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### **Away From Home: How Young Chinese Consumers travel with Global Brands?**

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#### **Abstract**

This interpretive study investigates how a group of young Chinese students consume global brands of American origins, in China and in the UK. More specifically, this research examines how meanings attached to global food brands travel abroad with consumers and investigates the relationship between brand consistency and brand meanings across national boundaries. Findings from a thematic analysis of focus group interviews conducted over a nine-month period, reveal that some brand meanings are context and culture specific (*contextual meanings*) while other meanings travel with consumers across borders (*core meanings*). Theoretically, this study shows how global brands provide a platform of structural meanings, ideas and practices that are global and globalising in themselves, allowing a degree of fluidity and adaptation in relation to the local context of consumption.

Key words: global brands, brand meanings, Chinese consumers, travelling consumers

## Away From Home: How Young Chinese Consumers travel with Global Brands?

### 1. Introduction

This study investigates how a group of young Chinese students consume global brands of American origins, in China and in the UK. More specifically, the objectives of this research are twofold: first, to examine how meanings attached to global food brands travel abroad with consumers, and second, to investigate the relationship between brand consistency and brand meanings across national boundaries. Consistent with the rich tradition in interpretive consumer studies, brand meaning is understood to include three components: 'its physical make up, its functional characteristics and its characterization- i.e., personality' (Ligas and Cotte, 1999: 610). According to this perspective, standardised branding activities across borders do not lead to brand consistency, as the symbolic meaning (the so-called characterisation) attached to global brands changes (Holt, 2004; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). For example, in China, young consumers attach contradictory meanings to global brands such as McDonald's, KFC and Starbucks, often considered as a bridge between cultures, but also a symbol of American imperialism (Yan, 1997, 2000; Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008; Dong and Tian, 2009).

While prior studies confirm that consumers attach different meanings to global brands in their home countries, little is known about how consumers travel abroad with global brands. As the symbolic aspects of brand meanings are context-specific, emerging from localised experiences of global brands (Holt, 2004), there is a need to know more about how brand meanings travel with consumers across different consumption contexts. Considering the high mobility of young Chinese consumers sojourning outside China as students (Chung, Holdsworth, Li and Fam, 2009), it is timely to investigate this group of consumers. The UK

represents a significant context, since there has been a steady growth of Chinese students attending UK universities, reaching 89 540 in the 2014/2015 academic year (UKCISA, 2016).

To investigate how travelling young Chinese consumers attach meanings to familiar brands in the UK, this research engages with the literature on brand consistency and brand meanings, following a “consumer-centric view of brand management, including a better understanding of consumer values and the socio-cultural contexts in which brands are consumed” (Quester, Beverland and Farrelly, 2006: 21). Such an approach is particularly relevant for international marketing scholars often accused of adopting a “purely managerial perspective on international branding issues” (Cayla and Arnould, 2008: 87) and of underestimating the symbolic and cultural dimensions of brands in the global marketplace (Askegaard, 2006). Findings from a thematic analysis of focus group discussions with 12 Chinese students reveal how some meanings are context and culture specific (*contextual meanings*). Other meanings travel with consumers across borders and as such are constant in both contexts (*core meanings*).

Theoretically, the findings of this research contribute to the literature by challenging previous studies that suggest standardisation of branding strategies leads to consistent brand meanings (e.g. Keller, 2008). The presence of context related meanings - which are generated in relation to the socio-cultural context of consumption and thus appear /disappear depending on situations – partly supports Bengtsson, Bardhi and Venkatraman’s (2010: 521) conclusion that “consumers develop multiple contextual brand meanings for global brands”. However, this study also identifies that some brand meanings remain constant regardless of the context of consumption. Indeed, the paper shows how global brands possess a platform of *core meanings* allowing a certain grade of variation and fluidity across contexts of consumption.

## **2. Meanings of Global Brands: Standardisation and Cultural Paradoxes**

The marketing literature on global brands tells us that when brands cross borders, standardisation of brand activities across countries leads to a consistent and coherent brand image (e.g. Keller, 2008). Brand image is understood as a set of meanings a brand has for consumers implying that such meanings are defined by the brand management side and then transferred to the consumer side (Keller, 2003). Managerial conceptualisations of brand meanings highlight how the creation of consistent brand meanings is mainly the result of various strategies and techniques of transferring selected meanings from the firm to the passive consumers (for an overview, see Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2009). Standardised branding strategies, techniques and activities (from distribution to integrated marketing communication) have positive outcomes in terms of reducing costs and enriching the coordination of various activities (Zou and Cavusgil, 2002), as well as promoting a consistent brand image (Keller, 2008).

