

Blending Culture, Bending Time: How Culturally Mixed Brand Cues Shape Customer Engagement

Qianying Huang
Sun Yat-sen University

Cite as:

Huang Qianying (2026), Blending Culture, Bending Time: How Culturally Mixed Brand Cues Shape Customer Engagement. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (132436)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



Blending Culture, Bending Time:

How Culturally Mixed Brand Cues Shape Customer Engagement

Abstract

Brands increasingly embed diverse cultural elements into their products and communications, yet research has primarily explained consumer responses in spatial terms (local vs. global, home vs. foreign). This paper develops a temporal-symbolic account, proposing that such culturally mixed brand cues activate a cyclical time perspective, fostering self-expansion and customer engagement. Seven studies (two pilots and five main studies) test this framework. Study 1 shows that mixed brand cues enhance voluntary engagement through a cyclical time perspective. Study 2 validates the mediation pathway linking mixed cues, cyclical time, and self-expansion. Study 3 experimentally induces cyclical time perspective to verify its causal role. Study 4 identifies a cross-cultural boundary, with the effect stronger among Chinese consumers than Americans. Study 5 shows that cultural co-creation invitations restore the weakened effect in Western contexts. This research integrates temporal cognition into culture-mixing studies and offers guidance for global brand strategies.

Keywords: *culture mixing, cyclical time perspective, customer engagement*

Track: *Consumer Behavior*

1. Introduction

Brands are increasingly blending cultural symbols in their campaigns, such as Louis Vuitton × Yayoi Kusama’s fusion of French luxury and Japanese art, and McDonald’s McAloo Tikki, which adapts Western fast food with Indian flavors. These instances of culture mixing raise an important question: How do culturally mixed brand cues influence consumer thoughts, feelings, and behaviors? Existing research shows that culture mixing can empower consumers by fostering creativity and identity expansion (Cheon, 2019; Torelli & Stoner, 2019), but it can also alienate them, triggering identity threat or appropriation (Cheon & Hong, 2020; Lin et al., 2024). While these mixed responses have often been explained through spatial frameworks (e.g., local vs. global), the temporal dimension—how past and present elements are interwoven—has been largely overlooked. This paper proposes a new perspective: exposure to culturally mixed brand cues activates a cyclical time perspective, a view of time as recurring rather than linear (Burgess & Elias, 2016). This shift in temporal thinking facilitates self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1996), which in turn fosters customer engagement (Hollebeek, 2011), a non-transactional, voluntary brand participation beyond purchase. Against this backdrop, our research aims to address two questions: (1) Does exposure to culturally mixed brand cues activate a cyclical time perspective that, in turn, fosters self-expansion and customer engagement? (2) When and why is this temporal pathway muted, and how can marketers reactivate it? To answer these questions, we conducted five main studies supported by two pilot studies.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Culture mixing has become a growing topic in consumer research, examining how distinct cultural elements coexist within a single brand cue, such as a product or advertisement (Chiu & Cheng, 2007). Unlike macro-level processes like globalization or hybridization, mixed brand cues operate at the micro level, influencing consumers through visual, linguistic, or narrative cues. Culture mixing can have both empowering effects, including enhancing creativity, identity expansion, and cognitive flexibility (Peng & Xie, 2016; Cheon, 2019), and alienating effects, such as symbolic contamination and identity threat (Cheon & Hong, 2020; Lin et al., 2024). While much research has framed culture mixing spatially, as a negotiation between “local” and “global” or “home” and “foreign,” its

temporal dimension remains underexplored. We propose that culture mixing activates a cyclical time perspective, where time is perceived as recurrent rather than linear (Xu et al., 2023), reshaping how consumers integrate past and present cultural meanings. This shift in temporal perspective facilitates self-expansion, the process of broadening one's self-concept by incorporating new identities or experiences (Aron & Aron, 1996), and enhances customer engagement—the voluntary, non-transactional participation in brand-related activities (Hollebeek, 2011). Exposure to culturally mixed brand cues, through their activation of cyclical time, may therefore foster self-expansion and deepen engagement. Building on this, we propose **H1**: Culturally mixed (vs. non-mixed) brand cues will trigger stronger customer engagement; and **H2**: The positive effect of culturally mixed brand cues on customer engagement will be mediated by an enhanced cyclical time perspective and the subsequent increase in self-expansion intentions.

