



**A Consumer Cultural Paradox: Exploring the Tensions
Between Traditional and International Education**

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A Consumer Cultural Paradox: Exploring the Tensions Between Traditional and International Education

Abstract

Purpose – In a globalized world, consumers embrace mutually conflicting cultural values rather than making exclusive, either/or choices. As a result, they experience multiple tensions, a phenomenon that can be identified as the *consumer cultural paradox*. Despite clear interest in the influence of local/global culture on consumers, knowledge of how conflicting cultural elements shape consumer behavior remains limited. To address these issues, the current article seeks to identify higher- and lower-level tensions inherent in the consumer cultural paradox.

Design/methodology/approach – Using in-depth interviews, the authors investigate tensions experienced by Chinese consumers of international private education services. This study applies a paradox lens, a tension-based conceptual approach that is well-suited for studying consumer paradoxes.

Findings – Ten lower-level tensions of the consumer cultural paradox arise in the focal international service context; these tensions in turn form three higher-level tensions.

Originality/value – The study is among the first in marketing to use a paradox lens and empirical research to delineate multiple dimensions of the consumer cultural paradox, then categorize them into lower and higher-level tensions. The findings offer theoretical and managerial implications, in that recognizing the multiple tensions experienced by consumers allows scholars and marketers to gain a better understanding of how consumers perceive and evaluate services from different cultures.

Keywords: consumer cultural paradox, international education, China; intercultural service encounters; acculturation; multiculturalization

Introduction

Global consumers, exposed to product and service offerings from a variety of cultures, may experience multiple, even conflicting attitudes (Chiu and Cheng, 2007; Cleveland and Bartsch, 2019). When local/national and foreign/global cultures appear incompatible, consumers experience tensions (Westjohn and Magnusson, 2019) that they seek to resolve, whether by embracing elements of new cultures, rejecting others that seem incompatible (Sobol *et al.*, 2018), or working to integrate elements into their existing cultural perspectives (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019; Ozer *et al.*, 2021). In service contexts in particular, resolving these tensions may determine service evaluations (Sharma *et al.*, 2016), satisfaction (Tam *et al.*, 2016), and loyalty (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019). Uber's failure in Southeast Asia could be attributed to Asian consumers' inability to resolve the tension created by the novel combination of individual (private) and collective (ride-sharing) offerings (Labbrand Brand Innovations, 2017). Conversely, American yoga options have successfully combined "Indian" spiritual/wellness elements with "American" fitness/commercial elements (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015).

Different streams of research explored how consumers negotiate divergent cultural influences, including research into intercultural service encounters (Sharma *et al.*, 2009; Stauss and Mang, 1999), consumer culture theory (CCT) (Kjeldgaard and Ostberg, 2007; Thompson and Arsel, 2004), acculturation (Luedicke, 2015; Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019), and multiculturalization (Kipnis *et al.*, 2014; Lücke *et al.*, 2014). While some studies have focused on the process of consumer negotiation between diverging values (Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Üstüner and Holt, 2007), the predominant focus in these studies is on outcomes, such as identity affiliations (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019), consumer satisfaction (Sharma *et al.*, 2009), perceptions of service quality (Sharma *et al.*, 2015), or reactions to service failures (Wang and Matilla, 2010). Comparatively less attention centers on the processes consumers adopt to make sense of the tensions created by multicultural marketplaces.

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3 Accordingly, we specifically explore the tensions that arise between local and global
4 cultures by introducing a concept we refer to as the *consumer cultural paradox*. This concept
5 pertains to a situation in which consumers desire mutually conflicting features of a service that
6 represents a culture (global) different from their existing one (local), leading them towards
7 simultaneous (both/and) rather than mutually exclusive (either/or) choices (Ng *et al.*, 2021). For
8 consumers, such a paradox might arise because they both like and dislike something or find it
9 advantageous and disadvantageous at the same time (Johnson *et al.*, 2008). The consumer cultural
10 paradox implies the co-existence of contradictory cultural norms and values that consumers both
11 embrace and reject, simultaneously. In multicultural marketplaces, characterized by intersecting
12 cultural flows (Kipnis *et al.*, 2014), consumers negotiate multiple cultural norms and values into
13 their consumption experiences (Seo and Gao, 2015). To understand how consumers integrate these
14 contradictory norms and values, we seek answers to the following central research question: What
15 are the underlying tensions that local consumers of global services experience due to the conflicting
16 features of services from another culture?
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35 To answer this question, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 Chinese parents
36 whose children were enrolled in international education services and applied a paradox lens (Smith
37 and Lewis, 2011) to explore the tensions between traditional Chinese education in public schools
38 versus private education in international learning centers. Education is a relevant setting for
39 investigating the consumer cultural paradox because such a service requires continued interactions
40 and close collaboration between service providers and consumers (Etgar and Fuchs, 2011) and the
41 tensions of the consumer cultural paradox may be particularly salient in such long-term
42 relationships with high complexity and uncertainty (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004). Thus, we
43 can identify tensions that might not arise during brief intercultural service encounters in other
44 service domains (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019; Stauss and Mang, 1999).
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3 Our study contributes to extant literature in several ways. First, in an extension of
4 acculturation and multiculturalization research (e.g., Demangeot *et al.*, 2015; Kipnis *et al.*, 2014), we
5 investigate the range of tensions that arise in the process of reconciliation that consumers adopt to
6 deal with contradictory local/global forces (Kipnis *et al.*, 2014; Seo and Gao, 2015). Even when
7 previous studies acknowledged that the choice of local versus global is not always mutually
8 exclusive, the tensions that arise in the consumer negotiation process have not been explored in-
9 depth. By using a paradox lens, we are able to identify tensions embodied in the consumer cultural
10 paradox and gain a better understanding of the complex, dynamic process.
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21 Second, by using a paradox lens and focusing on both/and preferences rather than either/or
22 choices, we seek to add to discussions of homogenization or polarization as responses to the
23 encounters of local and global cultures (Cleveland and Bartsch, 2019; Xie *et al.*, 2015) by
24 emphasizing the more rarely studied process of cultural hybridization (Bartsch *et al.*, 2019;
25 Kledgaard and Askegaard, 2006; Steenkamp, 2019). Thus, we highlight the hybridization or
26 glocalization process between conflicting cultural values that is increasingly present in many
27 consumption practices (Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019).
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37 Third, the experiences of service consumers in emerging economies when they encounter
38 international cultural elements rarely have been addressed (Furrer *et al.*, 2020; Steenkamp, 2019);
39 studies instead tend to focus on a few industries (e.g., tourism, financial services) and geographies
40 (North America, Western Europe) (Poulis *et al.*, 2013). The limited insights into consumers in non-
41 Western markets (Luedicke, 2015) means that our sense of how consumers negotiate tensions
42 during their intercultural encounters is anecdotal and fragmented (Bartsch *et al.*, 2019). By studying
43 international education, a rarely investigated service realm that requires long-term interactions and
44 close collaboration (Etgar and Fuchs, 2011), we identify cultural processes and tensions that might
45 not arise during brief intercultural service encounters in other domains (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019).
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3 Fourth, we also contribute to broader bodies of knowledge related to the cultural
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5 consequences of globalizations, beyond consumer research. The consumer cultural paradox might
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7 inform understanding of anti-consumption movements (Varman and Belk, 2009) or boycotts (Iyer
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9 and Muncy, 2009), de-Westernization movements in media and culture studies (Iwabuchi, 2010). A
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11 better understanding of this phenomenon can also help to establish a clearer distinction between the
12
13 concepts of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism (Roudometof, 2005) or shed new light on post-
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15 modernization (Inglehart and Baker, 2000) and cultural dynamics (Craig and Douglas, 2006;
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17 Kashima, 2014).

