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Culture is in the “I” of the Beholder: Identity Confirmation in Tourist Advertisements

Abstract

Consumers tend to self-confirm; they prefer, search for, and interpret information to confirm their beliefs. For example, consumers who think themselves adventurous will seek out adventure-filled activities. Thus, advertisements that contradict or question consumers' self-identity may be unappealing. The studies herein focus on the nexus of cultural identity (distinct from other identities) and self-confirmation, and examine how consumers evaluate tourism advertisements based on their cultural similarity. The results show that people respond less favorably to tourism ads perceived as incongruent with their identity (Study 1). Yet even when a tourism advertisement is congruent with consumer identity (e.g. Austin ad for U.S. citizens), geographic distance impedes self-confirmation decisions (Study 2). Studies 3 and 4 show that cultural self-identity priming can attenuate the negative effect of distance on consumer evaluations of tourism ads, by either making cultural identity salient or increasing the cultural relevancy of distant ads.

Keywords: self-confirmation, identity, cultural identity, distance, tourism, advertising

Highlights

- People respond less favorably to tourism ads inconsistent with their self-identity.
- Even when similar in identity, ads for far destinations are viewed less favorably.
- Making cultural identity top of mind can reduce the negative effect of distance.
- Adding culturally-relevant features in ads increases self-identity consistency.

Culture is in the “I” of the Beholder: Identity Confirmation in Tourist Advertisements

1. Introduction

Consumer often spend a lot of time and money preparing their vacations. Likewise, tourism boards invest money and resources in developing advertising campaigns to capture tourist attention and patronage. For instance, the U.S. government typically spends over 5% of its budget to generate tourism (Zanona, 2017) and the Seychelles invests over 20% of its annual budget in tourism marketing (Fahey & Wells, 2016). While several cities have developed strong identities through global marketing (e.g. Las Vegas, Paris, New York, etc.), others have not had the same success, and find it more difficult to build awareness, reputation, and loyalty. Given that some places find it easier than others to develop a tourism identity, such spending and awareness contrasts beg the question “how do consumers make travel choices?” and most importantly, “How can cities as business entities ensure their travel spending is used efficiently?” In response to this research, we turn to consumer identity.

We propose, in line with research on identity, that consumer travel decisions will depend on the degree of similarity or congruity between the destination advertised and the consumer’s identity. Research on consumer identity (c.f. Zschocke, 2013) suggests that consumers tend to make identity-confirming choices, such that advertisements (including tourism advertisements) dissimilar to a consumers’ identity may seem threatening and undesirable (Swann, 1983). Individual identities are multifaceted and include social and individual identity. Furthermore, social identity is often modeled by culture and national affiliation (c.f. White & Dahl, 2006) and influences product choices and evaluations (Gomez & Torelli, 2015; Torelli & Cheng; 2011). Research on social identity suggests that cultural and national affiliations can serve as a type of identity confirmation, related to belonging (White et al., 2012). These choices may be reflected in brand preferences. Brands can be

loaded with cultural meaning via branding cues (e.g., the bald eagle for the USA, or the Eiffel tower for France; Gomez & Torelli, 2015). Likewise, product categories can be culturally associated or typical of certain cultures (e.g., wine for France, pasta for Italy; Spielmann, 2016). More specifically, with regard to this research, social identity can manifest itself in tourism decisions. For example, preferring to travel domestically versus internationally can be motivated by patriotism and/or confirmation of national identity. As such, products, brands, and even activities may conjure cultural identities, resulting in culturally motivated behaviors.

Aside from speaking directly to social identities, culture also determine consumer receptivity to offers that represent choices incompatible with an individual's identity. Individualistic cultures (e.g., the USA, Germany, Canada, France, Australia) are more likely to value independence (Hofstede, 1991). For instance, Americans often relate to independence and individualism, and respond favorably to brands that represent these ideals (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2006). However, consumers can be motivated to choose identity-contrary offerings (White, Argo & Sengupta, 2012). In these cases, more independent consumers can view identity-dissociative advertisements as a way to validate self-identity. An identity-dissociative choice can be a way to self-confirm, as it involves choosing the unexpected (e.g. a Canadian choosing to visit Dubai). Thus, people from individualistic cultures may be more receptive to identity-dissociative tourism ads. Interestingly, travel spending tends to be higher in individualistic cultures. For example, French and German tourists together account for nearly half of all European tourism expenditures (Eurostat, 2016). The USA, considered the world's most individualistic country, reports 2014 per person travel spending at \$456.81, versus the world's average \$191.47 (World Bank).

This research examines whether individual tendencies to self-confirm depend on the consumer's cultural identity, and endeavors to understand how consumer identity influences choices in tourism advertisements. Specifically, we focus on how those with an independent

cultural identity make travel choices and, ask the following questions: how does cultural influence in advertisements lead to identity-confirming travel decisions? Does greater distance between the consumer and the culture promoted in the tourism advertisement inhibit identity-confirming choices? Can activating a consumer's cultural identity reduce the threat of identity-contrary choices, and therefore, make distant travel choices appear more desirable?