The impact of culture mixing on engagement may vary across cultures, as East Asians tend to adopt cyclical thinking, while Westerners are more likely to adopt linear perspectives (Ji et al., 2009). In this context, we expect that the effect of culturally mixed cues will be stronger among East Asian consumers, who interpret them through a cyclical time framework, and weaker among Western consumers, who may process them in a linear fashion. Therefore, we hypothesize **H3**: The indirect effect of culturally mixed brand cues on customer engagement through cyclical time perspective and self-expansion will be attenuated among Western consumers than among East Asian consumers. Finally, we propose that cultural co-creation invitations, which encourage consumers to contribute to the brand's cultural narrative, can reactivate the temporal pathway in Western contexts by fostering integrative processing and enhancing the brand-self link. These invitations promote a shift from viewing culture mixing as a novelty to interpreting it as a meaningful and cyclical process. Thus, we hypothesize **H4**: A cultural co-creation invitation will restore the positive indirect effect of culturally mixed brand cues on customer engagement in Western consumer contexts where the pathway would otherwise be attenuated.

3. Studies

Pilot A tested whether culturally mixed brand cues capture more visual attention than non-mixed cues. Eighty participants (46.3% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 29.58$, $SD = 8.06$) completed an

online eye-tracking task, randomly assigned to view either a culturally mixed or non-mixed mug design. The mixed version featured Chinese landscape motifs on a Western-style mug, while the non-mixed version displayed a neutral leaf pattern. Results showed that participants exposed to mixed cues had higher fixation counts ($M = 15.40$ vs. 12.00 ; $F(1,78) = 5.09$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2_p = .06$) and longer fixation durations ($M = 2702.58$ ms vs. 1783.80 ms; $F(1,78) = 8.91$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2_p = .10$), indicating that mixed cues are more attention-capturing.

Pilot B investigated whether culture-mixing experiences naturally evoke a cyclical time perspective. A total of 760 open-ended narratives were collected from Credamo participants (66.3% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 29.85$, $SD = 6.99$) who described one personal experience of purchasing a culturally mixed product. Using a hybrid human-AI text analysis approach, we identified whether each narrative contained cyclical temporal language (e.g., “revival,” “returning trend,” “dialogue between past and present”). Inter-rater reliability between human coders and the GPT-5 classifier was high (Cohen’s $\kappa = .82$). Results showed that 33.7% (256 of 750) of narratives explicitly contained cyclical time expressions, over twice the expected baseline frequency (15-20%; $ps < .001$; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

Study 1 aimed to test the main effect of culturally mixed brand cues on customer engagement and the mediating role of cyclical time perspective. A total of 191 participants (62.3% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 24.58$, $SD = 4.77$) were randomly assigned to view a promotional poster for a fictitious brand, *Aurevo*, with either a culturally mixed or non-mixed cue. In the mixed condition, the product combined “Italian craftsmanship $\times$ American classic design”; in the non-mixed condition, it read “High-quality craftsmanship $\times$ vintage design.” After viewing the stimulus, participants were presented with an incentive-compatible choice task: they could either skip a task and receive ¥5 or complete a short real-effort task for a chance to win a ¥20 bonus. The task involved writing suggestions for improving *Aurevo*’s upcoming product. Participants then completed a five-item measure of cyclical time perspective adapted from Xu et al. (2023) and Ji et al. (2009), such as “How do you perceive the flow of time” (1 = time keeps moving forward, 7 = time is repetitive and cyclical), $\alpha = 0.92$. Perceived novelty and product knowledge were measured as controls, since novelty perceptions are tied to culture mixing (Peng & Xie, 2016), and prior product knowledge may influence willingness to provide suggestions (Fuchs et al., 2010). Additionally, participants reported their cultural

