

## The Effects of Self-Construal on Brand-Page Connection: A Study of Young American and Chinese Fans

Alexander Muk, Christina Chung\*

*This study examines what factors motivate consumers to become brand-page fans and how differences in self-construal patterns influence brand-connection factors. Based on the self-concept theory, two levels of functional brand-connection factors are identified: individual-level connection (individual-identity) and group-level connection (social identity). Brand relationship drivers are used as an emotional connection construct. An online survey is conducted to understand the motivations and antecedents of consumers' intentions to join brand pages and the cultural differences in brand consumption behaviors between young American and Chinese consumers. The results show that Americans' brand-page connections are predominantly influenced by independent self-construal whereas interdependent self-construal has a stronger effect on Chinese's brand-page connections. These results provide key implications for international marketers using social networking sites as marketing tools.*

**Keywords:** Social media brand page; Independent-self; Interdependent-self; Self-image; China

### Introduction

Online brand communities have evolved from simple text forums to sophisticated interactive multimedia platforms on social networking sites (SNS) where consumers can gather product information, interact with other members and participate in dialog with brands. The interactive nature and networked characteristics of SNS have turned consumers from passive recipients of marketing activities into active participants in value co-creation processes that continually shape the image of brands (Popp et al., 2016). Social networking sites, for the most part, are free to use even for businesses. To get in on the action, 89% of U.S. advertisers use free social media platforms to promote their brands and products (Vega, 2013). A brand page is a form of brand community that advertisers set up free on SNS to reach, interact and communicate with consumers in a timely fashion. The marketing goals of brand pages are to generate strong consumer-brand relationships and increase consumer loyalty (Popp et al., 2016). Research shows that 35 % of SNS users regularly check brands' social media pages for brand and product information (emarketer, 2013). Consumers who follow brands on social media tend to be (more brand loyal and receptive to online brand news Jahn and Kunz, 2012). Using brand page as a strategic marketing tool to connect with consumers has gained attention from both academics and practitioners, thus, a stream of research on investigating the effects of brand pages has also emerged. Recent studies reveal that connecting consumers via brand pages may reinforce the consumer-brand relationship, raise brand awareness, influence consumer attitude toward the brand and increase purchase intention (Taylor et al., 2011; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Tsai and Men, 2013; Muk and Chung, 2014b; De Vries and Carlson, 2014). Positive brand posts generated and shared by brand page fans help enhance the popularity of brand pages (De Vries et al., 2012). However, to date, research on the functionality and influences of brand pages mainly focuses on investigating Western consumers' motives and behaviors. Zaglia

(2012) argues that social exchanges between brand users can be found in online and offline brand communities across cultures. The widespread use of SNS in Asian countries indicates that there is a need for examining the influence of culture on Asian consumers' perceptions of social network-based brand communities, and more specifically, brand pages.

Cultural values have been identified as important factors that affect consumers' behaviors when accepting technology-related products (Steenkamp et al., 1999; Choi and Totten, 2012). Consumers are the products of their own cultural orientations. The socio-cultural environment that people belong to influences their consumption behaviors (Choi and Totten, 2012). Even if in a culturally homogenous country, the practice of cultural norms and values could be different among individuals (Choi and Totten, 2012).

Joining a brand page is a self-motivated behavior, therefore, studying consumers' intentions to join brand pages at the national cultural level may not fully represent the intra-cultural variations within a culture (Choi and Totten, 2012). To examine culture as the antecedent to consumer-brand connection on social networking sites, the better alternative is to investigate the phenomena at the individual-level cultural orientation. The popular individual-level measurement of cultural orientation is self-construal which has its root in the individualism/collectivism dimension. Self-construal, an individual's internal attributes, consists of two aspects of self (independent and interdependent selves) that reside in an individual's self-concept (Triandis et al., 1990; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Aaker and Schmit (2001) point out that a country's cultural orientations foster the disproportionate development of the independent-self or interdependent-self in its people. For example, Americans with a dominant independent self-construal tend to see themselves as more independent and less interdependent on others than the Chinese who tend to have a dominant interdependent self-construal. Research suggests that an individual's brand consumption behavior is driven by either aspect of self as each self can be activated separately and become salient in different consumption contexts or social situations (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). According to the view of the two selves, an individual's consumption behavior may vary based on his/her construal of self and consumers express

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**Alexander Muk, Ph.D.**, Associate Professor of Advertising,  
Texas State University- San Marcos, San Marcos, TX.  
E-mail: am40@txstate.edu

**\*Christina Chung, Ph.D.**, Professor of Marketing, Anisfield School of  
Business, Ramapo College of New Jersey,  
Mahwah, NJ. E-mail: cchung1@ramapo.edu

different aspects of the self in varying consumption situations (Swaminathan et al., 2007).

Swaminathan et al. (2007) suggest that consumer-brand connections have multiple dimensions and the influence of these dimensions is moderated by self-construal. There are various factors that create connections between consumers and brands. Besides consuming the material utilities from products, consumers may also use the symbolic meanings of those products to express their individual-level unique self-identity. The symbolic meanings that are attached to brands help consumers construct and define their self-concept. In addition to individual-level connection, consumers may connect to brands through the group-level connection. In SNS context, consumers participate in online brand-reference groups including brand pages to assert their group-identity (Laroche et al., 2012).

Besides using brands to construct the self or to communicate the self to others, consumers may connect to brands through brand relationship. Feeling and trust are important emotional drivers that allow consumers to form mental attachment to brands (Franzen and Moriarty, 2009). As Fournier (1998) suggests emotional brand attributes capture more clearly the attitudinal effects on brand connection that could predict a range of dyadic consequences including behavioral ties and relationship stability.

