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Local Brand Aversion or Aspiration? The Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Chinese Consumer brand preference

Abstract

Consumers often choose specific brands to express their identity and status. While various factors influence the selection of products from specific countries, this study explores a less examined aspect: the socioeconomic status of consumers. Research indicates that consumers with higher socioeconomic status tend to favor international brands as status symbols. Conversely, other studies suggest that local brands appeal more to certain socioeconomic groups due to a stronger affinity with local culture and values. In light of this, the study investigates the psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions that influence local brand preference based on consumer socioeconomic status within the framework of social class structure. Specifically, through three studies, we found that socioeconomic status significantly impacts local brand preference (Study 1: $\beta = -2.36$, $SE = 0.76$, $p < .01$). The underlying mechanism is that consumers with different socioeconomic statuses emphasize distinct identity dimensions when forming their self-concept through brand consumption. Mediation analyses confirmed that both self-identity (indirect effect = -0.08 , 95% CI $[-0.13, -0.04]$) and social identity (indirect effect = 0.04 , 95% CI $[0.001, 0.074]$) serve as significant parallel mediators. Additionally, the role of these psychological mechanisms is supported through moderation analyses, which identified key boundary conditions: Brand Traditional Culture Load (BTCL) moderates the path from social identity to LBP (interaction effect: $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .01$), and reference group (in-group vs. out-group) moderates the same path (interaction effect: $b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$). In the long term, these insights can facilitate the diversified development and sustainable growth of the local economy, fostering a more stable and competitive local brand ecosystem.

Key words: socioeconomic status; social identity; self-identity; reference groups; brand traditional culture load

1 Introduction

In an era of rising cultural confidence and domestic pride—epitomized by China’s “*Guochao*” (National Trend) movement—consumers are re-evaluating the symbolic meaning of local brands (McKinsey, 2023). Classical consumption theory holds that higher socioeconomic status (SES) fosters a preference for global brands as markers of cosmopolitan distinction (Veblen, 1899/1964; Bourdieu, 1984). Yet, a contemporary paradox emerges: affluent Chinese consumers are increasingly embracing heritage-rich local brands such as Huawei, Li-Ning, and Maotai (Han et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). This tension—between the status-signaling allure of globalism and the identity-affirming pull of localism—forms the core of our investigation. Prior research shows that consumption serves divergent social functions: the leisure class uses it to signal prestige, while lower-status groups may engage in compensatory consumption (Veblen, 1899/1964). In emerging markets, global brands often symbolize modernity and global citizenship (Batra et al., 2000; Strizhakova et al., 2008), an association seldom extended to local brands. Higher-SES individuals tend to be more self-oriented and seek uniqueness (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2024), whereas lower-SES individuals exhibit stronger collectivist tendencies (Piff et al., 2012). Crucially, consumers possess multiple identities which, when activated, differentially guide consumption (Reed et al., 2012). While signaling theory suggests that high-SES consumers may occasionally prefer local brands due to group norms or ethical pressures (Balabanis et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2023), it remains unclear how the cultural essence of local brands interacts with SES to shape identity-driven choices within specific social contexts.

To address this gap, we investigate: How does SES influence local brand preference (LBP) through distinct identity mechanisms, and under what conditions—such as cultural symbolism and reference group influence—does this relationship strengthen or weaken? This research makes three key contributions: 1. Contextualizing Class Dynamics: We reveal that SES shapes LBP via divergent identity paths: self-identity (prioritizing uniqueness) for high-SES consumers versus social identity (prioritizing belonging) for low-SES consumers. 2. Unveiling Cultural Signaling: We establish brand traditional culture load (BTCL) as a critical moderator,

showing how culturally rich local brands can satisfy high-SES consumers' need for symbolic distinction when aligned with in-group norms.³ Mapping Social Boundaries: We identify reference groups as a boundary condition, demonstrating when social contexts amplify or dampen the effect of SES on LBP.

By integrating social class, identity, and cultural signaling theories, this study offers a nuanced framework for understanding the resurgence of local brands amid globalization backlash and cultural reclamation.

2 Literature review and Hypotheses Development

The consumption of brands is seldom a purely functional exercise; it is deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric that shapes consumer identity (Belk, 1988; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). To understand how socioeconomic status (SES) influences local brand preference (LBP), we ground our investigation in the Social Class Worldview Model (Liu et al., 2004). This model posits that individuals internalize the "economic culture" and worldview corresponding to their social status, which in turn fundamentally shapes their behavior patterns, including consumption. Consumption, therefore, becomes a key practice through which class is constructed and performed (Veblen, 1899/1964; Liu et al., 2004). Building on this foundation, we integrate Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and theories of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) to elucidate the psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions of the SES-LBP relationship. This integrated framework allows us to explore not just whether SES affects LBP, but why (through self-identity and social identity) and when (under varying levels of brand traditional culture load and reference group influence) this relationship holds.

2.1 Socioeconomic Status and Local Brand Preference

Socioeconomic status (SES), a composite measure of an individual's income, education, and occupational prestige (Liu et al., 2004), serves as a powerful predictor of consumer behavior. It influences brand identity (Claes et al., 2024) and purchase intentions (Piff & Moskowitz, 2018),

as individuals across the status spectrum are motivated to enhance or maintain their social standing through consumption (Witt, 2010; Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013).

From the lens of Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital, high-SES individuals typically possess greater economic and cultural resources, fostering a more globalized perspective. This capital allows them to navigate and benefit from cross-border flows and international media (Bourdieu, 2002), enabling a more diverse brand selection (Srivastava et al., 2023) and a greater emphasis on the symbolic value of brands for self-expression and identity construction (Gobel & Miyamoto, 2024). Global brands, particularly from developed Western nations, are potent symbols of modernity, global citizenship, and elevated social status (Batra et al., 2000; Strizhakova et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2021). Despite the rapid growth of Chinese brands, they often still lag in global prestige and high-end positioning compared to their European, American, and Japanese counterparts (Guo, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). This perceived gap may limit their appeal to high-SES consumers who use consumption to signal distinction and cosmopolitanism (Bourdieu, 1984; Özsomer, 2012).

Conversely, compensatory consumption theories suggest that low-SES individuals, who lack control over valued social resources, may engage in symbolic consumption to offset perceived power and status disadvantages (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Bronnenberg & Dube, 2017). For these consumers, local brands—especially those imbued with heritage and quality—can serve as powerful symbols of national identity. Consuming these brands fulfills needs for cultural belonging and social identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; He & Wang, 2017), allowing them to resist cultural homogenization and bolster cultural confidence (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019). According to Identification-Based Motivation Theory (Oyserman, 2009; Yang, 2017), when a brand aligns with an individual's salient identity, preference for it increases, independent of its functional utility. For low-SES consumers, local brands often align with a salient social or national identity. We therefore hypothesize:

H1: Consumers' SES can affect their preference for local brands, and compared with lower SES, consumers with higher SES may have lower LBP.