In a series of four experiments, this research makes four contributions to theory and practice. First, we show how cultural identity acts as a buffer against psychological and spatial distance. Second, we evaluate three separate highly independent cultures to enhance the work of White et al. (2012) on purchase decisions, varying degrees of self-identity, and different layers of self-identity. Third, we use a real-life event to prime cultural-identity, which has practical implications that tourist boards and foreign brands can use to encourage positive brand evaluations and bolster travel intentions. Finally, by focusing on several independent cultures, our results have tangible applications in some of the world's most important and valuable travel markets, providing managerial insights for tourism operators, tourism boards, and travel entities who need them most.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-confirmation

Self-confirmation, related to the self-concept, motivates consumers to maintain their current self-view at all costs, such that when presented with the opportunity to self-confirm, individuals do so, because it allows them to preserve their identity (Coleman & Williams, 2013). Identity confirmation is reflected in a plethora of decisions consumers make about their lives, behaviors, and the offerings they intend to purchase (Kwang & Swann, 2010). Given that self-confirmation goals motivate consumers to seek identity-relevant attributes in brands, products, and even advertisements (Bech-Larsen & Nielsen, 1999), products and

brands are instruments that maintain or improve the self-concept, because they represent symbolic aspects of consumer identity (Sirgy, 2015). Instinctively, consumers prefer more highly symbolic identity-confirming offerings, because these are more self-congruent (Sutin & Robins, 2008; White et al., 2012). Since tourism choices can be visible, often posted on social media for example, these experiences may follow a similar pattern of identity confirmation. So, when given choices, people tend to search for experiences that confirm their self-identity, and avoid experiences that threaten their sense of self (see Swann, 1983; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992).

However, consumer identities comprise two levels: individual identity, which depends on the person's self-concept, and social identity, which is more complex (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People experience varying degrees of association with certain social identities (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) – some will prefer a national identity (e.g., being American), a cultural identity (e.g., being French-Canadian) or an ethnic identity (e.g., being a Sephardic Jew). Because self and social identities are omnipresent, context will ultimately influence which identity level people will use to make their decisions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

It is important in the construction and confirmation of a consumer's identity for the products they buy to be consistent with their perceived self. First, consistency between the consumer's identity and a brand's identity leads consumers to feel more personal connections to the brand (Zhang & Aggarwal, 2015), which makes them feel less threatened and more contented. As such, consumers' self-confirmation aims predict their brand attitudes (He & Mukherjee, 2007). Likewise, the propensity to make self-confirming choices is partially driven by cultural consistency. Cultural identity is constructed in a context, via interactions with products and individuals, during activities and over time (Oyserman, 2009). For instance, a person born and raised in Texas may feel a stronger Texan identity than an adult who only recently moved to Texas. Similarly, interactions within a society help reinforce cultural

values, which inform cultural identity. For example, He and Mukherjee (2007) suggest that Chinese culture's emphasis on harmony and social acceptance could be the major motives underlying their brand choices. In line with this research, White et al. (2012) suggest that cultural independence directly impacts approach or avoidance behavior with regard to identity-relevant (versus irrelevant) products. Independence (interdependence) leads to greater avoidance (approach) of identity-contrary offerings. However, while congruity or brand choice reduces perceived identity threats, little research, to our knowledge, has examined how consumers reduce perceived identity threats.

2.2 Self-Confirmation and Tourism Offers

Traveling can result in a threat to a consumer's identity (Bardhi, Ostberg, & Bengtsson, 2010), because traveling often results in self-reflection; most tourists experience varied phases of self-exploration during their travel experiences. Tourism experiences include cognitive, affective and behavioral elements (Vincent & Thompson, 2002). Part of the evaluation made during a tourism experience is based on the destination's perceived value, and on how it helps the consumer achieve goals and purpose. Specifically, travel and tourism allows consumers to define their identity, by having a richer and fuller experience of being (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Thus, people's travel decisions, like product and brand decisions, stem from a consumer desire to self-confirm. Formally:

H1a: Priming a proximal (vs. distal) culture in a tourism ad leads to more positive attitudes and intentions toward a brand.

H1b: Self-confirmation thoughts underlie the relationship between culture in a tourism ad and each of positive attitudes and intentions toward the brand.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study 1 - Cultural Identities are Self-Confirming

3.1.1 Procedure and sample

This study follows a 2 (cultural identity: proximal vs. distal) x 1 between-subjects design using French consumers. We manipulated cultural identity via an online tourism ad to visit an attraction in a city. The destination was either Paris (culturally close for the French), with an image of the Sacré Coeur basilica, or Montreal (Canada), with an image of St. Joseph's oratory (culturally distant: see Appendix for visuals). The two buildings are very similar in shape and color. After randomly assigning the participants to view a destination advertised, we asked them to respond to items covering the dependent variables. These included self-confirmation, using the scale developed by Cable & Kay (2012; $\alpha = .90$) adapted to tourism; attitudes toward the ad (Lavack, Thakor, & Bottausci, 2008; a bi-polar scale, with 1 [versus 7] indicating negative; $\alpha = .93$); three items on intentions to spend a vacation in the city advertised (Spears & Singh, 2004; bi-polar scale ranging from 1 to 7: never/definitely; $\alpha = .96$); and self-city congruency (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffengger, 2011; 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .72$). Lastly, participants responded to items covering covariates, such as perceived beauty of the cathedral in the ad and perceived agreeableness of the city advertised. They also answered items covering demographics.

We used a Qualtrics Panel to collect responses from French participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 43$, 53% male) living outside Paris at the time of the study ($n = 57$ responses). As a manipulation check, all participants (100%) correctly identified the city in the advertisement.