In the global marketplace, it is important for global marketers to understand the impact of culture on consumers who follow brands on social media. As advertising dollars spent on social networking sites continue to grow, almost half of the total expenditure is invested in the U.S. and China, the two leading social media markets in the world (Perlberg, 2015). This study selects American and Chinese consumers for comparison because of their distinctive cultural differences that duly represent the individualism/collectivism dimension. Americans are predominantly individualistic while the Chinese are predominantly collectivistic. The two countries also are a good match for examining the effects of self-construal types on consumers' self-brand-page connection.

China, the second largest economy in the world, is undergoing a consumer revolution that induces changes in its cultural and social values. As Triandis et al. (1990) suggest, increase in wealth and exposure to modern media may cause cultural shift in a country. Studying a nation's change in social values is important to the understanding of current and future consumer behaviors (Xiao and

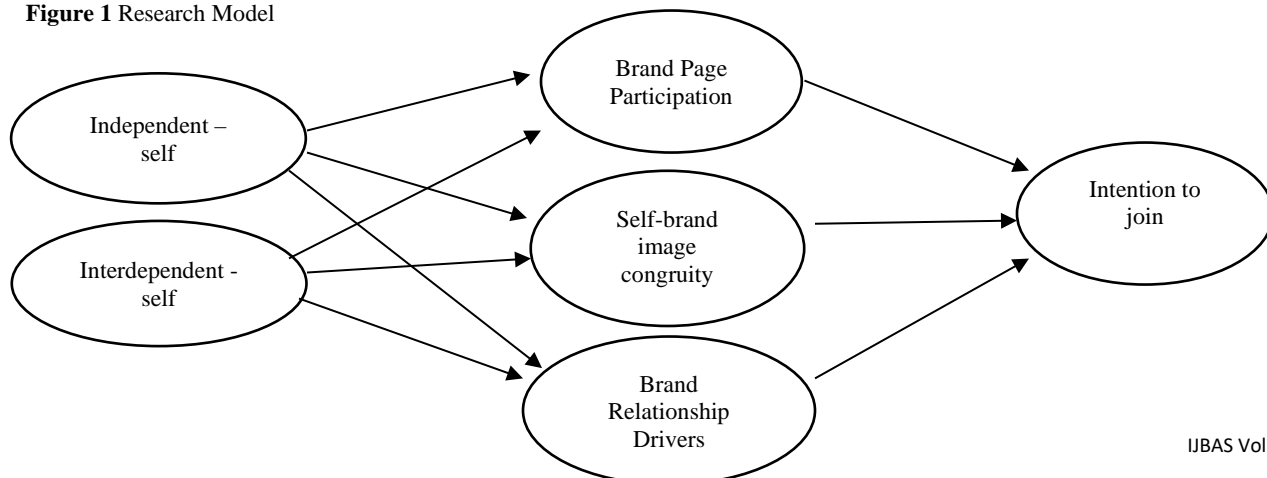
Kim, 2009). Drawing on the perspective of the two selves, this study develops a model to show how differences in self-construal patterns could affect the impact of self-brand-image congruity, brand page participation and brand relationship drivers on consumer brand-page connection (Figure 1). Specifically, this study examines the theoretical link from culture to a self-brand-page connection and how self-brand connection factors are more relevant and salient in influencing intention to join brand pages in a cross-cultural context.

## Literature Review

### *Culture and Self-Construal*

People in different cultures develop self-concepts that differ in specific ways (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In Western culture, self-concept is a cognitive structure that helps people maintain their self-esteem as well as strive for their self-enhancement. When interacting with others, Western individuals such as Americans are more individuated and have a sense of self as independent from others. Cross-cultural research, however, reveals that, in non-Westerners such as Chinese, whose self-concept focuses on self-criticism and thus self-improvement, interaction with others produces a sense of self as connected to others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Choi and Totten (2012) argue that self-concept plays an important role in explaining individuals' perceptions of brands. As Aaker and Schmitt (2001) suggest, every person within any culture possesses the concept of two selves: an independent-self construal and an interdependent-self construal. The independent-self construal involves cognitions about the personal self that is indicative of unique personal traits and the self is independent from social context and situational constraints. In contrast, the interdependent-self construal involves cognitions about the social self, and how the self is related to other people. The independent self-construal stresses the separateness, autonomy and uniqueness of the individual, while the interdependent self-construal focuses on one's connectedness, conformity and relations with others. Past consumer research has demonstrated that consumers' brand associations are significantly related to people's culturally-nurtured self-construal (Swaminathan et al., 2007). When a person's brand consumption is motivated by the self, the brand would become linked to the self (Escala and Bettman, 2005). For example, when an individual uses the brand to express his/her self-image, a self-brand connection is formed. A self-concept connection is a functional dimension of the consumer-brand relationship that helps consumers achieve self-construction goals.

**Figure 1** Research Model



While self-construal is culturally based, situational factors can elicit either type (Swaminathan et al., 2007, Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis and Sharkey, 1995). For example, within a group situation an individualist may activate interdependent self-construal to assimilate himself/herself into the group. Previous research reveals that Chinese advertising themes are closely related to the depictions of self in relation to others, as well as group consensus (La Ferle et al., 2008). As Wang et al. (2015) argue, the symbolic representation of individual identity against group affiliation can be used to study consumers' attachments to a brand. As Escalas and Bettman (2005) argue, the differences in self-construal caused by cultural differences, and individual differences in chronic self-construal tendencies are important because independent self-construal can lead to motivations different from interdependent self-construal. Applying self-construal in this study helps explain how a consumer's self-construction goals depend on the aspect of the self (independent self-construal or interdependent self-construal), which can influence his/her connection with a brand. Specifically, this study aims to provide a better understanding of the phenomena of intra-cultural effects on what motivates a consumer to become a brand page fan.

