

# Purchase intention of Chinese consumers toward a US apparel brand: a test of a composite behavior intention model

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to assist US apparel firms to successfully market in China. It aims to accurately predict Chinese consumers' purchase intentions toward a US brand. For this purpose, it proposes a composite model incorporating two behavioral intention models, Lee's model and decomposed Ajzen's model, and empirically tests the composite model.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A total of 747 consumer data were collected in three cities of China, Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, utilizing a series of mall intercept method at two levels of shopping malls in each city.

**Findings** – Among the proposed direct paths to purchase intention (PI), attitude toward the US brand apparel was the most important in explaining contemporary Chinese consumers' purchase intentions, followed by external perceived behavioral control (PBC) and subjective norm (SN). Two Confucian values, face saving and group conformity, did not directly affect PI at all, and face saving only influenced PI indirectly through the increase of attitude toward US brand apparel. Among external PBC (one's controllability toward a purchase) and internal PBC (one's self-efficacy), only external PBC led to PI.

**Practical implications** – By examining the two aspects of PBC, the study validated the importance of consumers' resource controllability (i.e. external PBC) in Chinese purchase behaviors in the midst of rapid socioeconomic changes. This approach advances previous studies that primarily viewed PBC as one dimension.

**Originality/value** – The paper is one of earliest endeavors to consider the decomposed PBC in a composite model. Also, the paper provides early proof that external PBC is more important than internal PBC in purchase contexts.

**Keywords** Consumer behaviour, Purchasing, China, Clothing, Marketing strategy, Foreign trade

**Paper type** Research paper

**An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.**

## Introduction

With one-fourth of the world's population and the world's fastest rate of economic growth, China offers huge market opportunities for US firms. To address these opportunities, a growing number of studies have explored Chinese consumer purchase behavior utilizing behavioral intention (BI) models such as the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), and Lee's (1990) modified Fishbein model (from now on Lee's model).

The early studies on Confucian consumer behavior generally agreed that Confucian consumers including

Chinese consumers reflect social pressures (e.g. face saving and group conformity) in their purchase decision more than western consumers (e.g. Lee, 1990; Lee and Green, 1991). However, the recent studies report rather inconsistent findings. It is not rare to see the insignificant role of subjective norm (SN) in Chinese consumers' purchase intention in recent studies (Chan and Lau, 1998; Shen *et al.*, 2003). Face saving also played an inconsistent role in explaining purchase intention in Hong Kong (Malhotra and McCort, 2001).

This study posits that the insignificant role of normative influences (i.e. face saving, subjective norm) may be related to value changes among contemporary Chinese consumers. As inevitable results of fast economic growth, Chinese traditional Confucian values have been challenged in the modernization process of China, and western characteristics, such as individualism and materialism, have been emerging (Leung, 2008; Piron, 2006; Wang, 2006a). Under these rapidly changing economics, traditional and contemporary values interplay (Leung, 2008); thus, neither Fishbein model that

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Journal of Consumer Marketing  
28/3 (2011) 187–199  
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 0736-3761]  
[DOI 10.1108/07363761111127617]

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This study is funded by the US Department of Agriculture and reports partial results of the project. The authors sincerely appreciate the generous support of the funding agency.

mainly provides explanation powers to western cultures nor Lee's model that was invented to explain Confucian consumers can adequately explain the consumption behavior of contemporary Chinese consumers. Therefore, it is vital to examine Chinese consumers' purchase behavior with a comprehensive research framework in order to provide realistic answers to US apparel firms.

The purpose of this study is to precisely explain contemporary Chinese consumers' purchase behaviors toward US branded apparel goods with a more comprehensive model. To this end, this study proposes a composite model that allows us to test the influence of both Chinese traditional and contemporary values on their purchase behavior, and empirically tests it with data collected in three cities of China. The composite model incorporates Lee's modified Fishbein model and decomposed Ajzen's theory of planned behavior. Lee's model was incorporated into the composite model to examine the influence of Confucian values, and the decomposed Ajzen's theory of planned behavior was integrated to examine specific influences of Chinese consumers' resources and control on their purchase behavior. This study decomposes PBC into two dimensions, internal control (i.e. one's self-efficacy) and external control (one's controllability toward external barriers such as resources), since it allows researchers to examine the specific influence of each of two dimensions on purchase intention. This study further compares the proposed composite model with Lee's model and decomposed Ajzen's model to verify the proposed model's accuracy. Levi's jeans was chosen as the US apparel brand in this study because Levi's has been identified as the most well-known foreign brand among Chinese people in previous studies (e.g. Wu, 2005).

## Literature review

This section first reviews how recent economic changes have impacted Chinese consumers' values, then outlines behavioral intentional models and their drawbacks in explaining Chinese consumers' purchase behaviors. Finally a composite model that might increase the explanation power for Chinese consumers' purchase intentions is proposed.

### Chinese consumers in the midst of dynamic economic changes

China has undergone dynamic political and social changes, including military defeats by western countries in the late nineteenth century, the Communist takeover in 1949, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy and economic reforms since 1978. The open door policy triggered China's industrialization and modernization, simultaneously carrying western ideas into China. These drastic political and social changes have demolished some traditional Chinese values (Bai, 1998), shifted the existing social order, and impinged on people's ways of thinking (Ng, 2004; Wang, 2006a).

China traditionally represents collectivism culture with the influence of Confucianism. However, their traditional Confucian values have been challenged and individualism and materialism have arisen as consequences of affluence and modernization owing to economic reforms (Leung, 2008; Wang, 2006a). Chinese consumers are becoming increasingly materialistic and self-centered, and are seeking fun and

hedonic experience and Confucian values are becoming meaningless (Piron, 2006). The "power of money" or "money worship" is reflected in three "gos" in China: go abroad, go coastal, and go where the money is (Wang, 2006a).

Under these transitional conditions, Chinese consumers have had ambivalence toward consumerism (Lu, 2004) and exhibit paradoxical behavior patterns. One force seeks to hold the Chinese true to their cultural roots of 2,000 years, while an opposite energy draws them into the twenty-first century of Western dress, values, individuality, and materialistic capitalism. However, the interplay between traditional values and contemporary values seem to vary by contexts. Leung (2008) argued that traditional norms and values are dominant in social behaviors but economic behaviors are more likely to be driven by contemporary social ethos based on their cost-benefit analyses and economic rationality.

