**MATERIALISM, COSMOPOLITANISM, AND EMOTIONAL BRAND ATTACHMENT: THE ROLES OF SELF-CONGRUITY AND PERCEIVED BRAND GLOBALNESS**

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how materialism and cosmopolitanism affect emotional brand attachment, a key driver of consumer brand equity. Further, it sheds light onto the contingent role of ideal self-congruity and perceived brand globalness in such relationships. The study uses a cross-sectional online survey of consumers of electronic brands in a market of major economic importance, China, where global brands of domestic and foreign origin engage in head-to-head competition. Based on data on 623 consumer-brand relationships, the study shows that materialism and cosmopolitanism are positively associated with emotional brand attachment when brands are high in ideal self-congruity, i.e., when they reflect an aspirational, idealized view of the consumer’s self. Further, the study shows that materialists (but not cosmopolitans) show emotional attachment to brands perceived as global, even when such brands are low in aspirational value. The study uncovers two new antecedents of emotional brand attachment and presents implications for managers making segmentation and brand strategy decisions.

*Keywords: emotional brand attachment, cosmopolitanism, materialism, ideal self-congruity, perceived brand globalness*

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*“For all the particularities of life in China, its big cities offer a familiar cosmopolitanism. … Here are all the signs and markers of placeless, globalized consumerism, and the metropolitan lifestyles that go along with it” (The Atlantic 2018).*

# INTRODUCTION

Materialism and cosmopolitanism are prevalent in Chinese society today. According to the Washington Post (2018), China today is suffering from “rampant materialism”. Recently, Chinese consumers came first in a global ranking of materialism, as 71 percent believe that their success is linked to the objects they own (Ipsos 2013). However, there are also signs that Chinese consumers are embracing cosmopolitan values associated with the acquisition of cultural capital and sophistication (cf. Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Global market research company Kantar (2018) finds that Chinese consumers today are seeking to achieve “more understated and inner cultivation states where genuine appreciation, a sense of inner cultivation, refinement and connoisseurship” drive consumption. This study sheds light on this seemingly conflicting evidence by studying how materialism and cosmopolitanism drive emotional brand attachment among Chinese consumers. Further, the study considers the contingent role of ideal self-congruity (Sirgy 1982), i.e., the fit between a consumer’s idealized self-view and a brand’s image; and perceived brand globalness (Steenkamp et al. 2003), i.e., the perception of a brand as being global, in such relationships.

This study expands the nomological network of emotional brand attachment by proposing materialism and cosmopolitanism as two key antecedents. Emotional brand attachment reflects the bond that ties a consumer to a specific brand and involves feelings of affection, passion, and connection towards that brand (Thomson et al. 2005). Emotional brand attachment is a key driver of brand loyalty (Park et al. 2010) and willingness to pay (Thomson et al. 2005). With few exceptions (e.g., Malär et al. 2011), research on the antecedents of emotional brand attachment is scant.

Materialism and cosmopolitanism are two key dispositional constructs that are associated with the notion that consumers are becoming more homogeneous across the globe, and they are thus used as key psychometrics for market segmentation in the global marketplace (Cleveland et al. 2009). Materialism is defined as “the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states” (Richins 2004: 210), and it is viewed as a central driving force in modern consumer societies such as China (Sun et al. 2017). Research has found that materialistic consumers prefer products of higher social value such as luxury products, i.e., products that signal a sense of status or membership to a social group (Sharma 2011). In emerging markets such as China, also imported products provide this signal (e.g., Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Consumers in such markets prefer imported products (especially from the West), as they perceive them as being of higher quality and offering more social-signaling value than domestic alternatives. Such perceptions are determined by the relative scarcity and higher price of imported products (Batra et al. 2000), coupled with the prevalence of xenocentric tendencies among Chinese consumers (Mueller et al. 2016), i.e., the belief that “a group other than one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others, including one’s own group, are scaled and rated with reference to it” (Kent and Burnight 1951: 256). Cosmopolitanism describes a conscious openness among individuals towards the world and towards cultural differences, a willingness to engage with different cultures, and competence with alien cultures (Cleveland et al. 2009). Cosmopolitans show a preference for products of higher social value such as luxury and globally popular apparel, but they do so because in their eyes such products symbolize “modern lifestyles or an association with the global elite” (Cleveland et al. 2009: 124). In sum, while research shows that both materialists and cosmopolitans prefer highly socially symbolic products, the literature is silent on how materialists and cosmopolitans develop preferences for brands.

We address this critical omission by firstly proposing that the effects of materialism and cosmopolitanism on emotional brand attachment will be contingent on ideal self-congruity. Ideal self-congruity describes the match that a consumer perceives between a brand and his/her ideal self, i.e., the person that he/she would like to be (Lazzari et al. 1978; Sirgy 1982). Ideal self-congruity matters to marketers because it has been shown to positively influence brand-related consumer responses (e.g., Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012). Thus, we expect both materialistic and cosmopolitan consumers to develop emotional attachment to brands, the more strongly such brands reflect their ideal selves. Second, we advance perceived brand globalness (PBG; Steenkamp et al. 2003) as a moderating variable that will play a different role in how materialism and cosmopolitanism predict emotional brand attachment. PBG reflects consumers’ perceptions that a brand is global, i.e., available and accepted in multiple world regions (Steenkamp 2014). Specifically, we expect PBG to increase the effect of materialism – but not that of cosmopolitanism – on emotional brand attachment.

We test our hypotheses on the basis of perceptions of brands in the consumer electronics category because consumers choose products in this category on the basis of both functional and social benefits (Xie et al. 2015). We deliberately steer away from products chosen mainly or exclusively for their social benefits – such as luxury products – because research suggests that both materialists (Wong and Ahuvia 1998) and cosmopolitans (Thompson and Tambyah 1999) are likely to find such products appealing. Thus, by choosing products that consumers choose because of functional – in addition to social – benefits we mitigate the risk of product-category effects biasing our brand-related focal measures.