3.1.2 Results

Perceptions of city agreeableness ($p < .01$) and cathedral beauty ($p = .02$) were significant covariates to the main effect of cultural proximity on self-confirmation ($F(1, 55) = 2.91$; $p = .03$), such that those who viewed the Paris ad reported more self-confirmation ($M =$

5.79) than those who saw the Montreal ad ($M = 5.41$). Additionally, participants felt higher self-congruency for Paris ($M = 4.77$) than Montreal ($M = 4.17$; $F(1, 55) = 3.17$; $p = .03$). Finally, attitudes toward the ad and visiting intentions were higher for Paris ($M_{\text{attitudes}} = 5.11$; $M_{\text{visit intentions}} = 5.02$) than Montreal ($M_{\text{attitudes}} = 4.57$; $F(1, 55) = 2.91$; $p = .04$; $M_{\text{visit intentions}} = 3.76$; $F(1, 55) = 21.18$; $p < .01$), thus supporting H1a.

To assess H1b, we ran the PROCESS model 4 with ad type as the independent variable, self-city congruency as the mediator, and each of purchase intentions and attitudes toward the ad as the dependent variables. We include these results in Table 1. As shown, with the mediator added to the regression on attitude toward the ad, the relationship between the ad condition and attitudes became insignificant, while the mediator, self-city congruency, significantly predicts attitudes toward the ad. Moreover, the index of the indirect effect was significant. Both the mediator and the ad condition significantly predict visit intentions. The significant indirect effects of the independent variable on visit intentions through the mediator provide evidence to support self-city congruency as a partial mediator of visit intentions, supporting H1b (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 About Here

3.1.3 Discussion

These findings support our proposal that self-confirmation choices are driven by identities, and in this case cultural identity. That is, when possible, individuals prefer self-confirming choices related to a proximal culture. Respondents felt higher self-confirmation after viewing the ad symbolic of their own cultural identity. Because of higher self-city congruency, attitudes toward the culturally confirming ad were more positive. However, Study 1 does not indicate whether physical distance, cultural distance, or both pose an identity threat influencing evaluations of an offering. Studies 2 and 3, therefore, aim to disentangle

these results. Study 2 examines how physical proximity, unlike cultural proximity, ultimately influences individuals' attitudes and intentions.

3.2 Study 2 - Does Distance Make the Heart Grow Fonder?

According to self-confirmation, individuals desire to be close to what they know. For example, perceptions of psychological proximity result in a more balanced focus on promotion and prevention goals (Pennington & Roese, 2003). However, when a person is more distant from a brand or offering (temporally, spatially, socially, etc.), he/she will find it more difficult to consider the brand or offering (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Yan, Sengupta, & Hong, 2016), and will opt for more promotion regulatory focus (Pennington & Roese, 2003). In other words, distant offerings will increase the desire to pursue identity-confirming offers. In the context of tourism, physical distance, or the amount of geographic space that separates a consumer from the destination, should be related to self-confirmation goals. Intuitively, the aforementioned research suggests that consumers will evaluate a proximal offering more positively because it is closer to what the consumer knows, and thus more likely to be identity-relevant. In sum, cultural identity is highly proximal to consumers, thus easier for them to evaluate than distant cultures, and should lead to more positive evaluations. However, we also suggest that individual versus cultural (social) identity-related evaluations will also depend on perceptions of psychological and physical distance.

Since culture is constructed through beliefs, values, and objects (Oyserman, 2009), when distance is greater, priming knowledge through cultural similarities can make relations easier (Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2012), and thus favor congruency with the self. The constructivist theory of culture states that cultural schemas, especially if more psychologically distant, become more accessible through priming. Thus, judgments and behavior align more closely with a brand when cultural identity is primed (Oyserman, 2009). Furthermore, we

propose that cultural identity can be activated, primed naturally, or made relevant through advertising that alludes to high cultural similarity. In contrast, without activating cultural-confirmation, distance, both psychological and spatial, can result in negative brand evaluations. Therefore, greater distance inhibits the formation of implementation intentions, and detracts from overall offer appeal (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman 2006; Liberman, Polack, Hameiri, & Blumenfeld, 2012; Trope & Liberman, 2010). More specifically, we argue that when an identity-relevant choice is not just identity-relevant but culturally-relevant, individuals will make more positive brand evaluations. Therefore, we expect that in travel settings people will look for a connection between the place brand and the self. When the place brand is more culturally congruent, the individual will report more positive attitudes and intentions toward the brand.

Furthermore, depending on the self-thoughts primed, geographic proximity should lead individuals to judge a brand more positively, because self-confirmation priming can moderate how geographical distance influences individual responses to an advertisement. Though greater spatial distance should lead to lower brand evaluations, cultural identity priming via cultural confirmation can attenuate the impact of geographical distance on brand evaluations, because individuals will think more about their social- than their self-identity. Cultural confirmation is a specific type of identity confirmation, where the individual ruminates on their national and cultural identity, thus more on their social- than their self-identity (e.g., what it means to be “American” versus what it means to be “me”). We propose that cultural-confirmation priming should make a brand, even a physically/culturally distant brand, more self-relevant and desirable. When cultural-confirmation is high, cultural distance will not diminish responses toward a distant offering. Therefore:

H2: Greater physical distance will worsen brand evaluations in a tourism ad when individuals are primed with self-confirmation (vs. with a cultural-confirmation).

3.2.1 Procedure and sample

In this study, we focus on physical distance within a national culture (versus between nations), and assume cultural identity to be the overarching national identity. We manipulated one factor on three levels: (identity prime: self-confirmation vs. cultural-confirmation vs. control) and one measured factor: geographic distance from the destination. We created the self-confirmation prime manipulation consistent with the literature (see Sherman, Nelson & Steele, 2000; Swann, 1983; Swann et al., 1992), which has used writing tasks focused on personal values. We asked those in the self-confirmation prime to write about a situation involving high public scrutiny where they acted in a manner consistent with their own identity, contrary to others' opinions. We gave participants assigned the cultural-confirmation prime the same instructions, but "American identity" replaced "identity." We asked those in the control condition to write about a social situation where they were seen positively. We include the writing task instructions in Appendix 2.