It is noteworthy that other established constructs, such as perceived brand globalness, perceived brand localness, and local iconness, as well as consumer dispositions like ethnocentrism, cosmopolitanism, and xenocentrism, also influence brand preferences and often relate to identity concerns. For instance, consumer ethnocentrism reflects a moral obligation to support the domestic economy (Shimp & Sharma, 1987), while cosmopolitanism embodies an openness to global cultures (Cleveland et al., 2011). Perceived brand globalness/localness captures brand-specific perceptions that can signal identity (Özsomer, 2012; Swoboda et al., 2012). While these constructs conceptually overlap with aspects of social or national identity, our focus is distinct. We theorize and test social identity and self-identity as fundamental, multi-faceted psychological mechanisms through which an individual's socioeconomic position shapes brand choice. This identity-based framework aims to provide a more direct explanation of how internalized class-based worldviews and self-concepts, rather than general attitudes towards foreign/domestic entities or brand image perceptions per se, underlie the SES-LBP relationship. It is worth noting that other contextual factors, such as decision focus, can also moderate consumers' choices between domestic and foreign brands (Yu et al., 2022). By situating our mediators within the Social Class Worldview Model and identity theories, we aim to demonstrate their unique explanatory power in this specific causal chain.

2.2 Self-identity and Social Identity

Self-identity and social identity are foundational constructs in consumer behavior, playing pivotal roles in shaping brand preferences through symbolic consumption (Belk, 1988; Ellemers et al., 2002; Reed et al., 2012). Self-identity refers to an individual's internal perception of their unique attributes, values, and personal goals (Tajfel, 1974), while social identity involves defining oneself in relation to group memberships—such as nationality, ethnicity, or class—and deriving self-worth from group affiliation (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). In the context of brand consumption, individuals often use products as tools for identity expression, either to assert individuality (via self-identity) or to signal belongingness (via social identity) (Berger & Heath, 2007; White & Dahl, 2007). Recent research highlights that socioeconomic

status (SES) systematically shapes the relative salience of these two identity dimensions. Individuals from higher SES backgrounds tend to cultivate an independent self-construal, emphasizing autonomy, personal achievement, and uniqueness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Stephens et al., 2007). This cognitive orientation fosters a stronger emphasis on self-identity, leading high-SES consumers to prefer brands that reflect personal distinction and global sophistication (Chernev et al., 2011; Kraus et al., 2012; Gobel & Miyamoto, 2024). Indeed, global brands—particularly those originating from Western developed nations—are perceived not only as markers of quality but also as symbols of cosmopolitanism and modernity (Özsomer & Altaras, 2008; Strizhakova et al., 2008). By consuming such brands, high-SES individuals construct a “global citizen” identity, leveraging cultural capital to maintain social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984; Huang et al., 2021).

In contrast, lower-SES individuals are more likely to adopt an interdependent self-construal, rooted in collectivist values and relational interdependence (Stephens et al., 2024). This mindset prioritizes harmony, group cohesion, and social embeddedness, making social identity a dominant driver of consumption behavior. For these consumers, local brands—especially those rich in national heritage and cultural symbolism—serve as powerful vehicles for affirming collective belonging and reinforcing in-group solidarity (He & Wang, 2017; Podoshen et al., 2011). This aligns with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive self-esteem from positive comparisons between their in-group and relevant out-groups. When faced with status disadvantage, lower-SES consumers may engage in compensatory consumption by identifying with broader, more prestigious social categories—such as the nation—to restore a sense of dignity and pride (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). This process strengthens their motivation to support domestic brands as expressions of patriotism and resistance against cultural homogenization (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019).

Moreover, the influence of SES on identity construction can be further understood through identification-based motivation theory (IBM; Shah & Higgins, 1997), which suggests that individuals are intrinsically motivated to act in ways that affirm their salient identities. For high-

SES consumers, whose self-concept is oriented toward individual agency and differentiation, brand choices become acts of self-expression aimed at maintaining uniqueness (Berger & Ward, 2010). Conversely, for low-SES consumers, whose identity is more contextually embedded, consumption serves a communal function—affirming loyalty to shared cultural values and enhancing social integration. Formally:

H2: Self-identity mediates the effect of consumer SES on LBP.

H3: Social identity mediates the effect of consumer SES on LBP.

2.3 Brand traditional culture load (BTCL)

Consumers possess multiple identities, each of which influences their consumption decisions to varying degrees depending on the context (Reed et al., 2012). Culture is a paramount cue that can activate shared attributes and strengthen in-group bonds (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Brand Traditional Culture Load (BTCL), is defined as the extent to which a brand's products, designs, and narratives are perceived to be embedded with elements of a specific, heritage-rich traditional culture. This construct aligns with research on cultural symbolism in products (Chai et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2023) and the "cultural essence" that can be carried by brands (He & Wang, 2015). BTCL is a multidimensional construct that encompasses several interrelated dimensions: aesthetic elements, which involve the use of traditional motifs, colors, and artistic styles (Lin, 2007); narrative elements, derived from historical tales, philosophies, and cultural practices that form the brand's story and design concept; and value elements, which reflect the embodiment of core traditional values such as harmony, benevolence, and collectivism. Together, these dimensions form a cohesive cultural signature that can activate specific identity-related associations in the consumer's mind (Chai et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2023).

Brands high in BTCL act as potent carriers of cultural meaning (Berger & Ward, 2010; Gao et al., 2009). From a social identity theory perspective, such brands can powerfully activate a consumer's cultural or national identity. When a local brand carries a high BTCL, it becomes a more concrete and valuable symbol of the in-group (the nation). This should strengthen the positive

relationship between a consumer's social identity and their preference for that local brand. The brand becomes not just a local product, but a vessel of shared cultural heritage, making it more appealing to those who derive a sense of self from their social group (He & Wang, 2017).

However, we do not anticipate BTCL to similarly moderate the self-identity path. Self-identity is driven by a need for uniqueness and personal distinction, which may not be directly enhanced by traditionally cultural elements that emphasize collectivity and shared history. Based on this, we propose:

H4: BTCL moderates the mediating role of social identity between consumer SES and LBP. Specifically, enhancing the traditional cultural load of a brand will enhance the positive influence of social identity on LBP.

2.4 Reference groups

Consumers' brand decisions are inherently social, as they use consumption to express identity, seek validation, and navigate group memberships (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). The symbolic meaning of a brand is often co-constructed through the interplay between consumers, the brand itself, and their reference groups (Hammerl et al., 2016). From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals derive a part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. Reference groups—which can be aspirational or associative—serve as a critical benchmark for self-evaluation, shaping attitudes, beliefs, and purchase decisions by providing informational and normative influence (Bearden et al., 1982; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). When self-expression and identity construction are uncertain, consumers rely on these external cues to guide their choices (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Through brand consumption, individuals satisfy self-affirmation needs and enhance their sense of belonging to a desired group (Gao et al., 2009; Park & John, 2010).