#### ***Self-Brand-Image Congruity***

Marketers position their brands in the marketplace with specific images to establish or reinforce associations with consumers. A brand image's attributes include the brand identity, brand values and brand personality imagery (Franzen and Moriarty, 2009). These attributes are symbolic meanings of the brand that consumers can associate with to help them create and define their self-concept. In other words, consumers like to compare themselves with the brand and see if the brand image matches their self-concept (Taylor et al., 2011). As discussed earlier, self-brand connection is a functional aspect of consumer-brand relationship that can be conceptualized as composed of a personal identity and a group identity (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Fournier (1998) suggests that people use brand image to express a significant aspect of their self-identity and express themselves to others based on the congruency between the brand image and their self-image. Consumers are more inclined to buy products or brands that are compatible with their self-images. When a person's consumption goal is to use a brand to construct his/her self-image, a self-brand connection is formed. Self-brand connection helps reinforce an individual's identity and allow him/her to connect to other brand users (Turri et al., 2013). When a brand image provides consumers with self-expressive values the self-brand connection would be intensified. The brand expressive values have to be displayed in the consumption process and be visible to others. In this manner, the brand becomes a symbol of personalization (Sirgy et al., 1997; Moven and Minor, 2001) that allows consumers to identify, sustain, and augment their self-concept (Aaker, 1996).

The self-brand-image congruity enhances positive attitudes and behaviors toward products and brands (Sirgy et al., 1997). Similarly, the way in which consumers express themselves in their responses to advertising or brand messages can also be transferred to the meaning for self (Taylor et al., 2011). As Tsai and Men (2013) suggest, liking or joining a brand page is a form of self-expression of which the action itself gives meaning to one's self-identity. In the SNS context, joining a brand page is an act that is visible to a user's SNS contacts or friends and such action could be perceived as a manner in which

the user expresses his or her self-image to them. Cross-cultural research suggests Western individualists tend to construct an independent self-construal as individuality is viewed as unique and separated from the social environment. Eastern collectivists, such as Chinese, focus more on interdependent self-construal that is based on the importance of close relationships, group memberships and social roles to define the self (Cross et al., 2003). As Escala and Bettman (2005) point out, American consumers may use brands that are compatible with their self-image to differentiate themselves from others by expressing their individuality. In contrast, Chinese consumers are more likely to use brands whose images are congruent with their reference groups to express their collective identity (Wei and Yu, 2012). Therefore, it is proposed that the associations of the two selves with self-brand-image congruity would be different between the U.S. and Chinese consumers.

**H1a.** There will be a positive relationship between self-brand-image congruity and independent-self construal for American consumers, whereas self-brand-image congruity and independent-self construal will have a negative relationship for Chinese consumers.

**H1b.** There will be a negative relationship between self-brand-image congruity and interdependent-self construal for American consumers, whereas self-brand-image congruity and interdependent-self construal will have a positive relationship for Chinese consumers.

#### ***Brand Page Participation***

Brand pages on SNS are online brand communities set up by advertisers as interactive communication channels to connect, communicate, and interact with their customers (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). A brand page community provides different ways of communication, conversion and collaboration among fans of the brand (Tuten and Solomon, 2012). Joining a brand page allows brand fans to share information about the brand and get emotional support from each other. Online brand communities also reinforce the legacy of a brand and build loyalty among members (Laroche et al., 2012). Studies of SNS brand communities reveal that connecting and sharing information with other members have strong positive relationships between the brand community and its members (Laroche et al., 2012; Jahn and Kunz, 2012).

In the aforementioned discussion, self-brand connection is the psychological association that consumers use for self-expression (Wei and Yu, 2012). As Fournier (1998) argues, self-brand connection reflects the degree to which the brand meaning is used to express a substantial aspect of a person's self-concept. Besides using the brand meaning to express oneself, consumers also use it to create and build their self-identity (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). According to the two-self views, situational contexts and priming factors can temporarily access either of the two selves, therefore, self-brand connection can be based on either the construction of personal identity or social identity (Swaminathan et al., 2007). For example, in a consumption situation when the independent-self has become salient, consumers' self-brand connections are based on their desires to express their individuality and differentiate themselves from others (Swaminathan et al., 2007). In contrast, when the consumption context changes in which an interdependent self-construal is made

salient, the self-brand connection related to a consumer's unique self would become less important when evaluating the brand. The brand attitude would change, regardless of whether the individual has a high or low individual-based relationship with the brand (Swaminathan et al. 2007). In this instance, the self-brand connection process is influenced by the meanings of brands that are consistent with the reference group and allow consumers to use as an expression of their social-identity (Escalas and Bettman, 2005).

Lam et al. (2010) argue that the social-self is rooted in brand communities as brand communities' members interact in more collective behaviors. Participating in an online brand community allows consumers to form their social relationships among other brand users (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) as well as identify with each other, or with symbols they desire to associate with (Laroche et al., 2012). Consumers are more likely to accept meanings from brands associated with groups that they belong to. Cross et al. (2003) argue that the independent conceptualization of the self in North American cultures is not universal. Americans' self-concept is also defined by their close relationships with others and they construct a relational-interdependent self-construal that can be accessible for enhancing maintenance of relationships.