First, the participants, who completed an online questionnaire wrote a paragraph in line with the manipulation. Next, they viewed an online advertisement to visit Austin, the Live Music Capital of the World (see Appendix for visual). Participants then responded to the same item measuring visiting intentions ($\alpha = .98$) as used in Study 1, and stated their daily willingness to pay for expenses, excluding accommodation and travel (e.g. food, entertainment, shopping, etc.) in light of the ad. Next, they provided the distance in miles between their current home and Austin, according to Google Maps, to provide the geographic proximity independent variable. Lastly, participants responded to items covering covariates, such as previous experience of working or living in Austin, how much they liked the image in the advertisement, their knowledge of Austin, and the number of vacation days they take per year. Participants then completed demographic type questions.

We used MTurk to collect 196 responses from American participants who did not live in Austin, Texas at the time of the survey, resulting ($M_{\text{age}} = 38$, 43% male). To check the manipulation of the self-confirmation prime, we asked participants how much the writing task made them feel like acting true to (changing) themselves, showing their real (an improved) self, their accurate (ideal) self, or confirmed (enhanced) who they are (7-point scale; $\alpha = .93$). Lower scores indicated self-confirmation tendencies, following the definition of self-confirmation by Swann (1983) and Swann et al. (1992).

3.2.2 Results

To ensure successful manipulations, we conducted an ANOVA with the three conditions as the independent variable and the self-confirmation scale as the dependent variable. This revealed significant differences in means for identity-confirmation ($F(1, 194) = 10.53$; $p < .01$). Post hoc analysis revealed that those in the control condition felt lower self-confirmation thoughts ($M = 3.46$) than those in the self-confirmation ($M = 2.29$; $p < .01$) or cultural-confirmation ($M = 2.42$; $p < .01$) conditions. Self-confirmation and cultural-confirmation did not differ ($p > .9$). As predicted, there were differences in the extent to which participants experienced individualistic thoughts ($F(1, 194) = 4.24$; $p = .01$). Those in the cultural-confirmation condition reported less individual self-identity ($M = 4.87$) than those in the self-confirmation ($M = 5.54$; $p = .02$) or control condition ($M = 5.47$; $p = .04$). Those in the control condition and self-confirmation condition did not differ on self-focus ($p > .9$). Thus, the manipulation was deemed successful.

Next, we run PROCESS Model 1, using distance in miles as a continuous independent variable. We had created three levels of self-prime, using two dummy variables: cultural self-confirm (1 = cultural-confirmation, 0 = all other conditions) and self-confirmation (1 = self-confirmation, 0 = all other conditions). Therefore, to examine the three levels of the

moderating variable, we ran two models with one dummy variable as the moderator and the other as a covariate, and vice versa, as suggested by Hayes (2012). To further explore the significant interactions using spotlight analysis, we examined the dependent variables within self-confirmation conditions at both levels of geographic distance (± 1 SD from the mean).

A regression analysis with self-confirmation, geographic distance, and their interaction term as the independent variables, cultural-confirmation as a covariate, and visiting intentions as the dependent variable, yielded a significant 2-way interaction ($\beta = -.0014$; $t = -2.68$; $p < .01$), with a main effect of distance ($\beta = -.0005$; $t = -1.68$; $p = .09$). We report these results in Table 2. Specifically, the spotlight analysis revealed that within the self-confirmation condition, distance has a negative effect on visit intentions ($M_{\text{proximal}} = 4.93$ vs. $M_{\text{distant}} = 2.33$). However, in the other conditions, distance does not affect visit intentions ($M_{\text{proximal}} = 3.74$ vs. $M_{\text{distant}} = 3.64$). The second regression, with the cultural-confirmation prime as the independent variable and self-confirmation as a covariate, resulted in a non-significant interaction with visit intentions, suggesting that cultural-confirmation enables people to overcome distance when evaluating an offer, supporting H2.

A regression analysis, with self-confirmation, geographic distance, and their interaction term as the independent variables, cultural-confirmation as a covariate, and willingness to pay as the dependent variable, yielded a significant 2-way interaction ($\beta = -.0652$; $t = -2.40$; $p = .01$). As shown in Table 2, the spotlight analysis demonstrates that within the self-confirmation condition, distance has a negative effect on estimated daily budget ($M_{\text{proximal}} = \$178.60$ vs. $M_{\text{distant}} = \$78.09$). However, in the other conditions, mileage does not affect daily budget ($M_{\text{proximal}} = \$140.04$ vs. $M_{\text{distant}} = \$155.57$). The regression with cultural-confirmation prime as the independent variable and self-confirmation as a covariate yielded a non-significant interaction. These results support H2, providing support for the fact that

greater geographic distance can reduce tourism ad evaluations, but only for individuals engaged in self-confirmation.