Consistent brand image offers several advantages, including strong brand awareness and increased brand equity (Kapferer, 2004). Such advantages are particularly appealing for global brands operating in different countries (Aaker, 1996; Pittard, Ewing and Jevons 2007; Keller, 2008; Polonsky and Jevons, 2009). For example, brand consistency is seen as a crucial element for controlling internal stakeholders operating in different countries, making alignment to the global brand vision possible (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Similarly, integrated marketing communication strategies are a useful tool for standardising messages sent to external stakeholders including consumers (Erdem and Swait, 1998). Although some studies show that brand consistency is not necessarily relevant to the success of integrated marketing communication (see, for example, Dickinson-Delaporte, Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010) or

to managing internal stakeholders (see for example, Christensen, Firat and Torp, 2008), the majority of research (Zou and Cavusgil, 2002; Kapferer, 2004; Keller, 2003, 2008) concurs that inconsistent brand image is problematic. For global brands, a consistent image is fundamental in communicating the brand in different geographical and cultural contexts (Keller, 2008).

Interpretive consumer research contributes to the brand meanings and global brand literature in two ways. Firstly, it criticises the supply driven perspective for its failure to consider consumers' agency and its role in the process of co-creating brand meanings through ongoing interaction with the firm. Prior studies demonstrate how brand meanings are not simply created by marketers, but they emerge through consumer experiences, which "fill the brand markers with meaning" (Holt, 2004: 3). Indeed, consumers "uncover and activate their own brand meanings," by re-shaping meanings existing in the marketplace and re-creating new ones (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003: 29). Although marketers create brands with unique personalities (Levy, 1959), images matching consumers' lifestyles and desires (Heisley and Cours, 2007) and emotional connections with consumers (Thomson, MacInnis and Park, 2005; Smith, Fisher and Cole, 2007), consumers can negotiate brand meanings by modifying and subverting them (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Within this negotiation process, consumers do not simply have feelings towards brands (Kahle, Poulos and Sukhdial, 1998) but develop relationships, resonating friendships, partnerships, marriages, casual affairs and enmities (Fournier, 1998). In summary, consumers do not simply accept brands, but co-create and negotiate them, '... mixing in cultural and individual expectations as they construct their personal narratives' (Escalas, 2004: 169).

Secondly, interpretive consumer research criticises the managerial driven approach for its failure to understand the complexity of the social and cultural process of creating brand meaning. According to the literature, brand meanings are created at three different levels (Ligas and Cotte, 1999, Broderick, MacLaran and Ma, 2003): a) in the marketing environment where brands are positioned by marketers using some associations; b) in the individual environment where consumers reshape such association in accordance to their own identity; and finally c) in the social environment where consumers use brands as symbols for communicating with each other and hence re-negotiating brand meanings collectively. Critical marketing literature has mainly investigated the process of negotiating meaning in the case of global brands crossing borders. For example, Ger and Belk's (1996) study on Western global brands in less affluent countries shows the existence of local consumptionscapes in which brands emerge as a nexus of contradictory and re-contextualised meanings fitting the specific context of consumption.

In China, global brands have positive and negative localised connotations: on one hand they are perceived as liberators and instruments of democracy and economic progress, but also as oppressors and instruments of Western domination over China (Dong and Tian, 2009). Although there is some negative attitude towards global brands, the majority of studies highlight that young Chinese consumers are enthusiastic supporters of global brands (see O'Cass and Siahtiri, 2013; Lysonski, 2014). For example, studies investigating the success of McDonald's and KFC in China during the 80s and 90s (Yan, 1997; Watson, 2000) demonstrate how the consumption experience attached to global brands attracts enthusiastic consumers (in particular, children and teenagers). Despite being dissatisfied with the food quality, people like the atmosphere, style of eating and overall experience. As such, "the

attraction of McDonald's is not that it offers fulfilling food but fulfilling experience" (Yan, 1997: 47).

Other studies show that McDonald's is not considered a legitimate option for formal meals such as family celebrations, but provides a fulfilling experience for informal gatherings such as young people's romantic dates, children parties and everyday lunch breaks (Eckhardt and Houston, 2002). Similarly, Venkatraman and Nelson (2008) highlight the fact that young Chinese consumers see Starbucks as an exotic but also familiar and reassuring experience. Indeed Starbucks acts as "a bridge between the two cultures" since it is a place where American culture is consumed without threatening the existing local culture (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008: 1021).

If critical marketing literature has investigated the negotiation process in the case of brand crossing borders, very little is known about brand meanings when consumers change their context of consumption. The few studies on tourists and students abroad show how consumers attach different meanings to familiar global brands while visiting a foreign country (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010; Osman, John and Lugosi, 2014; Rahman and Cherrier, 2010). Consumers navigate anxieties and uncertainties of the cultural context, consuming familiar brands previously experienced at home. As consumers move to a different consumption context they change meanings attributed to these brands. For example, American students visiting China change their negative attitude toward global brands, since the familiar brand conveys a sense of safety and being at home in an unknown and challenging context. As Bengtsson *et al.* (2010: 533) note:

“It is the perceived consistency of these global brands that enables consumers to co-create an experience of being at home while traveling. Global brands abroad may evoke meanings of comfort, predictability, safety, as well as national pride for home-country consumers”.