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21 In the following section, we provide an overview of relevant literature to establish a
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23 framework for our study. Then, we introduce the consumer cultural paradox lens and present our
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25 data collection and analytical methods. After we describe the key findings and discuss their
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27 implications for research and management, we conclude with suggestions for further research.

28 29 30 **Literature review**

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32 Studies of consumer behaviors across cultures take multiple perspectives though there is a general
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34 consensus that encounters of diverging cultural norms and values involve flows between “local”
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36 and “global” cultures (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019). A local culture is usually defined as the unique cultural
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38 meanings and norms of a person’s home country (Steenkamp and De Jong, 2010), including the
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40 shared beliefs, lifestyles, and symbols that distinguish it from others (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019). Global
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42 culture instead is interpreted as a shared cultural entity, unbound by geography (Cleveland and
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44 Laroche, 2007), such that global consumers connect through their shared consumption patterns
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46 (Holt *et al.*, 2004). A middle ground is hybridization, a blending of local and global cultural
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48 influences, which can result in new co-created service offerings at global levels, such as K-pop
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50 (BBC, 2019), “Nollywood” (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019), and American yoga (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli,
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52 2015).

Intercultural service encounters

Service marketing literature has long noted the influences of cultural norms and values on service encounters, highlighting cross-cultural differences in customer expectations (Donthu and Yoo 1998; Furrer *et al.*, 2000; Laroche *et al.*, 2005) and service outcomes, such as service quality evaluation (Laroche *et al.*, 2004; Voss *et al.*, 2004), satisfaction (Mattila, 1999; Wintsted, 1999), and behavioral intentions (Liu *et al.*, 2001). More recent studies have focused on service encounters, exploring how concepts such as perceived cultural distance or intercultural competence affect service evaluations (Sharma *et al.*, 2016) and satisfaction (Tam *et al.*, 2016). However, these emphases on outcomes provide only limited understanding of the potential tensions in consumer negotiations between cultures during service encounters. Furthermore, many investigations pertain to short service interactions, such as those taking place in the hospitality and tourism sectors (e.g., Sharma *et al.*, 2016). These encounters might involve colliding cultures and cultural shocks (Stauss and Meng, 1999) but do not necessarily require adaptations by the parties involved. However, the tensions arising from the consumer cultural paradox likely are more evident and relevant in complex, uncertain service settings such as international education during which various cultural values and norms likely affect the service process and its outcomes.

Among the few studies analyzing the influence of culture in education, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) argue that the converging values are “glonacal,” reflecting intersecting effects of global, national, and local cultures. With an explicit focus on how local culture affects domestic education policy, Akboga (2015) instead contrasts “world culture”—or the global expansion of certain educational principles and the emergence of new global actors—with “local culture,” then suggests that their interaction shapes education through social, economic, and political dynamics in a society. Moving beyond a conceptualization of globalization as a top-down imposition of policy, Vidovich (2010) explores active dynamics across global, national, and local policy processes and

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2 asserts that a quality policy in education gets negotiated by incorporating influences from local and
3 global institutional levels. As these descriptions indicate, most studies of international education
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asserts that a quality policy in education gets negotiated by incorporating influences from local and global institutional levels. As these descriptions indicate, most studies of international education pertain to institutional and policy levels, without addressing the influence of culture and cultural differences at a teacher–student level. A notable exception is Yuan *et al.* (2019), who identify tensions that arise in international education as an outcome of cultural encounters.

Consumer culture theory

CCT studies relate consumers' core identities to their consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). By noting the contextual, symbolic, and experiential aspects of consumption (Peñaloza and Barnhart, 2011), scholars in this domain regard consumption as simultaneously influenced by local and global factors (Steenkamp, 2019). Yet prior research has not reached consensus with regard to whether consumer cultures are becoming more homogenized or still feature substantial heterogeneity (Kjeldgaard and Ostberg, 2007). Some CCT studies assert that globalization invariably increases cultural homogenization (Ritzer, 1993; Xie *et al.*, 2015), but others suggest that consumers actively reject global influences (Ger and Belk, 1996). An alternative view proposes that consumers engage in “glocal” consumption (Strizhakova *et al.*, 2012; Thompson and Arsel, 2004) and accept local and global cultural narratives simultaneously while displaying national (ethnic), global (cosmopolitan), and foreign (xenocentric) cultural predispositions (Cleveland and Bartikowski, 2018). Such cultural plurality implies a hybrid of local and global cultural elements beyond the polarities of homogenization and local appropriation. For example, Kjeldgaard and Askergaard (2006) found that glocal structural commonalities emerged from a dialectical process (Holt, 2002) which result in diverse manifestations of culture. Beyond the basic intermingling notion (Robertson, 1992), glocalization is a highly complex process: when local cultures adapt and re-interpret global influences, the local even may become global, reflecting their growing awareness of the connected, global world (Kjeldgaard and Ostberg, 2007).

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3 In cultural anthropology, glocalization is often referred to as “creolization,” which
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5 highlights the possibility that consumers in emerging markets impose their own meanings on newly
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7 encountered global goods and services (Ger and Belk, 1996). That is, global products imbued with
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9 localized meanings get transformed as consumers work actively to transform the meanings of goods
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11 and services to reflect their own cultures (Eckhardt and Mahi, 2004). Thus, according to CCT,
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13 consumers often blend different cultural influences to build their own identity; however, what is
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15 less understood is how they do it at the intersection of global and local cultures which is likely to
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17 create the paradoxical tensions at the heart the consumer cultural paradox.
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20 21 *Acculturation research*