Insert Table 2 About Here

3.2.3. Discussion

These results extend our understanding of how self-confirmation thoughts can cause those with greater brand proximity to respond favorably to offerings representing their cultural identities. Specifically, the results support hypothesis 2, and show that self-confirming thoughts moderate the main effect of distance from the cultural brand advertised on intentions and WTP, such that consumers who are located closer to a cultural offering are more likely to self-confirm, which positively influences their behavioral intentions. On the other hand, distance can diminish behavioral intentions when individuals engage in self-confirmation thoughts; the self-confirmation literature suggests that identity-contrary offerings threaten self-confirmation thoughts, and so affect intentions and behaviors negatively (Swann, 1983). In other words, culturally relevant but physically distant choices lead individuals who self-verify to experience psychological distancing, making them less willing to spend, and express lower behavioral intentions. However, when cultural identity is primed, consumers think more about their social identity and no longer consider distance as a threat that negatively influences their decision-making. However, we further propose that this effect will also exist under varying conditions of psychological distance. This is the focus of our next experiment.

3.3 Study 3 - Is Cultural Proximity Enough to Self-Confirm?

The goal of Study 3 is to disentangle Study 1 further by controlling for physical distance while varying cultural distance. While brands and products can be culturally

ambiguous (e.g. Swiss Alps versus the French Alps), little is known about consumer interpretations of these overlapping cultural references, or whether these cross-cultural products are amenable to self-confirmation motives. Study 3 extends study 2 by examining psychological distance, and whether differences in self-confirmation types (cultural or self-identity-related) can lead to positive evaluations and less perceived identity threat when cultural distance is greater. Specifically, we predict that, in addition to physical distance, psychological distance can impede identity confirmation, unless people are primed with cultural-confirmation. When primed with cultural-confirmation, psychological distance should not impact how individuals evaluate tourism ads. However, greater psychological distance should worsen evaluations of a tourism ad when the subject is primed with self-confirmation. As a secondary objective of the study, we will also examine how psychological distance impacts perceived threats to identity (beyond physical distance). In hypothesis 3_b, we propose that when psychological distance is greater, individuals will experience a threat to their cultural identity. Formally:

H3_a: Greater psychological distance will worsen brand evaluations in a tourism ad when individuals are primed with self-confirmation.

H3_b: Greater psychological distance will increase individuals' perceptions of threat to their cultural identity.

3.3.1 Procedure and sample

This study follows a 2 (confirmation: cultural vs. self) x 2 (cultural distance: proximal vs. distal) between-subjects design. The self-confirmation manipulations were similar to Study 2. We manipulated cultural distance via an online ad for visits to the Niagara Falls, sponsored by either the USA or the Canadian Niagara Falls tourism board. The same aerial view of Niagara Falls was used for both ads, but with different tourism board logos and visitor

center addresses (see Appendix for visuals). After randomly assigning participants to a priming task and an advertisement, we asked them to respond to items covering the dependent variables: attitudes (as in Study 1: $\alpha = .97$), daily willingness to spend, and identity threat (measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Items included: “When I see an ad like this, it makes me feel like Canada is not well represented,” “This ad makes me feel like Canada is not well respected,” “I think that ads like this put Canada into danger,” and “An ad like this makes me question the strength of the Canadian identity” ($\alpha = .90$). Lastly, they responded to items covering the same covariates, including distance from Niagara Falls, according to Google Maps. Participants also provided demographic information.

We used a Qualtrics Panel to collect responses, from Canadian nationals who did not live in Niagara Falls at the time of the study ($n = 127$ responses). All participants were adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 46$, 25.4% male). We made the same manipulation check for destination as in Study 1 (100% correct identification of the advertised destination). To check the self-confirmation priming task, participants indicated whether the writing task involved writing about their Canadian identity. Again, all participants correctly remembered the task instructions.

3.3.2 Results

As shown in Table 3, an ANOVA provided a significant interaction on attitudes toward the advertisement ($F(1, 125) = 5.80; p < .01$), driven by a main effect of cultural distance ($M_{\text{Canada}} = 6.10$ vs. $M_{\text{U.S.}} = 5.55$). Planned contrasts revealed that when we primed cultural confirmation, cultural distance did not impact attitudes toward the destination ($M_{\text{Canada}} = 5.92$ vs. $M_{\text{U.S.}} = 5.82$). However, when we primed self-confirmation, participants reported better attitudes toward the culturally proximal (Canadian) destination ($M = 6.29$) than the culturally distant (U.S.) city ($M = 5.23$). Another ANOVA with daily willingness to

pay for expenses in Niagara Falls as the dependent variable only provided a significant main effect for the self-confirmation prime (see Table 3), such that the daily budget was higher when we primed participants with cultural-confirmation ($M = \$199.65$) than self-confirmation ($M = \$167.07$). Broadly, these results confirm H3_a, and indicate that cultural-confirmation priming can attenuate the impact of psychological distance on ad evaluations.

Next, we ran a 2-way ANOVA with identity threat as the dependent variable, to assess the perceived threat to cultural identity cause by the ad. Despite a non-significant 2-way interaction (reported in Table 3), we observed main effects for both independent variables. As predicted, the cultural-confirmation prime resulted in less perceived threat ($M = 2.63$) than the self-confirmation prime ($M = 3.13$). Additionally, greater cultural distance (U.S. ad) resulted in more perceived threat ($M = 3.27$) than cultural proximity (Canadian ad; $M = 2.47$). The results support H3_b, in that advertisements for offerings presenting greater psychological distance result in greater perceived threat to cultural identity.