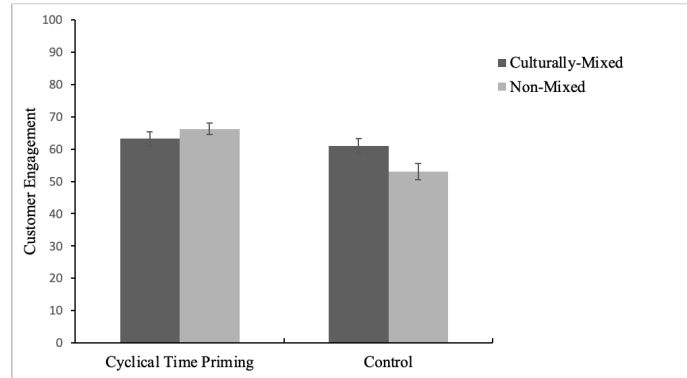
openness using two items (e.g., “I am willing to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds,” $r = 0.28, p < .001$), and completed a manipulation check for perceived cultural mixing (1 = not at all mixed, 7 = highly mixed). Results showed that 76.2% of participants in the mixed condition chose to complete the task, compared to 55.6% in the non-mixed condition ($\chi^2(1) = 9.14, p = .002$). A mediation analysis (Model 4 in Process) showed that the effect of brand cue on engagement was mediated by cyclical time perspective (index = 0.28, 95%CI = [0.005, 0.599]).

Study 2 extended Study 1 by testing a full psychological process model. A total of 201 participants (68.2% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.02, SD = 7.73$) were randomly assigned to view either a culturally mixed or non-mixed product. The stimuli were adapted from the pilot study 1, with brand information added (“岚明居,” translated as *Lanmingju*). Participants completed measures of customer engagement (6-item scale adapted from Hollebeek et al., 2014, capturing cognitive, affective, and activation dimensions, $\alpha = .73$), cyclical time perspective, and self-expansion (10-item scale adapted from Michel et al., 2022, e.g., “This product expands my vision of things”, $\alpha = .73$). Results showed that participants in the mixed condition reported higher engagement ($M = 5.76, SD = 0.55$) compared to the non-mixed condition ($M = 5.55, SD = 0.61; F(1,199) = 6.42, p = .012$). Mediation analysis (Model 6 in Process) showed a significant indirect effect through cyclical time perspective and self-expansion (index = 0.03, 95%CI = [0.004, 0.681]).

Study 3 aimed to provide causal evidence for the mediating role of cyclical time perspective. A 2 (brand cue: culturally mixed vs. non-mixed) $\times$ 2 (time perspective: cyclical priming vs. control) design was employed with 400 participants (65.0% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.49, SD = 7.60$). Participants viewed a simulated Xiaohongshu (RedNote) post for a fictitious coffee brand (*Blom Coffee*). In the mixed condition, the latte incorporated cross-cultural elements (e.g., Southeast Asian pandan flavor combined with Western coffee style); in the non-mixed condition, it featured standard flavors (e.g., vanilla). Time perspective was manipulated through the tagline: the cyclical priming condition used phrases like “A sip that connects memories and the future,” while the control condition used neutral slogans like “A sip is today’s happiness code.” After viewing the ad, participants completed three items assessing customer engagement, adapted from Eigenraam et al. (2021): (a) “How likely are

