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## **Co-creating stakeholder and brand identities: A cross-cultural consumer perspective**

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## **Co-creating brand and stakeholder identities: A cross-cultural perspective**

### **Abstract**

Co-creation of value and identity is an important topic in consumer research, lying at the heart of several important marketing concepts and offering a better understanding of a wide range of phenomena, such as consumer identity, satisfaction, or brand loyalty. The literature on co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities, however, draws from (and reflects) a focus on cultures with dominant independent selves. Managers are increasingly confronting globalized marketing environments and therefore must understand how cultural differences shape identity development and co-construction, from a brand, consumer, and multiple stakeholder standpoint. Drawing from a critical review of the literature, this study offers a novel conceptual framework, together with a set of propositions, which discusses how cultural differences might affect such reciprocal co-creation processes. The processes and outcomes involved in reciprocal identity co-creation are likely to differ as a function of cultural environments promoting different types of individual-level differences in self-perception. The study concludes by offering a research agenda to deepen understanding of cross-cultural reciprocal identity co-creation.

*Keywords:* Cross-cultural; Reciprocal co-creation; Stakeholder identity; Consumer identity; Brand identity

## 1. Introduction

*Time Magazine* named “You” personality of the year in 2006; today, the role of individual consumers or brand stakeholders (e.g., employees, suppliers, consumer associations) in generating brand-related content (e.g., social media posts) is central to contemporary consumption. Web 2.0 enables brands and companies to involve consumers and other stakeholders, from brand communities to employees, in the creation of identity-related brand content, such as running a campaign to cast a new model as the face of an iconic product (e.g., Kinder bars by Ferrero) or choosing a customer’s own name to appear on a bottle of soft drink (e.g., Coca-Cola’s “Share a Coke” campaign). In addition, various stakeholders play a growing role in incarnating and shaping a brand’s ethos. For instance, the Nike brand is shaped by its consumers, brand communities, or the celebrities being endorsed, which all positively contribute to its brand ethos. But another core Nike stakeholder, its suppliers, have controversially been in the spotlight over the years for the work conditions in the shoe factories, overall negatively contributing to the brand ethos.

As such, scholars are challenging traditional conceptualizations of marketing as a narrow and organization- or customer-centric activity (Deshpandé, 1999; Hult, Mena, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2011) and increasingly acknowledging that focusing on the firm/consumer does not adequately capture reality and that marketing should be understood from a societal standpoint (Hunt, 2007; Kornum & Mühlbacher, 2013). That is, marketing involves multiple direct and indirect contributors to the traditional consumer–firm dyadic. The roots of this idea trace back to the work of Bagozzi (1975), who conceptualizes marketing as sets of dyadic exchanges of tangible and intangible entities among stakeholders, organizations, and other social units at different levels. Stakeholder theory (Clarkson, 1995; Jones, 1995) provides further evidence for such interactions, by suggesting that companies have relationships with multiple

stakeholders with different objectives, expectations, rights, and responsibilities, who in turn can each influence the firm's performance. Vargo and Lusch (2004) offer, with their service-dominant logic framework, a management-centered perspective on consumption that includes the role of consumers as stakeholders of the consumption experience. This framework represents the idea of a co-construction process in which actions of various stakeholders mutually influence one another. Finally, Hillebrand, Driessen, and Koll (2015) suggest that the inter-relatedness of stakeholders is a central aspect of marketing.

Following this shift of attention, several studies explore the co-creation of identity on the brand and stakeholder side (e.g., Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). While this flourishing research attempts to capture a more realistic and comprehensive account of consumers' and other stakeholders' role in contemporary consumption, research treats two important aspects of the literature less than optimally. First, the literature on identity co-creation traditionally adopts a one-sided perspective when assessing the role of various stakeholders in the development and co-creation of brand identities, rather than a reciprocal one (Da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013). Second, research dedicated to identity co-creation mainly adopts a focus on the individual aspects of identity or independent self-construal. Nevertheless, understanding the full nature of the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities and gaining a comprehensive global perspective require consideration of cross-cultural differences.

This article addresses the first oversight by considering in more depth the interdependent or iterative reciprocal brand–stakeholder identity co-creation perspective, conceptualized as a two-way process in which brands contribute to the co-creation of identity of various stakeholders, who in turn shape the identity of the brand. Brands are at the heart of the consumption experience, and research conceptualizes them in both tangible (e.g., marks of ownerships, images, and symbols) and intangible (e.g., means of constructing identities, a

way to gain positive experiences) ways (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Brand stakeholders can take many forms, from consumer associations and brand communities, to suppliers and employees, to the media and other actors such as governments or non-governmental organizations (Hult et al., 2011; for a review on stakeholders, see Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Reciprocal identity co-creation encompasses various synchronous and asynchronous mechanisms through which brands and stakeholders contribute to the identity creation processes of the other, while using inputs from these to construct their own identity. Reciprocal identity co-creation is thus a process applied to both individuals (e.g., consumers, employees) and collective stakeholders (e.g., brand communities, company collaborators, network externalities, corporate brand identity). This article investigates the identity concept from both an individual level (i.e., what gives consumers or employees a sense of being unique in their own rights; White & Dahl, 2007) and a collective level (i.e., perceptions, feelings, and thoughts members of a corporation or community experience; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). The following example helps further illustrate the idea of reciprocal identity co-creation: when discussing Apple products online, consumers share their thoughts, pride, and passion about Apple's "sophisticated" and "trendy" products, something that first reflects on the brand and then reverses, giving consumers and the Apple brand community a sense of pride and feelings of sophistication and trendiness themselves (a basic two-way identity co-creation process). Consequently, the service from Apple's employees, another set of stakeholders, further reinforces this process; "Genius" frontline staff incarnate this sophistication and trendiness, further building the brand's, consumers', and their own identity along the same trendy and sophistication lines. Other stakeholders, such as suppliers, wholesalers, universities, or charities, also take pride in working with Apple, integrating the brand's quest for perfection and sophistication into their corporate or even personal identities, while working to reinforce the brand's ethos.

This article addresses the previously identified shortcomings by means of a critical analysis of the established cross-cultural literature, considering both macro-level (e.g., national or regional differences) and micro-level (e.g., institutional differences, local practices) aspects of cultures and resulting in a novel conceptual model. To gain a deeper understanding of how brand and stakeholder identities mutually influence each other and how this process varies across cultures, the study draws on established theories from the fields of branding, social psychology, sociology, and consumer psychology. The findings suggest that the identity co-creation process is likely to differ depending on both its reciprocal aspect and the individual-level aspects of culture, such as independent and interdependent self-construals. These findings can be the starting point for more rigorously comparative research on the topic. This study sheds light on similarities and differences in the co-production process across cultures and thus should aid managers in charge of social media and collective actors (e.g., online brand communities).