While ample studies address China's institutional changes in the midst of societal transformation (e.g. Tsui *et al.*, 2004), there have been very limited studies conducted on how traditional Chinese values and emerging values co-play in Chinese consumers' apparel consumption. As apparel consumption is part of economic behavior, this study posits that contemporary individualistic and materialistic values will play a more vital role than traditional values in shaping Chinese consumers' purchase behavior toward foreign brands.

### Theory of reasoned action (TRA)

The TRA model (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), typically referred to as the Fishbein model, has been the most well known behavioral model for a long time. The Fishbein model posits that both attitude toward a behavior and subjective norm are immediate determinants of intention to perform a behavior. Attitude toward a behavior is recognized as a person's positive or negative evaluation of a relevant behavior and is composed of a person's salient beliefs regarding the perceived outcomes of performing the behavior. On the other hand, subjective norm, a function of normative beliefs, represents a person's perception of whether significant referents approve or disapprove of a behavior. In other words, SN is related to how much an individual is aware of a salient referent's opinion. The TRA model has been proven remarkably robust in various settings (e.g. Gentry and Calantone, 2002).

However, recent studies that tested the TRA model in Confucian cultures found the path from SN to purchase intention, the core relationship in TRA, was insignificant. Shen *et al.*'s (2003) study of Chinese consumer purchase intention of USA-made apparel revealed that SN did not significantly influence purchase intention. The same insignificant relationship was found in a Taiwanese consumer apparel purchase study (Wang, 2006b). This guided us to consider that some cultural values, rather than SN, may be more related to purchase behavior among Confucian consumers. The next section reviews a model that incorporates Confucian values.

### Lee's modified Fishbein model

Lee (1990) modified the Fishbein model, criticizing that subjective norm in the model did not capture the social pressures affecting Confucian consumers. To explain consumers in Confucian cultures, he suggested substituting two strong social pressure constructs that are present in

Confucian society, face saving and group conformity, for the SN. Group conformity refers to social pressure to comply with the group norm regardless of an individual's own private view. Group conformity is a stronger social pressure than is SN in that SN simply refers to an individual's perception of important others' views (Lee, 1990).

Face saving is defined as an individual's place in his/her social network; it is the most important measure of one's social worth and reputation in Confucian cultures (Hu and Grove, 1999). A notion of face seems to be similar to western concepts of dignity and prestige (Yau, 1994); however, face has much greater social significance among Confucian societies than do similar notions among Americans (Hu and Grove, 1999). In Confucian cultures, face is lost when an individual does not satisfy essential requirements corresponding to one's social position (Ho, 1972). Failing to meet a requirement would place effective maintenance of one's social standing at stake; therefore, a consumer in a Confucian culture is always under strong social pressures to maintain one's face (Lee, 1990).

Lee (1990) also added a causal relationship between the social influence factor (face saving and group conformity) and attitude; the original Fishbein model assumed no linkage between the social influence variable (i.e. subjective norm) and attitude. Lee (1990) empirically found that the modified model had a greater power for explaining Korean students' sneaker purchase intentions than the original model did. The relevancy of Lee's model in explaining Confucian consumers was also verified in a more recent study. Malhotra and McCort (2001) identified superiority of Lee's model over Fishbein model in explaining Hong Kong consumers' behaviors regarding athletic shoes.

However, the influence of group conformity and face saving on Confucian consumers' purchase intentions is rather inconsistent. While group conformity did not influence Korean consumers' purchase behaviors of electronic goods and Polo sweaters (Chung and Pysarchik, 2000), it did impact purchase intentions of athletic shoes among Hong Kong college students (Malhotra and McCort, 2001). The other Confucian construct in Lee's model, face saving, has shown inconsistent findings in explaining purchase intentions of Hong Kong consumers (Malhotra and McCort, 2001). A recent study with Chinese college students failed to even establish discriminant validity among group conformity, face saving, and subjective norm, indicating that young Chinese consumers do not distinguish differences among the social normative influences (Jin and Kang, 2007).

Lee's (1990) model was developed almost two decades ago. Since that time, China has achieved outstanding economic growth. Considering that collectivists become more individualistic as economic affluence increases (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995), the influence of collectivistic normative factors may have become less relevant in China. As proof, Jin and Kang (2007) discovered that the influence of perceived behavioral control (PBC) was higher than that of face saving on purchase intentions of foreign brand jeans among Chinese college students. This logic guides us to examine the influence of PBC in more detail. The following section reviews the theory of planned behavior, which incorporates PBC.

### Decomposed theory of planned behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) extended the original Fishbein model by adding one variable, perceived behavioral control (PBC), to the original model to explain behaviors that require resources and control. Perceived behavioral control is the buyer's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing a given behavior. This ease/difficulty aspect relates to whether or not a person has the resources or control to perform a behavior. The theory of planned behavior has been found to be empirically superior to the Fishbein model in various settings (Ajzen, 1991; Kang *et al.*, 2006; Madden *et al.*, 1992; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1993).

When it was introduced by Ajzen (1991), PBC was viewed as one dimension. However, this one dimension of PBC measurement often provided poor internal reliability (Kidwell and Jewell, 2003). Notani (1998) suggested through a meta-analysis that the relevancy of the TPB model is heavily dependent on "nature, formulation, and adequacy of the PBC construct employed in a study" (p. 254) and recommended a more refined measurement of PBC.

Several researchers (e.g. Manstead and van Eekelen, 1998; Armitage and Conner, 1999a, b; Sparks *et al.*, 1997) who questioned the unitary conception of PBC suggested that PBC could be decomposed into two components: internal control and external control. Internal control refers to an individual's internal or personal confidence in his/her abilities, such as requisite skills to perform a behavior (e.g. Ajzen, 2002; Armitage and Conner, 1999a, b). The concept of internal control is similar to Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy that refers to the belief in one's capabilities to organize and to execute the course of action required to attain a goal (Celuch *et al.*, 2007). External control refers to the degree of one's controllability of a behavior and reflects an individual's beliefs about the extent to which performing the behavior is up to the individual (e.g. Ajzen, 2002; Armitage and Conner, 1999a, b). That is, external control represents an individual's judgment of control over external barriers, such as resource availability, to perform a behavior. If one has a high level of control over external barriers, this will facilitate a behavior; thus, external control acts as a facilitating condition (e.g. Ajzen, 2002; Armitage and Conner, 1999a, b).