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23 The main focus of acculturation studies is on how consumers adapt to new cultures and negotiate
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25 their cultural identity between local and global values (Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019). Cultural
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27 identity refers to the “range of beliefs and behaviors that one shares with members of one’s
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29 community” (Jensen, 2003, p. 190). The focus of acculturation studies is often on non-Western
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31 immigrants to Western markets (Luedicke, 2015), though more recent investigations go beyond a
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33 bicultural view of immigrants to address the co-mingling of local and global identities more broadly
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35 (Strizhakova and Coutler, 2019).
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40 Acculturation studies outline several factors that cause consumers to integrate their local and
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42 global identities more actively or not (Steenkamp and de Jong, 2010; Strizhakova *et al.*, 2012). For
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44 example, uncertainty can selectively activate a local identity and affiliation (Ng *et al.*, 2021).
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47 Among Chinese consumers, consumption of foreign services appears driven by concerns about loss
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49 of face, which represents a local cultural factor (Bartikowski and Cleveland, 2017). But a local
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51 cultural identity may be less accessible if its mental representations are less salient (Zhang and
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53 Khare, 2009). For example, Hong Kong residents endorse collectivistic values if prompted by
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55 Chinese cultural symbols but affiliate more with individualistic values when they encounter
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3 Western symbols (Hong *et al.*, 2000). Analyzing the adoption of veiling in Turkey, Sandikci and
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5 Ger (2010) explored the process of routinization/normalization of what used to be
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7 stigmatized/deviant consumption, pointing at the importance of factors such as urbanization and
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9 neoliberal policies. Local consumers also rely on their class-based resources for negotiating global
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11 meanings (Holt, 1998) whereby the sociocultural structures (Üstüner and Holt, 2007), social status
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13 and socioeconomical power (Üstüner and Thompson, 2012) in which consumers live might also
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15 (but not always, see Wilk, 1995) shape their acculturation process.
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19 Acculturation studies have proposed several acculturation models. Unidimensional models
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21 anticipate a continuum between cultural maintenance versus assimilation (Ryder *et al.*, 2000),
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23 whereas bidimensional versions assume the co-existence of two cultures, achieved through
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25 processes of assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization (Berry *et al.*, 1989). These
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27 processes lead people to develop dual affiliations with local and global cultures and develop a
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29 glocal identity (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006), which is the resulting synthesis of a dialectical
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31 process between local and global cultural influences (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006; Peñaloza
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33 and Gilly, 1999). Finally, multi-cultural models depict consumer multicultural identity as the result
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35 of the integration of local, global, and foreign culture elements (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019). Consumers
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37 who simultaneously develop local and global identities, feel more or less connected to different
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39 cultural norms and values (Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019), so different poles defining their cultural
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41 identities might become more or less salient in guiding their behavior (Ng *et al.*, 2021).
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46 *Multiculturation*

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48 Multiculturation studies (e.g., Kipnis *et al.*, 2019; Lücke *et al.*, 2014; Seo and Gao, 2015) conceive
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50 the multicultural marketplace as physical or virtual environments in which “the marketers,
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52 consumers, brands, ideologies, and institutions of multiple cultures converge” (Demangeot *et al.*,
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54 2015, p. 122). They define individual multiculturalism as a process of value reprioritization, such
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3 that the consumer seeks a multicultural orientation (Seo and Gao, 2015). In such marketplaces,
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5 consumers encounter a range of local, global, and foreign cultural meanings that they can deploy to
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7 construct a more complex identity than would be allowed by a simple local versus global dichotomy
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9 (Kipnis *et al.*, 2014). The very process of multiculturalization can reflect internal representations of
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11 multiple cultural meaning systems (Kostova and Roth, 2002; Lücke *et al.*, 2014), suggesting the
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13 need to clarify how consumers work to make sense of multicultural influences.
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16 **A consumer cultural paradox lens**

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18 To identify the process of negotiation among mutually conflicting cultural values and norms, we
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20 use a paradox lens (Calabretta *et al.*, 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011). A paradox is “some ‘thing’ that
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22 is constructed by individuals when oppositional tendencies are brought into recognizable proximity
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24 through reflection or interaction” (Ford and Backoff, 1988, p. 89) and it persists over time (Smith
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26 and Lewis, 2011). Paradoxes imply that “polar, opposite conditions can simultaneously exist, or at
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28 least can be potentiated, in the same thing” (Mick and Fournier, 1998, p. 124). As such, paradoxes
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30 should be distinguished from other forms of either-or problems, such as *puzzles* which imply a
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32 challenging problem with an optimal solution; *dilemmas* which are problems with two possible
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34 solutions, neither of which is logically the best, and *trade-offs* which suggest there are many
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36 possible solutions, each of which strikes a different balance between two conflicting pressures (de
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38 Wit and Meyer, 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Individuals experience paradoxes as tensions
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40 between “contradictory yet interrelated elements ... that seem logical in isolation but absurd and
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42 irrational when appearing simultaneously” (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). For consumers, a paradox might
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44 arise because they both like and dislike something or find it advantageous and disadvantageous at
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46 the same time (Johnson *et al.*, 2008).
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53 A paradox lens should be distinguished from the dialectical approach often used in CCT and
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55 acculturation studies (Holt, 2002; Kjeldgaard and Askergaard, 2006; Peñaloza and Gilly, 1999). A
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3 dialectical approach assumes that conflicting and independent cultural values compete with each
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5 other for domination and control (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). Such a struggle results in a
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7 synthesis which temporarily eliminates the tensions between the conflicting values. Rather than
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9 interpreting opposing attributes as conflicting and independent, a paradox lens acknowledges the
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11 “persistent contradiction between interdependent elements” (Schad *et al.*, 2016, p. 6). As such a
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13 paradox lens does not offer solutions to the tensions between opposing values, but rather proposes
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15 that tensions can only be coped with as best as possible (de Wit and Meyer, 2014). Using a paradox
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17 lens, it is possible to minimize stereotyping to gain a better understanding of changes due to
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19 globalization (Gannon, 2007), whereas a dialectical synthesis is likely to oversimplify some issues
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21 or ignore some pre-existing tensions (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989).
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26 Lewis and Smith (2014) outline a historic continuity in research using a paradox lens, which
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28 appears especially prevalent in management research (e.g., Poole and Van de Ven, 1989), though its
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30 application in marketing remains rare (Josephson *et al.*, 2016; Prage and Schlegelmilch, 2012). A
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32 few studies that apply a paradox lens to consumption identify some relevant paradoxes such as the
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34 interplay between cultural heritage versus contemporary relevance in corporate brand management
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36 (Schultz and Hatch, 2006), hedonic versus conscience-driven consumption (Smith, 2007),
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38 individualism versus tribalism (Skandalis *et al.*, 2016), easy-going versus socially conservative
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40 consumers (Tiwsakul and Hackley, 2012), ascetism versus hedonism, and discipline versus
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42 transgression (Cronin *et al.*, 2014). We seek to extend these applications by applying a paradox lens
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44 to determine how consumers negotiate the influence of local and global cultures.
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48 **Method**