This article begins by discussing the literature on brand and identity construction and then theorizes how cross-cultural differences are implicated in various mechanisms of reciprocal identity co-creation across varying cultural contexts. A first-of-its-kind conceptual framework, together with a series of propositions uncovering cross-cultural differences in reciprocal identity co-creation, focuses on both the prototypical brand–consumer relationship and other stakeholders to advance new theoretical suggestions that can be applied to various brand–stakeholder relationships. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and theoretical and managerial implications of the research.

## **2. Brand and stakeholder identities in individualist cultures**

Brand identity co-creation is in opposition to traditional marketing perspectives, which argue that managers primarily develop brand identities (Kapferer, 2004). A consistent body of work, however, suggests that consumers actively contribute to the co-creation of brand

identities (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), as do other stakeholders (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Conversely, research also explores the role of brands in consumer identity co-creation, suggesting that consumers use brands and products to construct different identities and adopt different roles (Belk, 2013; Berthon et al., 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). This section discusses the notions of brand and stakeholder identities and related concepts, showing that their conceptualization follows a distinctive individualist perspective.

### *2.1. Brand identity: a multifaceted literature*

The literature often paints a multifaceted picture of brand identity. Marketers note the importance of viewing branding, image, communications, and reputation as being integrated and mutually influencing in the conception of identity (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that factors such as identity and culture are all symbolic and value-based organizational constructs directly contributing to the consumption experience (Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007). Furthermore, Esch, Langner, Schmitt, and Geus (2006) gather several concepts, including brand awareness, brand image, brand personality, and brand identity, under the umbrella term “brand knowledge.” Other concepts, such as brand meaning, introduce the idea that social interactions, in the form of discussions and negotiations between consumers, can shape the meaning of a particular brand (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2015). Similarly, the concept of brand relationship, though developed to understand consumers’ bond with favorite brands (Fournier, 1998), is useful to understand how consumers’ interactions with other types of stakeholders can contribute to the construction of an image. Finally, Huang, Mitchell, and Rosenaum-Elliott (2012) suggest some degrees of overlap between consumers’ and brands’ identities.

The notion of brand identity or personality derives from advertising literature in the 1970s and marketing literature in the 1990s, with Aaker (1996) defining brand identity as a



set of unique associations that reflect what the brand entails. Stakeholders, whether internal or external, can influence an organization's activities, which in turn can shape their organizational identity (Maignan, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2005). Aaker's (1996) work, by helping clarify brand personality and identity, is anchored in an individualist perspective and mainly reflects ego-centered constructs, rather than relational dimensions of brand identity. For example, most dimensions of Aaker's brand identity constructs refer to traits, which are mainly brand centered (rather than involving other stakeholders or other externalities along a firm's value chain that would lean toward a relational orientation), thus reflecting a dominant individualist perspective. Kapferer (2004) offers a different take on brand identity with the brand identity prism, which adopts a management focus and captures more of the cultural and relational aspects of identity. Brand image, though related to brand identity (Nandan, 2005), reflects individuals' perceptions and construction of a brand representation. Kapferer's model offers an indirect perspective of the reciprocal aspects of brand identity by introducing the notion of self-image, which opens the door to consumers co-constructing images with other consumers, brand communities, and other stakeholders. Kapferer's model, however, is mainly applied in cultures that promote independent self-construals (i.e., individualist contexts) and therefore reflects a biased cultural perspective. Together, the difference among all these constructs lies in the focal point of the research: whereas constructs such as brand awareness or image entail a consumer's viewpoint, others such as brand personality or identity involve a corporate viewpoint.

Criticism of the brand identity literature revolves around three aspects (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). First, Aaker's (1996) and Kapferer's (2004) brand identity models remain ambiguous, failing to clarify the nature of the brand identity concept—that is, the extent to which brand identity should be understood as “state-like” or “trait-like,” following common understanding of human identity (Hogg & Vaughan, 2013). In addition, neither model

discusses the potential aspects of external influences (i.e., other stakeholders) on the co-construction of a brand identity. Second, the boundaries between internal and external stakeholders remain blurred and neglect both types' ability to negotiate brand identity: this issue becomes especially important in the context of reciprocal identity co-creation, in which brand and stakeholder identities can become blurred through multiple iterations. Third, current conceptualizations of brand identity as being enduring and stable are inconsistent with current social psychology theories on identity and personality, which view identities as dynamic and fluid (e.g., Howard, 2000; Onorato & Turner, 2004) and culture bound. Brand identity should be considered fluid and capable of changing over time, to be more consistent with the literature on personal identity. Understanding reciprocal and cultural identity co-creation is important, given that identity co-construction is iterative by nature; that is, co-construction happens through repeated interaction between stakeholders and brands.

## *2.2. Stakeholder identity co-construction: a consumer-centered individualist perspective*

Extant research on brand and stakeholder identity (co-)creation focuses on a single stakeholder, the consumer, rather than capturing a holistic stakeholder perspective (Hult et al., 2011). Extensive research follows Belk's (1988) work to explore the relationship among products, possessions, brands, and the self (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2007; Fournier, 1998). For example, research suggests that objects help confirm aspects of self-identity or reconstruct individual and collective identities, particularly when identity is challenged or uncertain (e.g., Baker & Hill, 2013; Belk, 1992). Brands also serve as cues about the owner's identity (Berger & Heath, 2007; Shavitt & Nelson, 2000), something that, in a stakeholder era, should be extended to the identities of all individual- or collective-level actors involved with a brand. According to Oyserman's (2009) model of identity-based motivation, the use of any product (including utilitarian products) can become identity-based and contribute to identity formation, especially when influenced by advertisements that prime consumers with certain

desired identities or group memberships. However, most literature on consumer identity co-creation is located in North America and Europe, reflecting an independent self-construal perspective on the phenomenon (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011).

More recent research explores differences between North American or European and Asian consumers in the domains of the (extended) self (Gjersoe, Newman, Chituc, & Hood, 2014; Ng & Houston, 2006; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007), consumer identity (Tiwsakul & Hackley, 2012), brand personality (Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Torelli, Özsomer, Carvalho, Keh, & Maehle, 2012), and brand loyalty (Eisingerich, & Rubera, 2010; Thompson, Newman, & Liu, 2014). Yoo's (2009) study on U.S. and South Korean samples shows that consumers scoring high on collectivism have a stronger brand loyalty than consumers scoring high on individualism. Zhang, van Doorn, and Leeflang (2014) find that Chinese consumers express higher brand loyalty intentions than Dutch consumers. They reason that Chinese consumers tend to resist change in valued brand relationships because of their high uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation. However, research involving other similar samples is necessary to further corroborate these findings and to determine whether cultural differences are stable.

Stakeholders other than consumers can use the brand and the organization they work for to co-create both personal and collective identities (Brickson, 2005; Burmann, Hegner, & Riley, 2009; Korschun, 2015). Brickson (2005) finds that among 88 organizations, the relationships between both internal and external stakeholders were a key determinant of organizational identity. Bingham, Dyer, Smith, and Adams (2011) find a more relational (than individualist) identity orientation among family firms, which affects their corporate social performance and activities with certain stakeholders. Carmeli, Gilat, and Weisberg (2006) show that the external prestige of a company, as measured by three groups of stakeholder

(competitors, customers, and suppliers), is positively correlated with employees' organizational identification. Finally, Thelander and Säwe's (2015) findings show the complexity of aligning the perception and position of different internal stakeholders to co-create a new place identity.