The connection between a reference group and a brand is pivotal. When consumers strongly identify with a group that is positively associated with a brand, they are likely to evaluate the brand more favorably and incorporate it into their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Conversely, if the desired group has weak ties to the brand, consumers may reject forming a relationship with

it (White & Dahl, 2007). Research indicates that Chinese consumers exhibit a stronger preference for local brands in group settings that activate a collective identity, whereas they may favor foreign brands in contexts emphasizing individuality (Wei & Yu, 2012). This is because in-group contexts make social identity more salient.

Critically, we posit that the influence of reference groups will differ for the two identity pathways. For the social identity path, in-group cues should act as a potent activator of one's collective self. When a local brand is endorsed by an in-group, it becomes a more concrete and validated symbol of that shared identity (Hogg & Reid, 2006). This strengthens the positive link between a consumer's pre-existing social identity and their local brand preference (LBP), as consuming the brand becomes a clear act of affirming group belonging (Jiang et al., 2024).

For the self-identity path, however, the effect of in-group cues is likely to be different, if not contrary. Self-identity is driven by a need for uniqueness and personal distinction (Berger & Heath, 2007). In-group influence, by promoting conformity to group norms, can potentially threaten this need for uniqueness. When a brand choice is strongly endorsed by one's in-group, it may be perceived as less effective for signaling individual differentiation (Berger & Heath, 2007; Jiang et al., 2024). Therefore, we do not expect in-group references to strengthen the self-identity path; they may even weaken it, as the goal of self-expression through uniqueness becomes less attainable. Formally:

H5: Reference group moderates the mediating role of self-identity between consumer SES and LBP. Specifically, the in-group condition will weaken the negative effect of self-identity on LBP.

H6: Reference group moderates the mediating role of social identity between consumer SES and LBP. Specifically, the in-group condition will enhance the positive influence of social identity on LBP.

We tested our hypotheses through three studies. Study 1 examined the mediating effects of self and social identities in the SES-LBP relationship. Study 2 manipulated SES to test BTCL's

moderating role. Study 3 investigated reference group effects on the SES-LBP association (see Fig.1).

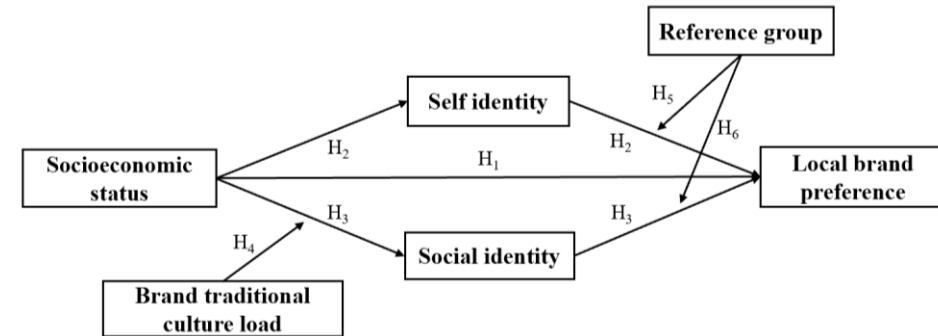


Figure 1 Conceptual model and research hypotheses

3 Study 1: Identity-Based Mediation Effects

Study 1 investigates the SES-LBP relationship and explores identity-based mediating mechanisms (self and social identity). We employed an online survey methodology where participants evaluated actual brand stimuli to measure their relative brand preferences.

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

Data were collected from 516 participants via Credamo platform. After screening for response time, attention checks, and missing values, the final sample comprised 414 participants (40.82% female, $M_{age} = 28$ years; see Table 1). All participants provided informed consent and received monetary compensation.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of participants

Variable	Category	Count	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	245	59.18
	Female	169	40.82
Age	18~25	151	36.47
	26~30	163	39.37
	31~40	86	20.77
	41~50	14	3.38
Education	Middle school or below	13	3.14
	High school	26	6.28
	Associate's Degree	79	19.08

	Bachelor's degree	270	65.22
	Master's degree or above	26	6.24
	Below 50,000 RMB	46	11.11
	50,000 - 100,000 RMB	113	27.29
	100,001 - 150,000 RMB	123	29.71
Annual Income	150,001 - 200,000 RMB	86	20.77
	200,001 - 250,000 RMB	30	7.25
	250,001 - 300,000 RMB	10	2.42
	Above 300,000 RMB	6	1.45
	Government and social managers	13	3.14
	Managerial Personnel	5	1.21
	Private business owners	20	4.83
	Professionals and Technicians	30	7.25
	Clerical staff	43	10.39
Occupation	Self-employed individuals	62	14.98
	Commercial and service workers	133	32.13
	Industrial Workers	38	9.18
	Agricultural laborers	46	11.11
	Unemployed or freelancers	24	5.80

3.1.2 Materials and Procedures

Study 1 comprised three distinct parts. First, participants were asked to evaluate their preferences for the presented brands. Subsequently, they responded to questions concerning their self-identity and social identity. Finally, participants provided demographic information, including their educational background, annual income, and occupational status.

To enhance the external validity of the findings and mitigate stimulus specificity, Study 1 draws upon prior research to select six distinct product categories: mobile phones, sports shoes, computers, cars, beer, and personal care products (Zhuang, 2006; He, 2017). These categories encompass a diverse array of markets, feature numerous well-known brands, and exhibit significant variations in terms of price, usage, evaluative attributes, technological content, and purchase frequency.

Prior to formal data collection, we employed a two-stage brand selection process. First, we conducted unstructured focus interviews with consumers across age groups and analyzed search data from the Chinese Brand website (www.chinapp.com) to identify popular local and foreign brands in each category, ensuring price comparability. Next, we administered a pretest survey to 222 university students (55% female, mean age 19-25 years) via an online platform. Participants rated brand familiarity on a 7-point scale (1 = unfamiliar; 7 = very familiar), with brands presented in random order. We then ranked brands by mean familiarity scores and selected the most familiar brand in each category for Study 1 (see Table 2).

Table 2 Brand Selection Results

Category	Local Brand (China)	Foreign Brand
Mobile Phone	Huawei ($M = 5.10 \pm 1.13$)	Apple / USA ($M = 5.01 \pm 1.50$)
Sports Shoes	Anta ($M = 5.18 \pm 1.28$)	Nike / USA ($M = 5.19 \pm 1.30$)
Computer	Lenovo ($M = 5.05 \pm 1.26$)	HP / USA ($M = 4.98 \pm 1.18$)
Automobile	BYD ($M = 5.39 \pm 1.32$)	Audi / Germany ($M = 5.54 \pm 1.20$)
Beer	Snow Beer ($M = 4.90 \pm 1.38$)	Budweiser / USA ($M = 4.74 \pm 1.52$)
Personal Care	PROYA ($M = 5.16 \pm 1.28$)	Lancôme / France ($M = 5.38 \pm 1.17$)

We used three indicators to measure consumers' SES: education level, occupation, and income level (Korndorfer et al., 2015). The results indicated that only one component had an eigenvalue exceeding the recommended threshold (>1), explaining 50.5% of the total variance. The factor loadings for education level, occupation, and income level were 0.56, 0.74, and 0.79, respectively. According to Linting and van der Kooij (2012), these loading values are considered excellent. Therefore, participants' scores on this component were retained as SES variables for subsequent statistical analysis (White & Tong, 2019).