Significant previous studies have confirmed the distinctiveness of internal control and external control, proving the relevancy of decomposed PBC (Ajzen, 2002; Kidwell and Jewell, 2003). The relative importance of internal control and external control are different by research contexts. In academic settings (e.g. Conner and Armitage, 1998; Manstead and van Eekelen, 1998) and in industrial buyer intentions to use the internet (e.g. Celuch *et al.*, 2007), the influence of internal control (e.g. self-efficacy) was stronger than that of external control on behavioral intention. However, for the adoption of information and communication technology among socio-economically disadvantaged consumers, only external control was related to behavioral intention (Hsieh *et al.*, 2008).

According to Ajzen (2002), the purpose of the investigation determines whether researchers treat PBC as a unitary factor or as two decomposed factors (self efficacy and facilitating conditions). Therefore, this study employs TPB treating PBC as two decomposed factors (from now on decomposed Ajzen model) because the decomposed Ajzen model can generate more specific managerial implications. Apparel consumption behavior requires resources and control. For Chinese, the

possession of resources may be even more important to an apparel purchase decision as price is a major obstacle of buying foreign products (Hu, 1994). Also Confucian values are becoming meaningless (Piron, 2006) and economic behavior is based on economic rationality under rapid economic growth (Leung, 2008), Chinese consumers' resources and control may influence more on purchase behavior of foreign brand apparel than will normative influences, such as subjective norm or face saving. To test this postulation, PBC must be considered as two dimensions so that each effect can be gauged and managed.

**A proposed composite model**

The proposed composite model incorporates Lee's model and decomposed Ajzen's model. As noted earlier, each model has its limitations. Lee's model does not consider consumers' resources and control, which are important in apparel consumption, and decomposed Ajzen's model does not take Confucian values (face saving and group conformity) into account. Therefore, this study views that the more comprehensive understanding of contemporary Chinese can be achieved only when important constructs are simultaneously examined in a model. In order to examine the proposed model's accuracy in predicting contemporary Chinese consumer purchase behavior, the proposed composite model will be further compared with two other models, Lee's model and decomposed Ajzen's model. Figure 1 shows the proposed composite model and the two other models that will be compared. All paths in Figure 1 are suggested to be positive, and the rationale for each hypothesis in the proposed model is well established in previous studies. Table I summarizes the previous studies that support each hypothesis and the research context of each study.

**Method**

**Measurement**

A questionnaire was initially developed in English and then translated into Chinese by an individual fluent in both English and Chinese. To ensure translation equivalence, the questionnaire was then back-translated into English by another bilingual native Chinese unfamiliar with the survey instrument.

Because Levi's was selected for this study, the questionnaire started with one screening question: How well do you know about Levi's? Only consumers who at least heard about the

Levi's brand name were asked to fill out the questionnaire. If mall visitors had not heard about Levi's, they were not asked to complete the questionnaire. The following section illustrates how each construct in the proposed model was measured.

*Face saving and group conformity*

Both constructs were adopted from Lee (1990) and operationalized in accord with Lee (1990). Three items measured face saving: "Whether owning a Levi's jeans would hurt my reputation with the people who are important to me," "Whether I feel ashamed when people who are important to me see me owning a Levi's jeans," and "Whether I think a Levi's jeans would improve my reputation to the people who are important to me." To measure group conformity, three items were included: "I feel that most people around me expect me to comply with their decision to buy a Levi's jeans," "My decision to buy a Levi's jeans would be influenced by knowing that many others would also buy a Levi's jeans," and "The decision to buy a Levi's jeans would be influenced by whether owning them would make me fit in with other people."

*Attitude*

To measure attitude toward US jeans, eight attributes representing various aspects of apparel products (well-known brand, comfort, reasonable price, good fit, durability, latest fashion, quality, and easy to coordinate with other items) were developed by the authors based on an extensive literature review. Attitude toward Levi's jeans was computed for each attribute using an expectancy-value model (i.e.  $A = e_i b_i$ ) (Shim *et al.*, 2001). In this formula,  $e_i$  represents the importance assigned to each attribute and  $b_i$  represents the belief that each attribute of Levi's jeans provides. Based on Eckman *et al.* (1990), brand, price, fashionability, and coordination were included into an extrinsic criteria, and comfort, fit, durability, and quality were incorporated into an intrinsic criteria of attitude when the data analysis was conducted.

*Subjective norm*

Five items were adopted from Shimp and Kavas (1984). Respondents were asked to use five bi-polar adjectives (bad-good, foolish-wise, boring-exciting, unnecessary-necessary, and worthless-worth money) to indicate how people who are important to them would probably consider their purchase of Levi's jeans. Items were evaluated on a seven-point Likert