A study of Chinese consumers' perceptions of advertising shows that reference group influences Chinese consumers' self-brand connections because they tend to conform to others (Wei and Yu, 2012). For group-oriented Chinese, focusing on the connection to others strengthens existing relationships that in turn shapes their interdependent-self construal (Cross et al. 2000). The preceding arguments lead to the following hypotheses:

**H2a.** There will be a negative relationship between brand page participation and independent-self construal for both American and Chinese consumers.

**H2b.** There will be a positive relationship between brand page participation and interdependent-self construal for both American and Chinese consumers.

### ***Brand Relationship Drivers***

The power of a brand to be used as a vehicle for self-expression is based on its ability to develop beliefs in consumers of the experiential benefits (Phau and Lau, 2000). Consumers' brand attitudes formed by direct behavior or experience accumulated over time are more accessible than attitudes based on information or indirect forms of behavior. A consumer-brand relationship can be reinforced through experience using a brand and its successful performance. Brands can be perceived as a partner during the consumption process (Fournier, 1998). Trust, the basis of brand relationship, is an important emotional brand attribute that consumers use to evaluate a brand's performance in its partnership role (Franzen and Moriarty, 2009). A trusting relationship with a brand would reinforce consumers' positive attitudes toward the brand. In the SNS environment, brand credibility and trust may play a strong role in reducing the consumers' uncertainty and their lack of information about brand pages. Laroche et al. (2012) argue that trust is an important antecedent of consumer-brand connection. In addition to trust, passionate attachment and intimacy are important emotional attributes that could enhance the consumer-brand relationship and

make the brand more likable (Fournier, 1998). Consumers assign personality qualities to brands and like them as if they were human characters. Humanizing brands with distinct personalities allow consumers to form dyadic relationships with the brands through the partnership role (Fournier, 1998). Brand personality is an important factor in liking, as it establishes the partnership feeling for a brand (Franzen and Moriarty, 2009). The symbolic meaning of a brand's personality for self-expression could go as far as becoming an extension of the self that would deepen the emotional attachment to the brand (Phau and Lau, 2000).

In the aforementioned discussion, American consumers often see themselves as autonomous, unique and independent of others. Therefore, consuming the symbolic meaning of brand personality allows American consumers to express their unique personality and differentiate themselves from others (Aaker and Schmitt, 2001). The Chinese consumers' self-views are predominantly defined by their social roles and social position in relation to others (Cross et al., 2003) and they use brand personality as a way to express their similarity to others (Aaker and Schmitt, 2001). The aforementioned arguments imply that the influence of self-construal on emotional brand connection should be different for American and Chinese consumers based on their cultural orientations. This leads to the following hypotheses:

**H3a.** There will be a positive relationship between brand relationship drivers and independent-self construal for American consumers, whereas brand relationship drivers and independent-self construal will have a negative relationship for Chinese consumers.

**H3b.** There will be a negative relationship between brand relationship drivers and interdependent-self construal for American consumers, whereas brand relationship drivers and interdependent-self construal will have a positive relationship for Chinese consumers.

### ***Behavioral Intentions***

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) suggest that behaviors result from the formation of specific intentions to behave in a particular way with regard to the purchase, disposition and consumption of products and services. Therefore, behavioral intentions are perceived as expectations to act in a certain way, and are predictive of actual behaviors (Mowen and Minor, 2001).

### ***Individual-level Connection***

In the aforementioned discussion, self-brand-image congruity can motivate consumers to process brand related messages that may result in higher brand involvement (Li et al., 2011). Taylor et al. (2011) suggest that the behavior in which consumers express themselves through their brand usage provides meaning to their self-identity. Joining a brand page is the result of self-connection with a brand which, in turn, helps consumers express their desired self-image through the brand image. The congruence between consumers' self-image and brand-user image can moderately influence consumer behavior (Sirgy et al., 1997). Cross-cultural research reveals that motivation for Western consumers to use brands for self-expression by demonstrating their individuality is higher relative to Eastern cultures (Aaker and Schmitt, 2001). Similarly, a study of Chinese

consumers' brand perceptions demonstrates that a negative relationship is found between self-congruity and brand's symbolic meaning (Hu et al., 2012). Based on the preceding arguments, self-brand-image congruity helps explain consumers' motives in joining brand pages.

**H4.** The influence of self-brand-image congruity on intention to join will be stronger for American consumers as compared to Chinese consumers.

#### ***Group-level Connection***

Social networking sites create online communities in which users feel a sense of human contact when connecting with people (Chow and Shi, 2015). Seeking social interactions and brand interactions via brand pages increase consumer behavioral intentions toward the brands (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). Brand page fans not only interact with the brands' messages and offerings via brand pages, but also communicate with their fellow brand fans (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). The communication exchange between brand page fans helps improve brand meanings through their co-creation of brand stories. Brand pages also provide opportunities for fans to collaborate on product innovation which can enhance their brand perceptions and behaviors toward the brand (De Varies and Carlson, 2014). As discussed earlier, self-brand connection is the psychological association that consumers have with brands, and can be formed at both individual and group levels (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Western consumers are more likely to form self-brand connection at the individual level using brands to express their unique personality traits whereas Eastern consumers' self-brand connection is more likely to occur at the group level using brands to express their social identity (Wei and Yu, 2012). As Chinese consumers' cultural orientations are predominantly collectivist, they may place less importance on expressing their personality traits, but rather, may prefer to express their conformance with their reference group (Phau and Lau, 2000). Prior research also suggests that social connection strongly influences Chinese consumers' satisfaction with brand pages (Chow and Shi, 2015). Therefore, it is reasonable to posit that the strength of social and participatory factors influencing behavioral intention would be stronger for the Chinese consumers than for American consumers.