Brand preference was measured following Zhuang et al.'s (2006) methodology using relative indicators. Participants rated their liking for each brand on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly dislike, 7 = strongly like). Mean liking scores were calculated for local and foreign brands within each product category. A relative preference index was computed by dividing the local brand score

by the foreign brand score and multiplying by 100. Index values above 100 indicated preference for local brands, while values below 100 indicated preference for foreign brands.

Self-identity was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Rozenkrants et al. (2017). Participants rated their agreement with statements such as "I have a strong desire to express myself," "I think I am unique," "I have a clear idea of who I am," and "I want to take action to let others know who I am" on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Higher aggregate scores indicated stronger self-identity.

Social identity was measured using four items adapted from the national identity dimension of the Social Identity Scale (Xue Ting et al., 2013). Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as "Being Chinese is very important to me," "I am proud to be a Chinese," "I strongly identify with the mission and goals of my country," and "Being Chinese greatly influences my view of myself" on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Higher aggregate scores reflected stronger social identification.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Effect of SES on Brand Preferences

We conducted multilevel linear regression analysis using SPSS 25.0 to test the relationship between SES and brand preferences. For LBP, we entered age and gender as covariates (Model 1) and SES as the independent variable (Model 2). Results revealed that SES negatively predicted LBP ($\beta = -2.36$, $SE = 0.76$, $t = -3.10$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.03$). Similarly, for foreign brand preference (FBP), we entered age and gender as covariates (Model 3) and SES as the independent variable (Model 4). This model was also significant ($\beta = 2.28$, $SE = 0.76$, $t = 3.06$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.03$), indicating that SES positively predicts FBP. Therefore, H1 was supported.

3.2.2 Mediating Effects of Self-Identity and Social Identity

We employed PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes & Scharkow, 2013) to examine whether self-identity and social identity mediated the relationship between SES and LBP. All variables were mean-centered prior to analysis. Mediation analysis results (Figure 2) revealed that for the self-

identity pathway, the 95% bootstrap confidence interval was [-0.13, -0.04], excluding zero. This indicates that self-identity significantly mediated the relationship between SES and LBP, supporting Hypothesis 2. For the social identity pathway, the 95% bootstrap confidence interval was [0.001, 0.074], also excluding zero, which confirms that social identity significantly mediated the relationship between SES and LBP, supporting Hypothesis 3.

The non-overlapping confidence intervals for both pathways indicate a parallel mediation effect. The mediating effect of self-identity (-0.08) was larger than that of social identity (0.04), with self-identity's effect operating in the same direction as the direct effect. This suggests that self-identity plays a more substantial role in transmitting the influence of SES on LBP.

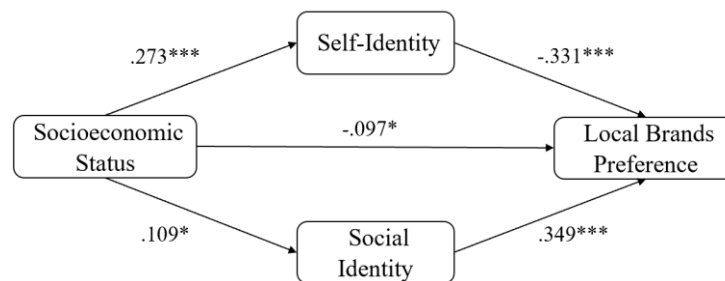


Figure 2 Mediating effects of self-identity and social identity

3.3 Discussion

Study 1 examined the relationship between SES and preference for local brands, revealing a negative association between these variables. This finding aligns with Cultural Capital Theory, which suggests that high-SES individuals maintain social distinction through differentiated consumption patterns (Bourdieu, 2002). Consequently, these consumers tend to prefer diverse and global brand options (Gurhan-Canli et al., 2018; Srivastava et al., 2023). Our results confirm that SES represents a critical factor in understanding consumer brand attitudes and purchase intentions, offering important implications for local enterprises' marketing positioning and strategic development. Furthermore, Study 1 demonstrated that self-identity and social identity function as parallel mediators in the relationship between SES and local brand preference, with their relative influence contingent upon SES.

Consumers possess multiple identities that, when activated in varying contexts, differentially influence consumption decisions (Reed et al., 2012). Consumer behavior complexity stems not only from internal cognitive processes but also from external social environments (Berger & Ward, 2010; Cote, 1996; Gao et al., 2009). As a distinctive cultural vehicle, brand culture imparts unique historical value and emotional significance while shaping consumer behavior through strengthened cultural identification (He et al., 2017). In Study 2, we examine the boundary conditions of SES effects on LBP and investigate the potential moderating role of traditional cultural elements within brand positioning.

4 Study 2: Moderating Effect of Brand Traditional Culture Load

Study 2 examines whether increasing a brand's traditional cultural elements enhances LBP across socioeconomic groups. We employed an experimental design using established social status comparison paradigms to manipulate participants' perceived SES. Participants were presented with brand stimuli containing varying levels of traditional cultural elements to assess how cultural loading moderates the relationship between SES and LBP.

4.1 Method

4.1.1 Participants

We conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1, which indicated a minimum required sample size of 210 participants to achieve 95% power ($1-\beta = 0.95$) at $\alpha = 0.05$ with a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$). Participants were recruited through the Credamo platform. After excluding participants based on response time anomalies, patterned responding, and failed attention checks, the final sample comprised 234 valid responses (50.4% male, 49.6% female; $M_{age} = 25.72$ years, $SD = 6.22$). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and received compensation upon successful completion of the study.

4.1.2 Materials and Procedures

Study 2 employed a 2 (SES: high vs. low) \times 2 (BTCL: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. We

manipulated SES following Mahadevan (2021) and Yoon (2018), presenting participants with a 10-step ladder visual. Participants were then exposed to condition-specific contextual material (e.g., low-SES participants read descriptions of high-status individuals possessing superior income, education, and employment conditions). To ensure engagement, participants completed an attention check identifying the social class described (1 = bottom, 10 = top), followed by a writing task requiring them to imagine an interaction with the described individuals, articulate SES differences, and propose potential conversation topics. Manipulation effectiveness was assessed by participants' self-placement on the social ladder.

Following Yu et al. (2023), we manipulated BTCL through visual and textual stimuli. In the low traditional culture condition, participants reviewed basic information about a new cup, emphasizing environmentally friendly materials, advanced tempering processes, and durability. In the high traditional culture condition, participants received identical product information plus design concept details explaining that the cup draws inspiration from the classical Chinese painting *Qianli Jiangshan Tu* and incorporates traditional Chinese colors *Tianshui Bi* and *Huang Liliu*. Participants then rated the level of traditional Chinese culture reflected in the product (1 = very low, 7 = very high) as a manipulation check. Then, we measured self-identity ($\alpha = 0.81$) and social identity ($\alpha = 0.76$) using the same scales as Study 1 (Rozenkrants et al., 2017; Xue et al., 2013). Brand preference was assessed using three 7-point items ($\alpha = 0.92$) measuring purchase intention, willingness to try new products, and likelihood of recommendation (Xie et al., 2015).

