



Young Consumers

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The perceived cosmopolitan consumption of globally mobile, young consumers from China

Wei-Fen Chen

Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to explore the consumption practices of globally-mobile, young consumers from China who experience both upward social mobility and geographically outbound mobility by studying abroad, echoing emerging scholarship of “moving consumption”.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 27 first-generation Chinese international students studying in the USA.*

Findings – *The informants interpret outbound geographical mobility and upward social mobility in an overlapping manner. For them, cosmopolitan consumption practices are a form of boundary work and identity construction, reflecting their international experience. At the same time, the informants seek affirmation of the meanings and references of their consumption in their remote, native cultural contexts. In this way, they ensure that their tastes align with the popular “West” with which Chinese consumers are already familiar.*

Originality/value – *This study examines international student mobility that is unique to the younger generation. It considers how such form of mobility shapes the consumption patterns of Chinese youth with substantial purchasing power. Young, affluent international students differ in fundamental ways from other cross-cultural, cross-border travelers such as migrants, globally-mobile professionals, global citizens, nomads, sojourners and tourists. Thus, this study not only sheds light on the under-researched subject of “moving consumption” but also addresses youth cultures in transitional economies by exploring how Chinese youth consume when they are away from home and exposed to global consumerism first-hand.*

Keywords *China, International students, Social mobility, Consumer culture*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

This study echoes emerging scholarship across social science disciplines on what is known as the “mobilities turn,” which examines the social position change or spatial flow of individuals, groups, non-humans (e.g. information) and objects, and it addresses subsequent sociological concerns such as uneven mobility, mobility justice and dynamic meaning construction (Sheller, 2014). Specifically, this study examines a form of mobility unique to the younger generation – studying abroad as international students – and how this influences their consumption practices. While it is the youth from Asian emerging markets – and especially China and India – that currently drive international student mobility (Maslen, 2014), the way in which their consumption practices are influenced by living abroad remains an under-researched topic.

According to Ulver and Ostberg (2014), consumers constantly experience different forms and trajectories of mobility. This situates them within a dynamic process of *becoming someone* rather than simply *being someone*, which may result in elusive identities. Traditional static market segmentation may therefore fail to accurately capture or represent

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these mobile consumers. However, consumers' experiences of social mobility have not yet served as a major lens for explaining and predicting consumer behavior. As [Friedman \(2014\)](#) argues, most social mobility studies revolve around macro-societal mobility rates, whereas there is scant scholarship on how social mobility is *lived* at the individual level. In other words, we know relatively little about the effects of macro-societal change on individuals' feelings, identities, attitudes and economic behaviors.

Exceptions to this paucity of research can be found in the sporadic studies of the "moving consumption" scholarship. This discipline investigates the intersection of consumption and movement to explore how individuals respond to and cope with social mobility in the field of consumption ([Brembeck et al., 2015](#)). For example, scholars explore transformations in consumer identities following globalization, travel and new occupational paths that are transferrable across cultural contexts ([Thompson and Tambyah, 1999](#); [Bardhi et al., 2010](#); [Bardhi et al., 2012](#); [Brembeck et al., 2015](#); [Figueiredo and Uncles, 2015](#)). Beyond consumers' experience with spatial, geographical mobility, moving consumption research also addresses consumers' vertical (upward or downward) social mobility ([Hamilton and Catterall, 2006](#); [Beagan et al., 2015](#)). [Friedman \(2014\)](#), for instance, reviews studies of consumers' subjective experiences in vertical social mobility and calls for more scholarly attention to be paid to how mobility affects individual well-being. He contends that, even upward mobility that appears to be beneficial can result in anxiety and self-doubt.

This study examines the consumption practices of young consumers who are "on the move" in the context of overseas study, a form of mobility that is under-researched in moving consumption scholarship. Drawing on in-depth interviews with first-generation international students from China currently enrolled at a major US university, this study demonstrates how young consumers pursue social status through strategic shopping practices that are perceived to be cosmopolitan and Western. Such perceptions, however, are ambivalently mediated by a Chinese perspective of what kinds of "cosmopolitan" and "Western" consumption are popular and worthwhile.

This study is structured as follows. First, the literature on how vertical social mobility (e.g. upward and downward) and horizontal, spatial mobility (e.g. tourism) affect consumption practices is briefly reviewed. Next, a two-pronged rationale is provided to show how international student mobility is a unique and pertinent lens to examine the moving consumption of Chinese youth. Empirical data are then presented to show how this study furthers our understanding of youth consumer culture in a transnational context.

