

Dissociative Fashion Practices and Identity Conflicts: Local Resistance as a Response to Clothing Acculturation in the Context of Rural-urban Migration

Introduction

Urbanization has been a prominent global phenomenon for many decades, with half of the world's population (4.2 billion inhabitants) now living in urban cities and this figure projected to increase to about 7 billion by 2050 (World Bank, 2020). The speed and scale of urbanization in East Asian countries is particularly significant, as hundreds of millions of people are moving from rural areas to urban centers in search of economic and social opportunities (International Organization for Migration, 2019). As one of the world's most populous countries, China is at the epicenter of this trend, with its urban population estimated to exceed 1 billion people by 2030 (China Daily, 2019). As a result of rapid urbanization and the ongoing rural-to-urban migration, the Chinese market has become increasingly diverse and complex in terms of changing consumer demographic profiles and their associated consumption preferences and practices (Wang and Tian, 2014). While urban expansion spurs regional economic growth and improves the living standard and income of urban residents (Morgan Stanley, 2019), the resulting rural–urban encounters also create social tensions and identity conflicts due to cultural differences in habits, norms, and practices (Göregenli *et al.*, 2016; Tang *et al.*, 2020) and other institutional factors such as unequal access to political and economic resources (Ho and Lu, 2018). Thus, direct exposure to these differences (Levy and Zaltman, 1975) may engender consumer agency, which pressures both migrant and local consumers to adapt to each other and negotiate their territorial claims, status hierarchy, and (collective) identities through consumption choices (Lam *et al.*, 2020; Veresiu and Giesler, 2018).

Prior consumer acculturation literature has shed light on immigrants' international border-crossing experiences in negotiating their ethnic affiliations through consumption choices, practices, and identity projects in a new cultural environment (Gbadamosi, 2012; Jo and Ha, 2018; Lam *et al.*, 2020). Consumer researchers have recently shifted their attention to the acculturation experiences prompted by internal movement within a country (Veresiu and Geisler, 2018), such as those related to differences in regional affiliation (Dion *et al.*, 2011), domestic tourism (Wang *et al.*, 2019), and rural-to-urban migration (Chu, 2015a). When rural migrants attempt to assimilate into the urban cosmopolitan lifestyle by learning and adopting consumption-related values, behaviors, and customs (Khare, 2014), they are often restricted by institutional barriers (e.g., household registration system) and are excluded from the urban consumptionscapes due to limited access to financial and medical services, housing, and education (Göregenli *et al.*, 2016, Wang and Tian, 2014). Many also face discrimination by urban residents who treat them as outsiders (Du *et al.*, 2018). As extant consumer acculturation research has mostly focused on understanding the struggles and challenges faced by the newcomers in adapting to an unfamiliar economic and sociocultural environment, little is known about the experiences of local urbanites who are required to constantly respond to the variety of changes brought by the encounters with immigrant consumers (Luedicke, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2018). To address this research gap, we aimed to contextualize the rural–urban identity projects among both locals and migrants that share the same symbolic market resources. We argue that the adaptation between rural and urban consumers is constantly reshaping their respective consumption behaviors and the socioeconomic characteristics of the marketplace they co-occupy (Pham *et al.*, 2017).

The present study was conducted in Guangzhou, as it is the largest city in Southern China, and is thus appropriate context for investigating how local urbanites perceive the evolving

rural–urban dynamics, and how it affects their fashion choices, brand relationships, and identity projects. We focused on the fashion narratives since clothing style not only reflects one’s identity and values, but it also signifies the subtle differences in visual norms and cultural customs between rural and urban settings (Khare, 2014; Yen and Hsu, 2017). The goal of this research was to examine the attitudinal and behavioral responses of local urban residents towards the acculturation of rural migrants as revealed in their fashion choices, consumption practices, and aesthetic taste. Extant research in this field offers a cross-national/cultural perspective on how immigrants maintain their ethnic identity and adapt to an unfamiliar new environment through fashion consumption (Chattaraman and Lennon, 2008; Gbadamosi, 2012; Jin *et al.*, 2010; Jung and Sung, 2008). In contrast, this study focuses on the fashion distinction between new rural settlers and the local residents in an intercultural context. We also aimed to establish how local urban consumers cope with urban-related identity politics and social tensions brought upon by the “unwanted” migrant acculturative forces (Askegaard *et al.*, 2005).

This paper commences with a brief review of the research context and the consumer acculturation literature, with a particular focus on identity construction as well as locals’ adaptation to the migrants’ acculturation attempts. Next, the qualitative method adopted in this study is described before presenting the study findings. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of the findings from an intercultural perspective, aiming to augment the understanding of local consumers’ role in and responses to migrants’ acculturation. The paper concludes with the key managerial insights for the market segmentation strategies employed by the fashion retailers, along with some suggestions for future research in this field. Our research contributes to both consumer acculturation and market segmentation literature. First, the findings presented here offer an intercultural perspective to the understanding of the local consumers’ practices in search for their

dominant position of cultural prestige in order to maintain their “regional uniqueness” (Sobh *et al.*, 2013, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2019).