**H5.** The influence of brand page participation on intention to join will be stronger for Chinese consumers as compared to American consumers.

#### ***Brand Relationship***

In general, a reputable brand name gains more consumer trust more than an unknown brand name because trust reduces risks and uncertainty of using the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Knowing a brand makes consumers feel comfortable using or buying it again. As Mowen and Minor (2001) argue, a person's intention to act is determined by the perceived positive consequences of engaging in the behavior. Brand pages on SNS are a relatively new medium and it is reasonable to presume that consumers' intentions to join brand pages on social media are formed primarily based on their past positive experiences with the brands. Intimacy of consumer-brand relationship is developed based on mutual understanding and trust through interactions with a brand that is accumulated over time

(Franzen and Moriarty, 2009; Fournier, 1998). The partnership relationships formed between brands and consumers are based on trusting and liking a brand and a distinctive brand personality that in turn would enhance consumers' behavioral intentions (Smit et al., 2007). A study of Chinese consumers reveals that the credibility of a corporate brand strongly influences purchase intention (Li et al., 2011). In the social media environment, brand followers have to entrust the brand that provides them with appropriate privacy protection (Smit et al., 2007). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that consumers who are more comfortable with and have trust in a brand are more likely to join its page on SNS.

**H6.** There will be a positive relationship between brand relationship drivers and intention to join for both American and Chinese consumers.

#### **Methods**

This study administered an online survey to measure young American and Chinese consumers' intentions to join brand pages using snowball sampling technique. The referral technique helps identify other respondents who share similar characteristics in the target population. In the U.S., 185 respondents were recruited on campus from one southern university and one northeastern university. In China, 178 respondents were recruited from one southern university and one northeastern university. Eighty American and Chinese college students were recruited on campus and instructed to invite at least two of their social media contacts to participate in the study via an online link to the survey questionnaire. The sample frame is suitable, as college students are avid users of social networking sites and they adopt social media platforms as their primary communication channel with friends and peers (Pempek et al., 2009; Turri et al., 2013). Young people are a popular subject in social media usage research (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Muk and Chung, 2014). Incomplete questionnaires with missing responses were dropped from the analysis. The final sample size consisted of 343 respondents with 55% females and 45% males. All respondents were between 18-26 years old.

Questionnaire items measuring brand page participation items (BP) were based on Tsai and Men's (2013) measurement scale and were modified for this study. The self-brand-image congruity (SBI) scale was constructed based on the Taylor et al. (2011) self-brand congruity scale. The measures of the brand relationship drivers (BRD) construct were adapted from the brand relationship quality (BRQ) construct proposed by Fournier (1998). The independent-self (INDS) and the interdependent-self (INTS) items were adapted from Choi and Miracle's (2004) revised self-construal scale. The intention to join (IJ) scale was adapted from Muk and Chung's (2014) research. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was originally written in English and was back-translated into Chinese (Brislin, 1986). A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the content validity of the measurement scales in the Chinese questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to 35 Chinese college students who were recruited on a university campus in China. They were instructed to answer, review, and critique the questionnaire. None of respondents had any difficulties in understanding the subject matter and all the questionnaires were completed without any missing responses. Their feedback was used

to revise and finalize the questionnaire. Data obtained in the pilot test were excluded from the final analysis. All items that matched correctly were kept after minor discrepancies had been resolved. In this study, the substantive knowledge about the constructs under examination satisfied the equivalent requirement for comparative research (Douglas and Craig, 1983). Screening questions were added to the final questionnaire to ensure that respondents had certain brand experience in following brands on SNS.

## Analysis and Results

### Overall Measurement Results

Cronbach's Alpha was used to test construct reliability. All measures demonstrate reliability with alpha values of .81 and greater (Table 1). A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the overall validity of the measurement theory. The CFA results

**Table 1** Measurement Items and Internal Consistency

		Coefficient Alpha
INDS1	I prefer to be self-reliant rather than dependent on others.	
INDS2	I have an opinion about most things: I know what I like and I know what I don't like.	
INDS3	I don't change my opinions to conform with those of the majority.	
INDS4	Understanding myself is a major goal in my life.	
INDS5	I act as a unique person, separate from others.	.89
INTS1	My happiness depends on the happiness of those in my group.	
INTS2	I try to meet the demands of my group, even if it means controlling my own desires.	
INTS3	It is important to consult close friends and get their ideas before making decisions.	
INTS4	I act as fellow group members would prefer I act.	.81
SBI1	I like brand pages on social networking sites that are consistent with how I see myself.	
SBI2	I like brand pages on social networking sites that cater to people like me.	
SBI3	I like brand pages on social networking sites that reflect who I am.	
SBI4	I like brand pages on social networking sites that are compatible with my self-image.	.89
BRD1	I follow my favorite brands on social networking sites because I know a lot about the brands.	
BRD2	I follow my favorite brands on social networking sites because the brands are reliable.	
BRD3	I follow my favorite brands on social networking sites because the brands are trustworthy.	
BRD4	I follow my favorite brands on social networking sites because I am greatly attracted to the brands.	.90
BP1	I can suggest new ideas for the brands through their pages on social networking sites.	
BP2	I can collaborate with other customers on developing new ideas for the brands through their pages on social networking sites.	
BP3	I can exchange information and opinions with other consumers about the brands through their pages on social networking sites.	.87
IJ1	I think my general intention to join a brand page on a social networking site is high.	
IJ2	I think about joining a brand page on a social networking site.	
IJ3	I will join a brand page on a social networking site in future.	.89