Consumers in social mobility

Social position, usually determined by factors such as group affiliation, economic standing or occupational prestige, is a fundamental concept that has often been used to account for and predict consumers' lifestyle variations and economic behaviors ([Mihic and Čulina, 2006](#)). In such accounts, an individual's social position is measured in a fixed, static and objective way that emphasizes demographics over other factors. The assumption is that people who have recently moved into a new social position will shop in the same way as those who are already established in that position.

For example, [Cui and Liu \(2001\)](#) segment urban consumer markets in China by household income to create four groups of consumers, each subscribing to a corresponding lifestyle. However, because large swathes of Chinese consumers have experienced upward mobility since the nationwide economic reform began in 1978 ([Liu et al., 2011](#)), it is unclear whether the rising living standards of the newly wealthy translate into consumption patterns identical to the already-wealthy. For example, if those categorized as "the little rich" (with annual household incomes RMB 20,001-40,000) experience an income boost, will they live and consume like the "yuppies" (with annual household incomes over RMB 40,000)? Will they, like the yuppies, enjoy outdoor activities, travel, luxury consumption, Western brands and

subscribe to the ethic of “work hard, play hard” (Cui and Liu, 2001)? The traditional, demographic accounts of consumer segmentation may be poor predictors of consumption after upward mobility (i.e. have achieved a new, “destination” social position) or while in a transitional stage. Further, such accounts may overlook consumers’ psychological features and lifestyle adjustments during or after such life transitions.

For instance, Chen and Nelson (2017) argued that well-educated, white-collar-professional youth suffering from downward mobility in the post-recession economy may develop money-saving strategies that cannot be easily imitated by others in the same economically-deprived position. In another study on food consumption, consumers experiencing either downward or upward mobility signal their belonging to, or distance from, certain social classes by creating discourses on “how to eat” (Beagan *et al.*, 2015). These cases indicate that for consumers in life transitions, self-identity can often be inconsistent with how they are categorized “on paper”.

When trying to understand the experience of consumers undergoing vertical social mobility, researchers tend to focus on how they pursue and maintain social status and prestige. In contrast, typical investigations into the relationship between horizontal, spatial mobility and consumption focus on how consumers shop to reproduce their self-identity in ways that are anchored to either their native or host cultural contexts. Bardhi *et al.* (2010), for example, find that when sophisticated, cosmopolitan American tourists travel to China, an unfamiliar cultural context, they sometimes lose interest in experimenting with local food after the first few days and choose to eat at Western fast food restaurants. Although these tourists may not choose to eat fast food at home, consuming the symbolic meanings of fast food during overseas travel may help them “feel like home” and create boundaries against the others (Bardhi *et al.*, 2010).

A lens to understand mobile, young consumers from emerging markets

Although the scholarship on moving consumption addresses multiple forms of mobility, it does not specifically consider how international student mobility affects youth consumption. Farrugia and Wood (2017) contend that spatial mobility is foundational to understanding young people’s lives, because they are “at the forefront of changes in the social organization of space” (p. 209). To address the youth’s values, lifestyles and spatial mobility intersect, in this study, outbound international students from China are the empirical focus not only because of the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad but also because their experiences may be relevant to the larger group of which they are a part, i.e. young men and women from developing countries who pursue advanced degrees in developed Western societies (Maslen, 2014). Specifically, this study explores how Chinese international students shop while studying in the USA.

In China, pursuing academic qualifications overseas is gradually becoming a mainstream manifestation of new middle class values (Larmer, 2016; Yang, 2016). China is the country sending the most outbound international students to host countries including the USA, the UK, Australia and Germany (Beine *et al.*, 2014). According to the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 544,500 Chinese students studied abroad in 2016, 91.49 per cent of them self-funded. While most Chinese students choose English-speaking countries as their destinations, the USA is the most popular choice. According to the US Institute of International Education, about one-third of the 1,043,839 international students in the USA came from China in academic year 2015-2016, constituting the largest international student population in the USA by country of origin. This was followed by 165,918 students from India during the same academic year. In other words, China is a major sending country, and the USA is a major host country, making outbound Chinese students in the USA a pertinent lens to discuss phenomena related to contemporary international student mobility.