This study is of managerial relevance. First, insights into how materialism and cosmopolitanism shape emotional brand attachment can help marketers make better international segmentation decisions given the prevalence of both consumer dispositions across East and West (Riefler et al. 2012; Jin et al. 2015; Awanis et al. 2017). Further, such insights can help marketers determine whether to incorporate themes surrounding materialism, cosmopolitanism, aspiration and globalness into their brand communications through, for example, the selection of characters, celebrities, and creative ideas. Understanding the role of PBG in such relationships is important because global brands play a key role in the brand portfolios of multinational corporations such as Unilever (Financial Times 2014).

# Theoretical background

Materialism and cosmopolitanism are consumer dispositions of particular relevance in emerging markets such as China (Jin et al. 2015; Awanis et al. 2017)[[1]](#footnote-1). The simultaneous prevalence of both dispositions is somewhat surprising given research showing that materialism and cosmopolitanism are unrelated (Cleveland et al. 2009). Materialism and cosmopolitanism differ in their underlying motivations. While consumers of both dispositions are motivated to consume for status signaling purposes, they differ in the types of status that they wish to gain through consumption. Materialistic consumption is focused on achieving status by arousing an "invidious distinction" and envy in others (Veblen 1899) while cosmopolitan consumption is focused on gaining the sense of status that arises from acquiring social and cultural capital (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Thus, materialism is associated with susceptibility to normative influence (Alden et al. 2006), i.e., the extent to which an individual is influenced by relevant others in “normative” domains, while cosmopolitanism is not (Riefler et al. 2012).[[2]](#footnote-2) The following sections present hypotheses on how materialism and cosmopolitanism affect emotional attachment to brands and on the role that ideal self-congruity and perceived brand globalness play in such relationships.

## Effects of materialism on emotional brand attachment

Materialism, a tendency among individuals to ascribe importance to possessions (Richins and Dawson 1992), has become a core social value in emerging markets such as China (Leung 2008). In the realm of consumption, materialists do not show a preference for all products but rather for those that signal status or membership to a social group, such as luxury products, (Wong and Ahuvia 1998) and, in developing countries, Western products (Prendergast and Wong 2003). Materialism is also linked to a global consumption orientation, i.e., a preference for global over local consumption alternatives (Alden et al. 2006). Materialistic preference for brands perceived as global is rooted in the fact that such brands are high in social signaling value (Dimofte et al. 2008). While there is a positive link between materialism and the consumption of products chosen mainly or exclusively for their social benefits, it is unclear how materialistic consumers develop preferences for brands in product categories also chosen for their functional benefits. To our knowledge, the only exception is Rindfleisch et al. (2009), who found that materialists develop self-brand connections to their preferred brands of (non-luxury) automobiles, jeans, microwaves, and watches, in response to existential insecurity. However, as Rindfleisch et al. (2009) focused on brands that respondents already frequently used, the question remains as to what drives materialists to develop attachment to such brands in the first place.

This study proposes ideal self-congruity as a potential explanatory factor of materialists’ attachment to brands in product categories that offer a balance of social and functional benefits. Consumers use brands to express their self-concept, i.e., a cognitive and affective understanding of who and what they are (Sirgy 1982). The actual self refers to someone’s perception of themselves as they currently are while the ideal self refers to perceptions of what they would like to or aspire to become (Lazzari et al. 1978). In this study, we focus on ideal self-congruity, i.e., the fit between a consumer’s idealized self-view and a brand’s image (Sirgy 1982). The ideal self-congruity effect is explained by the self-enhancement motive that guides human behavior, i.e., people’s tendencies to seek experiences that increase their self-esteem (Sedikides and Strube 1997). Ideal self-congruity drives brand preferences because people attempt to enhance their feelings of self-regard by seeking to reach a desired or ideal state of the self-concept (Rosenberg 1979). We expect ideal self-congruity to play a role in how materialism determines emotional brand attachment because materialism has been linked to self-esteem (Richins and Dawson 1992). Specifically, people engage in materialistic consumption because they believe that such consumption will raise their self-esteem, level of social approval, or control over life events that will shed a positive light on them (Shrum et al. 2013). Given that ideal self-congruity is driven by people’s tendencies to seek experiences that increase their self-esteem, we expect materialistic consumers to develop emotional attachment to brands high in ideal self-congruity but to form no attachment to those low in ideal self-congruity. Hence:

H1a: Materialism is positively associated with emotional attachment to brands high in ideal self-congruity.  
H1b: Materialism is not associated with emotional attachment to brands low in ideal self-congruity.

## Effects of cosmopolitanism on emotional brand attachment

We further propose that ideal self-congruity will serve as an explanatory factor of cosmopolitans’ attachment to brands in product categories that offer a balance of social and functional benefits. Cosmopolitanism is a disposition that describes “a specific set of qualities held by certain individuals, including a willingness to engage with the other (i.e., different) cultures, and a level of competence towards alien culture(s)” (Cleveland and Laroche 2007: 252). While research has studied cosmopolitans’ preferences for different product categories (Cleveland et al. 2009), research on how cosmopolitanism affects perceptions of brands remains limited.

Some of the extant research on cosmopolitanism appears to question a potential link between cosmopolitanism and preference for branded products given that cosmopolitanism has been described as a post-material value (Inglehart 1990). In line with this view, cosmopolitans should be motivated by abstract concerns such as environmentalism and self-actualization and should thus be less fixated on materialistic concerns such as self-expression through the accumulation of material possessions. However, such post-materialistic tendencies have mainly been observed in the West, i.e., among people who have consistently experienced high levels of affluence as opposed to those who have endured scarcity (Inglehart 1990). In addition, research has shown that cosmopolitanism predicts the consumption of specific product categories (Cleveland et al. 2009) across different countries, hence showing that cosmopolitans’ consumption is still (also) product-focused.