Second, the present study sheds light on the effects of newcomers’ acculturation practices on the awakening of local identities. In the face of migrants’ intrusion, urban residents reveal a variety of new fashion narratives and consumption practices as a means to differentiate themselves from the new arrivals. Our study also contributes to the growing body of market segmentation literature by highlighting the impact of mutual adaptation between rural migrants and urban locals. Finally, our findings indicate that the dynamics of social distinction between the two groups, led by rapid urbanization, continue to reshape consumers’ choices and practices in Chinese regional markets. Thus, it can be argued that intercultural relationships should be considered as a key dimension in market segmentation, which has traditionally primarily focused on the level of acculturation (Palumbo and Teich, 2004; Shoham *et al.*, 2017).

Context and Setting

As one of the world’s most populous countries, China is experiencing a rapid pace and ever-growing scale of urbanization which is unprecedented in the history of mankind (Miller, 2012; Yu *et al.*, 2019). Urbanization in China is inextricably linked to the “reforms and opening-up” policy (*gaige kaifang*) that was instated in 1978 as a key national initiative aimed at socioeconomic transformation and modernization (Shih, 2019). Since then, the country has recorded a drastic increase of urban population, from 172.16 million (17.92%) in 1978 to 848.43 million (60.6%) in 2019 (Guan *et al.*, 2018; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020). This state-led urban expansion was successful in promoting economic growth and improving the urban residents’ living standards (Lagakos, 2020). However, the restructuring of urban space and the shifting demography of Chinese cities has severely disrupted the everyday lives of local urban

residents, who are increasingly discontented with the migrants' encroachment on social and economic resources as well as their uncivilized public behavior (Gransow, 2014). Such antagonism and hostility toward migrant population is not uncommon in China, especially in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chongqing as the primary targets of rural-to-urban migration (Whyte, 2012).

Guangzhou is chosen as the context for this study for two reasons. First, Guangzhou is a provincial capital of the densely populated Guangdong Province and is expanding rapidly due to urbanization, as it is a key destination in Southern China for migrants from nearby regions who seek better living standards and greater employment opportunities (Yu *et al.*, 2019). To date, Guangzhou is the home of 10.33 million registered residents and is the third largest city in China. Almost half of the population (nearly 5 million) is considered "migrants". It is estimated that around 300,000 migrants move from rural areas into Guangzhou for work or study annually. This continued influx has caused severe population problems such as social inequality, social separation, and excessive strain on public services (World Population Review, 2019). Thus, in 2010, the local government commenced extensive urban renewal projects aimed at restructuring the urban space to accommodate the increasing needs of migrant population. This initiative has, however, fueled discontent and conflicts between local residents and the government (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Gransow, 2014).

Second, urbanization in Guangzhou has diminished the geopolitical significance and dominant position of the local Canton culture and traditions, prompting the local urbanites to develop antagonistic tendencies against migrants (Ho and Lu, 2018). Guangzhou has been the cultural hub for Canton culture and the ancestral home of the Cantonese people (or *Yue* culture) for over 2200 years. Historically, the Canton culture, in particular the Cantonese dialect, has

represented a sign of “regional uniqueness” and cultural prestige in Southern China (Liu and Faure, 1996). Thus, urbanite identity in Guangzhou is inseparable from the Canton culture. However, massive rural-to-urban migration as a result of state-led urbanization has not only reshaped the demographic composition of the city but has also changed its language and sociocultural environment as well as its socio-spatial environment as many historical buildings and old neighborhoods were demolished to provide space for new infrastructure developments (Gransow, 2014; Ho and Lu, 2018). Such dramatic spatial reconfiguration and the dislocation experience has made many local Guangzhou residents powerless and angry due the loss of sense of belonging in their home city. For many locals, culturally significant architecture is not only closely interwoven with their collective memories, but also signifies their deep historical roots. They thus condemn the Government’s policy on enforcing Mandarin (*putonghua*) as an official language in broadcasting media and educational institutions across major cities in China. In response to such practices, the local residents initiated the “Shore Up Cantonese” movement to confront the local authorities and rural migrants and protect their language as a means of reasserting its locality and individuality (Wang, 2020). Owing to all these phenomena, Guangzhou city is a highly-contested cultural space well suited for studying the ways in which local consumers negotiate their urban identity through a cosmopolitan lifestyle and urbanite outlook in the face of unwanted otherness.

Literature Review

Consumer Acculturation and Identity Conflicts

Consumer acculturation commonly refers to the adaptation process through which immigrant and indigenous consumers constantly negotiate and compete for resources to (re)construct their ethnic or multicultural identities (Luedicke, 2015; Veresiu, 2020). It is often conceived as a temporally and spatially bounded relational configuration process rather than a

result of cultural interaction among distinct groups (Lam *et al.*, 2020). The goal of consumer acculturation research is to understand how individual consumers experience and resolve identity conflicts through different acculturative consumption strategies (choices and practices) when confronted with people from unfamiliar national, social, and cultural backgrounds (Bardhi *et al.*, 2010).