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Manipulation Check

Independent samples t-tests confirmed successful manipulations. Participants in the high-SES condition reported significantly higher SES ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.57$) than those in the low-SES condition ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.65$; $t(232) = -3.33$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, participants in the high traditional culture condition rated the product significantly higher on traditional cultural elements ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.94$) compared to those in the low traditional culture condition ($M =$

3.75, $SD = 1.73$; $t(232) = 12.38$, $p < 0.001$). These results validate the effectiveness of both experimental manipulations.

4.2.2 Preference for Local Brand

A 2 (SES: high vs. low) \times 2 (BTCL: high vs. low) ANOVA on LBP revealed significant main effects of SES ($F(1, 230) = 5.45$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$) and traditional culture load ($F(1, 230) = 16.63$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$). Importantly, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 230) = 4.04$, $p = 0.046$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$). Simple effects analysis revealed that under low traditional culture conditions, high-SES participants exhibited significantly lower local brand preference ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.91$) than low-SES participants ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.26$; $F(1, 231) = 8.97$, $p < 0.01$). However, under high traditional culture conditions, no significant difference emerged between high-SES ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.06$) and low-SES participants ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 0.98$; $F(1, 231) = 0.06$, $p = 0.81$). Notably, high-SES participants demonstrated significantly increased local brand preference when traditional cultural elements were prominent ($F(1, 231) = 18.30$, $p < 0.001$).

4.2.3 Effect of Brand Traditional Culture Load on Social Identity

An independent samples t -test with social identity as the dependent variable revealed that participants in the high traditional culture condition reported significantly stronger social identity ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 0.78$) than those in the low traditional culture condition ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.69$; $t(232) = 2.17$, $p = 0.031$). A 2 (SES: high vs. low) \times 2 (BTCL: high vs. low) ANOVA on social identity yielded significant main effects of both SES ($F(1, 230) = 8.91$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$) and BTCL ($F(1, 230) = 4.96$, $p = 0.027$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$). The interaction was not significant ($F(1, 230) = 0.11$, $p = 0.74$), indicating that enhanced traditional cultural elements strengthen social identity across socioeconomic groups.

4.2.4 Mediation Effect of Social Identity and Self-Identity

To elucidate the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between SES and LBP, we conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013). The analysis employed 10,000 bootstrap samples with 95% confidence intervals. SES served as the

independent variable (0 = low, 1 = high), self-identity and social identity as parallel mediators, and LBP as the dependent variable. Results revealed a significant indirect effect through self-identity (effect = -0.12, 95% CI [-0.21, -0.05]), supporting H2. Similarly, social identity demonstrated a significant mediating effect (effect = 0.18, 95% CI [0.06, 0.33]), confirming H3. The direct effect of SES on LBP remained significant after accounting for both mediators (effect = -0.39, 95% CI [-0.65, -0.13]), indicating that self-identity and social identity partially mediate the relationship between SES and LBP.

4.2.5 Moderation Effect of Brand Traditional Culture Load

To further investigate the impact of BTCL on consumers' preference for local brands, Study 2 employed Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 14). SES served as the independent variable (0 = low, 1 = high), with social identity and self-identity as mediators. BTCL was the moderator (0 = low, 1 = high), and LBP was the dependent variable. This approach tested the moderated mediation effect. Table 3 reveals a significant interaction between BTCL and social identity on LBP ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 2.59$, $p < 0.01$). However, the interaction between BTCL and self-identity was not significant ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 0.42$, $p = 0.67$). Additional analysis using PROCESS Model 8 showed no significant interaction between SES and BTCL on either self-identity ($p = 0.86$) or social identity ($p = 0.76$). These findings indicate that BTCL moderates the mediating effect of social identity on the relationship between SES and LBP. However, BTCL does not moderate the relationship between self-identity and LBP. Thus, H4 was supported.

Table 3 Moderated Mediation Effect Test

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	R^2	F	β	t
Self-Identity		0.06	13.93		
	SES			0.47	3.73***
Social Identity		0.04	8.69		
	SES			0.38	2.95**
LBP		0.34	19.65		
	SES			-0.32	-2.82**
	Self-Identity			-0.22	-3.95**

Social Identity	0.39	6.68**
BTCL	0.21	3.93***
Self-Identity \times BTCL	0.02	0.42
Social Identity \times BTCL	0.14	2.59*

The interaction between BTCL and social identity is shown in Figure 3. The results of simple slope analysis show that under the condition of high-BTCL social identity has a significant effect on LBP ($b = 0.59$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 7.84$, $p < 0.001$). Under the condition of low-BTCL, social identity also had a significant effect on LBP ($b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 2.51$, $p = 0.014$). Under the condition of high-BTCL, the predictive coefficient of social identity on LBP is greater than that under the condition of low-BTCL ($0.59 > 0.23$), which indicates that adding traditional culture elements to the brand can enhance the positive predictive effect of social identity on LBP, and verify H4 again.

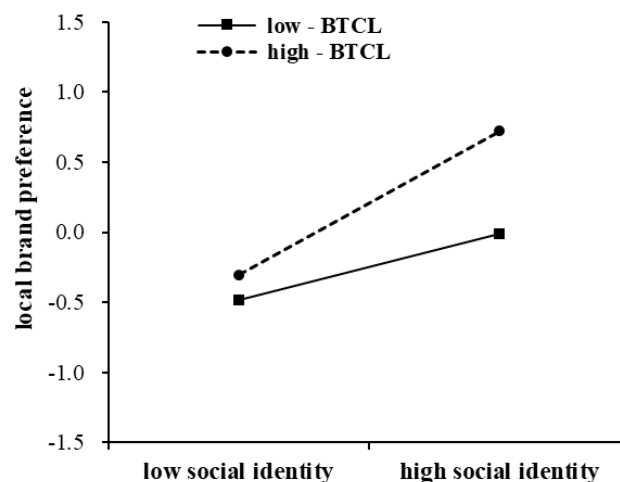


Figure 3. The moderating effect of brand traditional culture load (BTCL)

4.3 Discussion

Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 by exploring the boundary conditions of the relationship between SES and LBP. Specifically, it examines the moderating role of BTCL by manipulating SES. Results indicate that increasing a brand's traditional cultural load enhances the positive influence of consumers' social identity on LBP. These findings align with previous research. Chiu and Hong (2006) posited that cultural elements in branding can activate positive associations with a brand's country of origin due to cultural priming effects. This positive

association translates into higher brand evaluation and recognition, particularly for brands symbolizing national culture (e.g., the Chinese liquor brand "Wulangye"), thereby enhancing consumers' sense of social and cultural identity (Ozsomer, 2012; Bourdin et al., 2021). Furthermore, these results suggest that local brands can strategically leverage traditional cultural elements in brand naming and product design to reinforce consumers' nationalism and patriotism. This approach can foster political or cultural identity, ultimately achieving advantageous brand positioning (He et al., 2014; Preiksaitis & Dacin, 2021). This work contributes to the literature by elucidating the mechanisms through which BTCL influences consumer preferences, offering valuable insights for brand managers in developing effective cultural branding strategies.