Insert Table 3 About Here

3.3.3 Discussion

These results extend the generalizability of study 1 and complement study 2. Specifically, self-confirmation favors proximity: cultural proximity when we control for physical proximity and physical proximity when we control for cultural proximity. Our results suggest that cultural confirmation influences attitudes and intentions to pay. Additionally, cultural-confirmation buffers against greater cultural and spatial distance, consistent with hypothesis 3_a. This is partially due to the perceptions of threats; study 3 demonstrates that people perceive a threat when identity-confirmation is primed or because of greater cultural distance (supporting hypothesis 3_b). Thus, cultural-confirmation can reduce perceptions of identity threat. Though our priming instructions replicated the effects of cultural confirmation

consistently across studies 2 and 3, a more natural priming effect is needed to add robustness, thus motivating study 4. This final study also seeks to examine a boundary condition (i.e., cultural congruence) to the hypothesized relationships in hypothesis 2 and 3_a.

3.4 Study 4: Cultural Congruence as Overcoming Physical and Cultural Distance

Given the way culture is constructed and identity threats are experienced (Oyserman, 2009), cultural similarities can reduce experienced threats (Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2012). Aside from priming cultural identity through a writing task, we argue that it can be primed by iconic national events that exhibit elements of strong cultural identity (e.g. Bastille Day in France, Oktoberfest in Germany) or by advertising features alluding to cultural similarity (e.g. Absolute Vodka's use of local architecture in its advertisements). To overcome the threat perceived in greater distance (c.f. Fujita et al., 2006; Liberman et al., 2012; Trope & Liberman, 2010), we propose that individuals should evaluate identity-relevant offerings in advertisements more positively. When tourism ads display more culturally relevant features, consumers should evaluate the brand more positively. Without these ad features, a physically and/or culturally distant brand should become more desirable when individuals experience a natural cultural-confirmation prime, such as a national event linked to cultural identity. Thus:

H4: Without specific cultural-confirmation, culturally distant offerings with more (vs. less) culturally relevant features will improve evaluations of the offering.

3.4.1 Procedure and sample

The goals of Study 4 are to provide greater practical implications and to examine how an advertisement can enhance cultural congruity via cultural relevance. In this study, we simultaneously control for geographical and cultural distance using a tourist advertisement for a foreign culture. The study had a 2 (Cultural-Confirmation: Present vs. Absent) x 2 (Cultural

Relevancy: High vs. Low) between-subjects design. We primed cultural confirmation by timing data collection with regard to a national event consistent with U.S. culture, the Super Bowl. We organized the study on Mturk in two waves, with half the data collection occurring the week of Super Bowl 2017 ($n = 75$, $M_{\text{age}} = 39$, 46.7% male) and the other half a month later ($n = 76$, $M_{\text{age}} = 38$, 50% male). Of those who completed the questionnaire during the second wave, 65% reported watching Super Bowl 2017 (78% attended a watch party while five reported attending a Super Bowl event). To confirm that the Super Bowl is representative of American culture, two 7-point Likert scale items measured how much participants perceived the Super Bowl to be American and patriotic, analyzed as a single t-test (test value = 4). Our results confirmed that participants believed that the Super Bowl is American ($M = 6.45$, $t = 19.38$, $p < .01$) and patriotic ($M = 5.18$, $t = 5.65$, $p < .01$), and thus can be considered as priming cultural-confirmation

We showed participants a map of France (a culturally distant destination), showing the location of Reims (with a red balloon) with regard to Paris, and explaining its distance from Paris as a 45-minute train journey, costing approximately \$25. Next, participants viewed one of two versions of an online advertisement to visit the Reims local library. In the high cultural relevancy condition, the advertisement tagline said, “Discover the Carnegie Library” tour, and offered a description of the library, an iconic American effort to rebuild Reims, paid for by American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. In the low cultural relevancy condition, the advertisement read, “Discover the Historical Library.” The tour included the information that the library was part of the city’s rebuilding following WWII, and that the money was donated by a philanthropist, without any indication of the United States (see Appendix for visuals).

Next, participants had to imagine searching for flights to Paris: finding a flight from their closest airport for only \$650 per person in economy class, at a time compatible with their vacation period. To measure intent to visit, participants reported how likely they would be to

take advantage of the deal using the same bi-polar 7-point scales as attitudes ($\alpha = .98$) and visiting intentions ($\alpha = .98$) in the prior studies, as well as their willingness to pay for a tour of the library. Lastly, participants responded to covariate items, controlling for mood between data collection times (1 = very bad; 7 = very good), passport ownership, prior visits to France (15% indicated yes), attitude toward France (1= hate France; 7= love France), and number of vacation days per year. Participants then completed demographic information.

To check the manipulation of the cultural-relevancy prime, participants indicated the extent to which the library featured in the advertisement was connected to the United States. The 7-point bipolar items consisted of “No/ Many Connections to the United States” and “Very Un-/Very American.” Those who viewed the ad for the Carnegie (vs. Historical) library felt it had more connections to the United States ($M_{\text{carnegie}} = 5.49$ vs. $M_{\text{historical}} = 2.80$; $F(1, 149) = 128.05$; $p < .01$) and was more American ($M_{\text{carnegie}} = 5.45$ vs. $M_{\text{historical}} = 3.38$; $F(1, 149) = 97.53$; $p < .01$). Thus the manipulation was successful.

3.4.2. Results

An ANOVA, with mood as a covariate ($p < .01$), revealed a 2-way interaction on attitudes toward the city advertised ($F(1, 149) = 3.38$; $p = .07$), driven by a main effect of cultural-confirmation ($M_{\text{present}} = 5.73$ vs. $M_{\text{absent}} = 5.25$), as depicted in Table 4. Planned contrasts showed that for the high culturally relevant ad, attitudes did not differ whether or not the confirmation prime was present (5.67 vs. 5.44, respectively). However, those who viewed the low culturally relevant ad reported higher attitudes toward the city when cultural-confirmation was present versus absent (5.79 vs. 5.06, respectively).