Extant scholarship on the relationship between acculturative forces and consumer identity projects can be largely divided into two main streams, known as the assimilationist and post-assimilationist, which differ in their paradigmatic assumptions and methods (Askegaard *et al.*, 2005; Chytкова, 2011; Peñaloza, 1994). The assimilationist conceives acculturation as a continuum, indicating that consumers tend to draw cultural meanings from consumption objects which are determined by the strength of ethnic identification towards both their host and their home culture (Rajagopalan and Heitmeyer, 2005; Shoham *et al.*, 2017). Chattaraman and Lennon (2008) found that consumers with stronger ethnic identification to home culture were more likely to consume ethnic clothing since they were emotionally attached to the culturally-related consumption. Conversely, consumers with weak ethnic identification to home culture will fully assimilate into the host culture by adopting prevailing consumer attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of the host population.

However, post-assimilationists moved beyond this dichotomy of home/host cultural references or any fixation on identity formation drawing from these two frames of cultural reference (Oswald, 1999). Instead, this stream of research is guided by the premise that consumer identity is only partly shaped by sociocultural context, as it is also affected by local, global, or even multicultural ideological discourses (Veresiu and Geisler, 2018; Üstüner and Holt, 2007). For example, consumers may (re)interpret and innovate new consumption practices to resist

immigration myths (Hu *et al.*, 2013), to enact a double resistance to their home culture and Western ideologies through a layered fashion style (Sobh *et al.*, 2012), to reconcile the opposing fashion discourses of conservatism in home culture with the Western myth of modernity (Chytko, 2011; Jafari and Goulding, 2008; Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Sobh *et al.*, 2014), to rework a localized Western lifestyle with limited socioeconomic and cultural capital (Üstüner and Holt, 2007), or to appropriate global cultural rituals in a local context (Tinson and Nuttall, 2010). These findings suggest that consumers' identity negotiation and the associated acculturative symbolic consumption practices are inseparable from the sociocultural context in which they are situated, and often involve confrontation of multiple ideological meaning systems.

It is clear that prior consumer acculturation research is mostly conducted from the immigrants' perspective, the locals' perspective remains largely unexplored. In reviewing the trajectory of acculturation theories, Luedicke (2011) argued that marketing literature is dominated by the preposition that local citizens and institutions in the "host culture" are fixed and voluntary, and promote a welcoming and caring attitude toward the new arrivals (i.e., migrants) by temporarily granting them extraordinary rights and appreciation. However, available evidence indicates that acculturation experience is not always voluntary or gentle. For example, Sobh *et al.* (2013) opined that locals may not find themselves in a culturally dominant position. Threatened by a loss of identity and the numeric dominance of the migrant population, the locals use their hospitality rituals as a means of exclusion to assert their sovereignty and to define the symbolic boundaries that indicate to the migrants that they will always remain strangers and "others." In other cases, locals may develop hostility toward immigrants, thus fueling group conflicts. Members of the local culture may commit exclusionary consumption acts to differentiate themselves from the migrant population (Sandicki *et al.*, 2006; Sobh *et al.*, 2013). Recent research

also suggests that locals may choose to acculturate to the immigrant culture (Sobh *et al.*, 2012, 2014) or to reject the hegemony of global consumer culture in response to the changes brought by the influx of migrant or Western ideologies (Vikas *et al.*, 2015).

Reconciliation of two or more conflicting discourses in identity transition and negotiation, however, is rarely conflict-free. It may create profound social tensions and identity conflicts for consumers that manifest through their symbolic consumption (Jafari and Goulding, 2008). Ample body of evidence indicates that consumers express a sense of agency in resisting, negotiating, or even juxtaposing cultural meanings in their consumption strategies (choices and practices) to cope with conflicting demands of identity negotiation in the mainstream marketplace hegemony and to maintain a coherent sense of self during acculturation (Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Sobh *et al.*, 2012; Tinson and Nuttall, 2010). As clothing is connected to visual traditions and customs that can signify one's ethnicity or cultural identity (Johnson *et al.*, 2014), it is crucial for fashion researchers and practitioners to uncover the inner and outer conflicts interacting groups faced through unpacking their identification logics and practices such as their clothing norms, aesthetic standards, body image, and consumption habits (Jo and Ha, 2018).

Acculturation and Urbanization in China

While traditional consumer acculturation research has followed a global perspective in an attempt to elucidate the impact of ethnic identification on consumption behaviors, studies conducted in China are typically guided by an intercultural perspective as the aim is to examine the rural–urban identification from both migrants' and locals' perspective, and identify its impacts on rural migrants' adaptive consumption patterns in the urban context (Chu *et al.*, 2015a). Urban identity can be conceptualized as a comprehensive self-identity associated with urban environment

(Göregenli *et al.*, 2016), whereby a person (1) perceives the uniqueness of his/her town (*evaluation*); (2) connects the city with his/her own personal history (*continuity*); (3) has a strong sense of belonging (*attachment*); (4) is familiar with the urban environment (*familiarity*); and (5) is strongly committed to staying in the city in the future (*commitment*) (Lalli, 1992).