When consumers face uncertainty regarding self-expression and identity construction, reference groups provide external cues and prompts to facilitate decision-making (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). However, when consumers' desired group is closely associated with a particular brand, they tend to assign more positive meanings to that brand (Kowalczyk & Mitchell, 2022). Concurrently, reference groups in social media play a crucial role in shaping brand image and consumer cognition (Yin et al., 2025). Therefore, in Study 3, we continue to examine the boundary conditions under which SES affects their LBP, investigating the potential moderating effects of reference groups.

5 Study 3: Moderating Effect of Reference Group

Study 3 investigates whether heightened reference group influence enhances LBP across different SES groups. This study employs an online experimental design, manipulating participants' SES through a social status comparison paradigm. Brand-related visual stimuli are presented to assess differences in consumer preferences for local brands under varying reference group influences.

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Participants

Participants were recruited through Credamo platform for publishing experiments. After excluding participants with excessively long or short response times, those who answered regularly, and those who failed the attention check, a final sample of 222 valid responses was obtained. The sample comprised 107 males (48.2%) and 115 females (51.8%), with a mean age of 24.53 years ($SD = 5.59$ years). All participants carefully read the experimental instructions and provided informed consent before the experiment commenced, and those with valid data received a certain experimental reward upon completion.

5.1.2 Materials and Procedures

First, following the same SEE manipulation task as in study 2 (Mahadevan, 2021; YOON, 2017). They were randomly assigned to high or low SES condition groups, where they read the relevant graphic material and completed a writing task. To test the validity of the SES manipulation, participants rated their role's education, annual income, and occupational status (1 = very low, 10 = very high) to create an average index that served as the SES manipulation check. Next, participants read the graphic material about the brand and completed the brand preference measure. The manipulation of the reference group followed the methods of Chuang et al. (2012) and Mi et al. (2019), where participants read brand graphic materials with comments from different reference groups. In the in-group condition, participants were informed that a new brand umbrella was praised by a friend, and its user evaluation emphasized the unique design, good quality, and high recommendation within their friend circle. In the out-group condition, participants read pictures of similar products and comments from Weibo users. After reading the graphic materials, participants reported the type of group they thought would recommend the product (1 = family and friends, 2 = colleagues, 3 = online strangers, 4 = professional reviewers), which served as the reference group manipulation check item. LBP was measured in the same way as in Study 2, following the method of Xie et al. (2015), through 3 questions ($\alpha = 0.89$). Self-identity ($\alpha = 0.83$) and social identity ($\alpha = 0.89$) were then measured as in Study 1 (Rozenkrants et al., 2017; Xue Ting et al., 2013). Finally, participants reported demographic information such as gender and age.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 Manipulation Check

Independent sample t-test results showed that the SES score of the high-SES group ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.67$) was significantly higher than that of the low-SES group ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.60$), $t(220) = 4.60$, $p < 0.001$. This indicated that the manipulation of SES was valid in this study. Simultaneously, to test the effectiveness of the reference group manipulation, a regression analysis was conducted with the reference group type as the independent variable (dummy coded: 0 = out-group, 1 = in-group) and the manipulation check item score as the dependent variable. A lower score on the reference group manipulation check item indicated that the in-group was the source of product recommendation, while a higher score indicated an outgroup as the recommendation source. The results showed that the reference group type was negatively correlated with the manipulation check item score ($\beta = -0.51$, $t = -8.83$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the manipulation of the reference group was effective.

5.2.2 Preference for Local Brand

With local brand preference as the dependent variable, a 2 (SES: high vs. low) \times 2 (reference group: in-group vs. out-group) ANOVA was conducted. The main effect of SES was significant, $F(1, 218) = 5.97$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. The main effect of reference group was also significant, $F(1, 218) = 14.77$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. Importantly, the interaction between SES and reference group was significant, $F(1, 218) = 3.97$, $p = 0.048$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Simple effect analysis showed that in the in-group condition, the preference for local brands in the high-SES group ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.11$) was significantly lower than that in the low-SES group ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.12$), $F(1, 218) = 9.40$, $p < 0.01$. However, under the out-group condition, there was no significant difference in local brand preference between the high-SES group ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.00$) and the low-SES group ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.02$), $F(1, 218) = 0.11$, $p = 0.74$.

5.2.3 Moderation Effect of Reference Group

To further explore the influence of reference groups on LBP, we employed Hayes's (2018) PROCESS Model 14, treating SES as the independent variable (low = 0, high = 1). Social

identity and self-identity were the mediating variables, reference group (out-group = 0, in-group = 1) was the moderating variable, and local brand preference was the dependent variable to test the moderated mediation effect. As shown in Table 4, the interaction between self-identity and reference group was non-significant ($b = -0.003$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -0.03$, $p = 0.98$). However, the interaction between social identity and reference group was significant ($b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 3.74$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the moderating effect of the reference group occurred only in the regression path from social identity to LBP, indicating that the reference group regulated the relationship between social identity and LBP but not the relationship between self-identity and LBP. Consequently, Study 3 supported H5 but did not support H6.

Table 4. Test of Moderated Mediation Effect

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	β	t	R	R^2	F
Self-identity				0.18	0.03	7.53**
	SES	0.36	2.74**			
Social identity				0.15	0.02	5.09*
	SES	0.30	2.26*			
LBP				0.60	0.35	19.67***
	SES	-0.34	-3.03**			
	Self-identity	-0.28	-4.69***			
	Social identity	0.42	7.45***			
	Reference group	0.29	5.11***			
	Self-identity \times Reference group	-0.003	-0.03			
	Social identity \times Reference group	0.21	3.74***			

The interaction between social identity and reference group is depicted in Figure 4. Results of simple slope analysis reveal that under the in-group condition, social identity significantly influenced LBP ($b = 0.58$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 6.54$, $p < 0.001$). Simultaneously, under the out-group condition, social identity also significantly affected LBP ($b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 2.47$, $p = 0.015$). Notably, the predictive coefficient of social identity on LBP was larger in the in-group

condition compared to the out-group condition ($0.58 > 0.20$), indicating that the presence of an in-group reference enhanced the positive predictive effect of social identity on LBP.