49 *Research context*

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53 The empirical context for our study is a Chinese private education service provided by an
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55 international part-time after-school learning center in Beijing that offers academic lessons in
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3 English to children aged 3 to 15 years. This context is relevant, considering the vast demand for
4 international education in China as one of the largest sources of international university students
5 (UNESCO, 2017). Parents often spend as much as 50% of their disposable income to prepare their
6 children for international study (Chen, 2018). Mastery of English confers social and economic
7 prestige, prompting the “English craze” or “English fever” in China (Gil and Adamson, 2011).
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9 Because access to full-time international schools is limited to people with a foreign passport, most
10 parents turn to part-time afterschool international education (Zhang and Bray, 2018).
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19 Furthermore, Chinese culture embraces paradoxes as inevitable, desirable, and persistent
20 (Spencer-Rodgers *et al.*, 2010), in contrast with the generally more negative perceptions of
21 paradoxes among Westerners (Nisbett *et al.*, 2001). This cultural value is evident in the Chinese
22 language, which contains terms for many concepts that comprise two paradoxical sub-concepts,
23 such as “move-still” for activity (dongjing or 动静), “long-short” for length (changduan or 长短),
24 or “danger-opportunity” for crisis (weiji or 危机). This paradoxical worldview is also expressed by
25 the symbolism of the mutually opposing, complementary forces of yin and yang, which are both
26 conflicting and complementary (Li, 2012). In consumption contexts, this embrace of paradoxes
27 suggests that Chinese consumers expect traditional values to inform their modern consumption
28 (Wang and Lin, 2009).
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42 *Sampling and data collection*

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44 Following Lewis’ (2000) recommendation to use qualitative methods for studying paradoxes, we
45 conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 Chinese parents whose children were enrolled in the
46 international center. Informants were selected by using purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011), in that we
47 approached informants whose children attend the Chinese public schools full-time and have been at
48 the center for more than one year, and whose children attended the classes regularly which involves
49 frequent parental visits at the center. One of the authors, fluent in Mandarin Chinese, conducted
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2 interviews in Mandarin Chinese with parents, which lasted 30–45 minutes. This author knew the
3 informants, which encouraged a high level of trust and openness (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). For
4 the clarity of our discussions, we refer to the parents as consumers, because they purchase the
5 education service for their children, as end-users. The informants are all members of middle-class
6 families and the so-called “Social Reform Generation” (born approximately 1971–1980; Egri and
7 Ralston, 2008), such that they have experienced a period of unprecedented change in China (see
8 Table I for informant profiles). We stopped collecting data after the 32nd interview, having reached
9 thematic saturation as of the 28th interview (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

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23 In the semi-structured interviews, the interviewer encouraged participants to respond in their
24 own words (Bernard, 1988), but the set of fixed questions also enabled us to compare the
25 informants’ answers easily (Creswell, 2014). The questions were designed to reveal different
26 tensions between traditional Chinese and international education. For example, they prompted
27 informants to explain why they decided to enroll their children in the international center and
28 identify the advantages they perceived from international private education, compared with Chinese
29 public education. Questions also pertained more specifically to informants’ evaluations of the
30 international education service, in terms of academic and behavioral outcomes, again in comparison
31 with traditional Chinese education. Finally, the respondents evaluated the school overall, as well as
32 individual teachers.

33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 *Data analysis*

47 We used iterative data collection and interpretation process, during which we made inferences by
48 alternating between prior literature and our empirical findings (Goulding, 2005). We transcribed
49 each interview and undertook line-by-line open coding, in line with exploratory nature of our
50 research. Two coders, one of whom was an author, developed common coding themes in a step-by-
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3 step process. They first identified a large number of in vivo codes, reflecting actual terms used by
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5 the informants (e.g., “individual,” “tradition,” “face,” “personality”), that they grouped into
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7 concepts (e.g., “leadership skills,” “traditional learning”) and categories (e.g., “academic success vs.
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9 individual creativity,” “a drive to belong vs. a wish to deviate”) (Creswell, 2014). Among the
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11 concepts and categories identified by these two coders, we selected those that relate directly to
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13 education. After identifying first-level categories (lower-level tensions), we performed selective
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15 coding to group them into core categories (higher-level tensions), which represent opposing
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17 conditions for integrating further sub-categories (lower-level tensions) (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

21 Findings

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23 We identify ten paradoxical tensions between values associated with traditional versus international
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25 education (Table II), which we classify into three higher-level tensions, namely, tradition versus
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27 modernity, group versus individual, and social harmony versus free expression.

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30 – Insert Table II about here –

32 *Tensions of tradition and modernity*

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34 We identified four tensions affiliated with tradition and modernity:

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37 *Traditional learning methods–acquiring new skills.* Informants evaluated the international
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39 education service in accordance with traditional Chinese educational concepts such as
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41 memorization (Lee, 2000). Reflecting the nature of Chinese written language, systematic
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43 memorization is embedded in traditional learning methods, and characters must be learned
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45 individually through memorization techniques and rote learning (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). When
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47 their children are exposed to new educational programs that use alternative methods, such as
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49 inquisitive learning, informants experience a tension between their embrace of traditional learning
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51 methods and the benefits for their children of acquiring new skills:
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56 Memorizing is necessary due to the nature of Chinese characters. Because our children learn how to memorize
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3 so many characters, they can use the same method to remember any other information ... it doesn't matter if it
4 is English language, debate, or analytical thinking ... If it worked for so many years, why wouldn't it work
5 now? (C18)

6
7 To learn a new language, or leadership and innovation, the children need new skills. But we still like to know
8 how many new words they learned or they have to memorize for their homework. (C02)

9
10 As these comments indicate, the informants expect international educators to use traditional
11 educational methods to impart novel skills, and when they gauge the effectiveness of the programs,
12 they apply traditional education standards.

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16
17 *Cultivating character—acquiring knowledge.* In traditional Chinese education, the primary
18 focus is on moral education (Lee, 2000) and the main goal is to cultivate students' character
19 (Hildebrand *et al.*, 2008). Thus, our informants similarly expect a strong focus on moral behavior
20 by the international education service. However, we also find evidence of a contrast between
21 expectations for traditional character building, such as maintaining social harmony as a sign of
22 social competence (Chen and An, 2009), and parental expectations for their children to acquire new
23 skills and perform competitively. These tensions are evident in the following quotes from parents:
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34 The purpose of childhood education is not obtaining knowledge but morality, cultivating character,
35 benevolence. Why would it be any different here? So, if the children want to learn analytical thinking, or how
36 to debate, they really need to have their character built first. (C14)

37
38
39 The children need to learn how to succeed internationally, but also at home. The workplace is changing, it is
40 much more competitive, and there are new industries all the time. Here [international education center] they
41 learn practical things to help them. That should be most important. (C27)

42
43
44 *Academic success—individual creativity.* Exams have long been the primary determinant of
45 educational success in China (Ching, 2012). Accordingly, our informants express their hope that the
46 international education service will help their children earn high test scores. However, in this
47 rapidly developing society, with its increasing global integration, they also acknowledge the
48 importance of fostering individual-level innovation and creativity, evoking another tension:
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55 In any country, it is of course important to have good results, or good grades for the students. How else will
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3 anyone know how good they are? Nothing will change that as the main criterion of knowledge. (C03)

4
5 China is changing. We were very focused on achieving concrete results, but we now need to focus on
6 innovation. Our children need to be ready for this new reality. They also need to develop analytical thinking,
7 creativity, not just focus on getting good grades on tests. (C16)