**Figure 1** Three behavioral intention models compared in this study

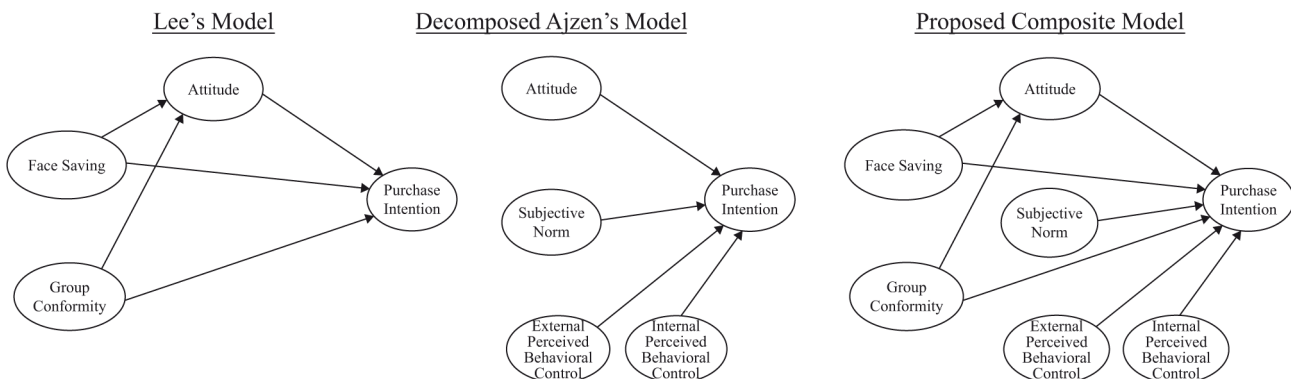


Table I A summary of proposed hypotheses and selected supporting studies

Hypotheses/paths	Proposed relationship	Selected studies supporting the proposed relationships	Research locations	Research contexts
H1. Face saving → Attitude	+	Chung and Pysarchik (2000)	Korea	Domestic VCR purchase
H2. Face saving → PI	+	Chung and Pysarchik (2000)	Korea	Domestic VCR purchase
H3. GC → Attitude	+	Malhotra and McCort (2001)	Hong Kong	Athletic shoes purchase
H4. GC → PI	+	Malhotra and McCort (2001)	Hong Kong	Athletic shoes purchase
H5. Attitude → PI	+	Shen <i>et al.</i> (2003)	China	US-made apparel purchase
		Chan and Lau (1998)	Hong Kong	Gold ring purchase
		Wang (2006a)	Taiwan	Apparel purchase
		Chung and Pysarchik (2000)	Korea	Domestic VCR purchase
		Summers <i>et al.</i> (2006)	US	American alligator leather apparel purchase
H6. Subjective norm → PI	+	Chan and Lau (1998)	Hong Kong	Gold ring purchase
		Shimp and Kavas (1984)	US	Coupon usage
H7. Internal PBC → PI	+	Lin (2007)	Taiwan	Internet purchase
		Manstead and van Eekelen (1998)	The Netherlands	Academic performance
		Celuch <i>et al.</i> (2007)	US	Industrial buyer intention to use the internet
H8. External PBC → PI	+	Hsieh <i>et al.</i> (2008)	US	Information and communication technology usage

Notes: PI = Purchase intention; GC = Group conformity; PBC = Perceived behavioral control

scale on which the left end equals  $-3$  (e.g. bad) and the right end equals  $3$  (e.g. good).

#### Decomposed perceived behavioral control

Based on Kang *et al.* (2006) and Kidwell and Jewell (2003), two items for internal PBC and another two items for external PBC were developed to measure perceived behavioral control. Two items for external PBC were “It is mostly up to me whether I will buy a pair of jeans or not” and “I have a great control regarding purchasing a pair of jeans.” Items for internal PBC were “It is very easy for me to choose a pair of jeans among many brands” and “It takes little time to find a pair of jeans I want to buy.”

#### Purchase intention

Based on Mathur (1998), four items were developed to measure purchase intention. The items were “I would definitely buy Levi’s jeans,” “I would absolutely consider buying Levi’s jeans,” “I would definitely expect to buy Levi’s jeans,” and “I would absolutely plan to buy Levi’s jeans.”

In addition to the above seven constructs in the proposed model, demographic variables were measured. With the exception of demographic variables and SN (described above), constructs were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = least important or strongly disagree; 7 = extremely important or strongly agree). Before the actual survey in China, a pre-test was conducted with 50 Chinese college students in the US at a Midwestern comprehensive university; revision of the questionnaire was based on the pre-test results.

#### Data collection

Data were collected in three major Chinese cities, Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, during July 2007. These cities were chosen because their residents have more exposure to foreign apparel brands than do residents in other parts of China. All three are modernized cities with higher monthly and disposable incomes compared to other cities in China (China International Information Center, 2007), thus many foreign apparel firms target residents in these cities and currently operate numerous stores in these locations (Li and

Fung Research Centre, 2006). A series of mall intercept surveys were conducted to target mall shoppers 18 years of age and older. To reach a diverse population of Chinese consumers, the surveys were conducted in at least two levels of shopping malls (high-end and moderate) in each city. Furthermore, to avoid systematic errors, the data were collected on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays over a two-week period during various mall business hours (i.e. 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.). Prior to administration of the survey, Chinese interviewers were trained by a Chinese colleague, a professor at a university in China. Interviewers obtained permission from each shopping mall to administer the survey. Mall visitors were asked to voluntarily participate in the survey, and each interview took approximately 15 minutes. T-shirts, with a retail price of US\$4 each, were given to respondents as incentives.

Initially, a total of 758 questionnaires were collected. After excluding 11 questionnaires that were incomplete, 747 usable data sets were entered for data analysis. Of the 747 data sets, 248 were collected in Shanghai, 248 were collected in Beijing, and 251 were collected in Guangzhou. Of the 747 respondents, 50.6 percent were female and 49.4 percent were male. The mean age of respondents was 20.89, and the range was 18 to 36 years old. This age range is rather small because respondents had to have at least heard about Levi’s. Most (64.4 percent) had monthly household income between US\$501 and US\$2,000. Compared to China’s national statistics, the respondents in this study were relatively young with relatively higher family income, reflecting the characteristics of middle-class urban consumers whom are the targets of US apparel firms.

#### Results

To prove the proposed model’s accuracy, the three behavioral intention models were first compared. Following Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) suggestion of a two-stage analysis, first the measurement model of each of the three models was

tested, and then structural model tests were performed using Lisrel 8.80.

### Measurement model test

To confirm measurement reliability and validity, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted for the measurement model of each of the three behavioral intention models. The CFA result of each measurement model indicated an acceptable fit (for Lee's model:  $\chi^2 = 211.35$  (df = 48),  $p$ -value = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.06, 90 percent CI for RMSEA = 0.05-0.07, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.06; for decomposed Ajzen's model:  $\chi^2 = 262.38$  (df = 80),  $p$ -value = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.05, 90 percent CI for RMSEA = 0.04-0.06, CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.03; for the proposed composite model:  $\chi^2 = 548.34$  (df = 168),  $p$ -value = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.05, 90 percent CI for RMSEA = 0.05-0.06, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.05). Table II summarizes the results of CFA for each measurement model. All factor loadings in the models were statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$  and in the 0.52-0.88 range, providing construct validity for each measurement. Internal consistency of each measurement model was also verified through construct reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). All CR and AVE were above the recommended levels of 0.50, proving internal consistency. The average AVEs of each paired constructs surpassed the squares of the correlation between them (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), confirming discriminant validity among the constructs in each model.

### Structural model test and model comparison

After confirming reliability and validity of the measurement models, a structural model test was conducted on each model in sequence. Fit indexes of each model were acceptable (for Lee's model:  $\chi^2 = 211.35$  (df = 48),  $p$ -value = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.06, 90 percent CI for RMSEA = 0.05-0.07, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.06; for decomposed Ajzen's model:  $\chi^2 = 262.38$  (df = 80),  $p$ -value = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.05, 90 percent CI for RMSEA = 0.04-0.06, CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.03; for the proposed composite model:  $\chi^2 = 548.34$  (df = 168),  $p$ -value = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.05, 90 percent CI for RMSEA = 0.05-0.06, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.05) (see Table III). The results of the structural model tests are shown in Table IV and Figure 2.