From this scant literature, we recognise that some brand meanings disappear in the new context while others remain. However, we are left with very little understanding of how this re-negotiation process works. In particular, as prior studies are based on short visits in unknown contexts wherein consumers attribute security and safety to familiar brands, little knowledge exists on how brand meanings might evolve over time. From past research, it seems that the new meanings are fixed, static and unchangeable as consumers’ experience of the new cultural environment is very limited. We question if this is indeed the case of consumers sojourning in a foreign country for a longer period of time. As consumers familiarise themselves to the unknown cultural context, reshaping their own consumption practices and attitude towards the new consumptionscape, meanings of global brands might also change over time.

### **3. Methods**

The research forms part of a larger study exploring food consumption practices among 12 Chinese students studying a one-year business course at a UK university. The study adopts an interpretive paradigm looking at how consumption practices change over time. Due to the small sample, this study does not attempt to generalise the findings to all Chinese students in the UK, but still provide thoughtful and critical insights to the current literature on travelling consumers and global brands. Data were collected using four waves of focus group

discussions (FGDs) over a 9 month period (FGDs were 3 months apart, starting in September shortly after participants first arrived in the UK). The authors facilitated the discussions and all participants attended each of the 4 FGDs. FGDs are the appropriate method to understand how a group of consumers - at a collective level - negotiate their food choices in a foreign context over time (Morgan, 1997).

Using a purposive sampling approach (Churchill, 1995) with a snowball technique (Silverman, 2006), 12 participants were recruited from a group of 62 students. The sample consisted of 9 females and 3 males between 21 and 22 years old. All participants were familiar with global food brands such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut, KFC, Starbucks and Subway. Based on frequency of consumption, participants were classified as *avid consumer* (consuming global brands more than twice a week), *regular consumer* (consuming global brands more than once a week) and *sporadic consumer* (consuming global brands at least once a month).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Participants come from the urban areas along the east coast of China (see Table 1). In comparison to their hometown, the host city was small (one of the UK's smallest cities with a population of approximately 94,000 residents). Most of the restaurants in the city centre sell Western (mainly British, French and Italian) food. Global brands food outlets such as Starbucks, McDonald's, KFC and Subway are also easily accessible. The city also comprises Indian restaurants, three Chinese restaurants and a small Asian food store selling Chinese cooking ingredients.

We informed participants about the nature and objectives of the study. Topics of focus group discussions included aspects of everyday life common to all participants such as shopping, eating out options available on campus/local town and consumption of Chinese, host and global food brands. On average, each FGD lasted approximately 2 hours. Participation was entirely voluntary and students could withdraw at any time during the process. With consent from all participants, FGDs were audio-recorded. Recording provides the opportunity to transcribe and analyse participants' discourse (Chisnall, 1997). To guarantee participants' anonymity and confidentiality, pseudo names are used in this paper.

The research team consisted of 4 marketing scholars with a rich experience researching food consumption and travelling consumers. All researchers are immigrants, thus relate to the experiences described by participants; two are of Chinese background and understood the peculiarities of our sample. The authors' different cultural backgrounds further enriched interpretation. FGDs were analysed thematically (Silverman, 2006) following common practices of interpretive consumer research (Spiggle, 1994). All authors interpreted the data separately and as such a "triangulation across co-authors led to new insights and resolved differences in interpretation" (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard, 2005: 163). A continuous interaction between the data and the theoretical framework was privileged as a crucial part of the hermeneutical process of understanding the consumption practices under investigation (Spiggle, 1994; Silverman, 2006).

#### **4. Findings**

Findings are organised into three main sections. The first section explores participants' perceptions of global brands at home (China). Then, we follow our participants while in the

UK and examine their brand experience. A third section illustrates the divergence of brand meanings in the two contexts. Results show that participants attach new meanings to global brands in the new context, but also retain meanings developed in China. We have mapped this process (see Table 2) in which meanings that remain constant are called *core meanings*, while the ones that appear/disappear depending on the context are called *contextual meanings*.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

#### **4.1 Global Brands in China**

In describing their food habits in China, participants confirm their familiarity with global food brands such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut, KFC and Starbucks, and their product offerings. In unpacking the practices of consumption of these global brands in China, we have identified three different meanings. Global brands symbolise local youth culture, temporal detachment from the formality of traditional Chinese meals and a sense of belonging to the global youth culture. The first meaning is present only in the Chinese context (contextual meanings), while the other two also appear in the UK, albeit in a slightly different form (core meanings).