you to like this post?” (b) “How likely are you to visit *Blom Coffee*’s Xiaohongshu homepage?” and (c) “How likely are you to follow *Blom Coffee*’s Xiaohongshu account?”. Responses were measured on a slider scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 100 (very likely), $\alpha = 0.93$. Next, they rated their self-expansion tendencies ($\alpha = 0.96$). As in Study 1, participants then rated perceived novelty, aesthetic appeal, and cultural openness ($r = 0.41, p < 0.001$). Participants also reported their average weekly Xiaohongshu usage frequency and their coffee preference. A 2×2 ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect on customer engagement ($F(1,396) = 6.05, p = 0.014$). In the control condition, the mixed cue evoked stronger engagement ($M = 60.98$ vs. $M = 53.13; F(1,198) = 5.29, p = 0.022$). In the cyclical priming condition, engagement was similar across conditions ($M = 63.26$ vs. $M = 66.29; F(1,198) = 1.16, p = 0.283$), see Figure 1. The moderated mediation (Model 7 in Process) effect was significant (index = -7.92 , 95%CI = $[-14.651, -1.329]$). Specifically, the indirect effect for the control condition was significant (effect = 7.33 , 95%CI = $[1.991, 12.430]$), while the effect for cyclical priming was insignificant (effect = -0.59 , 95%CI = $[-4.622, 3.449]$).

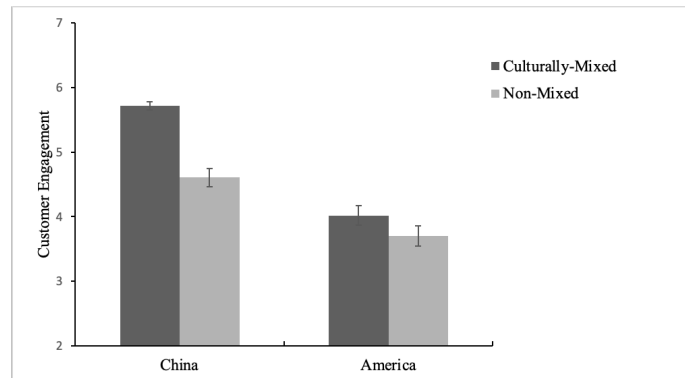
FIGURE 1 Interaction Effect of Brand Cue and Time Perspective on Customer Engagement



Study 4 tested the cultural boundary condition by comparing Chinese ($n = 210$ on Credamo; 67.6% female; $M_{age} = 30.55$, $SD = 6.47$) and American ($n = 206$ on Prolific; 53.4% female; $M_{age} = 43.53$, $SD = 13.08$) participants. In the mixed condition, participants viewed a denim jacket that combined Western denim with traditional Chinese elements. To capture potential cultural differences in baseline temporal orientation, participants first completed a pre-test measure of cyclical time perspective ($\alpha_{China} = 0.92$, $\alpha_{America} = 0.82$). After viewing the stimulus, they completed the customer engagement scale ($\alpha_{China} = 0.94$, $\alpha_{America} = 0.94$), followed by a post-test measure of cyclical time perspective. A difference score (post-test

minus pre-test) was calculated to represent changes in cyclical time perspective ($\alpha_{\text{China}} = 0.92$, $\alpha_{\text{America}} = 0.85$). Participants then completed the 10-item self-expansion scale ($\alpha_{\text{China}} = 0.97$, $\alpha_{\text{America}} = 0.98$), as well as measures of perceived novelty, aesthetic appeal, and cultural openness ($r_{\text{China}} = 0.40, p < .001$; $r_{\text{America}} = 0.85, p < .001$). Results showed that Chinese participants in the mixed condition reported higher engagement ($M = 5.72$) than those in the non-mixed condition ($M = 4.61$; $F(1,208) = 53.31, p < .001$). In contrast, American participants showed no significant difference in engagement between mixed ($M = 4.02$) and non-mixed cues ($M = 3.70$; $F(1,204) = 2.10, p = 0.149$, see Figure 2). We further tested moderated serial mediation (Model 8 in Process). As expected, the moderated mediation effect was significant (index = -0.07 , 95%CI = $[-0.147, -0.007]$). Specifically, the indirect effect for the Chinese participants was significantly positive: effect = 0.09 , 95%CI = $[0.022, 0.169]$; whereas the indirect effect for American participants was insignificant: effect = 0.02 , 95%CI = $[-0.005, 0.053]$, confirming H3.