The purchasing power of Chinese international students has caught the attention of marketers. Popular media coverage of Chinese students' shopping preferences seems to be guided by the trope that these youth are a new "Great Gatsby Generation," associated with luxury consumption and lighthearted shopping (Johanson, 2016). Alternatively, most academic studies tend to examine how the experiences of international students shape their roles in the production system, looking at their future monetary return (Kratz and Netz, 2018) and career prospects (Porschitz *et al.*, 2012). Some aspects of international students' everyday lives, including their struggles (Lee and Rice, 2007), vulnerability (Sherry *et al.*, 2010) and learning experiences (Henze and Zhu, 2012), are also explored. Furthermore, scholars also investigate their motivations for choosing specific destinations (e.g. students tend to choose where there is a large diaspora of their nationality; Beine *et al.*, 2014), and how those from underprivileged families may have an unequal access to overseas education due to reasons such as previous educational decisions (Lörz *et al.*, 2016). However, beyond these considerations, relatively few studies inquire into international students' consumption practices and their roles in the global consumer society.

This study argues that international student mobility serves as a pertinent and unique lens to inform scholarship on youth moving consumption. The rationale is twofold.

First, for most international students, studying abroad is a voluntary, motivated, fixed-term relocation to a foreign country based on a deliberate selection process. Such mobility experiences are special and should be differentiated from those of migrants, highly-skilled mobile professionals, global citizens, nomads, sojourners and tourists. Previous literature has addressed consumers' spatial mobility with regard to various temporal horizons – temporary, permanent, or constantly "on the move". These diverse mobility forms have resulted in a range of consumption practices. However, international student mobility may correlate with a unique form of consumption because young men and women left their homes for a foreign country, for an anticipated multi-year period and eventually return home. Given the connotation of "upward mobility" attached to higher education (Kupfer, 2012), international students experience dual mobility trajectories – the geographically outbound mobility and upward social mobility. Examining their consumption practices helps to illuminate how these Chinese youth make shopping decisions in the context of these dual and interrelated mobility experiences.

Second, international students can serve as a lens to examine how youth from emerging markets shop when they are given full access to global consumer culture. Emerging markets are often defined by their rapid economic growth and industrialization, resulting in new infrastructure demands, the proliferation of business opportunities and the growing purchasing power of young and urban populations (Uner and Gungordu, 2016). Previous studies tend to frame emerging market consumers as passive receivers of global consumerism with limited access to foreign commodities. For example, Keller and Vihalemm's (2003) research shows that Estonian youth in the post-communist era are ambivalent toward imported, Western consumer culture: while it serves as a gateway for local consumers to join the free world and become international shoppers, it also represents new problems of consumerism such as over-consumption and the creation of false needs. In the Turkish market, Kravets and Sandikci (2014) contend that because of perceived price and product differences, Turkish consumers tend to feel excluded from the "global middle," a general imagination of world life standards in places such as the USA and Europe. As a result, Turkish consumers have become interested in e-commerce, counterfeits and overseas shopping as a way to keep up with the world.

While scholarly discussions address how emerging market consumers interpret and shop for foreign commodities "at home," international students' consumption may bring new insights into how youth from emerging markets consume when they are away from home and given full access to an aspirational, Western culture. Instead of being laggards in the global consumer culture, these globally mobile, financially secure young people are capable of

acquiring international experience overseas and are exposed to Western consumerism first-hand. Hence, by looking at their consumption practices, this study may shed light on how young consumers' shopping is influenced by their mobility experience and how they negotiate discrepancies between global and local market norms.

Method

Given that consumers' behaviors are heavily associated with their identity and the way they make sense of their life transitions (Chen and Nelson, 2017), a qualitative approach is selected for this study. There are two reasons for this. First, it is a useful way to investigate subjective interpretations and inner-feelings, which are necessary to explore the informants' identity. Second, the qualitative approach is believed to be exploratory in nature (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2010) and is a good tool to use when asking "why" and "how" questions based on a holistic scope of analysis (Marshall, 1996). It allows for a more inclusive examination of the multiple dimensions of the informants' transnational relocation experiences, reproduced in their consumption practices. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted for data collection. As Seidman (2006) points out, at the root of the in-depth interview "is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9).