A main shortcoming identified in brand and stakeholder identity literature is that theories are culturally bound to what Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) call WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies, with research mainly focusing on Western individualist thinking and, by extension, centering on individuals holding dominant independent self-construals. In addition, most research on the relationship between consumption and identity does not consider cultural differences in consumers' selves and self-perceptions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tiwsakul & Hackley, 2012). Both types of cultural differences, individualism and collectivism, likely shape the way brand identity and stakeholder identities are reciprocally constructed across cultures.

Overall, only limited research investigates the role of culture in the co-creation process. Akaka, Schau, and Vargo (2013) introduce the concept of "value in cultural context" by integrating principles from service-dominant logic, consumer culture theory, and practice theory. They propose that (1) the cultural context mediates value co-creation, (2) systems and structures influence value in cultural context, (3) cultural contexts are (re-)formed through the enactment of practices, and (4) changes in one component or level of context influence changes in another component or level. Akaka, Vargo, and Lusch (2013) propose a framework that highlights the importance of social and cultural context. They argue that co-creation of value is influenced by practices on various levels of interactions and institutions that differ across cultures. Social norms and resources (e.g., signs, symbols) can also influence individual- or collective-level stakeholders' interactions. In a cross-cultural context, the integration of different practices can even lead to the development of new forms of value.

However, additional empirical research is required to explore how value is co-created within different cultural contexts and, in particular, across cultures. Conceptualizations that view stakeholders as actively negotiating the brand identity relative to their own personal, cultural, and social identity (Fournier, 1998) are necessary. Along this line, Alsem and Kosteljik (2008) propose a more balanced marketing paradigm, at the heart of which is the brand identity–customer relationship, but call for further empirical research on the topic.

### **3. The importance of culture in understanding reciprocal identity co-creation**

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991) and Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001), culture shapes perceptions of the world and is implicated in the processing of information, construction of attitudes, or experience of emotions. Different cultures trigger the experience of specific emotions (e.g., ego vs. other-centered emotions) or dominant modes of thinking (e.g., analytical vs. holistic thinking). Fundamental differences exist between individualist and collectivist cultures in the way individual actors (i.e., consumers or brand employees) and group actors (i.e., various brand stakeholders) perceive and interpret external stimuli (pre-behavioral processes) and also in the way these perceptions and interpretations manifest in overt behavior (behavioral processes): for example, in their summary of research in several fields, Kastanakis and Voyer (2014) categorize key perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral differences between individuals and groups holding independent versus interdependent self-construals. The present article adopts a social psychological perspective and follows Markus and Kitayama's (1991) classic conceptualization of cultural differences in terms of self-perception (independent vs. interdependent self-construals) and its adaptation to international marketing and consumer behavior. This article focuses on key areas of pre-behavioral and behavioral differences to theorize about how these reciprocally might affect processes of identity co-creation for brands and/or consumers or other individual- or group-level brand stakeholders. Pre-behavioral processes, such as perception and cognition, play a

central role in subjective human experience and eventual behavior (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014; Voyer & Franks, 2014), and thus studying differences in these two domains is crucial to eventually understand cross-cultural stakeholders' behavior, whether at the individual or group level. Key areas of perception (Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, Drolet, & Nowlis, 2001) and cognition (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) include (1) self- and group-perception differences (the most important, general, and overarching cross-cultural difference), (2) emotional differences (including memory and self-esteem), (3) differences in people's capability of being perspective takers, and (4) differences in decision making and processing of messages. The selected areas are likely to have an effect on co-creation processes, including roles, strategies, and identity outcomes (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015). That is, some are likely to affect *processes*, some are likely to affect *roles and strategies of co-creation*, some are likely to be more important for *identity outcomes*, and some may affect all three of these. This article's focus is on high-level, general issues that apply in many domains, with many examples referring to specific circumstances of brands', consumers', or other stakeholders' reciprocal identity co-creation.

### 3.1. Culture and the self

Ample work acknowledges the importance of culture and its impact on cognition, emotion, and behavior in a consumption context (Briley, Wyer, & Li, 2014; Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014). Culture affects both collective- and individual-level practices and group behaviors, resulting in different types of self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The notion of self-concept, and its cultural variations (i.e., independent self vs. interdependent self), plays a central role in social and consumer psychology because of its influence on cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and affective processes (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Leary & Tangney, 2012) in guiding identity construction. Despite some shortcomings (see Cayla & Arnould, 2008), the present work employs this widely used framework to offer more nuance

and to help avoid sharp oppositions between East and West cultural differences.

The self is both socio-culturally (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and biologically (Northoff, Heinzl, de Greck, Bermpohl, Dobrowolny, & Panksepp, 2006) rooted. Cross-cultural research suggests that the self develops through interaction with others and with the social and cultural environment (e.g., Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007). Both culture and the self behave in a dynamic way and mutually influence each other. For example, changes in the cultural environment can lead to changes in self-perception (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In particular, cultural norms and ideals as part of the socio-cultural environment are internalized as self-construals and influence cognitive and affective processes as well as motivations (Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O'Mara, & Gebauer, 2013). Norms and ideals emphasize uniqueness, personal success, and agency, fostering the development of the independent self in individualist cultures. In collectivist cultures, norms and ideals emphasize the importance of being connected and in communion with others, fostering the development of interdependent selves (De Vos, 1985).

Cultural differences in self-construal can also affect the extent to which consumers, employees, and other stakeholders strive to be unique and different from others. Consumer psychology links the distinctiveness motive to consumers' need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Becker et al. (2012) argue that the desire for a distinctive identity is a universal phenomenon across cultures, guiding individual or collective identity construction processes. Kim and Markus (1999) argue that individuals with a dominant independent self-construal are more likely than those with a dominant interdependent self-construal to try to differentiate themselves from others. In consumption contexts, individuals with a dominant independent self-construal (typically, but not exclusively, enhanced by individualist values in cultures with dominant independent self-construals) often desire to purchase original, unique products and brands, which can contribute to the development and

expression of this self-construal. Conversely, individuals with a dominant interdependent self (typically, but not exclusively, enhanced by collectivist values in cultures promoting interdependent selves) seek goods and services that give them a sense of belonging, thus choosing brands that allow them to resemble other consumers or fit in with positively valued brand communities.