Extant studies conducted in China tend to focus on the impact of urbanization on the consumer behaviors of rural migrants and local urbanites in the marketplace (Chu *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b; Wang and Tian, 2014). Authors of early marketing studies have noted significant differences between rural and urban Chinese consumers in terms of their consumption values, purchasing patterns, brand consciousness, and attitudes towards marketing mix (Chan and McNeal, 2006; Prion, 2006; Sun and Wu, 2004). These findings align with the Chinese market segmentation into several clusters distinguished by the level of economic development, consumers' demographic characteristics, and local culture (Cui and Liu, 2001; Dickson *et al.*, 2004). More recently, research focus has, however, shifted to the challenges faced by rural migrants in adapting to their new urban environment (Chu *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b). While migrant workers are willing to assimilate and integrate into the modern city lifestyle they have longed for (Gui *et al.*, 2012), many lacks the necessary resources (e.g., education, social and economic capital) to acculturate to the novel urban habits (e.g., use of credit cards and transportation cards) (Chu *et al.*, 2015b) and find themselves at the bottom of the urban hierarchy. In that sense, internal migration prompted by rapid urbanization has created dramatic social changes and stratification, since it has exacerbated social inequalities in large Chinese cities (Bian, 2002; Whyte, 2012; Yeung, 2002). As a result, Wang and Tian (2014) refer to the rural migrants as “vulnerable consumers” as they are marginalized by the institutional barriers (e.g., the household registration *hukou* system and banking policy) and are excluded from the “urban consumptionscape” in a wide

range of public domains, such as financial services, healthcare, housing, and education (p.45). The authors thus argued that migrant consumers have no choice but to seek support from their social circle to overcome these difficulties and adapt to urban life.

However, locals' reaction to the migrants' acculturation in the Chinese context remains insufficiently explored. Wang *et al.*'s (2019) study of Hongkongers' response to the influx of tourists from Mainland China offers insight into affluent local consumers' attempts to distinguish themselves from their Mainland counterparts by adhering to their perceived superior status, values, and tastes as manifested in their luxury consumption choices which they make as a means of identity negotiation as globalized wealthy class. It is evident from the above discussions that greater attention needs to be dedicated to the strategies local consumers employ to make sense of and negotiate multiple cultural meanings from the "global-local" perspective, as well as to formulate their responses to the changing cultural landscapes caused by the increasing influx of migrants (Kjelaard and Askergrard, 2006; Luedicke, 2015). Given that locals are living in a multicultural marketplace alongside migrant consumers, they too undergo complex identity evolution and multiple cultural experiences in the acculturation process (Kipnis *et al.*, 2014). Thus, by focusing specifically on local consumers' fashion narratives, the present study aims to explore their identity politics, since consumers may exercise agency in the play of signs by selecting opposing meanings in their fashion choices and style projects (Murray, 2002). Individual clothing and style choices constitute personalized fashion statements that align with consumers' specific cultural values and subject positions for the sake of social distinction and differentiation from the rural migrants they perceive as unwanted others (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, understanding of the evocation of identity conflicts, as manifested in different acculturation conditions, deserves much greater public attention since it has implications for political and social remediation of local citizen

responses to cultural changes prompted by the migrant populations' acculturation efforts and their outcomes. Therefore, the present study was guided by three research questions:

1. How do local consumers define and negotiate urban identity through fashion discourses when they come into contact with migrant consumers?
2. What struggles and identity conflicts local consumers face in response to the acculturation of rural consumers?
3. How do local consumers exercise agency in resolving identity conflicts and how are they reconfiguring social relationships with their rural counterparts through symbolic consumption of fashion-clothing?

Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project examining the acculturation experiences of local and migrant consumers residing in Guangzhou, China. The data was drawn from the ethnographic study conducted in Guangzhou City between 2010 and 2015 as a part of which the first author immersed himself in the local community to gain in-depth understanding of the consumers' perspectives on the symbolic world they habited as well as the changes brought by urbanization. In general, data was collected through interviews and observations which were documented through field notes, diaries, and photographs. The aim was to develop a detailed contextualized description of consumer behaviors in relation to their sociocultural context. Here, we focus on the findings yielded by the phenomenological interviews focusing on the local consumers' subjective experiences and emotions involved in resolving identity conflicts and the resulting changes to their consumption patterns and fashion tastes (Elliott and Fankel-Elliott, 2003).