The informants were selected through purposeful sampling, which is one of the most common sampling techniques in qualitative studies. In purposeful sampling, the researcher actively selects the most productive samples to answer the research questions (Marshall, 1996). In this study, potential interviewees were reached by recruiting messages distributed on social media and online forums. Those who replied to the recruiting messages underwent a screening process to confirm that they met the demographic criteria such as age and hometown, and that they had moved to the USA as an international student. The number of informants ($N = 27$) was determined by two criteria proposed by Seidman (2006). The first is that the researcher believes that the sample comprises informants from multiple backgrounds, to the extent that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experience of those within it. The second is that the information gained from data can be viewed as saturated once recurring themes are identified.

In-depth interviews were conducted in 2016 with first-generation international students from China. Each was funded by his or her parents to pursue an undergraduate or Master's degree at a major university in the USA. The informants' parents, or elder members of their core families, did not have long-term overseas experiences with either education or employment. For a manageable scope of data analysis, only self-funded international students were recruited. Not only were they more representative of the Chinese international student group, the sampling also ensured that the informants' overseas study is a motivated, deliberate and voluntary decision, unaffected by factors such as generous scholarships or corporate sponsorship. First-generation international students were recruited to eliminate situations in which the informants were "global citizens" who relocated with their entire family. Their ages ranged between 18 and 24, with the exception of two and most came from urban areas of China. The informants' profiles can be found in Table I.

Each interview lasted for approximately ninety minutes, during which, each informant was assigned a pseudonym. Prior to the interview, the informants were advised that the purpose of this study was to explore their mobility experiences and shopping preferences. The interview questions started with broad and general topics such as, "Do you enjoy shopping?" and "How did you decide to come to the USA?" The conversation then moved to more specific questions about the informants' spending patterns and the nuances between the US and the Chinese markets.

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and then analyzed using multiple coding methods (Saldaña, 2013). In the first cycle of coding, attribute coding was used to

Table I Informants' profiles

No.	Pseudonym	Degree level	Age	Gender
1	Annie	Bachelor's	22	F
2	Carol	Bachelor's	23	F
3	Elaine	Master's	23	F
4	Gabriel	Master's	25	M
5	Hannah	Bachelor's	22	F
6	Iris	Bachelor's	20	F
7	Jeff	Bachelor's	24	M
8	Karen	Bachelor's	23	F
9	Lara	Master's	26	F
10	Monica	Master's	20	F
11	Natalie	Bachelor's	21	F
12	Olivia	Bachelor's	21	F
13	Pam	Bachelor's	20	F
14	Rosa	Master's	22	F
15	Stanley	Bachelor's	22	M
16	Tracy	Bachelor's	18	F
17	Vincent	Master's	24	M
18	William	Bachelor's	20	M
19	Anna	Master's	23	F
20	Bonnie	Master's	22	F
21	Cindy	Master's	22	F
22	Deborah	Master's	22	F
23	Yvonne	Bachelor's	22	F
24	Elsa	Bachelor's	20	F
25	Faye	Master's	22	F
26	Gina	Bachelor's	19	F
27	Hailey	Bachelor's	21	F

categorize the informants' demographic characteristics, such as their hometowns, family backgrounds and fields of study. Thereafter, eclectic coding, encompassing various approaches, was used to facilitate analysis of the data because it is suitable to discerning a variety of phenomena and issues related to the informants' multicultural experience. Specifically, descriptive coding and initial coding, respectively, were used to identify topical dimensions and to separate the data into discrete parts so that similarities and differences could be compared.

In the second cycle of coding, pattern coding was used to generate more meaningful, parsimonious and abstract units of analysis. These pattern codes have merit because they allow major themes to be identified. For example, patterns could show that the informants' shopping preferences are influenced less by the local opinion leaders than by their peers in the remote home context.

The data were analyzed to reflect an issue-focused approach through which theoretical findings are expected to be generalized, as is typical of a sociological account (Weiss, 1994). According to Yin (1989), study results can be generalized from a small, non-probabilistic sample when "the investigator's goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)" (p. 21). In other words, the research findings are expected to connect with other narratives based on similar theoretical propositions instead of being universally applicable to other populations.