To identify an optimal model that best explains current Chinese consumers' apparel purchase intentions toward US jeans, this study followed Klein's (1999) suggested model comparison method that recommends three criteria to consider:

- model fit;
- squared multiple correlation for intention ( $R^2$ ); and
- patterns of significant causal relationships among the models.

Following Klein's method, this study first reviewed the model fit indexes of the three behavioral intention models. All three models showed acceptable fit, but no one model appeared notably better than the others (see Table III). Second, the  $R^2$  of each endogenous variable of the models were compared (see Table III). In  $R^2$  of purchase intention, decomposed Ajzen's model provided slightly higher  $R^2$  (0.30) than did

Table II Results of the measurement model test

Latent	Indicator	CSS	Lee's			CSS	Decomposed Ajzen's			CSS	Proposed composite		
			t-value	CR	AVE		t-value	CR	AVE		t-value	CR	AVE
SN	SN1	N/A				0.74	20.57	0.91	0.67	0.74	20.75	0.91	0.66
	SN2					0.83	25.14			0.83	25.07		
	SN3					0.83	25.57			0.83	25.63		
	SN4					0.86	27.16			0.86	27.27		
	SN5					0.81	27.08			0.81	27.30		
FS	FS1	0.78	26.86	0.76	0.52	N/A				0.79	27.18	0.76	0.53
	FS2	0.52	11.84							0.53	12.16		
	FS3	0.83	28.19							0.82	28.02		
GC	GC1	0.65	19.10	0.76	0.51	N/A				0.66	19.60	0.76	0.51
	GC2	0.71	20.96							0.71	20.75		
	GC3	0.78	25.12							0.78	25.00		
iPBC	iPBC1	N/A				0.86	15.24	0.78	0.64	0.80	16.49	0.78	0.63
	iPBC2					0.74	14.49			0.79	16.53		
ePBC	ePBC1	N/A				0.87	21.71	0.83	0.71	0.88	23.10	0.83	0.71
	ePBC2					0.82	20.60			0.81	20.75		
AT	AT1	0.80	14.60	0.70	0.54	0.71	15.27	0.69	0.52	0.73	15.79	0.69	0.53
	AT2	0.66	13.04			0.75	15.24			0.72	15.04		
PI	PI1	0.81	29.65	0.86	0.60	0.81	29.72	0.86	0.60	0.80	29.85	0.86	0.60
	PI2	0.83	28.79			0.83	28.86			0.82	28.64		
	PI3	0.76	23.08			0.76	23.30			0.76	23.84		
	PI4	0.69	19.69			0.69	19.63			0.70	19.93		

Notes:  $n = 747$ ; CSS: Completely standardized solution; SMR: Squared multiple correlations; CR: Construct reliability = (square of the summation of the factor loadings)/((square of the summation of the factor loadings)+(summation of error variances)); AVE: Average variance extracted = (summation of the square of the factor loadings)/((summation of the square of the factor loadings)+(summation of error variances)); SN (Subjective norm), FS (Face saving), GC (Group conformity), iPBC (Internal perceived behavioral control), ePBC (External perceived behavioral control), AT (Attitude), and PI (Purchase intention)

Table III Model fit indexes and squared multiple correlations

	Models		
	Lee's	Decomposed Ajzen's	Proposed composite
<b>Model fit indexes</b>			
$\chi^2$ (df)	211.35 (48)	262.38 (80)	618.79 (171)
RMSEA	0.06	0.05	0.06
CFI	0.97	0.98	0.97
SRMR	0.06	0.03	0.06
<b>Squared multiple correlation (<math>R^2</math>)</b>			
$R^2_{PI}$	0.27	0.30	0.29
$R^2_{ATT}$	0.05		0.06

Notes:  $n = 747$ ;  $R^2_{PI}$ : Squared multiple correlation for purchase intention;  $R^2_{ATT}$ : Squared multiple correlation for attitude toward US jeans

Lee's (0.27) model and the proposed composite model (0.29). This indicates that decomposed Ajzen's model explains 30 percent of the variance in purchase intention, the proposed composite model explains 29 percent and Lee's model explains 27 percent. In  $R^2$  of attitude, the proposed composite model provided a little higher  $R^2$  (0.06) than did Lee's (0.05) model. The decomposed Ajzen's model views attitude as independent of normative influences, unlike Lee's model and the proposed model, so  $R^2$  for attitude cannot be computed for decomposed Ajzen's model. Lastly, the patterns of significant causal relationships across the models were

examined (see Table IV). Overall, the same significant relationship was identified across all three models, except one path (face saving → purchase intention), while the strength of each path was marginally different across models. That is, if one path was positive in one model, the same positive relationship was observed in the other two models. A positive significance was found in a path from face saving to purchase intention in Lee's model, but the same path was not significant in the proposed composite model (this explanation will be provided in the discussion section). Three non-significant paths (group conformity → attitude, group conformity → purchase intention, and internal PBC → purchase intention) were found, and these non-significant relationships were identical across models.