Evidence on the link between cosmopolitanism and product preferences suggests that cosmopolitans’ preferences for brands will be affected by ideal self-congruity. Cleveland et al. (2009) show that cosmopolitanism predicts the consumption of luxury products (fragrances, cosmetics, jewelry, expensive wine/champagne, and boxed chocolates) and of several types of apparel (jeans, athletic shoes, and business attire), i.e., products of higher social value. In their view, such preferences reflect “the modern lifestyles associated with consumer elites that cosmopolitanism symbolizes” (Cleveland et al. 2009: 124). It has been further claimed that cosmopolitan consumption is “a symbol of social status and of one’s moral worthiness” (Skrbis et al. 2004: 131) and “a style of consumption that creates and maintains status distinctions between high-cultural-capital consumers and low-cultural-capital consumers” (Thompson and Tambyah 1999: 217). Ward and Dahl (2014: 594) suggest that “aspirational products have expanded beyond traditional luxury merchandise to domains such as environmentally friendly (e.g., Prius), organic (e.g., The Honest Company), healthy (e.g., Lululemon), and intellectual (e.g., Lagavulin) product categories.” This more comprehensive view of aspiration appears especially relevant to cosmopolitans. Given that ideal self-congruity entails notions of aspiration (Sirgy 1982), we expect cosmopolitans to develop emotional attachment to brands high in ideal self-congruity but no attachment to brands low in ideal self-congruity. Hence:

H2a: Cosmopolitanism is positively associated with emotional attachment to brands high in ideal self-congruity.  
H2b: Cosmopolitanism is not associated with emotional attachment to brands low in ideal self-congruity.

## Moderating effects of PBG

We propose perceived brand globalness as a moderating variable that will play a different role in how materialism and cosmopolitanism predict emotional brand attachment. Despite some definitional controversies, it is generally accepted that global brands are those characterized by larger global footprints, presence in key international markets, and significant sales volumes (Chabowski et al. 2013). However, as consumers may or may not be aware of such characteristics, this “supply side” definition is complemented by a “demand side” definition (Özsomer 2012). According to the latter, global brands are those high in perceived brand globalness (PBG), i.e., those perceived by consumers as being available and accepted in multiple regions (Steenkamp 2014). The importance of PBG arises from evidence showing that both in developed and developing countries, PBG leads to increased levels of perceived brand quality and prestige: quality perceptions arise from a global brand’s broad availability and acceptance while prestige perceptions arise from the relative scarcity of global over non-global brands (Steenkamp et al. 2003). Further, brands perceived as global fulfil a global identity expressiveness function, as they allow consumers to participate in the global consumer culture (Xie et al. 2015).

### Materialists’ emotional brand attachment and PBG

Identity expressiveness is a key function of brands (Erdem et al. 2006). Brands that allow consumers to express their identity are more likely to provoke passionate emotional attachment than those that do not (Ahuvia 2005). As materialistic consumers use products to make positive impressions on others (Richins and Dawson 1992), they should prefer brands that allow them to fulfill their identity motives of self-esteem or distinctiveness (Shrum et al. 2013). However, highly materialistic individuals value possessions also for their utilitarian value (Richins 1994). Research shows that consumers develop attachment to products of superior functionality because the presence of functionality increases the level of pleasure experienced during product usage, a determinant of attachment (Mugge et al. 2005). As PBG has been shown to enhance perceptions of both perceived brand prestige and quality (Steenkamp et al. 2003), we expect PBG to strengthen the effect of materialism on emotional attachment to brands low in ideal self-congruity.

In contrast, for brands high in ideal self-congruity, we expect the link between materialism and emotional brand attachment to remain unaffected by PBG. We base this expectation on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of attitude change and research on information overload. Ideal self-congruity perceptions demand central processing because they arise from the cognitive matching between value-expressive attributes of a brand and a consumer’s ideal self-concept (Sirgy 1982). In contrast, PBG information can be processed through the central and peripheral routes (De Meulenaer et al. 2015). Research on information processing shows that to reduce the risk of information overload, individuals employ adjustment strategies such as filtering, where they only process part of the information available about an object (Savolainen 2007). According to the ELM, people are more motivated to devote the cognitive effort required to evaluate the true merits of a product when involvement is high (Petty and Cacioppo 1981). Because of our focal product category, consumer electronics, we expect materialists in our sample to engage in cognitive processing to determine their level of ideal self-congruity with a brand and therefore to filter out additional information arising from PBG perceptions about that brand. Hence:

H3a: Perceived brand globalness positively moderates the effect of materialism on emotional attachment to brands low in ideal self-congruity.

H3b: Perceived brand globalness does not moderate the effect of materialism on emotional attachment *to brands high in ideal self-congruity.*

### Cosmopolitans’ emotional brand attachment and PBG

The literatures on cosmopolitanism and PBG allow for competing predictions to be developed on how PBG should affect the relationship between cosmopolitanism and emotional brand attachment. Some evidence suggests that in emerging markets PBG should strengthen the effect of cosmopolitanism on emotional brand attachment because individual consumers in such countries prefer global brands for aspirational reasons (Dimofte et al. 2008). As cosmopolitans perceive themselves as less provincial and as more international than non-cosmopolitans (Hannerz 1990), some researchers view cosmopolitans as presumably more responsive to global consumer culture positioning strategies than non-cosmopolitans. According to Alden et al. (1999: 76), as global segments such as elites or teens desire consumption experiences and objects to participate in “the more cosmopolitan global consumer culture communicated by the media”, products such as air conditioners, CDs, hamburgers and business suits become signs of “global cosmopolitanism and modernity”. In support of this view, research shows that in South Korea, a major emerging market, cosmopolitanism is associated with a preference for global consumption symbols (e.g., brands) over local ones (Alden et al. 2006). Further, it has been claimed that Chinese consumers value global elements in advertising as signs or surrogates of status, cosmopolitanism, excitement, modernity, quality, technology, and beauty (Zhou and Belk 2004). However, alternative evidence suggests that PBG should not moderate the effect of cosmopolitanism on emotional brand attachment because as part of their self-identity cosmopolitans can embrace the global, the local, or both (Hannerz 1990). Empirical evidence supports this notion, as it shows that cosmopolitans value global products and brands while also enjoying local alternatives (Cleveland et al. 2011). In fact, when seeking authenticity some cosmopolitans may even challenge global brands rather than embracing them (Beck 2004).