Research Instruments

Data for the present investigation was largely collected via in-depth interviews with local Chinese youth residing in Guangzhou, China. Their narratives were supplemented with the researchers' field notes and (non)participant observations in shopping districts, aiming to develop a thick description of the research phenomenon in a natural setting (Belk *et al.*, 2013; Elliott and Finkel-Elliott, 2003). In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 locally-born college students who were recruited through purposive sampling and snowballing techniques. A brief description of informants and their opinions towards the migrants' fashion acculturation is provided in Table 1. These informants were initially recruited from local universities in Guangzhou for a consultancy project of a large casual-wear fashion chain store in China. To determine their eligibility, all potential participants were asked to complete a questionnaire probing into their demographic background, fashion-clothing consumption preferences, and their understanding of local fashion market and culture. Following Boddy's (2016) guidelines, we adopted the non-positivist approach and deliberately recruited a small number of participants in order to generate in-depth understanding of the subjective acculturation experiences and identity conflicts of local consumers. This interpretive approach is in line with the data collection strategies adopted in extant qualitative research on fashion consumption behaviors (see Lee and Nodges, 2020; Nash, 2019). In the beginning of the field work, the first author has joined the informants' communities. The established relationship allowed the researchers to develop *guanxi* with their informants (Browne, 2005). These social networks extended the pool of potential participants and enriched the depth and variety of information available for analysis. Each interview lasted around 2–3 hours and was conducted in natural setting (i.e., at the participants' homes or dormitories). These students were selected as the focal point of the study because they were at the important stage of self-identity construction with the symbolic resources available in the marketplace (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

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Phenomenological interviewing method was chosen, as the aim was to obtain first-person, subjective descriptions of consumption experiences from a cultural perspective (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). The aim of these interviews was to reveal how young urban Chinese consumers appropriate meanings and display a sense of their aesthetic judgement and taste distinction in their consumption of fashion-clothing to resolve identity conflicts in their counters with migrant consumers that have in their view “invaded” their city as a result of government-led urbanization. All interviews were conducted using non-directive questioning techniques, adopting semi-structured and open-ended format, to encourage extended, detailed, and comprehensive descriptions of the participants’ subjective lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings on their acculturation experiences, as well as their aesthetic judgement (Lam *et al.*, 2016). The interview covered four key parts, including 1) background and life-history of informants, 2) perception towards Canton culture and regional identity, 3) impression towards rural migrants living in the city, and 4) the impact of rural-urban migration on their everyday life and consumption choices. Each interview began with “grand tour” questions, followed by the life-history approach to encourage the informants to describe their everyday lived experiences in detail, especially the changes to their city and lifestyle brought by rapid urbanization. They were also prompted to describe their consumption habits and fashion preferences, focusing on the impact of perceived local–migrant relationship on their consumption practices and fashion tastes . All interviews were conducted in Cantonese, which is the native dialect of the research informants. Additional techniques (i.e., wardrobe examination) were also employed during the interviews to allow visual elicitation and to uncover rich descriptions of the fashion styles that the consumers preferred and adopted (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010).

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-taped and were subsequently transcribed in Chinese. The transcripts were sent to informants to confirm that they provided an accurate account of the interview. The transcripts were analyzed in Chinese using iterative interpretive and hermeneutic methods, whereby triangulation was employed to obtain more accurate results through comprehensive reviewing and cross-checking of data collected from interviews, observations, field notes, media, and other documents. Analysis involved close reading of the transcripts as well as going back and forth between data points, potential explanatory theories, and the interpretations among the authors until central and meaningful themes crystallized (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018). The initial themes were continually refined until the authors were satisfied that they fully captured participants' lived experiences. The final themes were integrated with theoretical interpretations, which were supported by participant quotes. Specific quotes from the interviews were selected and translated into English by professional translator to ensure that these accurately captured the message the informants aimed to convey.

Findings and Discussions

The narratives of everyday fashion consumption practices (i.e., styling and brand consumption) revealed how local consumers perceive the acculturative behaviors of their migrant counterparts and subsequently reshape their self-identities to maintain an "us–other" group distinction prompted by the urbanization process (Bhatia, 2002). The local youth that took part in the present study developed three dissociative strategies (i.e., stigmatization, avoidance, and self-assertion). These attitudes are analyzed below to explain how local consumers ascribe new meanings to their fashion consumption practices to resolve identity conflicts and dissociate themselves from migrant consumers.

Self-reflexivity upon the Encounter of Differences

Rapid and extensive influx of migrants into Guangzhou city and their overwhelming intrusion into everyday lives of locals has prompted the urbanites to reflect on their identities between and within physical and ideological spaces in the face of rapid urbanization (Veresiu, 2020). The changes that urbanization imposed on the city landscape as well as lifestyle have challenged the locals' sense of social place and belonging (Anthias, 2008). In conducting the interviews for the present study, it became apparent that the young consumers were conscious of their identity as urbanites and were proud of their regional "Guangzhou Ren" affiliation (i.e., locals of Guangzhou). It was not uncommon to hear youngsters describing themselves as *Bendi Ren* (i.e., local people) or *Guangzhou Ren* (i.e., locals of Guangzhou) to differentiate from *Waidi Ren* (i.e., people from other places). While the encounter of rural–urban differences stimulated reflexivity on self-identity, we argue that such identity conflict does not stem from the need to assert one's identity as defined by place of origin, language, citizenship, or even ethnic affiliation (Askegaard and Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2011). Instead, for these youngsters, such identification practice was a social power negotiation (Veresiu, 2020) as that local youngsters in our study perceived rural migrants as unwanted others there they developed new identity narratives to differentiate the locals from the migrants. The growing influx of migrant consumers and their desire for acculturation thus contested an ideological space for the local consumers to re-configure rural–urban relations as well as their urban identities (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013). During individual interviews, some informants repeatedly highlighted the rural–urban distinction and complained about the uncivilized behaviors and dominance of *Putonghua* (i.e., the official language) in Guangzhou. It was, however, rather alarming to hear local youth describe the migrants as "cultural invaders" who infringed on their cultural territory.