Because the concept of validity has been controversial in qualitative research, Maxwell (2013) suggests that the validity of qualitative studies may not lie in an "observer-independent gold standard" to which accounts can be compared to see if they are valid. Instead, to achieve validity, situations can be reviewed to determine whether there is a "validity threat," that is, a way in which the findings can be challenged. In this study, a few

strategies were undertaken to enhance the validity of the research findings. For example, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect “rich” data that arguably provide a more revealing picture of the issues being studied. In addition, the researcher lived in the field of the current study for more than four years before data collection began. This provided the sensibility to ask pertinent questions and to probe the details of the informants’ responses. In addition, being informed of some numerical results (e.g. the percentage and composition of the Chinese international student body), a relatively representative group of informants was interviewed. This may have helped to build a foundation to evaluate the implicitly quantitative nature of the research findings. To elaborate, with such sampling, when a theme is claimed to be overarching among the informants, it is less likely to be merely exceptional, so that the extent to which the findings speak to specific scholarship can be better measured.

Findings

The data revealed that the informants perceive their outbound spatial mobility and upward social mobility as overlapping and intertwined. As such, when shopping, they tend to pursue status and social class differentiation by choosing global brands and following specific consumption practices perceived to be cosmopolitan and international. However, their perceptions of specific cosmopolitan practices were molded when they lived in China and are reinforced through constant reference to the Chinese context after leaving home. As a result, they perform a cosmopolitan consumption that is mediated through a Chinese lens. Even while living in the USA, the Chinese students are selective in terms of accessing consumer goods and practices reflecting popular “West,” a taste endorsed and aspired to by Chinese consumers.

In the following paragraphs, their consumption practices are discussed in detail.

“Moving up” by “moving out”

While the informants believe that they are experiencing upward and outbound mobility, their perceptions of these two trajectories overlap. Pursuing overseas degrees does not necessarily lead to a significant salary increase or occupational advancement – the traditional source of upward mobility – when the students return home (Berg, 2011). Nonetheless, they consider themselves to be achieving a better social position. This contradiction can be explained by the alternative and novel framework the informants had developed to define their mobility experiences, wherein upward mobility is determined by the characteristics obtained through outbound mobility. These include a broadened vision, familiarity with multiple cultural forms, relocation experience and other personal traits developed during travel, such as being independent, resourceful and informed. The following quote by Elaine illustrates how her perception of intergenerational mobility relates to the acquisition of fresh perspectives and critical thinking.

Elaine: I study abroad, which means I will see more in the geographical relocation. I started to think of things that I have never thought of before, I have new perspectives. Maybe my parents do not have such understanding due to the lack of cultural shocks and opportunities. I think I have been upgraded to a higher level of thinking. This is what I mean by moving up [...]. No, I don’t really care [about job title and salary], I care about how I am doing as a person, and whether I am doing something meaningful.

While Elaine defines upward mobility by what she sees and how she thinks, Gabriel straightforwardly remarks that he is moving upward in the process of being away from home, which means more contacts with the outside world.

Gabriel: I’ve been thinking that I am lucky, I am jumping upwards, like using a springboard, from the interior of China [...] to the USA. The validity of the springboard theory aside, I

believe my vision has been expanded, my capabilities are sharpened, including overcoming the challenges I encountered. I have seen more. Compared to my old classmates, I think we have different attitudes and visions.

Elaine and Gabriel both claim that their upward mobility is dictated by some inner, immaterial change associated with their international experience. Wang (2012) points out that the motivation for privileged youth to pursue overseas degrees is often driven by the desire to accumulate cosmopolitan capital, defined as “bodily and mental predispositions and competence which help to engage confidently in globalizing social arenas” (Weenink, 2008, as cited in Wang, 2012, p. 3). The informants prioritize the inner qualities they attain, such as confidence and a broadened worldview, which are especially important considering that the “mobility capital” assumption (the power of foreign academic qualifications to facilitate job-seeking in China) may no longer hold true (Hu and Cairns, 2017; Wang, 2012).

The informants’ overlapping interpretations of upward social mobility and outbound spatial mobility can be explained in part by Berg’s (2011) argument that individuals would develop subjective definitions of “getting ahead” if mainstream socioeconomic valuations leave them behind. In the same vein, a few reasons may explain why the informants associate international relocation with upward mobility.

The first relates to the “two-class” discourse within China’s social structure. Traditional accounts of social stratification may no longer address the social configuration of China following its recent economic and occupational shifts (Guo, 2008). This may result in individuals having an ambiguous social class consciousness (Miao, 2017). In this regard, the informants may hesitate to pinpoint their upward mobility trajectory with commonly-used conceptualizations because they are unsure of whether they are moving from, say, lower-middle to upper-middle class.

