaigns involving political issues. In other words, participating in campaigns involving political issues cannot increase the favourability of Chinese young people towards the brand. Therefore, brands can spend their limited resources on products and campaigns such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM rather than campaigns involving political issues. That being said, if the brands want to participate in campaigns involving political issues, then they need to consider the social and cultural background of the Chinese market very carefully and must take a stand consistent with the Chinese market.

For Chinese young people, campaigns involving political issues are a very serious and sensitive topic and brands' political positions are very important. In this sense, unlike brands who want to split the differences in different markets, Chinese young people require brands to firmly pick one side. If brands firmly take a stance consistent with the Chinese market, they will be supported by Chinese young people. If the brand takes a stance that is inconsistent with the Chinese market, the brand may face backlash or even boycott in the Chinese market. Furthermore, once the backlash and boycott are elicited, the strategy of apology does not work in the Chinese market and there is no other communication strategy that can reduce the negative impact of different political positions. Nevertheless, the product is deemed to be able to mediate the negative influence of different political positions. According to the findings, Chinese young people will continue to buy products from brands that engage in the Xinjiang cotton ban if their products are good. Moreover, if the brands are

able to provide products that can fill the gaps in related products or supply chains in the Chinese market, Chinese young people cannot find substitutes to replace the brand. In the absence of alternatives, Chinese young people will continue to buy the products from the brand. In this sense, the brand can reduce the negative influence of different political stances to some extent. This is also the main reason why Chinese young people continue to buy brands such as Nike even when they are dissatisfied with the brand's participation in the Xinjiang cotton ban.

To summarize, brands should engage in campaigns focusing on social responsibility such as Stop Asian Hate and BLM actively and try to avoid participating in campaigns involving political issues such as the Xinjiang cotton ban. If brands engage in campaigns involving political issues, the brands need to understand the cultural and social contexts of the Chinese market and take a stance consistent with the Chinese market. Furthermore, when brands face backlash and boycotts caused by different political positions, brands can mediate the negative influence of different political positions by providing good products.

5.4 Limitation

This study has four limitations. First, this research adopts focus groups as the data collection method. It has been suggested that the interaction between participants in the focus groups will inspire participants' implicit perspectives, providing researchers valuable insights and innovative ideas (Morgan, 1997). However, this study finds out that although the interaction in the focus groups can inspire participants' implicit perspectives to some extent, the participants will influence each other in the focus groups. Consequently, participants from the same focus group tend to have similar opinions, which might negatively influence the results of study.

Secondly, the majority of participants in this study are female. It has been suggested that gender plays a role in consumption. For instance, Monga (2002) argues that the relationship between consumers and brands is influenced by both brand's actions towards consumers and consumers' actions towards brands. However, men tend to evaluate their relationship with brands merely based on their actions towards brands, whereas women evaluate relationships in terms of actions in both directions. In the same vein, Tifferet and Herstein (2012) point out that, compared to the male, the female has higher levels of brand commitment and higher levels of impulse buying, which indicates that gender is a significant factor affecting the consumers' consumption and perceptions. In this sense, the majority of participants in this study are female, which might affect the research in a negative way.

In addition, the language is a limitation in two aspects. First, all focus groups are conducted in Chinese, and transcripts are needed to translate to English, which might affect the result. It has been suggested that in the process of translation, translators, as the main part of the translation process, reflect their subjectivity, mortality, and creativity when they achieve the purpose of translation (Huang, 2019; Lin, 2018). In other words, the translation is influenced by the translator's understanding and interpretation. Although I am Chinese and I can understand the information shared by participants accurately, the translated transcripts are based on my understanding and interpretation. Therefore, the translated transcripts might not be objective and accurate, which influences the results negatively. Secondly, the original language of all prompt materials used in interviews is English and I translated them into Chinese and showed them to participants. By doing so, participants can understand the general meanings of prompt materials. However, the translated text cannot allow participants to grasp the connotation of the original text through specific word choices accurately. In this sense, their understanding of the advertisements is limited.

Lastly, due to COVID-19, all focus groups are conducted via WeChat, which makes me unable to show prompt material appropriately, which influences the interaction and the depth of the focus groups. For instance, one prompt material in the focus group is a video on Instagram. When interviewees watch the video, they are supposed to watch the video together with the caption and the comments below, so that they can have a more comprehensive understanding of the content and background of the video. However, due to the Internet firewall in China, some participants cannot watch the videos with captions and comments below. In this sense, their impression, understanding, and opinions of the video are not as deep as participants who can watch the videos with captions, and comments. Therefore, the online focus group is a limitation of the study.