8
9 *Complexity–simplicity.* Finally, traditional Chinese society is based on complex hierarchical
10 structures (Faure and Fang, 2008), which our informants appreciate. They believe that complex and
11 rigid societal structures help their children cultivate resilience and install flexibility, by learning to
12 play different roles. Yet simultaneously, they identify the appeal of the international education
13 system based on opposite reasons, such as its simplicity, transparent communication, and lack of
14 strict rules.
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24 Children are flexible because of the traditional society strata; they are used to playing different roles, and they
25 know how to switch. They are capable of adjusting according to a situation and who they talk to.... Public
26 schools reflect a more traditional society. (C03)

27
28 It is very easy to see what is going on [in the international educational center], instructions are simple, and we
29 understand what to expect, though we don't understand English well enough to tell if the children are making
30 progress or not. (C19)

31
32
33 These examples illustrate the consumer cultural paradox, such that parents perceive educational
34 systems simultaneously and comparatively as advantageous and/or disadvantageous. For example,
35 consumers may expect education service to provide traditional character building (Lee, 2000) and
36 leadership skills, or to reconcile traditional moral education and academic success in the
37 contemporary context. The intermingling of traditional and contemporary values can thus be
38 understood according to specific tensions between the two educational systems and the process of
39 cultural hybridization (Bartsch *et al.*, 2019). This paradox lens offers a clearer view of consumers'
40 multicultural identity affiliations (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019), multicultural adaptiveness (Demangeot *et al.*,
41 2015), shedding new light on the process of reconciliation between local and global forces that
42 consumers undergo in multicultural marketplaces (Kipnis *et al.*, 2014). As we observe, informants
43 reprioritize the polar values that mark tradition and modernity, which resembles the paradox of
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3 universality versus change identified by Seo and Gao (2015).

4
5 *Tensions between the group and the individual*

6
7 Four additional tensions pertain to the group versus the individual:

8
9 *A drive to belong—a wish to deviate.* Informants hope that their children pursue an individual
10 educational path, but they also highlight the risks of doing so when that path deviates from
11 traditional values and norms. Chinese society is generally assumed to be collectivistic (Hofstede,
12 2001), though recent research identifies a rise of individualism (Xu and Hamamura, 2014). Still,
13 according to our informants, individualism does not cancel out traditional collective values. Our
14 informants enroll their children in international education as relevant to their contemporary
15 individualistic lifestyle, but these preferences do not always match traditional cultural norms. Even
16 if being different from the group may seem appealing, the risks of doing so might involve becoming
17 an outcast in social circles, thus creating tensions:
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31 We feel that everyone is pursuing international education.... We would like them [children] to make their
32 independent decisions, but we are afraid what will happen if we don't go with the mainstream. (C15)

33
34 International education is an essential part of our lifestyle today. All our friends are doing it. We can choose
35 not to do it, but if we don't do it, we will be something of an outcast, and our social circle would be much
36 smaller. (C24)

37
38
39 *Being stuck in the middle—bridging the gap.* The difference between the world experienced
40 by the parents versus that encountered by their children is substantial, due to the rapid pace of
41 change in China in recent decades (Egri and Ralston, 2004). In their position, our informants noted
42 the pressures they felt to compromise and give up their own individuality. They feel stuck in the
43 middle between the two generations of elders and children. But at the same time, they identify their
44 own responsibility to function as bridges between generations. This dual role is experienced as a
45 tension:
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55 Our generation is under biggest pressure, like we are stuck in the middle. We are carrying all the load, and we
56 are facing the biggest pressure, especially from our parents. Our parents and our children live in very different
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3 worlds, and it is up to us to bridge between the two. (C23)

4
5 We have to consider our parents and their needs. The problems we are dealing with for our children are
6 different, but they did the best they could with us. Also, most often they are paying for afterschool education
7 for the children, which means they need to have a say, and we need to compromise. (C12)

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9
10 *Studying diligently—having things come easily.* Another tension refers to parents' desire to
11 provide a contemporary, individualized lifestyle for their children and a traditional expectation that
12 those children focus on studying diligently. Traditional Chinese education promotes the belief that
13 everyone can succeed by working hard enough, because the education system is merit-based, and
14 degrees from a good university can guarantee a good life (Ching, 2012). For parents, raised in this
15 system, this norm remains influential. However, they also want their children to enjoy the benefits
16 of contemporary society, such as granting them time and resources to travel and accumulate
17 material wealth:
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28 Our parents feel that our children are getting it too easy—they have more money, access to technology, they
29 travel. All the things we didn't have. So, they are putting the pressure on us to invest in their education. (C10)

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31
32 Our traditional approaches to education, propagated by our parents, must be right at some level, because they
33 brought us to where we are today. But how do we explain to our children that they need to practice calligraphy
34 or an instrument all day, and miss out on other things their friends are doing? (C29)

35
36
37 *Collective responsibility—individual empowerment.* Informants value opportunities in
38 contemporary society, such as learning new things, traveling, becoming powerful leaders, or
39 achieving international success, inspired by the founders of competitive companies such as Alibaba
40 and Lenovo. However, they still believe their children need to meet their collective responsibility
41 toward their extended family or the society at large. This tension can be expressed as follows:
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49 We never had so many opportunities to choose from. We also have more access to information that was
50 previously unavailable, and we can make informed decision about what's best for each individual child. We
51 need to do what's best for them, regardless of what the world thinks. (C14)

52
53 Every new generation increases knowledge. Older generations didn't have this knowledge; we are in a unique
54 position. But this new knowledge creates new responsibility. We have more information than before, but also
55 more responsibility. Our children need to learn how to use all this information, not just for themselves, but also
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3 for the whole society. (C06)
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5 The quest for individualism is not simply overpowering traditional collectivist influences;
6
7 rather, we find a dynamic interplay across these two sets of values. Consumers may feel more or
8
9 less connected to various cultural values (Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019); at different times or in
10
11 various settings, a local versus global pole might become more or less salient and influential in their
12
13 consumption choices (Ng *et al.*, 2021). For example, consumers may want to integrate traditional
14
15 education elements appreciated by the social groups or family members, such as calligraphy, with
16
17 contemporary individualized programs, such as leadership. These insights help reveal the
18
19 constituent tensions of the consumer cultural paradox.
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22
23 *Tensions of social harmony and free expression*
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25 Finally, we also identified two tensions between social harmony and free expression:
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28 *Ritualistic communication–individualistic communication.* First, informants respect the
29
30 Chinese public education system for its capacity to cultivate students' traditional, ritualistic
31
32 communication skills and encourage social harmony. Establishing a harmonious relationship is an
33
34 ultimate goal in human relationships (Chen and Starosta, 2003) that also represents a measure of
35
36 social competence (Chen and An, 2009). In the hierarchical, traditional Chinese society, ritualistic
37
38 communication that reflects normative hierarchies is well regarded (Fang, 1999). But in addition to
39
40 the social value provided by traditional communication skills, such that children know to
41
42 acknowledge a social rank, our informants also cite the need for different communication skills in
43
44 the contemporary age, such that their children can articulate their individual opinions directly and
45
46 successfully engage in debates:
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51 The Chinese education system cultivates ritualistic communication. Here, it is the opposite—there are no
52
53 rituals. There is more flexibility to personalize education, and the children learn many different communication
54
55 skills, such as the ability to debate. (C07)