##### ***An urban consumption experience for young people (contextual meanings)***

Participants define their consumption of Starbucks, KFC and Pizza Hut as “normal” and “not a big deal”, highlighting how these global brands have penetrated current Chinese youth

culture. In fact, global food brands are considered ordinary consumption experiences as evidenced by the quotes below.

*“All my friends go to Starbucks for a coffee or a cappuccino and a chat. I usually go on Saturday afternoon and then maybe we go for dinner afterwards. It is not a big deal as everybody does it. Everybody knows Starbucks, it is something that all of us do! You go there, you sit down and have a coffee and a chat and then you go”* (Kate, regular consumer in China and in the UK).

*“It is cool to go to Starbucks! It is a nice atmosphere with good music. You can have a great time with your friends. I love it! Everybody loves it”* (Michelle, regular consumer in China and in the UK).

Participants’ descriptions are reminiscent of previous works demonstrating how retail environments are positioned in third place, between intimacy of home and formality of the office (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Consistent with Venkatraman and Nelson (2008), Chinese young consumers perceive global brands as a familiar consumption option, enabling them to take refuge from chaotic shopping experiences. Expressions such as “everybody does it”, “everybody knows Starbucks” and “it is cool” highlight how global food brands are part of a common and collective understanding of being a young Chinese consumer. In particular, participants can be portrayed as Chinese urban *flâneur* (Featherstone, 1991; Thompson and Arsel, 2004), experiencing the metropolitan stimulating environment through shopping, eating out, meeting friends and consuming specific products and brands. In addition, possessing the cultural and social capital to experience global brands indicates active membership of the local youth culture (“all my friends do it”).

***Escaping the local context: freedom from traditional culinary culture (core meanings)***

Using global brands to avoid the local culinary culture is a meaning present in both contexts. In China, global brands represent a secure escape from the demanding performances required by formal Chinese meals. These meals are consumed to demonstrate their membership to a different group: their family.

*“Well, if I go out with my parents we go for a more formal meal. Usually a Chinese meal... A Chinese meal requires a lot of etiquette. You need to wait for the food, you need to eat slowly and share your food with others, waiting your turn to serve yourself. It is a very polite way of eating, but sometimes you want something more relaxing. [...] McDonald’s and Starbucks are places for young people; you don’t go there with your parents!”*(Kate, regular consumer in China and in the UK).

Looking at Kate’s quote, it is apparent that the young Chinese generation consume global brands to mark a generational difference with their parents. In fact, formal Chinese meals are perceived as legitimate options to be shared with family, while global brands are considered appropriate experiences to share with friends. The informality offered by global brands, enables young consumers to take refuge from the excessive formality of norms and etiquette common with traditional Chinese meals. Findings are consistent with studies explaining the rise of the “me generation”, affirming how young Chinese consumers opt for a more individualised and Westernised lifestyle (McEwen, Xiaoguang, Chuanping and Burkholder, 2006) perceived as modern and informal (Yan, 2000; Eckhardt and Houston, 2002).

### ***Connecting with a globalised youth culture (core meanings)***

Consuming global brands is not just about identifying with the young Chinese generation. In both contexts, such consumption connects participants with the global youth culture, representing an ensemble of common lifestyles, subcultures, ideas and meanings but also practices and brands, globally spread and re-appropriated locally by young consumers (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). As Kevin explains:

*“When I go to KFC I feel that I can be everywhere in the world. You know what I mean? I can be everywhere and having the same stuff that people in America or in Europe can have. It’s cool that I can have the same stuff that young people have elsewhere without leaving the city”* (Kevin, avid consumer in China and in the UK).

The above quote indicates that global brands are understood as a cultural bridge linking Chinese consumers to Western cultures (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008). In China, global brands represent opportunities to connect with and to experience the lifestyle of other consumers in other cities (such as London or Tokyo). At the same time, they represent a way of sharing a set of “global youth” practices and discourses, allowing consumers to suspend the ordinariness of their life and to experience what “others” do, “without leaving the city”. For participants it seems that the local availability of global food brands is a sign of how China “is catching up” with other countries, and how Chinese consumers have access to Westernised (global) lifestyles. Similarly to prior studies, (e.g. Strizhakova, Coulter and Price, 2008; Strizhakova, Coulter and Price, 2012; Dong and Tian, 2009), findings reveal an aspirational element in consuming global brands.

## 4.2 Global Brands in the UK

Before discussing how global brands are perceived in the UK, it is important to highlight that despite a few cases where participants integrated British ingredients and brands into their cuisine, Chinese food remains the preferred option consumed on a daily basis. Findings confirm prior research on acculturation and food consumption (e.g. Penaloza, 1994; Laroche, Kim, Tomiuk and Belisle, 2005), suggesting that food habits are reshaped in relation to new contexts, but remain one of the last aspects of consumption to be modified. In the process of reshaping food consumption habits in the UK, participants developed divergent meanings for the same global brands previously consumed in China. Global brands are perceived as a familiar and safe consumption option, and a set of experiences to be shared with fellow students. The first meaning emerged only in the UK, and as such is contextual while the other two are constant in both contexts (core).