5.5 Suggestions for Further Study

This study raises several interesting avenues for further research. First, this study demonstrates that consumption is a way for consumers to express their social identities and values. However, consumption cannot reflect their social identities and values completely. Nevertheless, since the study is contextualized in China, this finding cannot be generalized to other markets. Furthermore, the extent that consumption reflects consumer identities and values remains unknown in the study. In this sense, further research can focus on the identity

issues in other markets and examine to what extent does consumption reflects consumers' identities and values.

In terms of the Chinese market, further research can conduct quantitative research to draw a general picture of brand activism in China. In terms of qualitative research, the Chinese young people are still a very large group. Therefore, further research can further subdivide the Chinese young people into different types and investigate the values a certain type of Chinese young people have and how the values influence their opinions on brands. Furthermore, this thesis examines political activism in China from the perspective of consumers. It would be therefore valuable for further research to study other types of brand activism in China from the perspective of other stakeholders such as brands and non-government organizations.

Thirdly, since the participants influence each other in the focus groups, which makes participants from the same focus group have similar opinions. Thus, further research can adopt in-depth interviews to grasp a deep understanding of Chinese young people's opinions on brands. According to Johnson (2011), the purpose of in-depth interviews is to seek a deep understanding of the overall situation of the participants and to grasp different insights into meaning in different contexts. In this sense, in-depth interviews are usually used to examine the views of specific groups of people on certain issues and topics (Johnson, 2011). Therefore, further research can adopt in-depth interviews to have a deeper understanding of Chinese young people's values and opinions on brand activism. Furthermore, the Chinese market cannot represent all Eastern countries. Therefore, the result of this study cannot be completely generalized to other Eastern countries. In this sense, further research can focus on consumers' values and opinions on brand activism in other Eastern markets to make a contribution.

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Appendix A Table of Participations

Name	Nationality	Age	Gender	Education	Profession	Where they live
Interviewee 1	Chinese	24	Female	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 2	Chinese	23	Female	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 3	Chinese	25	Male	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 4	Chinese	24	Male	Bachelor	Student	Netherlands
Interviewee 5	Chinese	24	Female	Mater	Student	Netherlands
Interviewee 6	Chinese	24	Male	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 7	Chinese	24	Male	Master	Finance	China
Interviewee 8	Chinese	24	Male	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 9	Chinese	26	Male	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 10	Chinese	23	Male	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 11	Chinese	26	Female	Master	UNV Programme Assistant	China
Interviewee 12	Chinese	23	Female	Master	Student	Netherlands

Interviewee 13	Chinese	24	Male	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 14	Chinese	25	Female	Master	Student	Netherlands
Interviewee 15	Chinese	25	Female	Master	Project coordinator	Netherlands
Interviewee 16	Chinese	24	Female	Master	Student	Japan
Interviewee 17	Chinese	26	Male	Master	Engineer	Netherlands
Interviewee 18	Chinese	23	Female	Bachelor	Student	Japan
Interviewee 19	Chinese	24	Female	Master	Student	China
Interviewee 20	Chinese	23	Female	Master	Student	China

Appendix B Interviewee Protocol

Before start

- Welcome the participant and thank them for participating
- Introduce myself
- Briefly state the purpose of interview: explore self-identification and consumption among Chinese Young People
- Ask to sign the consent form and permission to record

Warm-up:

- What are your favourite brands? Why?
- Do you remember any brands taking a stance on political issues on social media recently? Xinjiang cotton ban
 - What do you think about it?

- Why you think there is Xinjiang cotton ban?
- What do you think about brands that engage in Xinjiang cotton ban?
- Do you think the brand should get involved in politics

Nike and BLM

- Do you know anything about BLM?
- Where did you get that information?
- Why do you think that BLM can receive that much attention in China?
- Based on those information, what do you think about this movement?

Show “For once, Don’t Do it” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drcO2V2m7lw>

- What do you think about this advertisement?
- What do you think about Nike?
 - Why is Nike making this advertisement?
 - Should Nike advertise this?
 - Do you think his support for black people will really help the black community?
- Do you agree with Nike’s stance? Why?
 - Should black people be discriminated against?
 - Should black people be equal?
- Will you support/follow the brand because of this? Why

Nike and Stop Asia Hate campaign

- Do you know anything about the Stop Asia Hate campaign?
- Where did you get that information?
- Based on those information, what do you think about this movement?