In addition, the informants in this study come from privileged families, with middle class or higher backgrounds. Most of their parents are used in white-collar occupations or hold managerial positions. They have college or postgraduate degrees and enough discretionary income to fully sponsor their children’s overseas education. The informants may believe it is difficult or unrealistic to contemplate surpassing their parents’ socioeconomic status. In this case, they may rely on other traits that are popular among the younger generation to evaluate their social positions and to stand out, such as prioritizing the exploratory experiences they have away from home (Weinberger *et al.*, 2017).

Perceived cosmopolitan consumption

The informants’ overlapping interpretations of upward social mobility and outbound spatial mobility mold their consumption strategies, as these are what allow Chinese international students to signal their cosmopolitanism and international experience. There is boundary work done to communicate the “moving up” or “getting ahead” of upward mobility, especially when it derives from spatial relocation to study in the USA. According to Holt (1998), it is often the consumption practices, rather than consumption objects, that reflect social class differences in the contemporary society. In this study, the informants’ boundary work is also reflected in how they consume rather than what they consume.

The informants’ interests in popular upscale brands are similar to the preferences of other urban Chinese youth (e.g. Apple laptops, Hollywood movies, Kate Spade handbags, Kiehl’s skincare). However, their interpretations of these choices vary. For example, with the long-lasting debate over potential infringements of copyright and trademark law in China (Cendrowski, 2016; Rapoza, 2012), Hannah views listening to music on a copyrighted platform (such as Spotify or Apple Music) as something that consumers with international

experience would do. This understanding does not change her taste in genres but affects how she accesses media content.

Hannah: When I was in China I was not aware of copyright issues. It was free to watch videos or listen to music online [...] But here, gradually, I am willing to subscribe to Netflix and Spotify; I pay some money every month. It requires expenditure, but I am willing to spend the money, no matter how expensive it is, I am willing to pay every month.

What differentiates Hannah from her peers back in China is the use of legitimate channels to access media content, rather than Westernized taste itself. These tendencies are further evidenced in Hannah's fashion consumption. When shopping for apparel, what attracts her to shop in the USA is a more liberal attitude toward different body-images and less judgment in the marketplace, not Western styles.

Hannah: The service here is different. You walk in, you look around by yourself, you deal with the sales person only when you are ready to pay. In China, the sales person will follow you. It is annoying [...] I think there may be some people who like to be surrounded by salespeople, but consumers my age usually hate it. Some small-sized girls may not experience this, but I am not slim; so I needed to say "I need a large one!" in [a Chinese] store. It was like they were forcing me to say it out loud. After I came out from the fitting room, they would say something like "see, your legs look thinner, your waist is not as huge as you thought!" I just wanted them to leave me alone.

Hannah prefers shopping in the USA, as it signals proximity to cosmopolitan, Western and progressive norms that are not yet prevalent in China. Moreover, being a cosmopolitan consumer may also represent an escape from the Chinese collectivistic tradition, which imposes more rules and limitations on individuals (Cappellini *et al.*, 2017). However, the informants' shopping is not simply driven by an intent to connect with the global community through cosmopolitan practices and global brands. Instead, their shopping is largely mediated by Chinese references. Such ambivalence is discussed in the following section.

Counter-alignment with the Middle back home

As the informants are exposed first hand to the US consumer society, it may be assumed that their perceived Western practices are informed by their international experiences and that they are early adopters of the latest Western trends, serving as opinion leaders for their Chinese peers. However, the data reveal that even if the informants tend to signal cosmopolitanism, they do so through a Chinese lens, meaning that they will opt for practices that have already been "endorsed" as cosmopolitan in China.

To elaborate, the informants are interested in practices that are "perceived as cosmopolitan" by their Chinese peers, while caring little about whether the practices are "actually cosmopolitan". Rarely would they explore and consider products and practices that are popular or common in the USA but unfamiliar to Chinese consumers. For example, while some political consumption acts, such as supporting "cruelty-free beauty" (not using animal testing for cosmetics), have become a trend in industrialized countries (Kumar, 2005), none of the informants showed an interest in this category even if most of them regularly make cosmetic and skincare purchases. The gap is conceivable given that these "vegan" cosmetics are usually unavailable in China (Yan, 2017) and that the informants' primary information sources and opinion leaders come from their Chinese social networks either at home (e.g. relatives and friends) or in the USA (e.g. other Chinese students on campus). They also frequently refer to product reviews, bloggers and newsletters that target Chinese consumers.