### *A sense of home and familiarity (contextual meanings)*

During the first few months, global brands represent a familiar and predictable option. Familiarity was one of the most prominent meanings that participants attached to the brands in the new context. Interestingly, familiarity was not pursued via the consumption of local Chinese cuisine available through the various local takeaways and restaurants. Participants disapproved of the local marketplace offerings of Chinese food. Despite the desire to consume Chinese food, participants were critical about the marketplace manifestations in a host country and often looked down at the over-adapted “foreigner-cheating Chinese food” (Leung, 2003: 113). The interesting juxtapose here is while local Chinese restaurants and takeaways are ignored due to unfamiliarity, global brands previously consumed in China are

applauded for their familiarity, predictability and comfort. The following extracts are testaments of this occurrence.

*“When we are out shopping we go to Starbucks. Starbucks is my favourite, it’s nicer and I am used to it. I used to go to Starbucks every weekend with my friends in China [...] in a way being in Starbucks with my Chinese friends, speaking Chinese is like being in China”* (Sarah, regular consumer in China and in the UK).

*When you are there [McDonald’s] it’s like being at home. You know how to order, what to order. It is the same as in China. You know what to do. You are relaxed and you do not have any bad surprises like ordering something you do not like. The atmosphere is the same; you chill out with your friends as if you were doing it in China. That’s why it is my favourite place here* (Kevin, avid consumer in China and in the UK).

The brand consistency of Starbucks and McDonald’s offers Sarah and Kevin a familiar consumption experience. Products and service standardisation provide an environment for consumers to restore the normality of their weekends and hence recreate a hometown feel. Standardisation allows global brands to remain in third place (Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010) and thus remain (also in a new context) places to relax, socialise and to be comfortable with the surrounding servicescape. While in China global food brands were described as a means to demonstrate a belonging to the young Chinese culture, in the UK the same brands provide “a sense of comfort because it is part of the embodied taste of home” (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010: 529). This could explain the overall increase of consumption of familiar global brands amongst all participants (see Table 1). It is noteworthy to point out that

the 'home' feeling here refers to the cultural continuity brands provide, resonant with the Chinese youth culture (such as weekend shopping and gathering with friends in an urban environment).

***Escaping the new local context: safety and security (core meanings)***

In both the UK and China, global brands were seen as a safe option to escape the challenges and demands of the local food culture. In the UK participants refuse to eat local food on a daily basis. The majority of participants, when time permits, make an effort to reproduce home food on their own. Local food available through the university campus cafes, canteens and local pubs are considered too exotic and often challenging. In order to avoid the frustration and anxiety of consuming unfamiliar dishes, or to be challenged by unknown ordering systems and be exposed to different meal conventions (for example, eating with a fork, spoon and knife in the absence of chopsticks), participants exclude local meal options and take refuge in familiar and safe global brands. The following extracts provide evidence of the need for safety among participants.

*“I dislike the canteen food. I only tried it once and decided that I’m not going to have it anymore. It is too weird, too strange for me. Now I go to McDonald’s for lunch. I used to go to there once or twice a week when I was in China [...] I like burgers, they are convenient, quick and tasty.[...] I am familiar with McDonald’s and I can get pretty much what I used to have at home; the same burger with the chips and coke”*  
(Kevin, avid consumer in China and in the UK).

*“The nice thing about McDonald’s is that you can go in and ask for a cheese burger without many problems. You don’t have to explain in detail what you want, you know how it works [...] you order, you pay and you wait, it’s easy. You can see the pictures of the burgers and you can decide what you want”* (Susan, regular consumer in China and avid consumer in the UK).

*“When you go to the canteen you don’t know what you get. Food is strange and you don’t know the name of some of the stuff in front of you...you don’t know what you are ordering”* (Gemma, avid consumer in China and the UK).

The consistency offered by global brands, provides a sense of security given that participants already possess the cultural capital necessary to consume (including how and what to order) and share food with friends. As Bengtsson *et al.* (2010) note, such consistency represents a safe meal option, allowing participants to feel at home and hence escape the anxiety of facing unfamiliar and extraordinary consumption experiences.

### ***Connecting with a globalised youth culture (core meaning)***

In both contexts, global brands are associated with a globalised youth culture, which in China was described in abstract terms, while in the UK was referred to in terms of consumption practices shared with fellow students. In fact, after spending the first academic term in the UK, participants’ ties with the host and other international students became stronger. Some participants developed personal relationships (friendship and romance) with fellow British and international students (see Mike’s experience below). Global brands became an important

tool to understand and negotiate incompatible differences between host versus home cultures, and between home cultures versus other cultures.