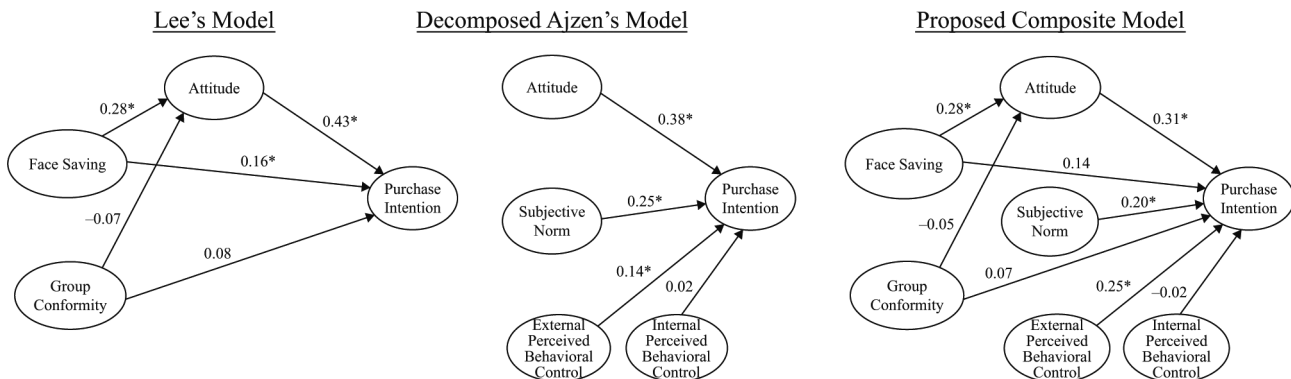
The above findings indicate that the three models are quite comparable and no remarkable differences could be found among them. When models fit characteristics are comparable, previous studies suggest two important research streams in selecting an optimal model: one is to select a parsimonious model (e.g. Bagozzi, 1992) and the other is to select a model that has higher explanation power (e.g. Lin, 2007). In other words, in comparing models, trade-offs between parsimony and more complete information should be examined. Considering the trade-offs, this study chose the proposed composite model as the optimal model because it provides more information for understanding Chinese consumer behavior toward a US apparel brand. Both decomposed Ajzen's model and the proposed model are parsimonious; the proposed model has only two more constructs than the

Table IV Comparison of significance and strengths of individual paths among the three models

Path coefficients	Lee's	Decomposed Ajzen's	Proposed composite
H1. Face saving → Attitude	0.28*	–	0.28*
H2. Face saving → PI	0.16*	–	0.14
H3. GC → Attitude	–0.07	–	–0.05
H4. GC → PI	0.08	–	0.07
H5. Attitude → PI	0.43*	0.38*	0.31*
H6. Subjective norm → PI	–	0.25*	0.20*
H7. Internal PBC → PI	–	0.02	–0.02
H8. External PBC → PI	–	0.14*	0.25*

Notes:  $n = 747$ ; the numbers presented denote completely standardized coefficients; \* $p < 0.01$

Figure 2 Summary of structural model tests on the three behavioral intention models compared in this study



Note: Numbers indicate structural coefficients. \* $p < 0.05$

decomposed Ajzen's model. In terms of explanatory power, however, the proposed model provides more information (thus higher explanation power), which fits with the main purpose of this study (i.e. providing accurate predictions of Chinese consumers' purchase intentions toward a US brand). While the explanation power of the proposed composite model for purchase intention was slightly lower ( $R_{PI}^2 = 0.29$ ) than that of the decomposed Ajzen's model ( $R_{PI}^2 = 0.30$ ), the proposed model provides information that the decomposed Ajzen's model cannot: the positive influence of face saving on attitude. The decomposed Ajzen's model cannot explain how attitude toward a US brand is formulated. Forming a positive attitude toward a US brand is pre-requisite to purchase intention; therefore, understanding how marketers can manipulate consumer attitude is vital. The proposed model, in that sense, provides more meaningful interpretations to marketing practitioners.

Our choice of the proposed model, a model with higher explanation power, corresponds to prior studies in marketing research that chose a model with higher explanation power over a parsimonious one to maximize practicality. For example, Lin (2007) chose a decomposed behavioral intention model when model fit indexes of two BI models were similar because the decomposed model provided a fuller understanding of the determinants of behavioral intentions.

### Hypotheses testing

Since the proposed composite model was chosen as the optimal one in this study, each hypothesized path was interpreted. As Table IV shows, among the eight paths, four paths were found to be significant and four paths were found to be non-significant. While face saving positively influenced attitude ( $H1$ ), it did not affect purchase intention ( $H2$ ); thus  $H1$  was accepted but  $H2$  was rejected. This finding is partially consistent with Chung and Pysarchik (2000) who found positive relationships on both  $H1$  and  $H2$ . Group conformity did not affect attitude nor purchase intention, rejecting  $H3$  and  $H4$ . This finding contradicts Malhotra and McCort's (2001) studies. Two traditional TRA constructs, attitude and subjective norm, increased Chinese consumers' purchase intentions of a US brand, supporting  $H5$  and  $H6$ . These results parallel numerous previous studies (e.g. Shen *et al.*, 2003; Chan and Lau, 1998). While external PBC (i.e. one's controllability) increased purchase intention toward a US brand, internal PBC (i.e. one's self-efficacy) did not. Therefore,  $H7$  was rejected but  $H8$  was accepted. These findings contrast with many previous studies that found stronger effects of internal PBC on behavioral intention (e.g. Lin, 2007; Manstead and van Eekelen, 1998; Celuch *et al.*, 2007), but are consistent with Hsieh *et al.* (2008) who found a significance of external PBC in explaining adoption intention of information and communication technology among socio-economically disadvantaged consumers.

## Discussion and implications

### Summary and discussion of major findings

In order to assist US apparel firms to successfully market in China, this study aimed to accurately predict contemporary Chinese consumers' purchase intentions toward a US brand. For this purpose, the study proposed a composite model incorporating two behavioral intention models, Lee's model and decomposed Ajzen's model, and empirically tested it with

data collected in three cities in China. By comparing the three models with three criteria suggested by Klein (1999), this study concluded that the proposed composite model provides the optimal explanation for Chinese consumers' purchase intentions toward a US brand (i.e. Levi's). The findings of the proposed model provided meaningful interpretations that are worthy of discussion.

First, among the five proposed direct paths to purchase intention (PI), only three paths (attitude  $\rightarrow$  PI, SN  $\rightarrow$  PI, and external PBC  $\rightarrow$  PI) were proved to be significant. Specifically, attitude toward US branded apparel was the most important in explaining contemporary Chinese consumers' purchase intentions ( $\beta = 0.31$ ), followed by external PBC ( $\beta = 0.25$ ) and SN ( $\beta = 0.20$ ). This finding supports many previous studies that found more importance of attitude on PI than of SN or face saving on PI (e.g. Chung and Pysarchik, 2000; Shen *et al.*, 2003; Summers *et al.*, 2006). As anticipated, external PBC was found to be more important than normative influence (i.e. SN) in influencing PI. External PBC is related to a person's perception of controllability about external barriers for a behavior. The most important barrier for purchasing foreign brand apparel among Chinese consumers was revealed to be price (Hu, 1994) and Confucian values are becoming meaningless (Piron, 2006). Accordingly, once Chinese consumers perceive their control over purchasing foreign brand apparel, they develop intent to purchase. This study views that this finding reflects the influence of Western values and materialism that have infused into Chinese values. The traditional Chinese collectivism culture emphasizes interdependence among people, thus others' opinions are more often reflected in Chinese consumers' purchase decisions than they are in the purchase decisions of consumers in an independent individualism culture (Hofstede, 2001). However, this study found less relevancy of SN than PBC, contrary to traditional beliefs. Triandis (1995) argued that three factors, affluence, modernization, and exposure to mass media, mediate consumer value shift from collectivism to individualism. As the Chinese experience affluence and modernization, they are becoming individualists; therefore the impact of others' opinions on their purchase decision is becoming less relevant.