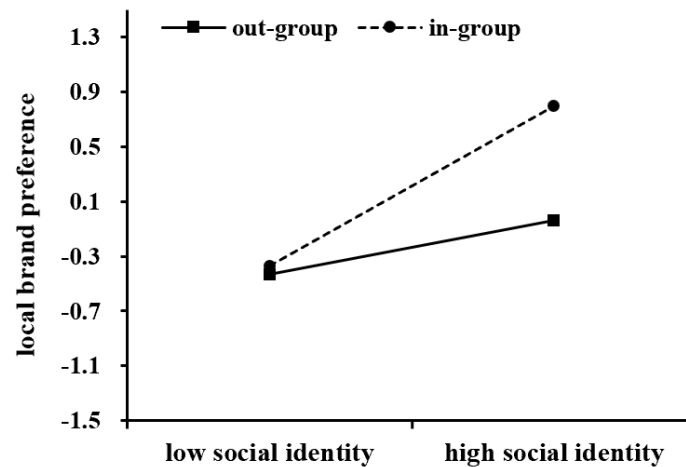


Figure 4. Moderating effects of the reference group

5.3 Discussion

Study 3 further explored the boundary conditions under which SES influences LBP. It examined differences in consumer preference for local brands under the influence of different reference group types. Specifically, under the in-group condition (compared to the out-group condition), SES enhanced the indirect effect of social identity on local brand preference. In other words, in the in-group condition, it increased the positive effect of consumers' social identity on their preference for local brands.

However, Study 3 did not find a moderating effect of the reference group on the relationship between self-identity and LBP. Two interpretations of this result are possible. On the one hand, the source diversity of reference groups provides consumers with multiple ways to establish their self-concept. With the rise of social media, Internet celebrity bloggers, live broadcast anchors, and marketing communities establish contact with consumers through dynamic social interaction (Yin et al., 2025), so the influence of reference groups on individuals is not a single dimension of member or non-member groups. On the other hand, in-groups may stimulate a sense of self-identity threat to consumption. When consumers are imitated by dissociative

groups (member groups), it leads to their sense of self-identity threat (i.e., uniqueness threat), which in turn increases their desire for self-expression (Jiang et al., 2024). Simultaneously, the results of this study indicate that high-SES individuals are dominated by self-identity in the consumption of local brands, so higher SES individuals are more likely to make brand decisions away from their group. However, it also depends on the consumption scenario. Zhe and Xinyi (2022) point out that in an identities-based self-consumption scenario, self-construction has no significant effect on consumers' brand preferences when they are members of an in-group, while in an identities-based consumption of others (i.e., gift-giving) scenario, gift-giving self-construction does not affect their brand preferences when gift-giving and gift-receiving have the same status. Therefore, the results of Study 3 also support related studies on the influence of self-identity on "uniqueness need" and "status gain" (Arbore et al., 2014).

6 General Discussion

The study investigates the effect of SES on LBP, uncovering the psychological processes and boundary conditions that shape this relationship. Three studies consistently demonstrate a negative correlation between SES and LBP. By measuring (Study 1) and manipulating (Studies 2 and 3) SES, the research reveals that self-identity and social identity are the primary psychological drivers of brand preference differences across SES groups. High-SES consumers, driven by self-identity salience, exhibit lower LBP compared to low-SES consumers. Furthermore, the study identifies brand traditional cultural load (Study 2) and reference group (Study 3) as key moderators of the SES-LBP relationship. A strong traditional cultural identity heightens social identity, strengthening its positive effect on LBP. (In Study 2, under the high BTCL condition, the predictive coefficient of social identity on LBP was $b = 0.59$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 7.84$, $p < 0.001$, significantly higher than under the low BTCL condition: $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 2.51$, $p = 0.014$). Similarly, although the study did not find a moderating effect of reference groups on the relationship between self-identity and LBP (In Study 3, the interaction between self-identity and reference group was $b = -0.003$, SE

= 0.06, $t = 0.03$, $p = 0.98$), in-group contexts were found to amplify the influence of social identity on LBP (In Study 3, under the in-group condition, the predictive coefficient of social identity on LBP was $b = 0.58$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 6.54$, $p < 0.001$, significantly higher than under the out-group condition: $b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 2.47$, $p = 0.015$), thereby enhancing purchase intentions across all SES groups compared to out-group settings.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The present work unveils a novel phenomenon of home-based brand consumption and sheds light on how SES influences consumer behavior. First, our findings enrich the understanding of how different SES consumer groups engage in brand consumption. Brand choice is influenced by various factors, including the difference in cultural capital, which leads distinct SES groups to prioritize local brand consumption differently. High-SES consumers possess more cultural capital and a global perspective (Bourdieu, 1984), benefiting from cross-border flows, globalized consumption, and international media (Bourdieu, 2002; Liu & Soleck, 2004). They often leverage cosmopolitan resources to create a sense of belonging and become "global citizens" (Carlson et al., 2017). While sociology and marketing have studied the impact of SES on consumer behavior (Srivastava, 2023; Aljukhadar, 2021; Mandel et al., 2017), few studies have examined the bias towards brands' country of origin. Concurrently, consumer brand choice aligns with rational choice theory, pursuing personal utility maximization (Vries & Fennis, 2019). From this principle, local brands can better meet the needs of economically disadvantaged groups, such as cost-effectiveness, compared to foreign brands. Our study contributes to the general knowledge of how SES influences consumer choice of local brands, providing valuable insights for marketing strategy formulation.

Second, we contribute to the literature on SES by uncovering the roles of self-identity and social identity (Easterbrook et al., 2020; Gobel & Miyamoto, 2024). While previous studies have shown that social class influences individuals' self-perception and self-concept construction (Kraus et al., 2012; Iacoviello & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2019; Oeberst & Wu, 2015), we demonstrate that SES itself can influence how consumers construct their self-identity and, consequently, their

preferences and behaviors. We posit that local brand consumption is a socially recognized practice. In expressing one's identity through consumption (self-identity), which often involves a preference for material products (Leung et al., 2022), choosing local brands may diminish one's uniqueness and represent conformity (Carvalho, 2019; Wang, 2023). Conversely, buying global brands provides consumers with a passport to global citizenship (Ozsomer, 2012; Strizhakova et al., 2008), offering more cultural capital for high-SES individuals to construct a global identity (Ozsomer, 2008; Stephens et al., 2024). Therefore, the mediation model indicates that consumers' SES shapes their identity structure, which subsequently influences their brand choice tendency.

Third, this study provides an important contribution to consumer researchers interested in cultural marketing. Previous studies have shown that culture can activate cultural attributes shared by individuals (He & Wang, 2015). Individuals use the "culture-identity" link to define and shape their identity by consuming culturally specific products (Berger & Ward, 2010; Gao et al., 2009). Our findings suggest that the traditional culture embedded in a brand impacts consumers' social identity, irrespective of their SES, which in turn affects their LBP. The consumer purchase process encompasses cultural recognition, emotional needs, and the pursuit of social value. Consumers with higher cultural and social identity tend to exhibit more positive attitudes toward domestic brands due to emotional ties to the symbolic meaning of their country's culture (Aaker et al., 2001; He & Wang, 2015). Therefore, this work provides theoretical support for the positive role of cultural promotion in the marketing of local brands. Future research could further explore how physical and social spaces shape the politics of consumer identity in relation to local brand consumption (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2021).