*“I sometimes go out with my British and European flatmates. We go to cinemas and shops and often stop at Starbucks. I know what to expect at Starbucks and I like it. There are many different people, black, white, Chinese and Indian... We can all have a drink and a rest there... just chill”* (Mike, regular consumer in China and avid consumer in the UK).

Mike’s description of his everyday encounter with the ‘Other’ shows the role of global brands in facilitating his understanding of the host culture as well as other (youth) cultures. Consuming Starbucks enables Mike to feel comfortable sharing this familiar and safe practice with people from other cultures. This is consistent with previous research highlighting how the consumption of global brands allows young consumers to display their belonging to the global youth consumer culture (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008; Strizhakova *et al.*, 2008), and hence to feel connected with other “like-minded people” (Holt, Quelch and Taylor, 2004: 71). In our study, global brands are used as a common terrain wherein cultural diversities desist and a shared understanding of food, meal structure and meal conventions takes place. As Berry (2008: 323) posits, consuming symbols of global consumer culture, such as global brands represent a ‘starting point of acculturation’ to other cultures.

### **4.3 Divergence of Brand Meanings**

From the previous discussions, we understood how meanings attached to global brands are reshaped once participants arrived in the UK. Such a reshaping process has been illustrated at

a collective level, but in this section, we show how brand meanings changed at an individual level. We only provide exemplars here and borrow from brand meanings discussed in previous sections. Given our sample, we do not provide any generalising or systematic overview, but rather some examples illustrating how participants attach different meanings to brands depending on their individual consumption experience.

It is worth noting that none of our participants reduced their consumption of global brands in the UK; half increased their consumption and the remaining half kept it constant (see Table 1). Take for example the case of Phil, a sporadic consumer in China who became an avid consumer in the UK. In China, Phil visits McDonald's once a month with his school friends. For Phil, McDonald's was "ok, not my kind of food, but a nice way to spend time with my friends". As explained in the previous section, visiting McDonald's was consistent with the local youth culture (Bookman, 2013; Thompson and Arsel, 2004) in which global brands are part of the urban consumptionscape for sporadic consumers like Phil. In the UK, Phil developed very weak ties with fellow Chinese, local and international students. Having difficulties in 'making friends' and in cooking Chinese food in the kitchen he shared with other international students, Phil's consumption of McDonald's increased significantly. His visits to the local McDonald's were as frequent as 3 or 4 times per week.

*"I go because I can have something I can eat. The canteen is terrible! They serve only pasta and potatoes and here there are not many options available, it is not like in a big city. I go there because I do not want to cook for myself and the food is OK. [...] it is very easy, you can order things easily and nobody looks at you"* (Phil, sporadic consumer in China and avid consumer in the UK).

The service and food offered in McDonald's become particularly important in sustaining a sense of home while abroad (see also Bengtsson et al., 2010). Being unable to eat food offered in the university canteen and in other local restaurants and cafes, McDonald's represents a familiar option with predictable service and safe food and drink offerings. Phil relies on McDonald's as a stable partner (Fournier, 1998) in the new context, but the meanings he attached to it in China were very different. Considered simply as part of the urban environment in China, in the UK it became crucial in sustaining a sense of comfort and security and a place in which he could blend in, since 'nobody looks at you'.

Another illustration of meaning divergence is the case of Susan, who shifted from being a regular consumer in China to an avid one in the UK. Before her travel to the UK, Susan considered global brands as part of the global youth culture that unifies young consumers across the world as illustrated in the following quote:

*"These places are everywhere in the world. They offer the same, nice atmosphere for young people. You can be in Europe, in China, in the US and you will still find one of these places full of young people"*(Susan, regular consumer in China and avid consumer in the UK).

Referring to global brands as 'places full of young people', Susan reaffirmed the idea that these brands unified an imagined global community, which adopts similar consumption practices and objects across the world (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008). In the UK, the imagined global consumer community became real. Indeed, Susan developed a rich network of international friends, including her British boyfriend. Given her preference for Chinese

food and the boyfriend's inclination for British food, Susan finds the practice of sharing a meal a very difficult one.

*“The only meal I can share with my boyfriend is a pizza at Pizza Hut! It is honestly the only thing we can have without having an argument. I do not like his jacket potato type of food and he does not like my soups. The only thing that makes both of us happy is a pizza! [...] Pizza is a kind of basic and safe option for both. I used to eat pizza sometimes in China, so I am used to it”* (Susan, regular consumer in China and avid consumer in the UK).

For Susan, Pizza Hut represents a way to avoid host food and the possibility of sharing a meal that will be appreciated by both parts. As mentioned earlier, for consumers like Susan, who display an extended network of international friends, global brands represent a common terrain and a starting point for understanding the ‘Other’ (Berry, 2008). Like Susan, Laura was an avid consumer of global brands in the UK, but in contrast, her enthusiasm started in China.