An ANOVA with visit intentions as the dependent variable revealed a significant 2-way interaction ($F(1, 149) = 7.76$; $p < .01$). For the high culturally relevant ad, visit intentions were not significantly different without (vs. with) the cultural-confirmation prime (4.56 vs.

4.18, respectively). However, as indicated in Table 4, for the low cultural relevance ad, the cultural-confirmation prime presence (vs. absence) led to higher visit intentions ($M_{\text{present}} = 4.77$ vs. $M_{\text{absent}} = 3.77$).

Lastly, a 2-way interaction emerged for willingness to pay for a tour of the monument as the dependent variable ($F(1, 149) = 4.14$; $p = .04$), with prior visit of France ($p = .04$) and mood ($p < .01$) as significant covariates. Only a main effect of cultural-confirmation influenced tour price, so that the presence (vs. absence) of cultural-confirmation increased willingness to pay for a tour ($M = \$16.28$ vs. $\$12.59$). Planned contrasts did not indicate any difference in willingness to pay within the cultural prime conditions for participants who viewed the high culturally relevant ad ($M_{\text{present}} = \$15.21$ vs. $M_{\text{absent}} = \$13.79$). Yet, as illustrated in Table 4, for the low cultural relevancy ad, cultural-confirmation prime presence (vs. absence) had a positive influence on tour price ($\$17.38$ vs. $\$11.32$, respectively). Thus, H4 was accepted.

Insert Table 4 About Here

3.4.3. Discussion

These results indicate that when cultural self-confirmation is primed naturally, during events such as the Super Bowl, culturally irrelevant offerings advertised can connect more with consumers, and be more persuasive. These results should also apply to other days important to cultural and national identity, such as Bastille Day, Memorial Day, and Canada Day. Specifically, our results indicate that consumers are willing to pay more for an offering during occurrences that naturally prime cultural identity. At other times (without natural priming), an advertisement can appear more culturally relevant by highlighting culturally similar elements; thus, advertisements that use culturally relevant cues or appear at times that

naturally prime cultural-confirmation are equally successful in increasing evaluations of a foreign destination, planned visits of that city, and financial budgeting.

4. General Discussion

Through four experiments, this research addresses how people's tendency to self-confirm their cultural identity influences tourism decisions. We summarize our results in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 About Here

Study 1 shows that consumers prefer tourism choices consistent with and confirming their self-identity. Further, study 2 demonstrates that, even within a culture, when individual self-identities are primed, geographic distance can influence tourism decisions negatively. Specifically, those who live further from a destination reported lower intentions to visit the destination and were willing to spend less; however, cultural-confirmation priming attenuated these effects. Study 3 replicates these findings for cultural distance, while controlling for physical distance, illustrating that cultural-confirmation priming also reduces the threat experienced when an offer is more culturally distant, and thus increases evaluations of a such destinations. Finally, study 4 used a national event in the U.S. to naturally prime cultural-confirmation, adding robustness to the previous studies by replicating the results for the cultural-confirmation prime and providing evidence of a boundary condition, namely that enhancing the ad's cultural relevancy can alleviate the negative effect of geographic and physical distance on tourism considerations.

This research makes several contributions to the literature. First, we examine cultural identity (versus self-identity) as a buffer against psychological and spatial distance. While prior work has examined other aspects of proximity and identity, it has not differentiated

between cultural-confirmation (a type of social identity) and self-confirmation, or investigated how identity-confirmation can moderate the effect of proximity on consumer decisions. Via the examination of tourism offers, this research distinguishes between cultural identity and individual identity, and their impact on consumer decisions. Our results indicate that consumers may perceive market spatially or psychologically distant offers more negatively. However, dissimilar (non-self-confirming) offerings can be made more appealing by priming cultural identity or by making the offering appear more culturally relevant. Essentially, priming a consumer's social identity via their cultural identity renders dissimilar offerings more unique, lowering identity threat and subsequently augmenting evaluations and behaviors.

Second, the research considers three separate highly independent cultures. Specifically, using a variety of samples (Canadian, U.S. American, and French) to support the hypotheses provides a strong basis for cross-cultural generalization, given their differences in language and cultural values. The advertisements developed for these studies focused on both international and national tourism. All three countries sampled are among the top ten for international tourism spending, providing several implications for tourist destinations targeting these populations, as well as those in other highly independent cultures. For instance, the U.S. (#2) spends 9% of total global spending on international tourism, followed closely by France (#6, 4% share) and Canada (#7, 3% share; Sawe, 2017). Concerning domestic tourism, while Canadians spend more heavily than European countries, the French spend the highest per capita amount per year in Europe (Eurostat, 2016) and Americans spend more overall than any other country (Knoema). Thus, the studies are based on countries with important tourist groups, which are representative for generalization to other independently oriented cultures.

Third, this research builds upon the work of White et al. (2012) and contributes to the ongoing discussion of identity and brand evaluations, adding generalizability through the samples and including more involving decisions. Further, the results show that individuals may respond differently than previously expected, as identity-confirmation can change evaluations of identity contrary offerings, depending on the identity activated, either cultural or self. Moreover, this research suggests that the type of identity can be affected by priming identity or allowing environmental conditions (e.g. cultural event) to prime cultural identity naturally. When primed with cultural-confirmation, individuals feel less threatened by psychologically or spatially distal offerings. The multiple studies in this research show that cultural identity has important downstream effects on consumer behavior.