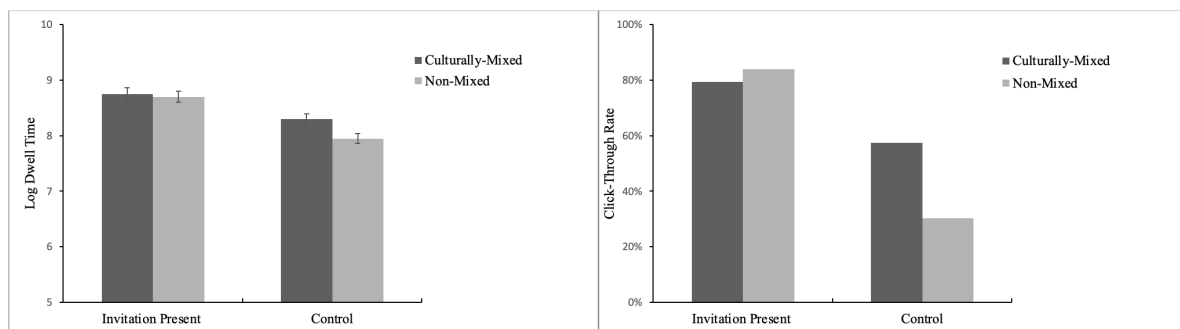
FIGURE 2 Interaction Effect of Brand Cue and Cultural Context on Customer Engagement



Study 5 tested whether cultural co-creation invitations could moderate the effects of culture mixing, particularly in Western contexts (H4). A total of 425 (63.9% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 42.36$, $SD = 12.08$) American participants were recruited via Prolific and randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (brand cue: culturally mixed vs. non-mixed) $\times$ 2 (cultural co-creation invitation: present vs. control) between-subjects design. Participants were directed to one of four brand pages created for a fictitious coffee brand, *Novura*. In the culturally mixed condition, the brand page described a roast blending Ethiopian beans, Italian roasting mastery, and Chinese jasmine tea; in the non-mixed condition, the roast was described as Ethiopian-only. The cultural co-creation invitation condition explicitly invited participants to

share their impressions for future blends, while the control condition presented a static description with no invitation. Engagement was measured by (1) page dwell time (milliseconds spent on the brand page before exit) and (2) click-through behavior (whether participants clicked the “Learn More” link; 0 = no, 1 = yes). After leaving the brand page, participants rated cyclical time perspective ($\alpha = 0.93$) and self-expansion ($\alpha = 0.86$). Control variables include perceived novelty, cultural openness ($r = 0.87, p < 0.001$), and perceived cultural respect (“I felt the brand treated the culture(s) involved with respect). For manipulation checks, participants indicated how culturally mixed the roast appeared and to what extent they felt invited to take part in the brand’s cultural story. Results showed a significant interaction between brand cue and co-creation invitation on both page dwell time ($F(1,421) = 4.17, p = .042$) and click-through behavior ($\chi^2(1) = 9.93, p = .002$). In the control condition, participants spent more time on the culturally mixed page ($M = 8.30$) than the non-mixed page ($M = 7.95$; $F(1,210) = 11.68, p = .001$). In the co-creation condition, there was no significant difference between mixed ($M = 8.75$) and non-mixed cues ($M = 8.70$; $F(1,211) = 0.10, p = .75$), see Figure 3. Moderated mediation (Model 83 in Process) analysis confirmed that cultural co-creation invitations restored the engagement effect of culture mixing in Western consumers ($\text{index}_{\log_dwell\ time} = -0.03, 95\%CI = [-0.068, -0.006]$; $\text{index}_{\text{click-through}} = 0.16, 95\%CI = [-0.326, -0.030]$).