We identify two potential reasons for this conflicting evidence. First, both researchers and the business press sometimes equate a cosmopolitan with a global consumption orientation (cf. Riefler et al. 2012). Such an equation is imprecise because globally oriented consumers prefer global over local brands while cosmopolitans maintain multiple loyalties to global and local brands (Cleveland et al. 2009; Riefler et al. 2012). Second, different conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism might explain the differing findings. Specifically, studies suggesting no preference among cosmopolitans for the global over the local (Cleveland et al. 2009; Riefler et al. 2012) conceptualize cosmopolitanism as reflective of open-mindedness towards the foreign and of appreciation of diversity (coupled with consumption transcending borders in the case of consumer cosmopolitanism; cf. Riefler et al. 2012). In contrast, a study linking cosmopolitanism to a global consumption orientation (Alden et al. 2006) measures cosmopolitanism as reflective of time spent outside one’s home country, of engagement in foreign language study, and of information gathering about world events (Baughn and Yaprak 1996: 768). Hence, it is possible that this latter conceptualization of cosmopolitanism at least partially overlaps with that of global identity. In sum, we posit that the relationship between cosmopolitanism and emotional brand attachment is likely to remain unaffected by PBG. In contrast to materialists, cosmopolitans may eschew global brands because of their mundanity and lack of authenticity (Beck 2004), which runs counter to the cosmopolitan sophistication ideal (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Hence:

H4: Perceived brand globalness does not moderate the effect of cosmopolitanism on emotional attachment to brands low (H4a) or high (H4b) in ideal self-congruity.

# METHODOLOGY

To test our conceptual model, we gathered data through an online survey of Chinese consumers who had purchased electronic products of domestic and foreign origin. We selected China as a market of major economic importance in which levels of consumption are expected to reach $6.1 trillion by 2021 (BCG 2017). China is a country in which materialistic and cosmopolitan tendencies are prevalent (Jin et al. 2015; Awanis et al. 2017). As outlined earlier, we deliberately chose electronic products as a focal product category because Chinese consumers purchase such products on the basis of both functional and social benefits (Xie et al. 2015). Further, the electronic products market in China is one in which foreign (e.g., Apple and IBM) and domestic brands (e.g., Huawei, Lenovo) compete head-to-head in an emerging market of major economic importance. This approach allowed us to limit the potential impact of xenocentric biases on our brand attachment measurements arising from the brands’ geographic origin.

Participants were accessed through the Qualtrics Internet survey panel. The questionnaire was originally developed in English and translated into Mandarin using double back-translation procedures by two bilingual translators (Craig and Douglas 2005). We asked Qualtrics to select participants living in Tier 1 cities (e.g., Shanghai, Beijing) and to achieve a balance of age ranges (between 18 and 65 years of age) and genders. Further, respondents needed to have purchased at least one Chinese and at least one non-Chinese electronics brand over the past two years. To ensure brand familiarity and experience, we asked respondents to focus their responses on brand related constructs on brands that they had purchased in the past two years. Specifically, in a first block of questions we asked respondents to name a domestic brand that they had purchased and to assess it using previously validated scales. We adopted the 3-item ideal self-congruity scale from Sirgy et al. (1997), the 3-item PBG scale from Swoboda et al. (2012) and the 6-item emotional brand attachment scale from Malär et al. (2011). With a second block of questions, we measured materialism using the 6-item scale developed by Richins (2004) and cosmopolitanism using the 7-item scale by Cleveland et al. (2014). The third block of questions mirrored the first block but was focused on a foreignbrand that respondents had purchased in the past two years. We randomized the order in which respondents were asked to respond to question blocks 1 and 3 to avoid sequencing effects.

As our unit of analysis we use the consumer-brand relationship. Data gathering led to an initial a sample of 315 responses, resulting in 630 brand relationships evenly split in terms of Chinese and foreign origin. After eliminating seven cases for which the brand name provided was not clearly identifiable, the final sample consisted of n=623. A total of 26 Chinese and 21 foreign brand names were provided by the respondents. Frequently named foreign brands included Apple (n=154), Samsung (n=46) and Sony (n=36), while frequently named Chinese brands included Huawei (n=110), Lenovo (n=50) and Oppo (n=47). Respondents were evenly distributed across genders and age brackets. However, as expected, inclined towards higher incomes (approximately 2/3 of respondents reported monthly incomes of at least 7,000 RMB) and more advanced educational qualifications (approximately 2/3 of respondents had a Bachelor’s degree or above) compared to the average population. To determine the potential impact of non-response bias on our data, we contrasted response patterns of the early and late respondents following recommendations from Armstrong and Overton (1977). As we found no significant differences in scores for our focal constructs across response waves, we concluded that non-response bias does not seem to be a major cause for concern in our study.

# RESULTS

## Measurement model

We assessed the measurement model fit through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS version 24. Emotional brand attachment and materialism were modeled as three dimensional, second-order constructs, in line with Malär et al. (2011) and Richins (2004), respectively. Results of the CFA (χ2 /df = 2.87, IFI = .96, NFI = .94, GFI = .91; CFI = .96, and RMSEA = .06) indicate a good degree of model fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). The measurement model (table 1) shows good levels of convergent validity, as all constructs demonstrate significant item loadings of above .60, composite reliability (CR) values of above .70, and average variance extracted (AVE) values for each construct exceeding .50 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Hair et al. 2006). Discriminant validity was established, as the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than the correlation between constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981; table 2).