*“In China we do things as other young people do elsewhere in the world. I go to Starbucks as you do in London, in Tokyo....everywhere. We do things as other countries do; we are developing so fast that we can do what other countries do”* (Laura, avid consumer in China and in the UK).

Seeing global brands as engines of modernisation, Laura was an enthusiastic consumer who started going to McDonald's as a child. Similar to children described by Yan (1997), Laura started consuming McDonald's with her parents and she continued to do so with her teenage

friends. In the UK, Laura has not developed a rich network of friends and, like Phil, she accesses familiar global brands on her own.

*It [McDonald's] makes me feel like I was at home having a snack with my friends. It is a safe option and makes me feel less lonely. It reminds me of home* (Laura, avid consumer in China and in the UK).

Once in the UK, the meanings that Laura attached to familiar global brands changed significantly, becoming a safe alternative in which nostalgic memories of home could be cultivated. To conclude, the data in this study illustrate that meanings attached to familiar global brands depend on the context of consumption. Findings provide insights into how consumers' relationships with brands change and how consumers can manage more than one relationship with the same brand (Fournier, 1998).

## **5. Discussions, Implications and Conclusions**

This study investigates how a group of young Chinese students consume global brands in China and when sojourning abroad. In examining meanings attached to brands consumed in China and in the UK, this study shows that travelling consumers evaluate brand consistency positively. In particular, extending existing theorisations, for example, the findings of Rahman and Cherrier (2010), Bengtsson *et al.* (2010) and Venkatraman and Nelson (2008) shows that young Chinese consumers, who are familiar and enthusiastic about global brands at home, consume the same brands abroad in order to reduce the anxiety of dealing with the new consumption experiences. Previous research demonstrates how global brands (such as Starbucks) are perceived as familiar and reassuring consumption experiences in China

(Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008). Our study further contributes to this body of knowledge and shows how Chinese consumers travelling abroad opt for global brands as they provide a sense of familiarity.

In fact, participants take refuge in the standardised menu, products and service offered by global food brands, limiting interactions with unknown and demanding meal options in the UK marketplace. While local Chinese restaurants and takeaways are regarded as disappointing and inauthentic, the standardised experience of global brands offers a sense of cultural continuity. It is noteworthy to point out that Chinese food options are not completely ignored, as our young consumers would still organise periodical trips to restaurants and takeaways in the nearest China town. However, in the small local town, paradoxically, global brands and not Chinese restaurants offer a consumption experience more resonant with home.

In looking at how brand meanings have developed over time, results indicate that consumers attach the same meanings to global brands both in the UK and in China. Such findings are in contrast with Bengtsson *et al.* (2010) arguing that “what consumer seeks from a global brand in unfamiliar context is different from what is sought in the home context” (p. 521). Bengtsson *et al.* (2010) also note that consumers shift from non-consumption to consumption of global brands when abroad. Plausible explanations for these diverging results reside in the nature of our sample. Participants were not opponents of global brands in China and hence their consumption remained constant in the UK. However, this does not imply all young Chinese are passionate about global brands, but participants could be defined as globally-engaged consumers (Strizhakova *et al.*, 2012: 50), who enthusiastically opt for global brands and “globally focussed consumption practices” such as studying abroad.

Furthermore, in China, participants chose global brands in order to show their sense of belonging to the global youth culture and thus to connect to an undetermined global 'Other'. Participants would also consume global brands at home to escape from local tradition. Young Chinese consumers would disconnect, albeit very briefly, with some demanding aspects of the traditional Chinese etiquettes and connect with a Westernised and more individualised consumption option (of American origin) available on demand via prototypical global brands. Similarly in the UK, participants use global brands as a way to escape unpleasant aspects of the host culture (i.e. unfamiliar meals), but also to re-connect themselves with a familiar global youth culture wherein specific 'Others' (British and other international students) meet and understand each other.

In looking at the fluidity of brand meanings over time and in different contexts, this study confirms previous works (e.g. Wilk, 1995; Askegaard, 2006; Holt et al., 2004) insisting on the existence of structuring meanings, ideas and practices that are global and globalising in themselves, allowing a level of fluidity and adaptation in relation to the local context. In our research, findings show that two meanings - accessing global youth culture and disconnecting from the local environment - re-appear both at home and abroad. Meanings re-emerge with contextual differences but they remain core meanings, and hence essential elements of global brands. It is not surprising to see that such core meanings are listed in previous works on global brands as crucial elements of the consumption experience of consumers in China (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008; Dong and Tian, 2009) and in the USA, as well as in other BRICs countries (Strizhakova et al., 2008; Strizhakova et al., 2012).