Si (F_22): There is a hostile attitude among ‘Guangzhou Ren’ as they strive to differentiate themselves from those coming from other places. Some of the locals emphasize that we are the locals (i.e., people of Guangzhou). We were born and have grown up here! Hence, there is a chasm that separates us from them....

Chi Pang (M_19): The Guangzhou City used to be a nice place.... People were nice and polite here! Nowadays, the city has changed and has become messy. It is all because of those migrant workers! Yes, I agree that some of them are very rich and invest a lot in Guangzhou. However, it does not mean that they are civilized! ... They throw rubbish everywhere and spit on the floor. The customer services have become poor as well. We Guangzhou Ren won’t serve people in such a bad manner! All bad things in Guangzhou are caused by them!

This finding is supported by the views shared by many local youngsters, who grudgingly admitted having a sense of dislocation in their hometown. They stressed that the government’s socioeconomic policy favoring rapid and extensive urbanization has not only changed the city landscape due to new infrastructure development, but is also threatening the dominant position of the local identity as Cantonese/Guangzhou Ren. These views counter the findings reported by Veresiu and Geisler (2018), who observed that specific institutional strategies can transform both locals and migrants into generic consumers. Instead, our study demonstrated that institutional strategies facilitated social exclusion and thus further segregated the two population strata. In Guangzhou, urbanization and the migrants’ desire to integrate into the city’s culture are perceived as a threat to the local identity and relative status among Guangzhou people (Wang *et al.*, 2019). As a result, local consumers feel forced to accept the change of their living reality.

Lun (M_21): We (Guangzhou Ren) used to have a friendly neighborhood and I am happy to know everyone here.... We greet each other in the morning and the whole environment is

harmonious. However, things began to change when outsiders started moving into the area in large numbers ...

In response to the threat of losing the sociopolitical dominance in their hometown, local residents have turned to consumption as a means to reproduce social boundaries that demarcate them from migrant consumers seeking acculturation into the mainstream urban culture in Guangzhou (Veresiu, 2020).

Stigmatization Strategies Based on Demonizing Otherness

While Sobh *et al.* (2013) argued that locals relied on overt hospitality as a way to resist migrants' acculturation, the participants in the present study focused on stigmatizing the migrants' appearance. During the interviews, local youngsters emphasized the importance of personal image and aesthetics in defining and conveying an ideal cosmopolitan lifestyle in Guangzhou. For them, fashion sensitivity was a significant symbolic marker that visually distinguished the rural migrants from the local urbanites, who in their view possessed better grasp of the urban clothing culture (Jo and Ha, 2018). The pursuit of beauty and fashion was seen as an effective means to differentiate from the rural migrant consumers in their everyday consumption discourses (Sandikci and Ger, 2010). This is also a powerful negotiation tool in asserting territorial claims and status hierarchy by displaying stylish fashion images in specific consumption arenas, such as shopping malls and supermarkets (Veresiu and Geisler, 2018). To further highlight their separation from *them*, the local youngsters even disparaged the migrant consumers' fashion taste and their village-man appearance.

Ming (F_22): I do think we (i.e., locals) have much more fashion sense than those coming from other places! We called them 'laau tau'.... It sounds rude but we use the term to label

those migrants who are not local people and can't speak fluent Cantonese.... Nowadays, we have so many migrants moving in and it is easy to identify those 'laau tau' by observing their appearance and style! What I mean is that you can easily identify them by looking at the clothes they are wearing.... They dress like rural workers ... and it is easy to distinguish those from the city from those that are not....

The locals exhibited a sense of pride in their fashion choices. During individual interviews, local youngsters were thrilled and enthusiastic to speak about their lifestyles and anything related to fashion, while the migrant youngsters were keen to talk about their studies in Guangzhou and social circles. Living in a first-tier city in China, the locals considered fashion and material possessions an essential part of everyday life that defined their urbanite identity. Some of them were eager to acquire trendy items even if they were not very passionate about fashion. Being dressed in accordance with the latest trends is just part of their everyday life, and many would mix and match, adding fashion accessories and paying attention to the subtle design details and cut of their clothes to demonstrate their aesthetic sense sourced from a global perspective of multiculturalism (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010; Veresiu and Geisler, 2018). For example, some of the study participants claimed to follow Korean and Japanese street fashion styles, where it is common to layer basic fashion items (e.g., T-shirts, sweaters, hoodies, jeans, and skirts), and played with different length and fabrication. They also claimed to value quality fabrics as another way to distance themselves from the migrants. One of the slightly older participants, Kong Wa, aged 26, asserted that, as migrants only wanted to buy cheap clothes, they didn't care much about the quality.