5.0 Conclusions

5.1 Managerial Implications

The research uses a real-life event to prime cultural-identity, providing practical implications that tourist boards, tourism actors and even foreign brands can use to encourage positive product evaluations. Marketers can make more psychologically or geographically distant offerings more proximal by encouraging consumers to think about their cultural identity. Additionally, we believe that the results are generalizable to other services and products. For example, a Swiss chocolatier could increase the attitude and desire for its chocolates in the U.S. market by advertising on President's day or by emphasizing culturally relevant cues, such as the use of Americans pecans. Likewise, a Korean spa in the Canadian market could flight its advertising campaign, focusing on Canadian cultural holidays, to reduce potential identity threats. On the other hand, making the product or service appear more relevant, by using Canadian natural ingredients at the Korean spa could make visiting the spa more amenable. The Peruvian tourist board has become more culturally relevant by

successfully using identity congruity in a campaign (see Leaps, 2012). National tourist boards could encourage consumers to be loyal and patriotic by priming their cultural-confirmation (i.e., reminding them of why it is important to travel locally or eat locally produced food). For more spatially distant domestic consumers, marketers could provide incentives to travel to lower perceived threats, such as offering discounted stays or dinners if tourists provide appropriate proof of residency.

As per Study 4, marketers should not hesitate to tailor their advertising using cultural facets that might appeal to their target markets. This research focused on U.S. historical involvement in Reims. Although the library featured is not promoted locally as having an American heritage, providing an American point of reference for American tourists significantly augmented interest in the library. This research therefore suggests that finding a point of similarity (not necessarily complete congruity) between a market offer and a consumer's cultural identity can have positive consequences for marketers. Similarly, if a wine store offers a tasting session comparing French and American wines, it would generate more interest from Americans by showcasing culturally relevant cues. Tourist boards should integrate several approaches to highlight congruencies, such as cobranding with other boards, emphasizing the role of other cultures in the destination, and encouraging tourists to share the congruencies via reviews.

5.2 Future research and limitations

The results of this series of studies have several limitations, such as the small sample size in Study 1, which future research could address. The intention of the research was to examine independent-leaning cultures; however, future research should study more collective, interdependent cultures. For instance, to what degree does self-identity (vs. cultural identity) influence consumers' need for psychological or spatial proximity? Although our studies cover

consumers in several countries, the samples only represent North America and Western Europe. Therefore, collecting data from other countries, especially developing nations where tourism is slowly becoming accessible rather than a luxury, such as China or India, would enhance the generalizability of our findings.

This research did not examine brand effects. Future research should focus on brands and brand equity as a moderator of the effects found here. As past research suggests that brand equity can trump cultural congruity on websites (Bartikowski & Singh, 2014) future research should contrast brands with high and low brand equity to examine the influence of cultural self-confirmation on desirable marketing outcomes. On another note, this research did not consider the influence of the macro environment, such as political climate or elections as potentially influencing consumer perceptions of foreign and even domestic tourism destinations (c.f. Zanona, 2017). This may be of interest for future researchers.

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Appendix 1: Study Visuals

Study 1 Stimuli



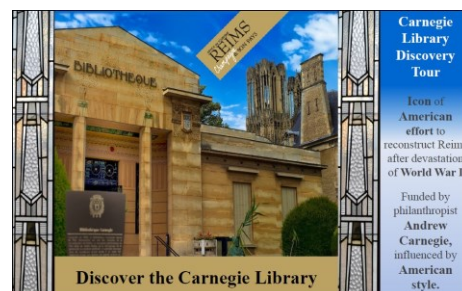
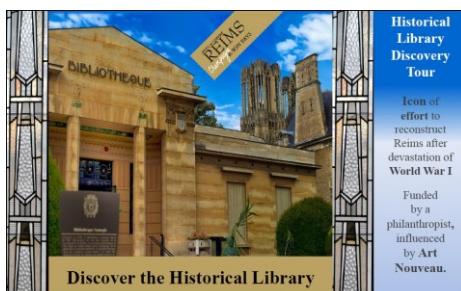
Study 2 Stimulus



Study 3 Stimuli



Study 4 Stimuli



Appendix 2: Prime instructions

Cultural Self-Confirmation Writing Task

Please think back to a prior experience, where people were focusing on something you were doing, and you felt like it was important to be true to yourself as a Canadian/American and your beliefs as a Canadian/American. In this situation, you wanted others to understand who you really are, that you are happy as you are, and that what you were doing was in perfect alignment with the person that you actually are every day, and that a big part of being this person you are has to do with being Canadian/American.

Recall all aspects of the situation, from what happened, to your reactions, and the reactions of others in the group.

Describe what happened, including your feelings and how you perceived others' judgments.

Individual Self-Confirmation Writing Task

Please think back to a prior experience, where people were focusing on something you were doing, and you felt like it was important to be true to yourself and your beliefs. In this situation, you wanted others to understand who you really are, that you are happy as you are, and that what you were doing was in perfect alignment with the person that you actually are every day.

Recall all aspects of the situation, from what happened, to your reactions, and the reactions of others in the group.

Describe what happened, including your feelings and how you perceived others' judgments.

Control Writing Task

Please think back to a prior experience, where people were focusing on something you were doing, and you felt like it was important to impress them. You wanted others to get the impression that by doing what you were doing, you were becoming an ideal and enhanced version of yourself.

Recall all aspects of the situation, from what happened, to your reactions, and the reactions of others in the group.

Describe what happened, including your feelings and how you perceived others' judgments.