One can speculate that the presence of such core meanings across cultures is quintessential for the existence of these brands as global. As Holt et al. (2004) point out in their research on

global brands in 41 countries, being part of a global culture is a common meaning consumers give to such brands. Indeed global brands “create an imagined global identity” which consumers understand as a way of living and consuming to be shared with other “like-minded people” from Western countries (Holt et al., 2004: 71). The way in which consumers describe their ideas of connecting themselves to a global community and disconnecting themselves from undesirable aspects of the local environment confirm how these core meanings are “global structures (which) organise diversity rather than replicating uniformity” (Wilk, 1995: 118). The adaptability of such meanings shows how core meanings can travel with consumers as they can be reshaped in relation to the context of consumption.

In addition, findings reveal that some meanings associated with global brands are context related and as such they remain anchored to the context wherein they have been produced without travelling with consumers across geographical and cultural borders. For example, the meaning of global brands as a way for participants to manifest their association with the local youth culture in China seems to disappear once consumers arrive in the UK. Similarly the sense of familiarity and security global brands have in the UK are new meanings, not present in China. Contextual meanings are more fluid and represent local reinterpretation of local and appropriation of global signs, images and ideas. Such processes have been highly celebrated in the literature as a demonstration of how global brands do not lead to a cultural homogeneity (see for example, Miller, 1998). Although our findings show that global brands are characterised by locally produced meanings, we agree with Wilk (1995) and Askegaard (2006) or Askegaard et al. (2005) affirming that such local meanings emerge because global brands offer structures to reshape globalising meanings in specific contexts. However, this study does not investigate these structures in depth, but still shows that some brand meanings (core meanings) are able to travel across borders and be reshaped in relation to changing

contexts. Also these core meanings interrelate with other contextual meanings, and thus this interconnection generates new and localised combinations of meanings in different contexts.

In summary, findings reveal that global brands do not necessarily lead to uniformity of consumption practices and meanings (Miller, 1998; Wilk, 1995; Holt et al., 2004). Meanings associated with global brands can be understood as a platform of core and contextual meanings, some of them global and globalising in themselves and other local and localising in themselves. Core meanings travel and allow these brands to be global; contextual meanings demonstrate that global brands do not lead to cultural homogenisation, but rather to a plurality of consumption practices and discourses with the permanence of core (and globalising) meanings.

### **5.1. Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

In this study, we examine global brand meanings at home and abroad among a small group of young Chinese consumers. Our participants represent a privileged group of consumers with growing mobility to travel abroad. We therefore acknowledge our findings cannot be generalised to other young consumers from other countries (such as India). Future studies should replicate this research with different consumer groups (e.g. Generation Z) from various other countries (e.g. India). In addition, the first wave of FGDs was conducted shortly after participants first arrived in the UK. Future studies can extend this research by collating data (for example, using diary methods) in the participants' homeland with subsequent data collection during their stay in the UK. Also, this study did not control the extent to which participants had formed prior relationships with the global brands (see Fournier, 1998). The degree of consumer-brand relationships can influence brand meanings (Brosius and

Fernandez, 2013). Finally, the prototypical brands examined in this study are solely of American origins and relate to low involvement food related consumption experiences. Future research should examine consumer experiences and meanings associated with high involvement global brands (such as luxury fashion brands) of various origins.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

<b>Participants*</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Consumption of Global brands (food) in China</b>	<b>Consumption of Global brands (food) in the UK</b>
Laura	F	21	Beijing	Avid consumer	Avid consumer
Gemma	F	21	Chongqing	Avid consumer	Avid consumer
Susan	F	22	Beijing	Regular consumer	Avid consumer
Sarah	F	21	Chongqing	Regular consumer	Regular consumer
Kate	F	21	Chongqing	Regular consumer	Regular consumer
Michelle	F	21	Suizhou	Regular consumer	Regular consumer
Sophia	F	22	Shenzhen	Sporadic consumer	Regular consumer
Sonya	F	22	Dalian	Sporadic consumer	Regular consumer
Charlotte	F	22	Shenzhen	Sporadic consumer	Regular consumer
Mike	M	22	Liouzhou	Regular consumer	Avid consumer
Phil	M	21	Nanjing	Sporadic consumer	Avid consumer
Kevin	M	22	Jining	Avid consumer	Avid consumer

\*pseudo names are used.

Table 2: Core and Contextual Meanings of Global Brands in China and United Kingdom

<b>Context of Consumption</b> <b>Brand meanings</b>	<b>CHINA</b>	<b>UNITED KINGDOM</b>
<b>Contextual meanings</b>	<i>An urban consumption experience for young people</i>	<i>Sense of home and familiarity</i>
<b>Core meanings</b>	<i>Escaping the local context: freedom from traditional culinary culture</i>	<i>Escaping the local context: safety and security</i>
	<i>Connecting with a globalised youth culture (imaginary Western Other)</i>	<i>Connecting with a globalised youth culture (specific Other: international and host students and friends)</i>

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