The informants also oriented to products compiled as a wish list prior to leaving China, meaning that their shopping was often "detached" from the local context. "Fitting in" was rarely a concern, as they showed little interest in exploring mainstream practices of local,

young, American consumers. For example, while a down coat is usually considered a must-have item that incoming students need to survive the winter in the Midwestern USA (where the study participants were recruited), the informants' purchasing decisions were not usually informed by local standards. Instead, as suggested by the following quote, purchases are made to fulfill their fantasies about what a winter look should be, for instance, parkas like those worn by the actors in Korean TV series popular in China.

Anna: When it comes to a down coat, it must be Canada Goose [...] It is cold here [...] I learned about this brand in China, as the brand became popular because of a Korean TV series.

Similar to Anna, Deborah's decision about which down coat brand to purchase was made before even arriving in the USA.

Deborah: I spent 1,000 US dollars on a down coat [...] The brand is Moncler, I learned about this brand when I lived in Shanghai [...] but [I didn't buy it because] it was very expensive in Shanghai [...] more than 10,000 RMB [...] and 1,000 dollars is equal to only 6,000 or 7,000 RMB. My mom thinks it is a good bargain.

As with the other informants, Deborah prefers shopping in the USA for global brands that are overpriced in China, which are perceived as "high-end" and aspirational despite their affordability in the USA. In other words, a high-end brand image in the informants' home context overrides their perceptions of same brand in the host context. The following quote by Iris reveals that, in terms of car purchase, she was most interested in a few luxury brands after referring to their higher retail prices in China. Iris cares about how a luxurious car purchase will be perceived in her hometown.

Interviewer: What kind of car would you like to buy?

Iris: Of course a nice car. Nice cars are cheaper here. Landrover, Mercedes, BMW. My dad loves cars and he had a BMW. If I drive a nice car, I can earn mianzi [face] for him.

Iris' reflection echoes [Johanson's \(2016\)](#) observation that international students' enthusiasm for luxury cars is not simply out of a desire to stand out on campus. Studying abroad means a limited period of time with access to global brands that were unaffordable in China, and the informants seize this opportunity to become cosmopolitan shoppers. When shopping, they constantly referred to the Chinese context to confirm the symbolic meanings of certain products and the price differences. Their consumption practices, in other words, are USA-based but China-oriented.

According to [Kravets and Sandikci \(2014\)](#), consumers from emerging markets develop practices that distance themselves from the "less developed" markets of their home country and align themselves with the "global middle," a generalized imagination of the world's standard of living, constructed by popular culture representations of people's everyday lives in exotic, developed and global societies. However, the informants in this study, who live overseas but expect to return home eventually, counter-align themselves with the "middle" in their home country, even when they are exposed to "authentic" Western consumer society. Remaining aware that they will only stay in the USA for a few years, the informants oriented their signaling of consumption toward the remote Chinese context. Shopping preferences are thus mediated by their sensibilities of what cosmopolitanism should look like in China.

Concluding discussion

Echoing the new mobilities paradigm ([Sheller, 2014](#); [Brembeck et al., 2015](#)), this study investigates the large-scale movement of Chinese young people to the USA as international

students, focusing on how such mobility influences their consumption in a foreign marketplace.

The informants' eclectic shopping strategies – USA-based but China-oriented – had not previously been observed among other consumers on the move. The findings add to the moving consumption scholarship by showing how young consumers' practices in international student mobility are different from other forms of moving consumption. For example, migrants leaving their home country for good would value their country-of-origin symbols even more than they did when living there as a kind of performative identity maintenance, showing that they had not lost contact with home (Mehta and Belk, 1991). While the informants of the present study were not interested in stressing their Chinese origins outwardly, the Indian immigrants in Mehta and Belk's (1991) study conspicuously displayed symbols of their national identity (e.g. having Indian food and celebrating Indian holidays).