Finally, the independence and interdependence constructs can also describe societies that prioritize either *personal* or *social* identities (Oyserman, 2009). Although individuals have both a personal and a social identity, which mutually reinforce each other, one can become dominant, due to different social and cultural contexts (Hogg & Vaughan, 2013). According to Ozer and Benet-Martinez (2006), individual identity is an outcome of personality. Thus, personal identities refer to individual aspects of various personality traits that define an individual's uniqueness (e.g., extraversion, agreeableness; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Conversely, social identities refer to a sense of group belonging derived from group membership and guide individual behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The socio-cultural context of interdependent cultures is more likely to cue social identity, while that of independent cultures is more likely to cue personal identity. Relational aspects of identity (e.g., importance of in-groups) are stronger in interdependent than independent cultures (Kwan, Hui, & McGee, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These are, however, not rigid distinctions: in all contexts, both social and personal identities are inextricably linked (Percy & Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2012), such that, for example, group affiliations contribute to the sense of self in independently oriented cultures and self-related needs, emotions and cognitions feed into one's social identity or even affect group values in interdependently oriented societies.

Overall, cultural differences in self-concept formation and expression carry important consequences for scholars interested in identity co-construction. Given that stakeholder identity co-construction and its reciprocal aspects involve various relational aspects of



identity, cultural differences are likely to exist in the co-creation of brands', consumers', or other stakeholders' identities.

### *3.2. Cross-culturally common elements of identity co-creation: processes, roles, and outcomes*

Given the research on cultural differences in identity formation, processes of traditional co-creation and/or reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities are likely to differ across cultures. However, extant literature on the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities is scarce. In addition, the vast literature on traditional co-creation (the one-sided, singular relationship, in which many stakeholders contribute to a brand's identity) suffers from an individualist bias. Within these constraints, this literature focuses on *co-creative practices* resulting in a brand identity reflective of the actors involved, including their values and, importantly, cultural complementarities that create synergistic outcomes (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). Consumers especially contribute to brand identity co-creation through either *co-production* (with the company) or *value-in-use* (e.g., with other consumers, brand communities, the media) during the life of the brand (Ranjan & Read, 2016). Furthermore, in a more inclusive conceptualization in accordance with individual- and social-level perspectives (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015), multiple brand stakeholders (1) *co-create brand meaning* (e.g., through events, logos, rituals, and practices), (2) *co-generate brand manifestations* of brand meaning (e.g., adding value-in-use), and (3) *co-construct brand stakeholders or brand-interest consumer groups*, either by self-affiliating with the groups or by identifying suitable group members and networking with them.

A company can attempt to control co-production activities but not value-in-use encounters. When several stakeholder groups (each with their own idiosyncratic identities) “negotiate” with one another through various social discourses, the outcome can be a severely fragmented brand image, especially because their discursive strategies not only reflect their

unique (or collective) identities but also involve opposing roles, such as brand-promoting (*brand promoters* produce company-intended brand interpretations), brand-offending (*brand offenders* spread alternative or even negative brand interpretations), and *brand-neutral* activities (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

Therefore, because (brand or stakeholder) identity co-creation can be subject to such variability in processes (including roles and strategies employed) and, thus, possible identity outcomes, existing perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral differences at the cross-cultural level (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014) should make the (reciprocal) creation of brand and stakeholder identities a rich and culture-specific process that cannot be adequately captured with existing frameworks. Instead, this alternative life philosophy and view of the world (e.g., independent vs. interdependent self-construals) result in (1) variable (co-creation) *processes*, (2) preference for different (stakeholder) *roles or strategies*, and, eventually, (3) culture-specific *outcomes* with regard to the (brand or stakeholder) identity co-produced. In other words, processes of co-creating identities, co-generating brand manifestations, and co-constructing stakeholder groups (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015), as well as the adoption of discursive strategies (or group member roles; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), are culturally conditioned (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014). Eventually, identity outcomes should also differ reciprocally for the brand and stakeholder groups involved.

#### **4. Understanding identity co-creation across cultures: a conceptual framework**

##### *4.1. Self- versus group perception differences*

People in societies fostering individualist values develop an individualist/independent orientation (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014), in which the self is autonomous, detached, and differentiated from that of others. Individuals with a dominant independent self-construal focus primarily on self-related goals and needs, while their self-perceptions mainly comprise unique personal traits and attributes (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Overall, individualist

cultures tend to nurture autonomous individuals who strive more for singularity than connectedness. (Being autonomous does not mean that individualists do not possess collectivist traits; however, dominant characteristics exist, and these are the focus of the analysis without implying a strict binary opposition.) Conversely, in more collectivist societies, people tend to mostly develop an interdependent orientation (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014), in which they perceive the self as inseparable from, connected with, and non-differentiated from others, while features of uniqueness are less pronounced. These individuals tend to focus more on the interpersonal domain, the opinions or reactions of others, and how their public self appears to society. Thus, the relationship rather than the individual is the fundamental unit of consciousness.

Regarding self-perception differences at the group level (a core level for co-creation processes), groups in cultures that favor dominant independent self-construals exist to serve individual needs more than social ones (e.g., even when group needs are at stake, the individual may prioritize a more self-promoting solution). Thus, whenever a group fails to meet the individual's priorities, he or she may legitimately attempt to change or even leave the group (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Conversely, individuals in cultures that favor dominant interdependent self-construals serve group needs even when displaying their individuality. These people tend to conform to others' wishes, attend to others' needs, and consider how their own actions reflect on the in-group's image and collective well-being. Conflicts with the in-group must adhere to prescribed role expectations to preserve "face." Overall, traditional interdependence-focused societies foster tradition that evaluates an individual's freedom in terms of costs and benefits to the group, to maintain peaceful and harmonious relationships. These contrasting views of the self versus others greatly affect every aspect of (reciprocal) identity co-creation, including group behavior, key processes, roles adopted, and, eventually, identity outcomes.

First, for *co-creation processes* such as creating brand interpretations through shared consumption practices (Al-Mutawa, 2013; Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015), some acts such as brand resistance (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) or antagonistic acts toward the brand image could be more common among independent-oriented stakeholders (especially individual-level ones, such as consumers) because exhibiting their independence and uniqueness is a key aspect of the self (thus, manifesting their opposition to conformity or “group-over-me” pressures), whereas the opposite should hold for interdependent-oriented stakeholders (e.g., employee groups reciprocally “adopting” the brand identity to co-create their own identity). These latter stakeholders might appreciate practices such as supportive documenting (a co-creation practice fostering positive contributions, e.g., sharing exciting consumption or employee stories; Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008), advocating a “one-for-all” brand positioning (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeck, 2013), undertaking collaborative work (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007), and concentrating on co-creation acts that promote similarity, inter-connectedness, and harmony among co-members (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008; Eckhardt & Houston, 2008). Similar reciprocal effects could arise from brands affecting the formation of consumers’ or other stakeholders’ identities.

Second, co-creation differences should extend to the adoption of corresponding *roles* or *strategies* among brand communities. Reflecting the discursive strategies Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) suggest, brand opposition acts should be more common among independent-oriented stakeholders because they tend to choose the role of brand offenders to protect their uniqueness against the perceived threat of group homogeneity. Conversely, brand supportive acts should be more common among interdependent-oriented stakeholders, who tend to choose the role of brand promoters to adopt a more conformist stance as a cultural response to

maintain peace in the stakeholder group. The community nature of certain stakeholders (e.g., brand communities, consumer associations) might further reinforce these supportive practices.