INDS: Independent-self; INTS: Interdependent-self; SBI: Self-brand-image congruity; BRD: Brand relationship drivers; BP: Brand page participation; IJ: Intention to join

reliability estimates are adequate, ranging from .81 to .92 (Table 2). Discriminant validity is measured by comparing variance-extracted (VE) for any two constructs with the square of the correlation estimate between these two constructs. The VE is greater than the squared Interconstruct correlation (SIC) estimate (Table 3). Thus, the results support the construct validity of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2006).

show a good model fit for a 23-item model, with  $\chi^2 = 429.01$ ,  $df = 215$ ,  $p < .00$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .96; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .05; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = .92; the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .94. The CFI, and NFI both exceed the recommended cut-off point ( $> .90$ ) and the RMSEA is lower than the cut-off level ( $< .08$ ). Further, convergent and discriminant validity were examined for construct validity. It is suggested based on the factor loading estimates, construct reliabilities, variance extracted percentages and inter-construct correlations (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham, 2006). All loading estimates are significant ( $p < .00$ ) with the lowest being .65 and the highest being .93. The variance extracted estimates are .54, .53, .74, .71, .70, and .75 for independent-self, interdependent-self, self-brand-image congruity, brand relationship drivers, brand page participation, and intention to join, respectively. The construct

### Two- group Measurement Model

For more than one group, prior to any comparison of the relationships between the variables of the model, metric invariance between American and Chinese samples has to be examined. Overall, the free model fits reasonably well, with  $\chi^2 = 650.18$ ,  $df = 430$ ,  $p = .000$ ; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .04; PNFI = 0.68. Next, constraining the measurement weights to be equal between groups, the model fit with  $\chi^2 = 672.22$ ,  $df = 447$ , CFI = .95; RMSEA = .04; PNFI = 0.71. The

change in  $\chi^2$  by adding these constraints is 22.04 with 17 degrees of freedom ( $p = .18$ ). The results suggest that full metric invariance could be established. Finally, the CFA analyses included a test of scalar invariance. Full scalar invariance was tested by constraining the CFA model. Here, the zero-intercept terms for the measured variables in the Chinese sample would be equal to the matching zero-intercept terms in the U.S. sample. The model produced  $\chi^2 = 931.37$ ,  $df = 491$ ,  $p = .000$ , CFI = .91; RMSEA = .05. The change  $\chi^2$  of 281.19 with 61  $df$  (relative to the TF model) was significant ( $p < .001$ ). The results indicate that full scalar invariance was supported. Thus, valid factor means comparison could be made for all factors. Table 4 shows the nested model comparisons results.

### Two- group Structural Model

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was run to examine the

overall theoretical model specification. The one group model provides a satisfactory fit of data with  $\chi^2 = 602.10$ ,  $df = 220$ ,  $p = .000$ ; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .07; TLI = .90. Next, the procedures turn to a test of moderation using the country classification variable. The structural invariance model is assessed by constraining all structural coefficients to be equal in both groups. Overall fit measures of the “totally free” model indicate that the model is consistent with the data ( $\chi^2 = 819.21$ ,  $df = 440$ ,  $p = .000$ ; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .05; TLI = .90). Next, constraining the measurement weights indicate  $\chi^2 = 841.45$ ,  $df = 457$ ,  $p = .000$ ; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .05; TLI = .90. Structural weights indicate  $\chi^2 = 1039.27$ ,  $df = 489$ ,  $p = .000$ ; CFI = .88; RMSEA = .06; TLI = .88. The results indicate that the moderation model is significantly different from the total free model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 220.06$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Thus, it indicates the model is moderated by country (Table 4).

**Table 2** Standard Factor Loading Estimates

	INDS	INTS	SBI	BRD	BP	IJ
INDS1	.69					
INDS2	.75					
INDS3	.75					
INDS4	.82					
INDS5	.65					
INTS1		.64				
INTS2		.79				
INTS3		.77				
INTS4		.69				
SBI1			.85			
SBI2			.88			
SBI3			.86			
SBI4			.84			
BRD1				.76		
BRD2				.93		
BRD3				.90		
BRD4				.76		
BP1					.73	
BP2					.93	
BP3					.84	
IJ1						.87
IJ2						.91
IJ3						.80
Variance Extracted	53.8%	52.5%	73.5%	70.8%	70%	75.3%
Construct Reliability	.85	.81	.92	.91	.87	.87

**Table 3** Variance Extracted and Squared Interconstruct Correlation

CONSTRUCT	VE	SIC
INDS	.54	.02, .16, .10, .01, .04
INTS	.53	.02, .08, .03, .04, .06
SBI	.74	.16, .08, .45, .19, .27
BRD	.71	.10, .03, .45, .19, .27
BP	.70	.01, .04, .19, .19, .41
IJ	.75	.04, .06, .27, .41, .12

**Table 4** Comparative Model Fit results

	<u>Overall</u> Sample	<u>USA</u> Sample	<u>China</u> Sample	<u>2-Groups</u> TF	<u>2-Groups</u> LX=IN	<u>2-Groups</u> PH=IN	TX=IN
$\chi^2$	429.01	407.83	411.38	650.18	672.22	931.37	839.27
<i>df</i>	215	220	220	430	447	491	470
CFI	0.96	0.92	0.91	0.95	0.95	0.91	0.92
RMSEA	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05
PNFI	Na	na	na	0.68	0.71	0.73	0.71

### Hypotheses Testing

The SEM structural paths show that not all constructs were positively related in both samples (Table 5). For the U.S. sample, independent-self was positively related to both self-brand-image congruity ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $t = 4.1$ ) and brand relationship drivers ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $t = 3.3$ ). Contrary to expectations, the relationship between independent self-construal and brand page participation was not significant for the U.S. sample. As expected, independent self-construal was negatively related to self-brand-image congruity ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t = -2.7$ ), brand page participation ( $\beta = -.30$ ,  $t = -2.9$ ) and brand relationship drivers ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t = -2.7$ ) for the Chinese sample.