*Insert tables 1 and 2 about here*

We employed the marker variable assessment technique (Lindell and Whitney 2001) to assess common method variance (CMV) using the item “Germany is a country of my dreams” (measured on a seven-point scale) as conceptually unrelated to our dependent and predictor variables. Our analyses suggest that the effect of the marker variable on the variables in our model is negligible, as correlations between the marker variable and the other variables are below the threshold of a weak correlation of .20 (Evans 1996). We further included the marker variable in our measurement model and compared the models with and without the marker variable. CFA results remained stable, as none of the significant correlations observed in the original model became insignificant in the model that included the marker variable. Moreover, the results of our hypothesis tests did not change when controlling for CMV, thus indicating that CMV is not a major concern in our study.

## Structural model and test of hypotheses

The model fit statistics for the structural model suggest a satisfactory fit (χ2 /df = 3.750, IFI = .95, NFI = .94, GFI = .92; CFI = .95, and RMSEA = .07). To test hypotheses 1 and 2 contrasting brands high vs. low levels of ideal self-congruity, we used median splits of ideal self-congruity scores to create two subsamples. Table 3 shows standardized parameter estimates for the structural model and significance levels. In *support of H1a and H1b*, materialism (MAT) has a positive effect on emotional brand attachment for brands high in ideal self-congruity (γ = .36, p < .001) but not for those low in ideal self-congruity (γ = .11, p > .05). The results *support H2a and H2b*, as cosmopolitanism (COS) has a positive effect on emotional brand attachment for brands high in ideal self-congruity (γ = .41, p < .001) but not for those low in ideal self-congruity (γ = .02, p > .05).

*Insert table 3 about here*

Tests of moderation were carried out using the PROCESS macro on SPSS (Hayes 2013). To calculate MAT and emotional brand attachment scores we first averaged item scores for each construct’s first order dimension and then averaged composite scores for all first dimensions to obtain an overall composite score for each construct. We conducted four separate moderated multiple regressions (table 4) to test H3a, H3b (moderated MAT effect on emotional brand attachment), H4a and H4b (moderated COS effect on emotional brand attachment). Interaction terms included in each regression were determined by multiplying mean-centered scores for MAT (H3a/b) and COS (H4a/b) by those for PBG (Aiken et al. 1991). Results for H3a show that MAT and the interaction term (MATxPBG) explain a highly significant proportion of the variance in emotional brand attachment *for low ISC brands* [R² = .23, F(3, 286) = 17.25, p < .001]. The significant interaction found between MAT and PBG [b = .23, p < .001] *lends* *support for H3a.* Thus,for low ISC brands, PBG strengthens the association between MAT and emotional brand attachment, which is negatively significant for low PBG values but positively significant for high PBG values. The results for H3b show that the two predictors explain a highly significant proportion of the variance in emotional brand attachment [R² = .28, F(3, 329) = 29.79, p < .001]. Thenon-significant interaction found between MAT and PBG lends *support for H3b* [b = .02, p = .757]. Thus, for *high ISC brands,* the relationship between MAT and emotional brand attachment is positively significant and of similar strength at all levels of the moderator. The results for H4a show that COS and the interaction term (COSxPBG) explain a highly significant portion of the variance in emotional brand attachment *for low ISC brands* (R² = .18, F(3, 286) = 9.72, p < .001). The non-significant interaction found between COS and PBG *supports H4a* [b = .09, p = .251]. Further, the results for H4b show that the two predictors explain a highly significant proportion of the variance in emotional brand attachment (R² = .23, F(3, 329) = 29.69, p < .001) for *high ISC brands*. The non-significant interaction found between COS and PBG lends *support for H4b* [b = .10, p = .163]. In sum, the results for H4a and H4b show that PBG does not have a moderating effect on the relationship between COS and emotional brand attachment at low or high levels of PBG.

# DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer initial empirical evidence showing that materialism and cosmopolitanism drive emotional brand attachment. Focusing on a product category chosen for both functional and social benefits, we find that materialism and cosmopolitanism are positively associated with emotional brand attachment yet only for brands high in ideal self-congruity. These findings build on insights about how materialism and cosmopolitanism shape preferences for products by identifying ideal self-congruity as an explanatory factor of their preference for brands.

First, we build on extant research showing that materialists prefer products that signal status or membership to a social group, such as luxury products (e.g., Wong and Ahuvia 1998) and, in emerging markets, imported products (Sharma 2011). Our findings add to this research by showing that materialists develop attachment to brands in product categories chosen for both functional and social benefits when such brands are high in ideal self-congruity, i.e., when they reflect the consumers’ idealized, aspirational self. The role of ideal self-congruity in this relationship can be explained by the self-enhancement motive underlying the ideal self-congruity effect (Sirgy 1982). According to this psychological motive, people attempt to enhance their feelings of self-regard by approaching a desired or ideal state of their self-concept (Rosenberg 1979). As materialists tend to have lower levels of self-esteem than non-materialists (Richins and Dawson 1992), our findings suggest that materialistic preference for brands high in ideal self-congruity may be related to the ego-enhancement benefits that consumption of such brands can deliver. Second, we build on work by Rindfleisch et al. (2009), which identified existential insecurity as the explanatory factor of materialists’ connections to their preferred brands in consumer product categories. We add to this work by identifying the ability of a brand to reflect a consumer’s aspiration and idealized view of him/herself, ideal self-congruity, as a driver of the development of materialistic brand preference.

Further, our findings contribute to knowledge on cosmopolitan preference for products by shedding light on their preference for brands. Extant literature shows that cosmopolitan consumers prefer products that project status and connoisseurship/sophistication (Holt 1998; Cleveland et al. 2009). We build on that literature by showing that cosmopolitanism is associated with emotional attachment to brands high in ideal self-congruity. Hence, also in the case of cosmopolitans, the ability of a brand to reflect a consumer’s aspiration and idealized view of him/herself will drive the development of brand preference. However, because of the different motivations underlying each disposition, materialistic and cosmopolitan aspiration are likely to differ markedly. Materialistic aspiration is likely to involve ideals of, for example, financial security and monetary success (Richins and Dawson 1992), while cosmopolitan aspiration is likely to relate to notions of high cultural capital and sophistication (Thompson and Tambyah 1999).