Finally, as a natural consequence, the eventual identity (outcome) co-produced should also reflect these opposing worldviews, as identity continuously emerges from interactions between different stakeholders, who have different foci depending on the cultural environment. For example, because people with a dominant independent self-construal are tuned to reproducing their own uniqueness, the elements (e.g., traits, thoughts, roles) they project onto brands should be highly variable, reflecting the high variability in individualist societies (the unique, egoistic, singular self). Thus, brands co-created should be highly variable and fragmented, possessing heterogeneous, multiple personalities due to multiple controversial interactions (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002) during the social discourse in engaging with the brand (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015); the same should hold true for the reciprocal effects on involved consumers' or employees' identities. In sharp contrast, because individuals with a dominant interdependent self are tuned to reproducing commonly accepted societal values (e.g., saving face, promoting harmonious relationships), social discourse should result in more consensus on central elements of brand meaning over time (Quenza, 2005). That is, the elements predominantly interdependent individuals project onto brands should be largely similar, reflecting the high communalities of a collectivist society. Therefore, brands co-created could possess single and coherent personalities, with more homogeneous and relational identities, indicating the importance of the group over the individual. Regarding reciprocal identity co-creation, this situation should apply to both consumers' (reciprocal effect of brands on people's individual-level selves; Belk, 1988) or other stakeholders' identities and to brand personalities co-created by stakeholder groups. Thus, reflecting self- versus group perception differences in cultures with dominant

independent versus interdependent self construals, co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities should differ as follows:

**P1a.** Co-creation processes of an individualist nature should prevail in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas co-creation processes of a collectivist nature should prevail in cultures with dominant interdependent self-construals.

**P1b.** Co-creation strategies of opposition should be more common among stakeholders with a dominant independent self-construal, whereas co-creation strategies of brand support (role of brand promoters) should be more common among stakeholders with a dominant interdependent self-construal.

**P1c.** Brand identities co-created in cultures with dominant independent self construals should be more heterogeneous and fragmented, whereas brand identities co-created in cultures with dominant interdependent self-construals should be more homogeneous and coherent.

#### 4.2. *Emotional differences*

Mirroring the fundamental perceptions of the self versus others, emotional differences important for co-creation also exist. Specifically, *ego-focused emotions* tend to dominate in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas *other-focused emotions* tend to dominate in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals. Ego-focused emotions refer to emotions for which the individual's internal attributes are the primary referent (e.g., pride, narcissism, anger). Other-focused emotions (e.g., sympathy, interpersonal communion, shame) have another individual or the group as the primary referent. Important for co-creation, the ability of people in individualist cultures to decode or understand other people's emotions is not as high as that in collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Emotional differences across cultures are likely to affect reciprocal identity co-creation in three ways. First, emotional differences should have important consequences on collective or individual identities' co-creation. For example, *empathizing practices*, such as lending emotional and physical support to other brand stakeholders, that increase social bonding (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006; Schau et al., 2009) are more prevalent in other-focused cultures. Such group-prioritizing practices should result in smoother *networking* and, eventually, to superior *co-construction* of stakeholder group practices (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015) in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals. In cultures with dominant independent self construals, ego-focused emotions result in less development of a communal spirit, with less collaborative work and stronger prevalence of personalization practices. Individuals tailor mass-produced objects to properties that carry individual meaning, thus “making the brand mine” (Arnould & Price, 2000).

Second, focus on opposing emotions should also translate into different stakeholder roles and strategies in cultures with dominant independent versus interdependent selves. For example, brand critics—in the form of consumers or groups (e.g., consumer associations, brand communities) who publicly share negative experiences and complaints (Ertimur & Gilly, 2012)—could prevail in cultures with dominant independent self construals, reflecting Vallaster and von Wallpach's (2013, p. 1513) findings that brand offenders “spread alternative, negative brand meanings through their brand-related discourse.” Ego-focused or other self-serving emotions in independent-oriented societies could also result in more incidents of disapproval, protest, complaints, and use of anti-corporate rhetoric (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010). In contrast, in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals, other-focused emotions, coupled with conformity and propensity to maintain harmony, could lead consumers, employees, and brand communities to adopt a *brand-promoting* stance, which includes evangelizing the brand identity (either as co-created with

peers or as originally intended). In turn, high levels of emotional bonding with the brand could lead to attempts to convert others (Rozanski, Baum, & Wolfsen, 1999), as could empathizing feelings that, in the context of the reciprocal co-creation process, reinforce the adoption of brand personality when consumers, employees, or brand communities build their own identities.

Third, as an *outcome*, brands co-created in cultures with dominant independent self construals should be more narcissistic and emotionally unstable (incorporating a multitude of ego-focused feelings), thus becoming emotionally diverse. Conversely, in interdependent-oriented cultures, brands should have less variability in their emotional personalities because they are likely to reflect communal, societally recognized, and dominant group feelings. The same should apply cross-culturally, when consumers (stakeholders) reciprocally “extend” their self (Belk, 1988) to incorporate brand identities as building blocks of their own.

Thus, reflecting emotional differences in cultures with dominant independent self construals versus cultures with dominant interdependent self construals, the co-creation of brands’, consumers’, or stakeholders’ identities should differ as follows:

**P2a.** Co-creation processes adopting ego-focused emotions/perspectives should prevail in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas co-creation processes adopting other-focused emotions/perspectives should prevail in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals.

**P2b.** A higher incidence of emotionally brand-offending co-creation strategies should reflect ego-focused emotions in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas a higher incidence of emotionally brand-promoting co-creation strategies should reflect other-focused emotions in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals.



**P2c.** Brand identities co-created in cultures with dominant independent self construals should be more narcissistic, self-serving, and emotionally unstable, whereas brand identities co-created in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals should be more altruistic, communal-spirited, and emotionally stable.

#### *4.3. Perspective-taking ability*

The ability to empathize and understand situations through the eyes of another person is also important in social discourses relevant to co-creating brand or, reciprocally, stakeholder identities (especially those in close relationships with the brand such as brand communities, employees, or suppliers). In line with previous findings, cultural patterns of independence, which are more prevalent in individualist cultures, lead to a shift of focus on the self, causing people to be worse perspective takers (than those in collectivist cultures), with low perspective-taking ability and more incidents of egocentric errors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, Americans evaluate the similarity of others to themselves more than they evaluate the similarity of themselves to others because their self functions as a habitual reference point in comparison with others (Wu & Keysar, 2007). Conversely, cultural patterns of interdependence in traditional collectivist societies habitually focus attention on others or groups, leading individuals with a dominant interdependent self-construal to be better perspective takers with less egocentric errors. Cohen and Gunz (2002) show that Americans asked to remember and describe an occasion when they were the center of attention report the event from a first-person perspective, whereas Chinese asked to remember and describe a similar occasion report the event from a third-person perspective.