56 The traditional Chinese system gives the children a big advantage of flexibility; they learn to switch by
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3 communicating differently with different people. But they also need new communication forms to succeed
4 today. They need to express who they are. (C18)

5
6 *Face-saving-free expression.* For our informants, the traditional concept of face reflects the
7
8 social capital they gain through an indirect communication style and by regulating their emotions
9
10 (Fang, 1999), as illustrated by the traditional saying that “only devils move on a straight line”
11
12 (Faure, 1999, p. 202). These traditional norms take a poor view of the direct communication style
13
14 that is more common in Western cultures. But informants also recognize that traditional face-
15
16 saving, indirect communication could hamper their children’s success in contemporary society,
17
18 even as their preference for face-saving remains evident in their service evaluations. This quest for
19
20 both communication styles is expressed in the following quotes:
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24
25 It is impossible to avoid confrontation if you want to communicate what’s really on your mind, someone will
26 take offense. We can’t always worry about face in the bigger group. We are always taught to preserve harmony
27 in communication, but it is not the same today as it was before. They [children] need to learn how to do it
28 [communicate directly] in today’s world, because it’s a practical skill. (C28)

29
30
31 We understand that the teachers are under pressure in Chinese schools, because the system is so competitive
32 and strict. Poor teachers, they have to avoid conflicts and a loss of face to keep their jobs. (C21)

33
34 Thus, consistent with the consumer cultural paradox, the informants indicate that they
35
36 appreciate the benefits of individual free expression and new communication skills (e.g., debate,
37
38 direct expression), but still acknowledge the value of traditional, ritualistic, and indirect
39
40 communication that facilitates societal harmony.
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42

43 **Discussion**

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45
46 The paradox lens we used helped us to identify a range of higher/lower-level tensions consumers
47
48 experience when reconciling between local and global values in China. By exploring these tensions
49
50 embedded in the consumer cultural paradox, we can gain better insights into cultural dynamics
51
52 (Craig and Douglas, 2006), the process of value reprioritization, and how cultural values realign to
53
54 produce a multicultural orientation (Seo and Gao, 2015). For example, diverging values and norms
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3 produce unique communication style preferences—at times consumers may prefer a more indirect
4
5 style, while at other times they may prefer a more direct communication style. These preferences
6
7 could be attributed to the process of reconciliation through which consumers gravitate toward more
8
9 or less direct and indirect styles, depending on the salience of contradictory values (de Mooij,
10
11 2004). Thus, we confirm that cultural adaptation in multicultural marketplaces is not an either/or
12
13 choice but rather involves both/and preferences (Ng *et al.*, 2021). Consumers often desire mutually
14
15 conflicting features of a service simultaneously, influenced by both local and global values and
16
17 norms. This co-existence of conflicting cultural influences leads to a range of tensions that together
18
19 form the consumer cultural paradox (Figure 1).
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22
23 – Insert Figure 1 about here –
24
25

26 In identifying the co-existence of contradictory cultural values that consumers desire
27
28 simultaneously, our findings clarify that consumers' multicultural identity construction and cultural
29
30 adaptation are not merely an exclusive choice between local versus global (Kipnis *et al.*, 2014). A
31
32 consumer cultural paradox is characterized by the co-existence of contradictory cultural values
33
34 which consumers may at times both embrace and/or reject, because they are unable or unwilling to
35
36 choose between either pole of the tensions and thus desire them both simultaneously. The higher-
37
38 level tensions that we identify are consistent with some previous findings pertaining to the
39
40 continued influence of traditional values in China, such as number-based superstitions (Westjohn *et*
41
42 *al.*, 2017), that contrast with active pursuit of scientific development (Faure and Fang, 2008); the
43
44 tensions between collective versus individual values (Hofstede, 2001); and the importance of face
45
46 versus the desire for self-expression and directness (Faure and Fang, 2008). We add more nuanced
47
48 insights by establishing detailed, lower-level tensions for the first time, as a novel contribution to
49
50 consumer behavior and intercultural service literature. Specifically, in an education service context,
51
52 these lower-level tensions can inform existing identity paradoxes, such as those identified by Yuan
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3 *et al.* (2019): dedicated learners/disoriented bees, global citizens/proud Chinese, and team
4
5 players/independent thinkers.

6 7 *Theoretical contributions*

8
9 By introducing the consumer cultural paradox and its constituent tensions, we contribute to CCT,
10
11 acculturation, and multiculturalization research (Cleveland and Bartsch, 2019; Demangeot *et al.*, 2015;
12
13 Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019), as well as to studies of services in intercultural marketplaces
14
15 (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019). In particular, by revealing how consumers negotiate diverging
16
17 local/global cultural elements, rather than focusing solely on the outcomes of cultural encounters
18
19 (Kipnis *et al.*, 2019; Sobol *et al.*, 2018), we extend understanding of the consumer multicultural
20
21 identity, which is more complex than assimilation or acculturation (Demangeot *et al.*, 2015).
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25 A paradox lens offers new insights into consumers' negotiation processes between local and
26
27 global values (Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019) and value reprioritization toward a more
28
29 multicultural orientation (Seo and Gao, 2015). Identifying the multiple dimensions of the consumer
30
31 cultural paradox can also inform cultural hybridization processes, which remain relatively
32
33 unexplored compared with cultural homogenization versus polarization (Cleveland and Bartsch,
34
35 2019). A paradox lens can help scholars broaden investigations of the "glocal" consumption
36
37 environment to embody global and local cultural narratives simultaneously (Strizhakova *et al.*,
38
39 2012; Thompson and Arsel, 2004).
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44
45 Responding to recent calls to expand the range of service contexts studied (Steenkamp,
46
47 2019), we investigate educational services in a non-Western market. In addition, challenging the
48
49 focus in prior literature on short service encounters (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019), we expand the
50
51 contextual purview to international education services, characterized by long-term relationships
52
53 with substantial complexity and uncertainty. In turn, we outline the scope and relevance of different
54
55 cultural values and norms and their application in this particular consumption situation (Craig and
56
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3 Douglas, 2006), adding detail and a consumer perspective to previous studies of the influence of
4 culture on international education that highlight macro or policy factors (Akboga, 2015; Vidovich,
5 2010).
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9
10 Finally, our findings imply that a paradox approach to diverging cultural influences might
11 clarify other consumption tensions, such as between growing consumerism versus anti-consumption
12 (Iyer and Muncy, 2009) or between de-Westernization versus “McDonaldization” in media and
13 culture studies (Iwabuchi, 2010). For sociology, mapping lower-level tensions could add nuance to
14 the tensions between transnationalism or cosmopolitanism versus nationalism (Roudometof, 2005)
15 or between modernization and post-modernization (Inglehart and Baker, 2000).
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23 *Managerial implications*