Kong Wa (M_26): Believe it or not, if you see somebody on the street wearing faint or muddy colors ... you would know that they are not Guangzhou Ren but rather those 'laau tau'! They are not willing to buy good quality clothing since they find it expensive!

The study participants were also of view that, compared to the migrants, local people possessed higher cultural capital, gained from consuming fashion more knowledgeably and aesthetically. Specifically, they exercised discursive power over the migrant population by openly stigmatizing their poor fashion taste and unsophisticated appearance (Murray, 2002). These observations are in line with the findings reported by Wang *et al.* (2019), who noted that, in response to large numbers of tourists from Mainland China, Hongkongers belittled their conspicuous consumption, their manners, and their perceived lack of class and taste. However, our findings further show that the symbolic boundaries demarcating the two groups are often vague, emotional, and exaggerated. Despite conveying a sense of superiority, some of our informants admitted that they would struggle to precisely define the typical *laau tau* style. For example, 19-year-old Chi Pang described *laau tau* as alternative fashion (i.e., *feizhuliu* – non-mainstream), a commonly used Chinese Internet meme pertaining to youngsters who deviate from the norm in their lifestyle, attitudes, and behaviors.

Chi Pang (M_19): Yes! 'Laau tau' means those 'feizhuliu' (i.e., non-mainstream/alternative).... It refers to those coming from other provinces who look bizarre! ... They dye their long hair in different weird colors, and make it into a punk hairstyle.... We Guangzhou Ren would never do that!

The study participants clearly associated the migrant population with the *feizhuliu* out of malice, signifying the negative impression the locals have of the migrants. Based on the analysis of the visual data collected from street snapshots and observations, and by triangulating the findings with the interview data, it could be established that the typical *laau tau* style would be best described as slovenly, with a clear gender demarcation. In the eyes of the local youth, male migrants typically had tanned skin and adopted either “homely villager look” or “gangster look”

(see Image 1). The locals often perceived that as a sign of laziness and complete absence of style. For example, it was not uncommon to see male migrants clad in untucked and loosely-fitting unbuttoned shirts paired with twill chinos or stacked jeans. The shirts were typically long enough to cover half of the back pockets of the pants. Some would even wear loose-fitting vests or shirts with cargo shorts. The quality of the garments was usually poor due to repeated washing and long use. Colors were often dull and faded, and silhouettes were worn and out of shape. The migrant community also paid less attention to their shoes, and many would wear a pair of flip-flops or dilapidated sneakers with any outfit. Their hairstyle was also unfashionable, whereby boys usually had a mop-top or a side part with long sideburns covering their ears. There was not much layering, but a solid, sloping fringe. In addition, since many of them did not dye their hair in lighter colors, it tended to look chunky and oily. To a certain extent, they attempted to show a masculine image by not focusing on the latest trends and opting instead for inconspicuous shirts and trousers.

---- Insert Image 1 about here ----

Similarly, female migrants were looked down upon by the locals for their old-fashioned and yokel-like sartorial style. Indeed, they seemed to favor “fancy” scandals with lots of trim, stripes, and other embellishments, in an attempt to look attractive and feminine. The silhouette of their clothes was usually figure-hugging or layered (e.g., a loose-fitting, wide-neck T-shirt that showed part of the inner garment underneath) to emphasize the waistline (see Image 2). Unlike some of the local informants who preferred subtle design details and were very conservative with respect to revealing their body shape, the migrants favored hot pants, short tight skirts, and wider neck openings, which the locals found too “sexy” and “exposed.”

---- Insert Image 2 about here ----

The stigmatization strategy adopted by the study participants was purely emotional and subjective (Wang *et al.*, 2019). More importantly, the generalizations they applied to the migrants largely stemmed from locals' perceptions. It is through the process of stereotyping the poor appearance of the rural migrants that constantly reshaped the fashion practices and choices of the local consumers in defining their urbanite as well as Cantonese identity. In sum, the term *laau tau* emerged in response to the changing socioeconomic landscape in Guangzhou, signifying the helplessness of the local inhabitants in adapting to the influx of migrant population into the city. Moreover, many of the locals worried about losing the dominant position in their home city, yet they were unable to reverse the situation through other socioeconomic means. Hence, for them, being civilized and consuming fashion knowledgeably emerged as a cultural resistance strategy, as they strove to establish a cultural barrier, preventing the migrant consumers from assimilating into the local Guangzhou in-group.

Avoidance Strategies – Dissociative Consumption Practices

Seduced by prevailing market ideologies and consumerism in a first-tier city, the local youngsters chose to pursue a cosmopolitan ideal of being “modern Chinese” who were knowledgeable in lifestyle and image consumption (Piron, 2006). Since fashion sense is an obvious signifier of a person's social identity and status, these local consumers were very sensitive to the social cues on what was deemed acceptable to wear to differentiate from their migrant counterparts. During his interview, 19-year-old male student Chi Pang highlighted this distinction by noting that the locals and migrants shopped in different parts of the city. Similar views were shared by a female informant Ka Bo.