Second, it is worthwhile to note that the two Confucian values that Lee (1990) suggested, face saving and group conformity, did not affect PI at all. This result is completely opposite of Lee (1990), who insisted direct influence of the two variables on PI about two decades ago. In this study, group conformity affected neither attitude nor purchase intention, and face saving only influenced PI indirectly through the increase of attitude toward US branded apparel. We believe this is another reflection of changed values among Chinese consumers. Collectively, these findings support our initial thoughts that PBC (in particular external PBC) may be more important than normative influences in leading Chinese consumers to purchase US branded apparel.

Third, among the three normative influences (face saving, group conformity, and subjective norm), only subjective norm had a direct influence on purchase intention. No direct effect of the two Confucian factors (face saving and group conformity) suggest that caution needs to be paid to viewing contemporary Chinese consumers through traditional Chinese values. A close examination of the face saving  $\rightarrow$  PI path reveals that the relationship was only significant in



Lee's model that did not include SN. Jin and Kang's (2007) study that tested Shanghai college students' PI toward foreign brand apparel found a stronger impact of face saving on PI than of SN on PI. This current study, which tested shoppers in three major Chinese cities and included a wider range of ages, revealed the opposite result. Taken together, we cautiously conclude that in the absence of SN, face saving plays a role, but when both are present, the findings are more likely to be dependent on a respondent's individualism level. That is, if a respondent is more collectivistic, then the influence of face saving may be more significant than that of SN. However, if a respondent is more individualistic, the influence of SN may be more significant than that of face saving. The data of this study were collected from shoppers in Western-atmosphere shopping malls in China. Thus, our respondents may have had higher level of individualism than had the college students in the classroom setting in Jin and Kang's (2007) study. One empirical study supports this notion. Leong (2000) found in the study of party clothes purchase intention among Singaporean (i.e. collectivists) teens that the level of teen agers' modernity moderates the relationship between attitude and SN and the purchase intention. That is, SN exerted a higher influence on purchase intention than attitude for traditional teens but attitude was more important than SN in explaining the purchase intention of modern teens. While Leong (2000) study did not include face saving construct, the main idea of the result that traditional collectivistic consumers are more influenced by traditional values supports our notion. This interpretation is worthy of further testing.

Fourth, between internal and external PBC, only external PBC (i.e. controllability) was found to significantly affect purchase intention, supporting the idea of viewing PBC as two dimensions (e.g. Armitage and Conner, 1999a, b) instead of one. The reason for external PBC's impact on PI is evident. The purchase of foreign brand apparel requires resources (i.e. money, external PBC), but it may not require special skills (i.e. internal PBC), so an individual's confidence (i.e. self-efficacy) toward a behavior has little explanatory power for a foreign brand purchase. The greater importance of external PBC over internal PBC is a relatively new finding because previous studies that took a decomposed PBC approach primarily found a higher relevance of internal PBC over external PBC. However, those previous studies were largely performed in academic performance or internet usage settings, both of which require special skills and confidence (Celuch *et al.*, 2007; Lin, 2007; Manstead and van Eekelen, 1998). In this sense, the current finding supports Gentry and Calantone's (2002) view that the relative importance of internal control and external control in the prediction of purchase intention is expected to change across behaviors and situations.

#### Academic and managerial implications

This study is the first to directly compare three behavioral intention models in a single study of Chinese consumers in an apparel consumption context. While a significant number of studies have tried to explain Chinese consumers' purchase behaviors toward foreign brand apparel (i.e. Shen *et al.*, 2003), limited study has ever attempted to comprehensively predict their behaviors. This study provides a useful comprehensive prediction tool by proposing a composite behavioral model resulting from the integration of two

existing behavioral intention models. In addition, this study was able to discern the proposed model's relevancy through a rigorous model comparison process.

This study is one of earliest endeavors to consider the decomposed PBC in a composite model. By examining the two aspects of PBC, this study validated the importance of consumers' resource controllability (i.e. external PBC) in Chinese purchase behaviors in the midst of rapid socioeconomic changes. This approach advances previous studies that primarily viewed PBC as one dimension (i.e. Shim *et al.*, 2001). Also, this study provides early proof that external PBC is more important than internal PBC in purchase contexts.

The findings of this study provide timely, relevant information to practitioners. First, since attitude toward US brand apparel was found to be the most important antecedent of PI, marketers should put efforts into creating favorable attitudes toward US brands. Attitude toward a US brand is largely determined by evaluation of jeans attributes; thus, marketers need to analyze which attributes contribute to creating favorable attitudes toward US brand jeans. Face saving was found to influence attitude; thus marketers need to consider the face saving concept in their advertising campaigns. For example, a Chinese consumer's ownership of foreign brand apparel often signifies his/her success (Wei, 1997). This conveys symbolic meaning from foreign brand apparel ownership will ensure one's face in society. Therefore, advertising campaigns may consider featuring symbolic or prestigious images of foreign brands.

Next important antecedent of PI was external PBC, which is related to a consumer's controllability of a purchase. Thus, marketers should consider pricing strategies carefully. If a premium pricing approach is taken, Chinese consumers may perceive that they cannot control the purchase of US branded apparel (i.e. external PBC), so favorable attitudes created by advertising campaigns may not lead to purchase intentions. However, if the price of US branded apparel is affordable to everybody, Chinese consumers will perceive that they can easily control the purchase, but they may fail to see the purchase as a prestigious image, which might be critical in creating a favorable attitude toward US branded apparel. Therefore, US firms need to choose between the two. That is, they need to maintain a prestigious brand image by holding the price relatively high, but they should also offer opportunities for Chinese consumers to purchase items through exclusive sales to selective customers or offer selective promotions. Such a situation will enable Chinese consumers to perceive their control of external barriers (i.e. resources) or external PBC, so purchase intention can be created.