Consequently, the ability to co-create value is intertwined with an adequate understanding of fellow co-creators through superior perspective-taking skills. For example, when co-producing elements of brand identity with the firm or, more important, when

creating value-in-use in collaboration with other consumers or staff members, high perspective-taking ability resulting from a group- rather than a self-focus should result in less conflict, smoother co-creation processes, and greater participation in any social discourse among interdependent-oriented consumers. Conversely, having the self as a habitual reference point should result in higher demand for *customization* (individualized manifestations of a brand; Miceli, Ricotta, & Costabile, 2007), higher incidents of *antagonization* with others, and a preference for *personalization* in cultures with dominant independent self construals. Co-creation of brand meaning through *objectification* (i.e., converting abstract brand meaning into tangible everyday concepts capable of being experienced by the senses, such as a logo, a product, or a brand event or ritual) should reflect group values in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals and more individualist values in cultures with dominant independent self construals—for example, rituals of *empathizing* in the former versus rituals expressing one’s inner, “true” self in the latter.

Brand or stakeholder identity co-created should also be more homogeneous and coherent in collectivist cultures (reflective of groups rather than individuals as a reference point) and more heterogeneous and fragmented in individualist cultures (taking co-creators’ own selves as reference points). As a more general observation—and blending the discussions on self versus group perception, emotional differences, and perspective-taking ability—people who *self-affiliate* with groups (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015) should lean more toward identifying with or adopting group values in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas they should internalize brand values more deeply and merge these with their identities in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals. That is, internalization deepens self-affiliation, thereby increasing the commitment to a group whenever individuals recognize the congruence of their goals, values, and beliefs with those of other stakeholders (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004) and making the self almost

inseparable from the group; in contrast, internalization or adoption reflects a lower degree of group commitment, enabling the individual to leave the group, if necessary. Thus, reciprocal effects of brand identities on stakeholders' identities should be weaker for independent-oriented stakeholder and stronger for interdependent-oriented stakeholders. Reflecting perspective-taking ability differences in cultures with dominant interdependent versus independent self construals, co-creation of either brand or stakeholder identities should differ as follows:

**P3a.** Uneven co-creation processes with more occurrence of egocentric errors and more tension should prevail in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas smoother co-creation processes with less occurrence of egocentric errors and less conflict should prevail in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals.

**P3b.** Brands', consumers', and other stakeholders' identities co-created in cultures with dominant independent self construals should reflect more of a singular nature, whereas brand (stakeholder) identities co-created in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals should reflect more of a communal nature.

**P3c.** Perspective-taking differences should result in a shallower identification with group values in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas such differences should lead to a deeper internalization of group values in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals.

#### *4.4. Decision making and processing of persuasion messages*

Both cross-cultural differences in decision-making processes and the processing of advertising messages are relevant to co-creation processes. Aaker and Sengupta (2000) note that U.S. consumers (compared with Hong Kong consumers), owing to focal, analytical

thinking, are not comfortable with contradictory statements and therefore cannot easily process conflicting pieces of information; rather, to reduce cognitive dissonance, they favor one statement over the other or try to find the truth on one side by rejecting that on the other side (Nisbett et al., 2001). Conversely, interdependent-oriented consumers engage in holistic thinking, which enables them to better value and process contradictory pieces of information. Thus, interdependent-oriented consumers are more comfortable with contradictory statements (e.g., “too humble is half proud”) and try to find the truth on both sides, leading to lower levels of cognitive dissonance.

Cultural differences in information processing and decision-making style should influence mutually dependent—brand, consumer, or other stakeholder—identity co-creation. For example, in contexts of joint-development activities in online consumer groups (Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007), brand stakeholders jointly create and shape all kinds of brand manifestations. However, depending on the cultural context, strongly opinionated members can severely influence decision making (Nisbett et al., 2001) and the direction of co-production of meaning. Thus, extreme co-creation iterations and reformulations of meaning, caused by the rejection of contradictory opinions, could take place during co-creation processes in cultures with dominant independent self construals. Conversely, co-development by synthesizing opposing views should be the norm in the East. For example, in cases of brand engagement through *anchoring* (a practice of social interaction that depends on discursive participation), strongly opinionated members or *brand offenders* could more easily shift public opinion among independent-oriented consumers, causing *brand neutrals* to subscribe to one solution over another, whereas *synthesizing* should occur among interdependent-oriented brand communities, such as those with Confucian values of humility, superior perspective taking, greater empathizing, and the ability to “see the big picture.” In addition, stakeholders with a dominant independent self should have more difficulty in

“adopting” brand values that cause mixed feelings or cognitions and, to reduce dissonance, should simply reject them; in contrast, people from collectivist cultures should have a higher propensity to co-construct their identities by synthesizing, such as picking up congruent brand values while screening out incongruent elements.

Finally, according to Kastanakis and Voyer (2014), cultures also respond differently to *content* and *form* (alternative modes and styles) of communications. The nature of the product advertised (i.e., whether the product is to be shared with others or not) affects consumers' propensity to value culture-congruent information (i.e., uniqueness and self-promotion are valued in individualist cultures, whereas social harmony and conformity are valued in collectivist cultures). In addition, individualist cultures prefer more direct and explicit styles of communication. They value the content more than peripheral elements, such as the mood, tone, or aesthetics of advertisements (central orientation: focus on message content). Conversely, collectivist cultures evaluate communications using an indirect or implicit style. They value the mood, tone, or aesthetics of advertisements more than the content (peripheral orientation: how is the message delivered).

Thus, (1) stakeholders' propensity to value culture-congruent information in reciprocal stakeholder–brand identity co-creation practices and (2) brand stakeholders' identity co-construction (by evaluating and controlling group participation) should also vary between interdependent- and independent-focused cultures, depending on the nature of the product/service/idea at stake. Social discourses geared toward producing “relational” products (services/ideas) should generate more interest and participation in collectivist cultures, while independent-oriented stakeholders should value (and adopt as identity elements) practices around “individualist” products. In addition, the latter group (e.g., independent consumers) should have a greater propensity to generate brand meaning by focusing on core (central) elements, such as a brand's logo or a certain product, whereas the former should engage more

in social discourses that revolve around peripheral elements, such as objectifying brand meaning by developing rituals or other intangible ways to generate brand identity value. Again, these tendencies should also reciprocally reflect stakeholders' identity-building processes. Thus, reflecting differences in decision making and processing of persuasive messages in cultures with independence versus interdependence foci, co-creation of either brand or stakeholder identities should differ as follows:

**P4a.** More complicated co-creation processes should be more common in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas less complex co-creation processes should be more common in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals.

**P4b.** Co-creation processes favoring self-centered products/services/ideas and explicit styles of communication should prevail in cultures with dominant independent self construals, whereas co-creation processes favoring relational products/services/ideas and implicit styles of communication should prevail in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals.