Furthermore, through this work, we show that consumers do not always switch to status symbolic brand consumption. Instead, we identified specific contexts in which local brands became more attractive. Specifically, we show that the in-group condition raises the desire for homegrown brands. Previous studies have shown that reference groups can influence consumer behavior from both informational and normative dimensions (Chuang et al., 2012; Jiang et al., 2024; Orth & Kahle, 2008). The former reflects that consumers directly obtain product or brand

information of reference group members, or observe their consumption behaviors and concepts to guide their consumption decisions (Chuang et al., 2012). The latter reflects that consumers follow or conform to the will of others in order to obtain the recognition of the reference group (Wei & Yu, 2012). However, due to the high belief of power distance in Chinese culture, consumers are more sensitive to normative influences and thus tend to follow the norms of the social class to which they belong or aspire (Huang Haiyang et al., 2021). Our findings suggest that although high SES consumption of local brands is more driven by self-identity, it may also be moderated by group information.

6.2 Marketing implications

The findings of this research offer actionable insights not only for marketing managers but also for corporate strategists, product developers, and public policymakers seeking to foster local brand growth and cultural confidence in a globalized marketplace.

First, for brand managers, our results underscore the importance of segmenting consumers by socioeconomic status (SES) and tailoring branding strategies accordingly. While high-SES consumers are driven by self-identity and a desire for uniqueness, they are not entirely impervious to local brands—especially when these brands are imbued with high levels of traditional cultural symbolism. Therefore, local brands aiming to attract high-SES segments should emphasize cultural distinctiveness and symbolic value rather than competing solely on functional attributes or price. For example, brands like Li-Ning and Huawei have successfully leveraged traditional Chinese aesthetics and narratives to appeal to both domestic and international audiences (He & Wang, 2017; Wang, 2023). By positioning local brands as vehicles of cultural heritage and identity, firms can enhance perceived brand status and desirability among high-SES consumers who value differentiation and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Özsomer, 2012).

Second, for product developers and design teams, the moderating role of BTCL suggests that integrating traditional cultural elements into product design, packaging, and storytelling can strengthen social identity and foster emotional connections with consumers across SES groups. This is particularly relevant in industries such as fashion, cosmetics, and food and beverage, where

cultural narratives can enhance product meaning and consumer engagement (Chai et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2023). For instance, incorporating motifs from classical art, using traditional color palettes, or drawing on historical narratives can activate shared cultural schemas and reinforce in-group identity (Chiu & Hong, 2006). Such strategies not only elevate brand perception but also contribute to the preservation and modernization of cultural heritage, aligning with broader societal goals of cultural confidence .

Third, for public policymakers and industry associations, our findings highlight the potential of local brands as catalysts for sustainable economic development and cultural soft power. Policymakers can support local brands through cultural branding initiatives, such as sponsoring design competitions, establishing cultural branding guidelines, or creating certification systems for “heritage-inspired” products (Daskon & Binns, 2010). Additionally, given the influence of reference groups, public campaigns that feature in-group endorsements (e.g., respected community figures, celebrities, or KOLs) can enhance the social acceptability and appeal of local brands, especially among low-SES consumers who are more sensitive to normative influences (Wei & Yu, 2012; Yin et al., 2025). Such efforts can help build a cohesive national brand identity and reduce over-reliance on foreign brands.

Finally, for digital and community managers, the role of reference groups—especially in-group influences—suggests that brands should prioritize community-building and social validation in their digital marketing strategies. Online platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu offer opportunities to create branded communities where consumers can share experiences, co-create meaning, and reinforce social identity (Yin et al., 2023). Brands can also collaborate with local influencers who embody cultural authenticity to amplify their message. For example, HEYTEA and Nayuki have successfully used social media to foster a sense of belonging and cultural pride among young consumers (Wang et al., 2023). These strategies not only drive engagement but also strengthen the link between brand consumption and social identity.

In summary, this research provides a multi-level framework for leveraging identity-driven motivations to enhance local brand competitiveness. By aligning brand strategy with the cultural

and social identities of target segments, stakeholders across sectors can contribute to a more resilient and culturally-grounded brand ecosystem.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This research provides robust evidence for the roles of self-identity, social identity, BTCL, and reference groups in shaping the relationship between SES and local brand preference. However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings, and they offer productive avenues for future inquiry.

First, regarding the measurement and manipulation of SES, our operationalization relied on objective indicators (income, education, occupation) and a ladder-based priming task. While these approaches are well-established, they may not fully capture the subjective or multidimensional nature of social class. Future studies could simulate more immersive social comparison scenarios to enhance ecological validity. Additionally, given our finding that high-SES consumers' preference for local brands can be elevated under high-BTCL conditions (Study 2), future work should examine whether specific dimensions of SES (e.g., education level vs. income) differentially predict identity activation and brand responses.

Second, the external validity and cultural specificity of our findings warrant further investigation. All three studies utilized Chinese consumer samples, whose cultural orientation—characterized by collectivism and high power distance belief—likely amplified the observed effects of social identity and reference groups (Huang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). To assess the generalizability of our model, cross-cultural replications are essential. For instance, in individualistic cultures where self-identity may be chronically salient, the moderating role of BTCL or in-group references might be weaker or operate through different mechanisms. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of “local” versus “foreign” brands varies across markets (e.g., in Western countries, foreign brands often originate from developing economies), which may alter the status connotations uncovered in our studies.

Third, although we controlled for brand familiarity and used hypothetical brands in Studies 2 and 3, participants' pre-existing brand attitudes in Study 1 may have influenced their

preferences. Future research could employ lesser-known or newly launched brands to minimize the confounding effects of prior associations. Alternatively, longitudinal designs tracking brand perception evolution as cultural positioning is introduced would shed light on causal processes over time.

Finally, our studies identified BTCL and reference groups as key moderators, but other boundary conditions remain unexplored. For example, product category (luxury vs. necessity, public vs. private consumption) may interact with identity motives in shaping local brand appeal. Similarly, individual differences such as consumer cosmopolitanism or national identity strength could further qualify the SES–LBP relationship. Investigating these factors would yield a more nuanced understanding of when and for whom local brands resonate.

In conclusion, while this work illuminates the identity-based mechanisms and contextual conditions underlying SES differences in local brand preference, it also highlights the need for more diverse methods, samples, and moderators in future research. Addressing these limitations will not only validate the present findings but also refine theoretical models of social class, identity, and consumer culture in an increasingly globalized marketplace.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval Statement:

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Northeast Normal University (Approval No. 2023058) on June 15, 2023.

Informed Consent Statement:

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The consent process was conducted in written form by the researcher Xia Xin between June 20 and October 20, 2023. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential handling of their data. They consented to the use of their responses for research purposes and the publication of aggregated results.

The scope of the consent covered the following:

- Agreement to participate in the study
- Consent for the use of collected data for research purposes

- Consent for the publication of research results

Data Availability Statement:

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality agreements with participants but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Supporting materials, including survey instruments and experimental stimuli, are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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