Thus, hypotheses H1a, and H3a were supported but H2a was partially supported. The relationships of interdependent-self with brand page participation ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $t = 2$ ) and brand relationship drivers ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $t = 2.1$ ), were all positive for the U.S. sample. However, the results showed that interdependent-self and self-brand-image congruity also had a positive relationship for the U.S. sample ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $t = 4.1$ ). Similarly, interdependent-self had positive impact on self-brand-image congruity ( $\beta = .68$ ,  $t = 3.6$ ), brand page participation ( $\beta = .6$ ,  $t = 3.5$ ) and brand relationship drivers ( $\beta = .61$ ,  $t = 3.6$ ) for the Chinese sample. Thus, the results supported H2b and H3b but partially supported H1b. H4 was supported as self-brand-image congruity had a stronger impact on intention to join for the U.S. sample ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 3.1$ ) than for the Chinese sample ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p = n.s.$ ). On the other hand, the relationship between brand page participation and intention to join was not significant for the U.S. sample, but had a positive effect in the Chinese sample ( $\beta = .2$ ,  $t = 2.2$ ). Thus, H5 was supported. H6 was supported as the results showed that a positive relationship between intention to join and brand relationship drivers was detected for both American and Chinese consumers (U.S.  $\beta = .59$ ,  $t = 7.3$ ; China  $\beta = .37$ ,  $t = 3.8$ ). These results indicated that the influence of independent self-construal on self-brand-image congruity and brand relationship drivers helped predict American consumers' behavioral intentions to become brand page fans. The independent self-construal had no effects on Americans' brand page participation, and it was also not a significant predictor of intention to join. For the Chinese sample, self-brand-image congruity failed to predict intention to join. The positive impact of interdependent self on brand page participation and brand relationship drivers indicated that the interdependent self-construal was the dominant influence on Chinese respondents' behavioral intentions in the brand page context.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show how a brand's symbolic and relationship functions can influence consumers' intentions to join a brand page

based on an individual's self-construal. The current study also suggests that both antecedents and outcomes of the constructs' relationships are moderated by consumer cultural orientations, and different factors influence American and Chinese respondents' intentions to join brand pages. In the brand page context, the independent self-construal is the dominant self in American respondents which has a stronger impact on self-brand-image congruity and brand relationship drivers than do the effects of interdependent self-construal. The effects of independent self-construal on self-brand-image congruity in the U.S. sample are in line with the self-concept research (Sirgy et al., 1997; Fournier, 1998) that young American consumers use brand pages for self-expression as their behaviors are internalized. They like brand pages with images that match their self-images and meet their needs of expressing their unique identities, a core characteristic of American individualism. The influence of independent-self on brand relationship drivers may suggest that their attitudes toward brand pages are based on a trustworthy partner-relationship. However, no relationship is detected between the independent-self and brand page participation. This is consistent with the characteristics of an independent-self construal that focus on personal preferences and goals (Markus and Kitayama, 2010) and de-emphasize their connectedness to others and group memberships (Cross et al., 2000). On the other hand, the positive relationships of interdependent-self with brand page participation, self-brand-image congruity and brand relationship drivers can be explained by American consumers' need of sense of belonging in a situational context. As past research suggests, Americans exhibit collectivist tendencies in situations when sense of belonging to in-groups and seeking peers' advice are perceived as ways of being related (Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier, 2002). Through interactions with group members, American consumers may use brands to express their social identities (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). This is congruent with the functions of social-networking-sites that people may join them for satisfying their needs for belongingness and peer-to-peer communication. The positive impact of interdependent-self on brand relationship drivers in the U.S. sample may also be ascribed to the relational-interdependent self-construal, which suggests that Americans who are less group-oriented are more likely to include individual relationships with relational partners in their self-representations (Cross et al., 2000). However, these types of relationship are perceived as voluntary and as a matter of choice that can be easily discontinued. In this instance, the interdependent assigning human properties to a brand allows consumers to accept the brand as a relational partner and form a dyadic relationship.

In the Chinese sample, the negative impacts of independent-self on self-brand-image congruity, brand page participation and brand



**Table 5** Comparisons of Standardized Coefficients and t-values between constructs

	Standardized Coefficients		t-values	
	USA	China	USA	China
INDS→SBI	.34	<i>P</i> <.001	-.21	<i>P</i> <.01
INDS→BP	.09	<i>n.s.</i>	-.30	<i>P</i> <.01
INDS→BRD	.29	<i>P</i> <.001	-.18	<i>P</i> <.01
INTS→SBI	.36	<i>P</i> <.001	.68	<i>P</i> <.001
INTS→BP	.18	<i>P</i> <.05	.60	<i>P</i> <.001
INTS→BRD	.18	<i>P</i> <.05	.61	<i>P</i> <.001
SBI→IJ	.21	<i>P</i> <.01	.09	<i>n.s.</i>
BP→IJ	.09	<i>n.s.</i>	.20	<i>P</i> <.05
BRD→IJ	.59	<i>P</i> <.001	.37	<i>P</i> <.001

relationship drivers support the significant influence of interdependent self-construal on the three brand connection constructs. The findings suggest that interdependent-self dominates Chinese consumers' behavioral intentions. Chinese consumers focus more on their social self and their relations with their close others rather than expressing their personal self in the brand page context. The findings also support the underlying assumption of collectivism in that Chinese consumers tend to think of themselves as interdependent with close others, as defined by their social roles, duty to in-group and situations (Cross et al. 2000). The brand congruency also reflects value expressive social influence on Chinese consumers - they use brands' images to form a psychological connection with their reference groups (Escala and Bettman, 2005). Expressing their group identity is a vital part of self-concept in which the identification process allows Chinese consumers to acquire a membership position within the group (Wei and Yu, 2012). The positive linkages between interdependent-self and the three brand connection constructs are consistent with Muk et al.'s (2014) findings that young Chinese consumers rely more on external cues to evaluate brand page values.