FIGURE 3 Interaction Effect of Brand Cue and Cultural Co-Creation Invitation on Page Dwell Time (log-transformed) and Learn-More Click Rate



4. Discussion

Theoretically, this research shifts explanations of culture mixing from spatial fit to temporal processing by showing that culturally mixed brand cues can activate a cyclical view of time that organizes links between past, present, and future (Burges & Elias, 2016; Xu et

al., 2023). This mechanism extends self-expansion theory by identifying temporal scaffolds that make identity growth coherent and connects culture mixing to engagement rather than only to evaluations (Aron & Aron, 1996; Hollebeek, 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010). It also refines cross-cultural theory by explaining weaker effects under analytic defaults and by positioning co-creation invitations as tools that can recalibrate interpretation, not merely reflect fixed cultural traits (Ji et al., 2009). Practically, this work provides guidance for international marketing, responding to recent calls that identify culturally contingent drivers of engagement that are scalable across contexts (Steinhoff et al., 2023). Managers should design culturally mixed cues that signal continuity and return and embed co-creation invitations that position consumers as contributors to the brand's cultural story, strengthening brand-in-self links and sustaining participation.

5. References

- Aron, E. N., & Aron, A. (1996). Love and expansion of the self: The state of the model. *Personal relationships*, 3(1), 45–58.
- Burges, J., & Elias, A. (Eds.). (2016). *Time: a vocabulary of the present*. NYU Press.
- Cheon, B. K. (2019). The diversity of cultural diversity: Psychological consequences of different patterns of intercultural contact and mixing. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 22(1), 93–105.
- Cheon, B. K., & Hong, Y. Y. (2020). Aversive response towards culture fusion is moderated by the source of foreign cultural inflow. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 51(5), 370–386.
- Chiu, C. Y., & Cheng, S. Y. (2007). Toward a social psychology of culture and globalization: Some social cognitive consequences of activating two cultures simultaneously. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 84–100.
- Eigenraam, A. W., Eelen, J., & Verlegh, P. W. (2021). Let me entertain you? The importance of authenticity in online customer engagement. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 54(1), 53–68.
- Fuchs, C., Prandelli, E., & Schreier, M. (2010). The psychological effects of empowerment strategies on consumers' product demand. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(1), 65–79.
- Hollebeek, L. (2011). Exploring customer brand engagement: definition and themes. *Journal*

of Strategic Marketing, 19(7), 555–573.

- Ji, L. J., Guo, T., Zhang, Z., & Messervey, D. (2009). Looking into the past: cultural differences in perception and representation of past information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(4), 761–769.
- Lin, J. D., Kim, N. Y. J., Uduehi, E., & Keinan, A. (2024). Culture for sale: Unpacking consumer perceptions of cultural appropriation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 51(3), 571–594.
- Michel, G., Torelli, C. J., Fleck, N., & Hubert, B. (2022). Self-brand values congruity and incongruity: Their impacts on self-expansion and consumers' responses to brands. *Journal of Business Research*, 142, 301–316.
- Peng, L., & Xie, T. (2016). Making similarity versus difference comparison affects perceptions after bicultural exposure and consumer reactions to culturally mixed products. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 47(10), 1380–1394.
- Steinhoff, L., Liu, J., Li, X., & Palmatier, R. W. (2023). Customer engagement in international markets. *Journal of International Marketing*, 31(1), 1–31.
- Tausczik, Y. R., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2010). The psychological meaning of words: LIWC and computerized text analysis methods. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 29(1), 24–54.
- Torelli, C. J., & Stoner, J. L. (2019). Global consumer culture: consequences for consumer research. *International Marketing Review*, 36(4), 587–592.
- Van Doorn, J., Lemon, K. N., Mittal, V., Nass, S., Pick, D., Pirner, P., & Verhoef, P. C. (2010). Customer engagement behavior: Theoretical foundations and research directions. *Journal of Service Research*, 13(3), 253–266.
- Xu, L., Zhao, S., Cotte, J., & Cui, N. (2023). Cyclical time is greener: The impact of temporal perspective on pro-environmental behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 50(4), 722–741.