In addition, and in line with our expectations, we find that PBG strengthens the relationship between materialism and emotional attachment to brands low in ideal self-congruity. Our results show that materialists develop emotional attachment to brands low in aspirational value yet only when they perceive those brands as global. When brands are high in aspirational value, the relationship between materialism and emotional brand attachment is positively significant irrespective of globalness perceptions. These findings raise questions on earlier suggestions that particularly in emerging markets perceptions of the global trump those of the local because the former are viewed as a symbol of success (cf. Zhou and Belk 2004). Instead, our findings suggest that when brands are associated with aspiration, materialistic consumers develop emotional attachment to such brands irrespective of their globalness. These findings suggest that global brands can select from local, foreign and global consumer culture positioning alternatives (Alden et al. 1999) when targeting materialists. Finally, our findings extend global consumer culture theory (Alden et al. 1999) by suggesting that, at least for materialistic consumers, the effect of global consumer culture positioning strategies may be contingent on the aspirational value of a brand.

Our results support the expectation that the relationship between cosmopolitanism and emotional brand attachment remains unaffected by PBG for brands low or high in aspirational value, i.e., ideal self-congruity. Hence, when brands target cosmopolitan – in contrast to materialistic – consumers, they cannot offset a “deficit” in aspirational value through associations of globalness. This finding supports the notion that cosmopolitans are “citizens of the world” and “world-minded consumers” (Cleveland et al. 2011; Zeugner-Roth et al. 2015) and yet not necessarily more attracted to global over local brands, as suggested by Alden et al. (2006). Further, this finding challenges early research on the superior appeal of the global over the local among Chinese consumers (cf. Zhou and Belk 2004) because when aspirational value is absent in a brand, Chinese cosmopolitans are not, contrary to materialists, swayed by the aspirational nature of global brand consumption (Strizhakova et al. 2008). Our findings thus confirm cosmopolitans’ openness to engage with diverse cultural experiences and affinities to a local as well as the global culture (Cleveland et al. 2011).

# MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has several clear managerial implications. First, our findings show that the two important consumer segments characterized by high levels of materialism and cosmopolitanism react most positively to brands embodying their aspirations. Materialists seek products that allow them to become members of an aspirational social group (Shrum et al. 2013). Consequently, to target materialist consumers, brand managers should develop marketing measures that associate their brands with prestige and status by, for instance, creating limited-edition product lines. In contrast, cosmopolitans are likely to find different forms of aspirational consumption practices appealing. Cosmopolitan consumers are typically educated, financially affluent, and early adopters of new (including green) technologies (Riefler et al. 2012). In recent years, aspirational consumption has expanded into domains such as environmentally friendly, organic, healthy, and intellectual product categories (Ward and Dahl 2014). For example, there is evidence of a “conspicuous conservation effect” (Sexton and Sexton 2014) according to which consumers perceive environmentally friendly products in much the same way that they perceive luxury products. Thus, to signal their “green” identity consumers are willing to pay more for the “green halo” generated by the purchase of, for example, a hybrid vehicle. As cosmopolitanism has been associated with sustainable behavior (Grinstein and Riefler 2015), brand managers could target cosmopolitan aspirations by creating “green” associations around their brands. This is a promising strategy because our findings show that when levels of aspirational value are high, cosmopolitan consumers develop the strongest levels of emotional brand attachment, and such attachment determines financial success (Park et al. 2010), brand profitability, and customer lifetime value (Thomson et al. 2005). These findings are particularly meaningful given the prevalence of materialistic and cosmopolitan consumer segments in both developed and developing countries (Riefler et al. 2012; Jin et al. 2015; Awanis et al. 2017).

However, not all brands can or wish to associate themselves with high aspiration (cf. Malär et al. 2011). Therefore, when the aspirational value of a brand is low managers must apply alternative strategies to appeal to materialistic and cosmopolitan segments. Our findings suggest that for materialistic consumers, increasing the perceived globalness of a brand can make up for a “deficit” in aspiration. Materialists choose brands that offer them utilitarian value while also conveying prestige in their social groups (Richins and Dawson 1992; Shrum et al. 2013). As perceived globalness enhances perceptions of both the quality and social signaling value of a brand (Dimofte et al. 2008), high PBG brands will give materialistic consumers the self-presentational and functional quality value that they crave. Perceptions of brand globalness can be developed by associating a brand with symbols of a global consumer culture (e.g., the English language or globally recognized spokespersons; Alden et al. 1999). Meanwhile, our findings suggest that for cosmopolitan consumers, increased perceptions of globalness cannot make up for the absence of aspirational value. Brand globalness may not appeal to cosmopolitans because the mundanity of standardized and mass-marketed consumer culture that global brands represent (Thompson et al. 2006) does not match the cosmopolitan ideal of sophistication and high cultural capital (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Because cosmopolitans appreciate both the local and the foreign (Cleveland et al., 2011), brand managers should rather pursue local or foreign consumer positioning strategies (Alden et al. 1999), as they are likely to be perceived as more authentic by cosmopolitans. For instance, highlighting a product’s genuine local craftsmanship or its exotic, genuine foreign origin are likely to have much greater appeal among a cosmopolitan segment keen to communicate its innovativeness and openness to new experiences (Riefler et al. 2012). Overall, managers of brands targeting cosmopolitan consumers need to position their brands in alternative ways, e.g., by associating them with attributes that cosmopolitans find appealing such as authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly 2010), ethnicity (Grier et al. 2006), and exoticness (Holt 1998).