*– insert Table 1 here –*

## **5. Discussion**

This article addresses the overlooked question of the nature, processes, and outcomes of reciprocal brand and consumer or other stakeholders' identity co-creation across cultures and offers several conceptual and managerial contributions. Table 1 provides a summary of core marketing implications of cross-cultural differences for brand–stakeholder (reciprocal) identity co-creation. The framework and series of propositions advance theory building in two ways. First, they highlight existing research limitations on brand and stakeholder identity; that

is, prior work is limited to an individualist perspective. To develop culturally sensitive research on the topic of identity co-creation (reciprocal or unilateral), marketing scholars should consider the specific aspects of cultural mandates and examine their role in co-creation processes. Second, this article serves as a starting point for scholars investigating reciprocal and cultural identity co-creation across cultures. Given that the field of reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identity is still in its infancy, this article first develops a research agenda to help the field grow and then discusses how the research contributes to marketing management practices.

### *5.1. Cultural and reciprocal identity co-creation: a research agenda*

Research on the cross-cultural reciprocal co-creation of brands', consumers', and other stakeholders' identities can use the proposed framework as a guide when going beyond the brand–consumer or brand–stakeholder dyads. While branding theories, such as Ind and Bjerke's (2007) participatory marketing orientation framework, put particular emphasis on treating all stakeholders as co-creators of brands, empirical research still focuses mainly on the consumer–brand dyad and to a lesser extent on the stakeholder–brand one (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). Despite growing evidence showing that different types of stakeholders can take active roles in co-creating value (e.g., Fournier & Avery, 2011; Schau et al., 2009), Hult et al.'s (2011) survey of 58 marketing articles reveals that marketing theory and research mainly focus on specific stakeholders rather than taking a holistic perspective and examining the interaction between stakeholders. Hult et al. find, for example, that six stakeholder groups can have a particular influence on marketing relationships: customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders, local communities, and regulators. The cultural differences introduced and discussed herein are likely to affect all these, as well as other stakeholder groups, in how they interact with one another as well as the outcome of the reciprocal co-production process. Additional factors, however, might affect this process, such

as the status of the different stakeholders involved in the reciprocal co-construction process (e.g., large vs. small customer) or the timescale of the relationship (e.g., long-established vs. new supplier). Finally, the interaction between different stakeholders might differ depending on the culture. For example, employees, suppliers, and consumers share brand-related knowledge about certain cultures or organizations (e.g., Apple community) but not about others (e.g., banking or consulting industries).

Both quantitative and qualitative marketing research can benefit from the conceptual framework and propositions developed herein. Our conceptual framework bridges positivist and more constructivist approaches on the topic to offer propositions that can be explored and tested both quantitatively and qualitatively. A first research area requiring attention is the measurement of constructs that are relevant to the reciprocal co-creation process of brand and stakeholder identity. Such measurement is especially important given the challenges of developing reliable and valid scales for use in different cultural contexts (Smith, 2004). Scales for measuring customer value co-creation behavior (Yi & Gong, 2013), co-creation experience (Verleye, 2015), and brand personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) are available, but they have mainly been designed, tested, and validated in an individualist context. The development of reliable and valid cross-cultural measures is a challenge in cross-cultural research, because researchers often fall into what Matsumoto (1999) calls the “questionnaire trap.”

A second research area is the role of group memberships in reciprocal identity co-creation. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), which highlights inter-group comparison, plays an important role in theories on the self and community consumption. Yuki (2003) argues that social identity may not accurately represent East Asians’ group behaviors, because the focus is on intra-group rather than inter-group relationships. According to Yuki’s proposed intra-group relational model, the goal of East Asians’ group behavior is to maintain mutually



beneficial relationships with fellow in-group members because they view the self as a relational unit and cooperation within groups as important. Identities are likely to be viewed as being connected with others more so than in other contexts. In reciprocal consumer identity co-creation, for example, individualist-oriented consumers may attend more to co-constructing their identities in opposition to other groups of brand stakeholders, whereas consumers with more pronounced collectivist characteristics are likely to co-construct similar identities to other consumers or brand stakeholders.

A third research area is the role of emotions, a core variable in terms of understanding the co-creation aspects of identity. Research discusses implications of cross-cultural differences in experiencing, engaging, and disengaging emotions for subjective well-being (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000) but not for consumer behavior or, especially, co-creation. Future research might address the constructs of brand attachment (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) and brand love (Ahuvia, 2005; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012), both of which spark strong and positive emotions for a brand. In addition, Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger (2011) show that brands perceived as congruent with a consumer's self generate higher levels of emotional brand attachment. Future research might explore effects of cross-cultural differences on experiencing emotions in relation to brand identity and brand attachment and assess how these effects reinforce the reciprocal identity co-creation process. The co-creation process might play a specific role in influencing and further engaging customers with the brand (Payne et al., 2009).

A fourth research area is to gain a better understanding of how brand and stakeholder identities can evolve over time as a result of the reciprocal co-creation process. As Oyserman (2009) notes, although identities might feel stable, they are dynamically created and re-created in specific situational contexts. In addition, identities include not only content but also

readiness to act to make sense of the world (identity-based motivation; Oyserman, 2007). Few studies examine brand identity in the light of current cultural and social identity research on the fluidity of identities. To understand the reciprocal processes of co-constructing and negotiating brand identity involving various stakeholders in an increasingly complex social and cultural environment, future research should try to understand whether societal processes play a role in brands' and stakeholders' identity formation and contribute to its evolution over time. Longitudinal designs would be especially useful in examining these aspects. Another related area for research is to understand the relationship between a series of related constructs, such as brand identity and brand image, especially when external stakeholders co-produce brand identities. The sports industry, for example, in the context of sponsorship provides several lines of research (see Motion, Leitch, & Brodie, 2003).

Overall, future research on the cross-cultural reciprocal identity co-creation process will require working with either comparative samples or multi-cultural individuals. Recent research explores the influence of the bi-cultural self on consumer behavior (Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008; Mok & Morris, 2013), including the effect of bi-culturalism on decision making (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2005). No research investigates the relationship between brand identity and the bi-cultural self (implying two cultural identities; Luna et al., 2008). Therefore, research on the cross-cultural reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identity would benefit from using bi-cultural participants to explore the topic. Incorporating other dimensions of cultures and cultural values, especially beyond the traditional individualism and collectivism dichotomy, might also reveal finer insights into cultural differences in reciprocal identity co-creation. For example, Hofstede's (2001) cultural values of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long-/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint or the Inglehart–Welzel World Values Survey might add some nuances to the identity creation process. However, scholars should try to avoid falling

into the ecological fallacy of assuming determinism on the basis of the cultural environment in which individuals grew up (Taras & Steel 2009).

### *5.2. Managerial implications*

Brands are increasingly becoming global, and the interest in becoming a global brand comes not only from U.S. or European brands but also from Asian brands (Zhiyan, Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2013). For marketing managers, especially those in charge of online communities, understanding local and cross-cultural similarities and differences in the reciprocal construction of brand and stakeholder identities and what they can potentially control and not control would aid them in designing a social media strategy. Depending on the cultural context, marketing managers would be able to emphasize certain emotions or encourage or discourage interactions between different groups of stakeholders. Gylling, Elliott, and Toivonen (2012) highlight the importance of developing shared meaning between, for example, consumers and organizations to develop a successful market-focused strategy.