24
25 The consumer cultural paradox comprises higher- and lower-level tensions, each of which might
26 inform managerial efforts, particularly in relation to service design, communication, and marketing
27 promotions. In Table III, we suggest some exemplary implications for practice.
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32 – Insert Table III about here –
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35 *Tradition versus modernity.* For service design, the lower-level tension of traditional
36 learning methods versus acquiring new skills reveals that consumers may prefer traditional methods
37 in their service evaluations, but they seem to prefer contradictory, new methods that promise the
38 acquisition of new skills when they evaluate service outcomes. With this insight, service marketers
39 could adjust their reporting and evaluation templates for the different service stages, such that they
40 anticipate that consumers will seek to understand how the new service fits with traditional offerings
41 during the learning process, then gauge its outcomes on the basis of the extent of acquisition of
42 contemporary skills. With regard to the tension between cultivating character versus acquiring
43 knowledge, managers might add traditional elements to evaluation rubrics for new programs, to
44 match consumers’ expectations of a traditional focus on character even while students gain new
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3 knowledge. Similarly, the academic success versus individual creativity tension suggests that
4
5 managers should balance their curriculum design to incorporate programs focusing on individual
6
7 skills and on test preparation, together with extracurricular activities that help bridge the two
8
9 systems. The tension between complexity versus simplicity also suggests that educational service
10
11 providers could incorporate traditional elements such as cultural visits and social service hours in
12
13 ways that encourage students to apply their new knowledge to performing these activities. Finally,
14
15 the servicescape might feature a traditional appearance but provide novel experiences (Warden *et*
16
17 *al.*, 2021), by incorporating service design-specific elements that consumers value across
18
19 seemingly conflicting cultural perspectives (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008).
20
21

22
23 *Individual versus group.* Here we focus on implications for service design and
24
25 communication. For example, the drive to belong versus a wish to deviate implies that curricula
26
27 need to balance between individualized and peer learning. With regard to the tension between being
28
29 stuck in the middle versus bridging the generational gap, consumers need help in performing their
30
31 bridging role, which service providers could offer by enabling more direct exposure and
32
33 participation in the learning process among grandparents. When consumers negotiate the tensions of
34
35 studying diligently versus getting things easily, they want their children to study hard but also attain
36
37 a comfortable, contemporary life, so service providers might adjust their communication efforts to
38
39 promote how their offerings can offer both outcomes, in balance. Considering the tension between
40
41 individual empowerment versus collective responsibility, we suggest communication that stresses
42
43 the benefits of societal responsibility for personal success.
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49 *Individual expression versus social harmony.* Because consumers experience a tension
50
51 between ritualistic versus individualistic communication, managers might try to combine traditional
52
53 and contemporary service provision, by introducing examples and cases from traditional society to
54
55 help students build contemporary communications skills. Promotional and marketing efforts also
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3 should feature different communications styles, to help cater to the tension between face saving
4
5 versus free expression.
6

7 Overall, by recognizing higher- and lower-level tensions and their impacts on consumers,
8
9 marketers and managers can adjust their service design and communication efforts more effectively.
10
11 Recognizing how the opposing tensions interact could inform service design. For example, the
12
13 servicescape for providing the service might feature a traditional appearance but provide novel
14
15 experiences (Warden *et al.*, 2021), by incorporating service design elements that consumers value
16
17 across seemingly conflicting cultural perspectives (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008). Marketing
18
19 communication styles could encompass the different poles in a tension (de Mooij, 2004), such that
20
21 visuals in promotional materials could signal contemporary values while the text content focuses on
22
23 traditional norms, or vice versa. The careful balance between them might rely on multiple cues and
24
25 symbols (Warden *et al.*, 2021). Because local and global cultural identities become more or less
26
27 salient, according to situational factors (Ng *et al.*, 2021), we also suggest tailoring marketing
28
29 communications in accordance with the salience of paradoxical tensions, which may make it easier
30
31 for consumers to process and reconcile seemingly conflicting messages.
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37 **Limitations and research directions**

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39 Our findings that reveal how Chinese education service consumers experience the consumer
40
41 cultural paradox cannot be directly extrapolated to other cultures or service contexts. Even within a
42
43 single national culture, notable differences might arise among sub-cultures and geographies, and
44
45 research in other cities or regions may offer other nuances, especially in terms of the lower-level
46
47 tensions. In this sense, the paradox lens may be particularly valuable for studying multiple cultures,
48
49 such that they might exhibit more similar higher-level tensions but more culturally unique lower-
50
51 level tensions. An interesting research effort would be to categorize tensions into higher and lower
52
53 levels, then analyze their salience across different service contexts, consumption stages (e.g.,
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3 consumer acquisition versus retention), and consumer evaluations (e.g., of processes versus
4
5 outcomes). In addition, considering the unique nature of educational services, it might be
6
7 worthwhile to assess other service industries to explore relevant tensions that might be specific to
8
9 them.

10
11 We rely on a cross-sectional method to elicit participants' perceptions of tensions;
12
13 longitudinal studies could reveal whether the paradoxical tensions we observe remain stable or
14
15 evolve with changes to micro (individual) or macro (societal, economic) conditions. Our qualitative
16
17 method could be complemented by quantitative approaches with larger samples of consumers that
18
19 can establish the salience of tensions we have identified. Consistent with our research question, we
20
21 used a paradox lens to identify a range of specific lower/higher tensions comprising the consumer
22
23 cultural paradox, demonstrating that consumers negotiate between opposing poles of different
24
25 tensions. However, we did not explore how consumers negotiate between these tensions across
26
27 different contexts and did not identify which personal and environmental factors might influence
28
29 how consumers do so (Mick and Fournier, 1998). Additional studies might investigate which
30
31 consumers use which coping strategies, when and how, including how these responses vary with
32
33 different tensions.

34
35 Finally, some of the paradoxical tensions we identified are novel to the literature. Future
36
37 studies could help to move the field forward by examining how these tensions affect consumer
38
39 identity, but also their behavior. Future experimental studies, for example, might want to
40
41 manipulate the salience of the opposing poles of these new tensions to better understand how they
42
43 affect consumers' evaluation and their acceptance or rejection of foreign service offerings from
44
45 different cultures.

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Table I: Informant profiles

Code	Child's Age	Profession	Age
C01	4	Accountant	29
C02	5	Marketing Manager	38
C03	4	Sales Manager	36
C04	4	Business Owner	41
C05	4	Teacher	29
C06	5	Engineer	32
C07	6	Business Owner	31
C08	5	Business Owner	40
C09	5	Business Owner	36
C10	6	Financial Manager	44
C11	4	Sales Manager	29
C12	4	Sales Manager	31
C13	5	Business Owner	40
C14	8	Business Owner	43
C15	8	Sales Manager	39
C16	8	Marketing Executive	31
C17	7	Business Owner	33
C18	9	Sales Manager	35
C19	11	Investor	42
C20	13	Business Owner	46
C21	10	Engineer	39
C22	14	Business Owner	43
C23	12	Sales Manager	31
C24	12	Business Owner	39
C25	13	Financial Manager	29
C26	11	Business Owner	34
C27	10	Sales Manager	42
C28	9	Business Owner	48
C29	11	Business Manager	42
C30	10	Sales Manager	39
C31	9	Business Owner	35
C32	13	Business Manager	38