Second, while the focus of our study was on consumer electronics, our findings may have implications for marketers in the services sector as well. More recent conceptualizations of materialism have extended its applications beyond material objects. For instance, Shrum et al. (2013) argue that not only material objects but also services and experiences (e.g., mountain climbing) allow materialists to self-express. Hence, when targeting materialists, a cosmetic surgery clinic could provide limousine pick-up services from an airport as part of an overall package and/or include a stay at a prestigious hotel and luxury shopping tours post-surgery. Such service packages would likely add to aspirational perceptions of core services among materialists. Similarly, companies may use services to capture cosmopolitans interest, especially when they signal membership to an “enlightened community that leads authentic and purposeful lives, exhibiting a relaxed sense of joie de vivre and an enthusiasm for new experiences and cosmopolitan pleasures” (Thompson et al. 2006: 57). For instance, cosmopolitans are likely to be interested in weekend getaways coupled with culturally rich and unique festivals (e.g., the “Tomatina” held in Spain) or events targeting “foodies” (e.g., Salon du Chocolat, which is held yearly at varying locations across the world) that allow cosmopolitans to further cultivate their understanding of both local and foreign cuisines. Such initiatives would likely strengthen attachment between the service provider and the cosmopolitan consumer, which should result in increased loyalty.

# LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, as our data stems from a single emerging economy, future research should validate our findings in other markets. Second, our data is based on perceptions of consumer electronics brands only. Given that cosmopolitans’ and materialists’ preferences for products vary by category (Cleveland et al. 2009), future research should examine other product categories. Further, while we asked respondents to focus on brands that they had purchased and to name those brands, we did not ask them to specify the products that they had purchased. Hence, we are unable to control for possible variations in the social value of focal products within of the consumer electronics category (e.g., cell phones vs. televisions).

Third, the role of PBG in the relationships found may differ in developed markets. PBG effects have been found to be similar in developed and developing countries (Özsomer 2012; Swoboda et al. 2012) in terms of functional (i.e., quality) and social value perceptions (i.e., prestige). However, the longer exposure of consumers in developed markets such as the USA to global brands may have lowered the social value of such brands relative to consumers in developing markets. Fourth, we measured self-congruity as the degree of perceived similarity between a consumer’s ideal self-image and the typical user of a brand (Sirgy et al. 1997). Despite being widely employed, this approach has the downside of not allowing the identification of the specific associations that respondents have with their idealized selves. To address this limitation, future research may instead measure self-congruity as the degree of perceived similarity between a brand’s personality based on Aaker’s (1997) dimensions and perceptions of a person’s actual vs. ideal personality as suggested by Wee (2004).

Fifth, we followed Steenkamp and colleagues (2003; 2014) in conceptualizing PBG as the perception that a brand is available and accepted in multiple world regions. This widely accepted conceptualization can be challenged in that it can apply to brands associated with symbols of the global, the local, and the foreign. Therefore, future research should find better ways to isolate a “true” globalness effect on our main relationships. This could be achieved by, for instance, conceptualizing brand globalness as reflective of a brand’s “global iconicity”, i.e., as the association of a brand with symbols of a global culture. Defined in this way, PBG could mirror the “brand as icon of a local culture” construct introduced alongside PBG in Steenkamp et al. (2003). Sixth, while brand attachment is viewed as enduring (Park et al. 2010), it is possible that cosmopolitans’ attachment to a specific brand may diminish over time, for example as a consequence of cosmopolitans being novelty seekers (Cannon and Yaprak 2002). Therefore, future research should consider applying longitudinal research designs to identify potential variations in cosmopolitan brand attachment occurring over time.

Seventh, to test our hypotheses, we grouped responses on the continuously measured variable ideal self-congruity based on a median split of responses. The median split approach is widely applied in this field (Malär et al. 2011) and even specifically recommended by some authors (Iacobucci et al. 2015). However, others suggest that more reliable results are obtained by contrasting groups with only very high vs. very low scores (McClelland et al. 2015). Future studies should therefore validate our findings using alternative split procedures. Finally, it is notable that despite the differing underlying motivations of materialists and cosmopolitans, our study finds a significant correlation between these two dispositions of r = .59. This finding is interesting because it may help explain why a previous study by Cleveland et al. (2009) found both dispositions to be unrelated in Canada, Mexico, Chile, Sweden, Greece, Hungary and India yet positively significantly correlated in South Korea. Specifically, it is possible that the correlation between materialism and cosmopolitanism found for the Korean sample of that study and in our sample was influenced by higher levels of face consciousness, defined as “a desire to have favorable social self-worth and to be respected in relation to others and in social activities” (Liao and Wang 2009: 988). Face consciousness is usually discussed in the context of Chinese culture yet research links it to the similar construct of *che-myon* in Korea (Park and Jun 2003). As face consciousness mediates the effect of materialism on brand perceptions (Liao and Wang 2009), extensions of our research with Asian samples should incorporate measurements of face consciousness into their study designs.

Despite these limitations, our findings add significantly to knowledge on materialism and cosmopolitanism as two key antecedents of emotional brand attachment. They show that emotional brand attachment with both materialistic and cosmopolitan consumers is contingent on perceived brand aspiration while attachment for materialistic consumers is influenced by both perceived brand aspiration and globalness. Therefore, our findings suggest that marketers need to be vigilant when positioning their brands to target consumers with these types of dispositions, which are important in East and West.