### *5.3. Limitations*

This research has several limitations. First, owing to the conceptual nature of the research, further research is necessary to corroborate the conceptual framework and the propositions offered. Second, an inherent limitation to most cross-cultural and social psychological identity research is its focus on North America (mainly the United States and Canada) and Asia (mainly China and Japan). In addition, such binary opposition between cultures often shunts finer, within-cultural differences, which can be equally important in understanding cross-cultural differences (Triandis, 2001). Traditional binary oppositions between different cultures are becoming less relevant as cultural values evolve toward uniformity and convergence and behaviors and modes of thinking traditionally observed in certain parts of the world spread to other areas, thus challenging cultural stereotypes (Chakkarath, 2010; Craig, & Douglas, 2001; Tamura & Kobayashi, 2014; Yan, 2009).

Cultures should therefore not be treated as homogeneous spaces. For example, de Bellis, Hildebrand, Ito, and Herrmann (2015) find that customization works well in certain parts of Asia (e.g., China, Singapore) but not in others (e.g., Japan, Taiwan). In addition, research suggests that national cultures can be overcome by brand or consumption-related cultures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Other ambitious research projects offer a more comprehensive approach to culture (see, e.g., the GLOBE project; House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). After becoming further established and empirically tested, these newer frameworks can constitute a finer and less binary starting point. Finally, cultures should not systematically be assimilated to countries or geographical regions. Culture can refer to and be shared by both macro and micro groups of individuals (e.g., organizations or individuals from different age groups all share different cultural referents). Thus, certain brand communities might share different cultures, fostering different types of collective values and therefore affecting stakeholders' self-construal differently. For example, brand communities around other-focused organizations (e.g., charities) could try nurturing a more interdependent-focused micro culture; conversely, brand communities around self-focused organizations (e.g., luxury brands) could try promoting independent-focused micro cultures. These examples call for careful consideration of what culture is and should be with regard to understanding cultural differences. As scholars working on cross-cultural issues dig deeper into the world of cultural universals versus cultural-specific aspects of humankind, more categorizations of cultures will emerge, complementing or even replacing previous ones (Lonner, 2015).

## **6. Conclusion**

In a traditional sense, brand identity comes from the organization and is strategically used by brand strategists to control the meaning, image, and aim of the brand (Kapferer, 2004). The recent rise in interest on the iterative co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities is a step forward in developing a more comprehensive approach on identity-related mechanisms. This

modern take on a classic phenomenon acknowledges that brand and stakeholder identity co-creation is not simply a one-way process but rather a reciprocal, comprehensive one, that involves not just one brand, company, or stakeholder at a time, but several. This article highlights the importance of understanding and accounting for the role of culture in reciprocal identity co-creation. Building on recent developments and adopting the most established theories in the field of social, cross-cultural, and personality psychology, this study offered a conceptual framework and a critical review of the marketing research literature to show how cross-cultural differences can affect the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identity. As Hatch and Schultz (2010) note, research exploring how brands are co-created with multiple stakeholders is in its infancy. The next step for scholars is to examine the topic from a cross-cultural perspective to fully capture the potential of emerging theories.

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**Table 1**

The effect of culture on (reciprocal) brand/stakeholder identity co-creation

<p><b>Independent-oriented brand, consumer, &amp; stakeholder co-creation contexts</b> (mainly in cultures with dominant independent self construals)</p>	<p><b>Marketing implications for</b>  brands' ← (reciprocal) → stakeholders' identity co-creation</p>		<p><b>Interdependent-oriented brand, consumer, &amp; stakeholder co-creation contexts</b> (mainly in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals)</p>
<p align="center"><b>(Brands', Consumers', &amp; Stakeholders') Identity Outcome</b></p>			
<p>Individuals are more important than groups, which are valued as long as they can fulfill individual needs</p> <p>Individuality over harmony</p>	<p><i>Stakeholders co-create (or re-interpret) brand identities that tend to be more heterogeneous, narcissistic, emotionally unstable, ego-focused, and fragmented than those co-created among interdependent-oriented stakeholders</i></p> <p align="center">← →</p> <p><i>Consequently, brand personalities feed back to (re-)creating &amp; re-enforcing (pre-existing) singular, uniqueness-oriented stakeholder identities</i></p>	<p><i>Stakeholders co-create (or re-interpret) brand identities that tend to be more homogeneous, altruistic, emotionally stable, other-focused, and coherent than those co-created among independent-oriented stakeholders</i></p> <p align="center">← →</p> <p><i>Consequently, brand personalities feed back to (re-)creating &amp; re-enforcing (pre-existing) relational, community-oriented stakeholder identities</i></p>	<p>Groups are more important than individuals, who are valued because they contribute to group needs</p> <p>Harmony over individuality</p>
<p align="center"><b>Co-Creation Processes and Consumers' (Stakeholders') Discursive Strategies (Roles)</b></p>			
<p><b>Brands, Consumers, and Stakeholders tend to:</b></p> <p>Mostly have ego-focused, non-relational emotions and memories</p> <p>Mostly have low perspective-taking ability, make egocentric errors</p> <p>Be uncomfortable with contradictory information, focus on the content of</p>	<p><i>Processes/discursive strategies (roles) employed to co-create brand/consumer (stakeholder) identities tend to have the following characteristics (when compared with those in cultures with dominant interdependent self construals):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on one's self (the reference point in similarity comparisons)</li> <li>- Higher incidence of emotionally brand-offending co-creation strategies (brand criticism, disapproval, complaints)</li> <li>- More "brand offenders"</li> </ul>	<p><i>Processes/discursive strategies (roles) employed to co-create brand/consumer (stakeholder) identities tend to have the following characteristics (when compared with those in cultures with dominant independent self construals):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on communities (the reference points in similarity comparisons)</li> <li>- Higher incidence of emotionally brand-promoting co-creation strategies (brand support, approval, resolutions)</li> <li>- More "brand promoters"</li> </ul>	<p><b>Brands, Consumers, and Stakeholders tend to:</b></p> <p>Mostly have other-focused, relational emotions and memories</p> <p>Mostly have high perspective-taking ability, make less egocentric errors</p> <p>Be more comfortable with contradictory information, focus on</p>

<p>messages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Uneven co-creation processes with more occurrence of egocentric errors and more tension</i></li> <li>- <i>Prevalence of (a shallower) identification with group values</i></li> <li>- <i>Complex co-creation processes (high cognitive dissonance effects)</i></li> <li>- <i>Focus on isolated brand elements (e.g., a logo)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Smoother co-creation processes with less occurrence of egocentric errors and less conflict</i></li> <li>- <i>Prevalence of (a deeper) internalization of group values</i></li> <li>- <i>Less complex co-creation processes (low cognitive dissonance effects)</i></li> <li>- <i>Focus on relational brand elements (e.g., a ritual)</i></li> </ul>	<p>how messages are delivered</p>
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