Table II: Higher- and lower-level tensions in the consumer cultural paradox

Higher-Level Tensions	Lower-Level Tensions	Excerpts of Exemplary Quotes
<i>Tradition vs. modernity</i>	Traditional learning methods vs. acquiring new skills	<p>Memorizing is necessary due to the nature of Chinese characters. Because our children learn how to memorize so many characters, they can use the same method to remember any other information ... it doesn't matter if it is English language, debate, or analytical thinking ... If it worked for so many years, why wouldn't it work now? (C18)</p> <p>To learn a new language, or leadership and innovation, the children need new skills. But we still like to know how many new words they learned or they have to memorize for their homework. (C02)</p>
	Cultivating character vs. acquiring knowledge	<p>The purpose of childhood education is not obtaining knowledge but morality, cultivating character, benevolence. Why would it be any different here? So, if the children want to learn analytical thinking, or how to debate, they really need to have their character built first. (C14)</p> <p>The children need to learn how to succeed internationally, but also at home. The workplace is changing, it is much more competitive, and there are new industries all the time. Here [international education center] they learn practical things to help them. That should be most important. (C27)</p>
	Academic success vs. individual creativity	<p>In any country, it is of course important to have good results, or good grades for the students. How else will anyone know how good they are? Nothing will change that as the main criterion of knowledge. (C03)</p> <p>China is changing. We were very focused on achieving concrete results, but we now need to focus on innovation. Our children need to be ready for this new reality. They also need to develop analytical thinking, creativity, not just focus on getting good grades on tests. (C16)</p>
	Complexity vs. simplicity	<p>Children are flexible because of the traditional society strata; they are used to playing different roles, and they know how to switch. They are capable of adjusting according to a situation and who they talk to.... Public schools reflect a more traditional society. (C03)</p> <p>It is very easy to see what is going on [in the international educational center], instructions are simple, and we understand what to expect, though we don't understand English well enough to tell if the children are making progress or not. (C19)</p>
<i>Individual vs. the group</i>	A drive to belong vs. a wish to deviate	<p>We feel that everyone is pursuing international education.... We would like them [children] to make their independent decisions, but we are afraid what will happen if we don't go with the mainstream. (C15)</p> <p>International education is an essential part of our lifestyle today. All our friends are doing it. We can choose not to do it, but if we don't do it, we will be something of an outcast, and our social circle would be much smaller. (C24)</p>
	Stuck in the middle vs. bridging the gap	<p>Our generation is under biggest pressure, like we are stuck in the middle. We are carrying all the load, and we are facing the biggest pressure, especially from our parents. Our parents and our children live in very different worlds, and it is up to us to bridge between the two. (C23)</p>

		We have to consider our parents and their needs. The problems we are dealing with for our children are different, but they did the best they could with us. Also, most often they are paying for afterschool education for the children, which means they need to have a say, and we need to compromise. (C12)
	Studying diligently vs. getting things easy	Our parents feel that our children are getting it too easy—they have more money, access to technology, they travel. All the things we didn't have. So, they are putting the pressure on us to invest in their education. (C10)
		Our traditional approaches to education, propagated by our parents, must be right at some level, because they brought us to where we are today. But how do we explain to our children that they need to practice calligraphy or an instrument all day, and miss out on other things their friends are doing? (C29)
	Individual empowerment vs. collective responsibility	We never had so many opportunities to choose from. We also have more access to information that was previously unavailable, and we can make informed decision about what's best for each individual child. We need to do what's best for them, regardless of what the world thinks. (C14)
		Every new generation increases knowledge. Older generations didn't have this knowledge; we are in a unique position. But this new knowledge creates new responsibility. We have more information than before, but also more responsibility. Our children need to learn how to use all this information, not just for themselves, but also for the whole society. (C06)
<i>Free expression vs. social harmony</i>	Ritualistic vs. individualistic communication	The Chinese education system cultivates ritualistic communication. Here, it is the opposite—there are no rituals. There is more flexibility to personalize education, and the children learn many different communication skills, such as the ability to debate. (C07)
		The traditional Chinese system gives the children a big advantage of flexibility; they learn to switch by communicating differently with different people. But they also need new communication forms to succeed today. They need to express who they are. (C18)
	Face-saving vs. free expression	It is impossible to avoid confrontation if you want to communicate what's really on your mind, someone will take offense. We can't always worry about face in the bigger group. We are always taught to preserve harmony in communication, but it is not the same today as it was before. They [children] need to learn how to do it [communicate directly] in today's world, because it's a practical skill. (C28)
		We understand that the teachers are under pressure in Chinese schools, because the system is so competitive and strict. Poor teachers, they have to avoid conflicts and a loss of face to keep their jobs. (C21)

Table III: Managerial implications

Higher-Level Tensions	Lower-Level Tensions	Managerial implications
<i>Tradition vs. modernity</i>	Traditional learning methods vs. acquiring new skills	Consumers expect both traditional rote learning methods and new learning methods that help their children acquire new skills; managers might adjust their reporting and evaluation templates to stress the benefits of both traditional and new skills.
	Cultivating character vs. acquiring knowledge	Consumers seek new knowledge while also expecting a focus on traditional character cultivation; managers could redesign curricula to add traditional elements to the evaluation rubric for programs offering new knowledge.
	Academic success vs. individual creativity	Consumers expect courses that improve academic performance while developing individual creativity; managers could expand the service offering with programs that cater to test preparation and also offer customized individual lessons.
	Complexity vs. simplicity	Consumers appreciate both the traditional complexity of the Chinese traditional society and the simplicity reflected in international education; managers could offer more activities such as events, cultural visits, and social service hours to students to give them opportunities to apply their new knowledge in traditional society.
<i>Individual vs. the group</i>	A drive to belong vs. a wish to deviate	Consumers are trying to reconcile the needs of the group versus the individual; managers could adjust service designs to balance peer learning, team work, and individual activities.
	Stuck in the middle vs. bridging the gap	Consumers experience pressures from both their elders and their children; managers could offer new options to expose older generations to new styles of education, such as direct class observations, to help them learn about the new programs.
	Studying diligently vs. getting things easy	Consumers negotiate the tension between the societal expectation that children should study hard to achieve academic success and their desire to provide a comfortable contemporary life to their children; managers could adjust communication and promotional efforts to help consumers see the benefits of both.
	Individual empowerment vs. collective responsibility	Consumers expect both individual success and cultivation of traditional collective societal responsibility; managers could tailor their promotional messages to stress the benefits of societal responsibility for personal success.
<i>Free expression vs. social harmony</i>	Ritualistic vs. individualistic communication	Consumers want their children to develop ritualistic communication skills based on age and social rank hierarchies along with individualistic skills; managers could blend traditional and contemporary service offerings by applying examples and cases from the traditional society in new communications skills classes.
	Face-saving vs. free expression	Consumers expect their children to communicate based on face considerations and at the same time learn to express themselves freely and directly; managers could balance between the two communication styles in their promotional materials to show they are incorporating both in their programs.

Figure 1: Tensions in the consumer cultural paradox