#### Limitations and future studies

While the endeavors of this study are first and unique, before they are generalized the findings need to be tested in other Confucian cultures with similar economic development situations and in other segments of Chinese consumers because China is not a homogenous market and their purchase behaviors are often differ by demographic variables. Also testing the composite model in other segments of Chinese As noted earlier, the relative importance of face saving or SN on PI may be contingent on respondents' individualism tendencies. This means that respondents' individualism tendencies may moderate the impact of face

saving on PI. This topic merits future study. The importance of external PBC or internal PBC on PI appeared to be dependent on research contexts; thus, further study can test this idea in other contexts so that more generalizations are possible.

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## Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

*This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.*

China's significance as an overseas market for western companies has increased markedly over recent years because of the country's vast population size and rapid economic growth it has experienced. It is therefore important for marketers to identify factors that most influence the purchase behavior of Chinese consumers towards goods from the US and other nations.

Scholars point out the impact of dramatic political, social and economic change that China has undergone. The country's shift to become more industrial and modern has seen many of its established values threatened by western ways. Reforms have brought greater affluence among consumers and this has triggered materialistic urges and self-interest. Such desires run counter to the collectivist norms of Chinese culture shaped by traditional Confucian values.

The result is a society where conflicting forces are at work. In the view of certain analysts, the relative influence of old and new beliefs can differ according to context. One suggestion is that social behaviors are mainly driven by conventional norms, while modern ideals hold most sway over economic decisions. Since research is limited, the present study investigates the interplay between traditional and contemporary values in relation to the purchase of US apparel by Chinese consumers. Jin and Kang selected Levi's jeans for the study, as previous research in China had identified Levi's as the most recognizable foreign brand.

Studies into consumer behavior have used a variety of different models. A key element of one approach is that intention to perform a behavior is influenced by attitude and subjective norm. Attitude refers to consumer beliefs that determine how the behavior is perceived in positive or negative terms. Whether or not the individual expects significant others to approve or disapprove of the behavior defines subjective norm. The relationship between subjective norm and purchase intention has, however, become questionable following recent investigations. Different studies in China and Taiwan reported subjective norm as inconclusive and invited speculation that purchase behavior within collectivist societies may be influenced more by other cultural values.

Uncertainty about the significance of subjective norm prompted greater attention on other factors. Given the social pressures that exist within Confucian society, certain academics have forwarded the idea of group conformity and face saving being more influential. In a collectivist culture, group norms take precedence over individual desires. Face roughly equates to Western notions of dignity and prestige, albeit with even stronger social significance. The expectation is that people behave in ways appropriate to their social standing, which is jeopardized by a failure to meet these requirements.

It was therefore assumed that group conformity and face saving also impact on attitude. But research in Korea, Hong Kong and China reported inconsistent findings in the relationship between the two constructs and purchase intention. Others claim this as evidence of the dwindling significance of collectivistic factors in China and have responded with studies indicating that perceived behavioral control (PBC) has greater effect. Since then, PBC has been modified to include both internal control and external control elements. The former component reflects an individual's own skills and ability to perform a certain behavior, while the latter concerns judgment about the ability to overcome external barriers to complete the action. Resource availability is one such potential barrier.

Different scholars have found evidence to support the influence of internal and external control elements and noted that their relative importance appears to vary by situation. The authors point out the cost of buying foreign clothing to illustrate their expectation that both components will be significant in the current study.

The aim of this research was to identify the combination of factors which most impact on the purchase intention of Chinese consumers towards the US brand Levi's. A questionnaire was distributed in shopping malls in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, three large Chinese cities where many foreign apparel stores currently trade. The authors targeted consumers aware of the Levi's brand and a final sample of 747 respondents aged between 18 and 36 was obtained. Subject numbers were almost equally divided between the three cities and male to female ratio was similarly ordered. Participants were asked for their response to questions and statements relating to face saving, group conformity, attitude, subjective norm, the two PBC components and purchase intention.

Analysis revealed that:

- face saving positively influenced attitude but did not impact on purchase intention towards the US apparel brand;
- neither attitude nor purchase intention were influenced by group conformity;
- attitude and subjective norm increased consumer purchase intention; and
- external PBC increased purchase intention but internal PBC did not.

Attitude most influenced purchase intention, followed by external PBC then subjective norm. Given that price is regarded as the largest barrier, Jin and Kang conclude that purchase intention increases when consumers believe that they have the financial means.

They point out that this finding illustrates how traditional Confucian norms have become vulnerable to pressure from western values like materialism. As affluence and media exposure transform consumers into individualists, cornerstones of collectivist culture like the opinion of relevant others become less pertinent. The apparent insignificance of face saving and group conformity provides further evidence of the diminishing strength of traditional values. But since data was gathered from "western atmosphere shopping malls" in China, the authors do acknowledge the importance of context and concede that face saving could still be significant among consumers with a collectivist orientation.

Findings regarding the two PBC elements were contrary to expectation and results from certain previous studies. According to the authors, this may reflect the fact that purchase of foreign brand clothing demands resources but not necessary any noteworthy personal abilities. This belief is corroborated by research conducted in relation to academic performance and internet navigation. That “special skills and confidence” are necessary in such contexts meant that internal PBC was found to be more influential than the external element of the construct. One possible conclusion here is that external PBC is the most essential PBC component in purchase contexts.

Since attitude was found to be important, marketers should focus on initiatives that help cultivate positive feelings towards US brands. In this case, that could be achieved by highlighting the attributes of jeans that consumers regard as most important. Although face saving does not evidently impact on purchase intention, its influence on attitude should not be ignored. It therefore needs to be incorporated within advertising campaigns. One idea is to create associations

between foreign brand ownership and success. Campaigns that portray foreign brands through “symbolic or prestigious images” could help achieve this connection.

Jin and Kang urge caution with pricing. If marketers adopt a premium approach, they risk Chinese consumers perceiving that purchase of the brand is out of their control. On the other hand, widespread affordability would seriously weaken the prestigious image of the product. A compromise would be to set a relatively high price but offset this with such as promotions or exclusive deals for selected customers.

Further investigations could be conducted in other areas of China or similar Confucian cultures where varying degrees of collectivism and individualism prevail. Examining the respective importance of internal and external PBC within different research contexts is also suggested.

*(A précis of the article “Purchase intention of Chinese consumers toward a US apparel brand: a test of a composite behavior intention model”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)*