Show the clips on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLfbO2Wn5v9/>

- What do you think about this advertisement?
- Compared to the BLM ad, do you feel different? Why?
- What do you think about Nike?
- Do you agree with what Nike did? Why?
- Now, will you support/follow Nike? Why?

Close-Up:

- Do you have any questions or anything you want to share with me?

Thank you

Appendix C Informed Consent Letter

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Shiya Hu

2522EM, Den Haag, Netherlands

Shiyahu321@gmail.com

0612988574

DESCRIPTION

You^[1] are invited to participate in a research about brand activism. The purpose of the study is to understand why brand activism matters to Chinese young people.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be part of a focus group.

In general terms,

- The questions of the focus group will be related to consumers' opinions on brand activism.
- Your participation in the experiment will be related to consumers' opinions on brand activism.
- My observations will focus on consumers' opinions on brand activism.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a tape recorder for the focus group.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point. Every time I want to accompany you in any activity (such as watching advertisements and sharing your opinions), I will ask you your permission again.

RISKS AND BENEFITS [alternatives A and B are presented below, but there may be further variations]

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information [such as age, gender and occupation] not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by [measures that will be taken: pseudonym, general identification only mentioning age and gender, etc.].

B. I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks for your political stances and social relations. For that reason—unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, occupation, etc.)—I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only pseudonyms to identify participants.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take one hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue

participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Dullemond MSc, V. (Vera), mamedia@eshcc.eur.nl, Media Studies Programme, Erasmus University.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you do not need to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name Signature Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name Signature Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix D Code Book

**Main
categories**

Subcategories

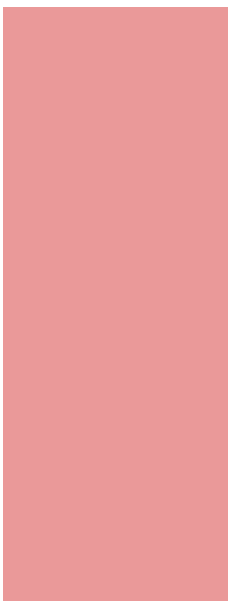
Example

Agency

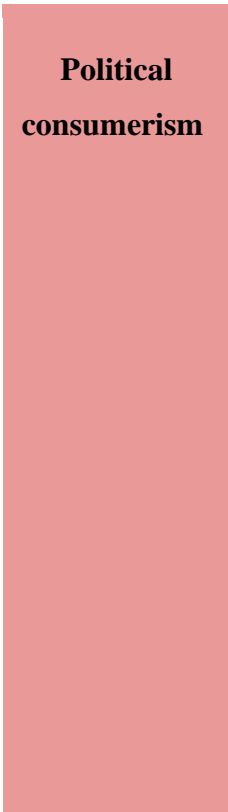
- Brand Agency
“Yeah, I think the brand should still participate in this type of event, because I feel that the brand has a sense of social responsibility. I think they benefit from society, so they should still contribute to society.” (Interviewee 19, 4: 101)
- Market Agency
“I should be able to say that I am just optimistic, I will feel that this is correct, I think it is necessary for the brand to participate in such events, and then I hope that the brand can encourage their consumers. To express their views on any issues.” (Interviewee 5, 1: 336)
- Consumer Agency
“I also don't want brands to participate in politics. Because I think for consumers, the product is still the first. If the brand spends too much resources to participate in political and social events, some consumers might have a positive perception of those brands, but I think most of them are still rational. ” (Interviewee 14, 3: 272)
- Moral Agency
“But it may be more important to me whether the brand’s participation in this event is authentic” (Interviewee 3, 1: 147)

Global China

- Universal Value
“I mean every race should be treated equally. There should not be any hierarchy between races. This is not fair. Every race is equal in nature.” (Interviewee 12, 3: 336)



- Local Value “Because I also asked my classmates from Xinjiang whether the human right violation in Xinjiang is true, my classmates said no. This is something out of nothing.” (Interviewee 12, 3: 61)
- US vs Them if “We” and “You” appear in the slogan, I feel more disgusted. Because as we said before, racial discrimination is a problem for all mankind. Why are there such things as you and we? (Interviewee 14, 3: 475)



Political consumerism

- Boycotting “ I feel like no matter for what purpose did Nike make this video, I think it can have a certain positive impact on Asian groups and Asian equality. For this kind of thing, I think we should support it” (Interviewee 20, 4: 416)
- Boycotting “ I will boycott those brands, because I think they are just like what Interviewee 9 said. These brands make money from the Chinese on the one hand, and then they say that China is not good.” (Interviewee 10, 2: 69)