The positive influence of self-brand-image congruity and brand relationship drivers on intention to join in the U.S. sample reveals that young American consumers join a brand page to express themselves about whom they are or whom they aspire to be (Fournier, 1994). Similarly, the findings are consistent with Asker and Schmitt's (2001) argument that self-expressive need in American consumers is higher than in Asian consumers when given the opportunity to express their individuality. Contrary to brand community research, there is no relationship detected between brand page participation and intention to join among the U.S. respondents. To the individualist American respondents, they choose to join brand pages which is part of their freedom of selection to express themselves and they may enjoy being related to other brand page fans in a casual manner (Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis et al., 1990). In this study the results suggest that American consumers do not feel that joining a brand page is to connect with like-minded people. To Americans, asserting their individuality is more important than connecting with other brand page fans. However, in the Chinese sample, the significant relationship between brand page participation and intention to join is in line with the collectivistic culture that the context-dependent values (collaboration and group sharing) are motivational factors for Chinese consumers to join brand pages on SNS. Similarly, the positive impact of brand relationship drivers on intention to join in the Chinese sample suggests that brand trust is also an important evaluation factor. However, the relationship

between self-brand-image congruity and intention to join is not detected in the Chinese sample. This finding could be ascribed to the Chinese consumers' need for group identification rather than for expressing their self-identity. As Ye et al. (2012) suggest, due to their collectivist culture, Chinese consumers could not relate to the Western sense of brand image that advocates a distinct personality. Overall, the results from both countries show that the consumer-brand relationship is the strongest predictor of intention to join. As discussed earlier, the differences in the relative strength of both selves can influence individuals' behaviors and situational factors can activate either aspect of self-construal. The results show that in the brand page context, independent self-construal is still the dominant self in individualist American consumers, which affects their intentions to act, while interdependent self-construal dictates collectivist Chinese consumers' decision making, and influences their behavioral intentions. This is contrary to Triandis et al.'s (1990) argument that economic growth in China has not shifted its collectivist culture.

### Limitations and Implications

This study provides some evidence on the role of culture in understanding young American and Chinese consumers' motivations to join brand pages in general. Using college students as sampling units is considered appropriate as they are avid users of social media products but this cross-sectional survey is not without its limitations. One limitation is generalizability. In the future, similar research needs to be replicated with diverse demographic groups with different cultural values in other parts of the world. Using a diverse range of age groups with different cultural orientations provides accurate explication of how young consumers around the world perceive brand pages, and a general picture can be drawn from analyzing the similarities and differences between different age groups across different cultures. What the present study lacks is an examination of the experiential aspects of joining brand pages. Advertising literature suggests that both hedonic and utilitarian values affect consumers' attitudes toward the ads (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). Future research may include these two variables to investigate the influence of entertaining and informational values of brand pages on consumers' intentions to join brand pages in a cross-cultural context. As no specific brand types are examined in the current research, including them in future studies may also provide a better understanding of the effects of brand saliency on brand fans' motivations.

From a managerial perspective, the study may provide international advertisers a better understanding of how to use brand pages to connect and communicate with their brand fans via SNS.

Identifying the consumption differences help implement an effective branding strategy on social networking sites that can be used in different countries.

The findings of this study reveal that the consumer-brand relationship significantly influences both American and Chinese respondents' intentions to join brand pages. In the U.S., consumer-brand relationship usually begins in offline environments and continues into the virtual world. A brand page is a medium that can further reinforce the consumer-brand relationship as well as serve as a virtual customer relationship enhancing tool that continues communicating and interacting with consumers when they go online. Brand pages appear to be more suitable for leading or famous brands than for smaller or lesser known brands because recognizing the identity of a famous brand would make consumers feel more comfortable about joining the brand page. Delivering trustworthy brand messages via brand pages is important, but the communication or interaction has to be reciprocal so that page fans can be actively involved in the brand conversation and feel close to the brand. A trustworthy relationship is also vital to a brand's success on social networking sites for Chinese consumers because the Chinese e-commerce market is fraught with inferior goods and/or counterfeit products (Tejada, 2015).

In the U.S., marketers have to set up brand pages with content and images that are compatible with the brand fans' perception of self enhancement. To attract brand followers, American marketers should humanize and personify the page content with symbolic meaning that reflects the consistent image or personality of what the brand stands for. Consuming the symbolic meaning of the brand via brand pages would allow American brand fans continue to express themselves. The interactions between consumers and brand pages could eventually turn into a long term virtual brand-consumer relationship. On the other hand, international advertisers should develop their Chinese brand page content with more collectivism and group consensus mechanisms that facilitate collective behaviors between Chinese brand page fans, such as sharing brand experiences or collaborating on new brand ideas. In China's social media markets, localizing the brand page content with Chinese cultural elements helps enhance the collective expression of Chinese brand-page fans.

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