International students' consumption practices also differed from those of highly-skilled, mobile professionals, whose shopping reflects multiple temporal considerations, such as refrain from buying large pieces of furniture in anticipation of potential moves (Figueiredo and Uncles, 2015). In this study, the informants also refrain from the "liquid consumption" practiced by nomads who constantly move from one country to another to prioritize the situational, utilitarian values of goods that are flexible, light and virtual, such as electronic photos (Bardhi *et al.*, 2012). In contrast to these nomads who evaluate a product based on its instrumental use-value in the immediate context (Bardhi *et al.*, 2012), the informants' consumptions are heavily mediated by the meanings attached to objects and practices, which were constructed in a past and remote home context rather than the host context.

That said, the informants' consumption practices should be distinguished from how other short-term travelers and tourists consume the symbols of home (e.g. USA tourists buying Western fast food when traveling in China) to pursue a sense of security and familiarity (Bardhi *et al.*, 2010). Their shopping is less about using global brands to construct and assert Chinese identity (Dong and Tian, 2009), but to effect a class distinction based on cultural sensibilities of a Chinese taste.

The findings also inform studies of global youth consumer culture in general by illuminating how youth from emerging markets shop when they are away from home. Typically, higher social status in emerging markets seems to be associated with Westernized tastes. As foreign commodities serve as status markers, Chinese consumers and individuals in other emerging markets, may deem purchasing imported products a useful way to signal their cosmopolitanism, modernism and sophistication (Liu *et al.*, 2011). In Turkey, elite consumers emphasize their international, Western experiences and eventually may develop a cultural propensity detached from the local context (Üstüner and Holt, 2010). In China, Ngai and Cho (2012) identify a group of young consumers of luxury, "the overseas pack," who have international experiences and deem themselves trendsetters informed of the latest foreign fads. In contrast, in this study, the informants' shopping is not merely West-oriented. Expecting to return home, they take advantage of their easy access to Western practices to signal cosmopolitanism, but they do so while ensuring that the symbolic meanings of their cosmopolitan practices have already been familiar to Chinese society.

The theoretical contribution of these findings is twofold.

First, this study contributes to scholarship on moving consumption by examining the dual mobility forms experienced by international students from emerging markets. The findings shed light on Chinese youth's interpretations of social mobility, where social configurations are undergoing rapid transformation and individuals may not have clear social class consciousness. By examining how these young men and women interpret social mobility, we better understand their values, the boundary work they perform in pursuing social status and how these are informed by their consumption practices in transnational relocations.

Second, this study reveals how Chinese youth strategically appropriate global consumer culture and turn it into meaningful signals for their domestic peers. Compared to youth in other industrialized countries, the informants' preferences reveal that they have little interest in indigenizing global youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). Even with international experiences, Chinese youth may tend to appropriate the "original form" of the global consumer culture, interpreting practices and brands with common discourses in the domestic market. In other words, emerging market youth may tend to accept rather than craft prevailing market norms.

Limitations

This study has limitations that need to be addressed in future research.

First, due to the scope and exploratory nature of this study, data were collected from the largest international student group in the USA, i.e. inbound students from China. The experiences of international students from other regions may have been overlooked. Without a culturally diverse sample, the informants' perceptions of social mobility and consumption practices may not be generalizable to other societies. For example, because Chinese students in the USA form a large diaspora, they may have more resources to share within the community and thus they do not need to adapt to the local society as much as international students from other countries. Students with weaker networks in the host society may use a different shopping strategy. In addition, because the informants come from an emerging market with a developing economy, the findings may not apply to international students from developed countries, who may perceive similar living standards between their home and host countries. They may be less likely to follow the "moving out as moving up" discourse and may be less motivated to signal cosmopolitanism to their peers at home. Future studies could consider examining the relationship between perceptions of social mobility and consumption in other national contexts to further understand how such linkages manifest national particularities.

Second, while this study takes an inductive approach and analysis is based on overarching themes revealed in the data, the underlying mechanism for the informants to differentiate desirable from undesirable Western-ness needs to be further explored. Such distinctions may result from macro-societal ideologies regarding the East-West division in Chinese history. As contact between China and Western countries can be traced back to ancient times, future studies may consider taking a historical view to examine consumers' essential perceptions of foreign culture, local culture and cosmopolitanism.

Finally, female informants are overrepresented in the data. Because both shopping activities and mobility perceptions may be gendered, future studies should include more male participants to inform scholarship on moving consumption with more nuanced gender-specific insights.

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