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# TABLES

Table 1: Statistics of Construct Items

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Materialism (7-point Likert-type scale),** CR = 0.940; AVE= 0.837 | **Factor Loadings** |
| 1. Success | 0.893 |
| 1. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes | 0.610 |
| 1. The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life | 0.667 |
| 1. Centrality | 0.877 |
| 1. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure | 0.745 |
| 1. I like a lot of luxury in my life | 0.656 |
| 1. Happiness | 0.974 |
| 1. My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have | 0.746 |
| 1. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things | 0.832 |
| **Cosmopolitanism (7-point Likert type scale),** CR =0.938; AVE = 0.69 |  |
| 1. I am interested in learning more about people who live in other countries | 0.837 |
| 1. I like to learn about other ways of life | 0.820 |
| 1. I enjoy being with people from other countries to learn about their unique views and approaches | 0.828 |
| 1. I enjoy exchanging ideas with people from other cultures or countries | 0.833 |
| 1. I like to observe people of other cultures, to see what I can learn from them | 0.813 |
| 1. I find people from other culture stimulating | 0.828 |
| 1. Coming into contact with people of other cultures has greatly benefited me | 0.835 |
| **Emotional Brand Attachment (7-point Likert type scale),** CR = 0.936; AVE= 0.820 |  |
| My feelings towards this brand can be characterized by |  |
| 1. Affection | 0.910 |
| 1. Affection | 0.792 |
| 1. Love | 0.869 |
| 1. Connection | 0.888 |
| 1. Passion | 0.913 |
| 1. Passion | 0.851 |
| 1. Delight | 0.875 |
| 1. Captivation | 0.757 |
| **Ideal Self-Congruity (7-point Likert type scale),** CR = 0.900; AVE= 0.75 |  |
| 1. This brand reflects who I would like to be (my ideal self) | 0.869 |
| 1. This brand is consistent with how I would like to see myself (my ideal self) | 0.867 |
| 1. People who are similar to the person that I would like to be (my ideal self) use this brand | 0.862 |
| **Perceived Brand Globalness (7-point Likert type scale),** CR = 0.888; AVE= 0.73 |  |
| 1. To me, this is a global brand | 0.856 |
| 1. I think consumers in other countries buy this brand | 0.876 |
| 1. This brand is sold all over the world | 0.823 |

**Notes:** All factor loadings are significant at the p < 0.001 level; **CR** = Composite reliability; **AVE** = Average variance extracted

Table 2: Full Sample Latent Variables Correlations

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Means** | **SD** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| **1.MAT** | 5.199 | 0.861 | **0.915** |  |  |  |  |
| **2.COS** | 5.661 | 0.822 | 0.590 | **0.831** |  |  |  |
| **3.EBA** | 5.331 | 0.934 | 0.550 | 0.575 | **0.906** |  |  |
| **4.ISC** | 5.313 | 1.008 | 0.485 | 0.538 | 0.772 | **0.866** |  |
| **5.PBG** | 5.596 | 1.073 | 0.426 | 0.602 | 0.743 | 0.734 | **0.854** |

**Acronyms: MAT** = Materialism; **COS** = Cosmopolitanism; **EBA =** Emotional Brand Attachment; **ISC** = Ideal Self-Congruity; **PBG** = Perceived Brand Globalness

Note: Bold values represents the square root of the AVE

Table 3: Standardized Parameter Estimates and Significance Levels (Hypotheses 1   
and 2)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Direct effects** | **Std. estimate** | **P** | **Result** |
| H1a | MAT 🡪 EBA (high ISC) | 0.36 | \*\*\* | Supported |
| H1b | MAT 🡪 EBA (low ISC) | 0.11 | NS | Supported |
| H2a | COS 🡪 EBA (high ISC) | 0.41 | \*\*\* | Supported |
| H2b | COS 🡪 EBA (low ISC) | 0.02 | NS | Supported |

Notes: Model fit: χ2 /df = 3.750, IFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.92; CFI = 0.95, and RMSEA = 0.07; \*\*\* ρ ≤ 0.001, \*\* ρ ≤ 0.01, \* ρ ≤ 0.05, Abbreviations: NS = Non-significant, MAT = Materialism, COS = Cosmopolitanism, EBA = Emotional Brand Attachment, ISC = Ideal self-congruity

Table 4 Mediation analyses

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Moderated effects** | **Path coefficients and significance** | **Result** |
| H3a | MATxPBG 🡪 EBA (low ISC) | b= 0.23, 95% CI [.1018, .3613, \*\*\*] | Supported |
|  | Low PBG values | b= - 0.21, \* |  |
|  | Mean PBG values | b= 0.02, NS |  |
|  | High PBG values | b= 0.23, \*\* |  |
| H3b | MATxPBG 🡪 EBA (high ISC) | b= 0.02, 95% CI [-.1599, .2197, NS] | Supported |
|  | Low PBG values | b= 0.26, \* |  |
|  | Mean PBG values | b= 0.29, \*\*\* |  |
|  | High PBG values | b= 0.31, \*\*\* |  |
| H4a | COSxPBG 🡪 EBA (low ISC) | b= 0.09, 95% CI [-.0632, .2418, NS] | Supported |
|  | Low PBG values | b=- 0.19, \* |  |
|  | Mean PBG values | b=- 0.11, NS |  |
|  | High PBG values | b=- 0.03, NS |  |
| H4b | COSxPBG 🡪 EBA (high ISC) | b= 0.10, 95% CI [-.0424, .2509, NS] | Supported |
|  | Low PBG values | b= 0.24, \* |  |
|  | Mean PBG values | b= 0.33, \*\*\* |  |
|  | High PBG values | b= 0.41, \*\*\* |  |

Abbreviations: NS = Non-significant, MAT = Materialism, COS = Cosmopolitanism, EBA = Emotional Brand Attachment, ISC = Ideal self-congruity, PBG = Perceived brand globalness

1. In describing materialism and cosmopolitanism as consumer dispositions, we follow the literature according to which (dispositional) materialism (Kasser 2016) and cosmopolitanism (Woodward et al. 2008) are stable – rather than situationally specific – and reflective of materialistic and cosmopolitan values, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Materialism is most frequently conceptualised as reflective of the importance that an individual assigns to the possession of material goods in achieving major life goals (Richins 2004). According to this conceptualization, the absence of an association between materialism and cosmopolitanism seems logical, as research shows that, for example, better educated people (such as cosmopolitans) derive more happiness from experiential over material purchases (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). However, alternative conceptualizations posit that materialists derive symbolic value not only from material possessions but also from life experiences (Shrum et al. 2013). Hence, there may indeed be an association between materialism and cosmopolitanism when the former is conceptualised in this alternative form. To our knowledge, research has yet to explore this possibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)