Chi Pang (M_19): I usually go to 'Yuefu Plaza' (i.e., a local shopping center). There are lots of small boutiques selling local private labels and you can't find any big brand names.... More importantly, I shop there because migrants don't know about this place.... Many migrants will go to a mall called 'Dongji Xintiandi Shopping Mall' in Shangxiajiu Pedestrian Street. I used to shop there but not anymore! Things sold there are low-quality and cheap....

Ka Bo (F_22): Most of the migrants like going to 'Beijing Road Pedestrian Street' and 'Xiajiu Pedestrian Street'.... However, it is quite interesting that most of these migrants just window-shop and hang out there! Not many of them really buy something! But in 'Yuefu Plaza,' you can definitely find lots of locals....

Due to coming into direct contact with the migrant population on a daily basis, many local youngsters were aware that migrants were keen to assimilate into the city culture of Guangzhou. For the new arrivals, in addition to learning Cantonese, adopting local lifestyle choices was an important strategy, as pointed out by Ka Bo, who observed that many migrant consumers learned where the locals shop and would adopt the same purchasing practices. During the interviews, the local youngsters highlighted that they found migrants' attempts to emulate locals' consumption practices awkward and would do all they can to disassociate from such behaviors. Veresiu (2020) argued that space can be an active consumer acculturation agent, in which spatial structural conditions might shape consumer acculturation experiences that promote or constrain immigrant consumers' ability to acquire agency. Our findings indicate that local consumers may also exercise agency to distinguish from the migrant population by actively demarcating and (re)defining city space to attenuate group and identity conflicts when presented with unwanted otherness either directly or indirectly. Extending the concept of threshold places (Vikas *et al.*, 2015), it is evident

from the preceding narratives that the consumption spheres (i.e., different shopping districts) in Guangzhou have become a contested place for symbolic power and social status negotiation between local and migrant consumers. The local consumers pay attention to the acculturation of migrant consumers into their consumption spheres, and have adopted a “guerrilla tactic” whereby they constantly shift to new places instead of occupying and demarcating specific location as reserved for the local community. Chi Pang, a 19-year-old male student, asserted that the migrants’ acculturation had forced the locals to shop in different places. He elaborated that *Beijing Road Pedestrian Street* and *Shangxiajiu Pedestrian Street* used to be shopping areas frequented by the locals, but are now avoided due to the overwhelming presence of migrants. These places are located in Laiwan District, the old city center of Guangzhou known for rich heritage and history, which became a tourist spot for shopping once migrants moved to the city in larger numbers.

The “guerrilla tactic” also extended from physical to ideological space (Veresiu, 2020). Our findings revealed that the local youngsters seek to convey who they are by displaying a different brand literacy in their everyday purchasing decisions. Many youngsters confirmed that some of the Chinese fashion chain-store brands used to be popular with the locals due to the good-quality clothes and accessories at affordable prices. However, once migrant consumers started shopping in these areas, many local consumers abandoned these stores and even gave up some of the local fashion brands they previously wore.

Chi Pang (M_19): I used to shop in Baleno and S&K. However, I won’t go there anymore since there are more migrants shopping there.... They are learning from us ... and we have to shift to another brand instead....

The findings that emerged from the analysis of ethnographic field notes supported Chi Pang’s observation that the growing number of non-local shoppers has even prompted the sales

persons of fashion boutiques in *Beijing Road Pedestrian Street* and *Shangxiajiu Pedestrian Street* to speak Putonghua instead of Cantonese. In her interview, 22-year-old female student Si argued that, owing to the growing influx of migrants, locals have started purchasing clothing in small boutiques or have opted for imported mass-fashion brands (i.e., Hong Kong or international fashion labels). A brand-recall test conducted with the research participants also showed that they preferred imported fashion brands or international labels, such as Esprit, I.P. Zone, Giordano, Uniqlo, H&M, Levis, Nike, Adidas, and Reebok, while shunning local chain-store brands. Such a discrepancy in fashion brand literacy (Lam *et al.*, 2011) was ascribed to the retail penetration strategies adopted by fashion brands. Chinese chain-store brands often penetrate their distribution channels into second- or even third-tier cities, while international fashion brands focus on first-tier cities like Guangzhou.

The local youngsters that took part in our study refused to visit Chinese chain stores because they often associated these brands with rural population, standardized clothing, and less fashionable style. In response, local youngsters started embracing global consumer culture and displaying another level of semiotic literacy to differentiate from the migrant population (Luedicke, 2015; Vikas *et al.*, 2015). Yet, they were keen to stress that they were not loyal to any particular fashion brand. Rather, they strove to convey their personal taste and knowledge of fashion design and style, irrespective of the brand. Consequently, the locals developed mix-and-match techniques as a means of demonstrating strong aesthetic sense. While Wang *et al.* (2019) found that local consumers in Hong Kong tended to purchase luxury brands that differed them from Mainland tourists to signal superiority of their social status, our findings indicate that young urban consumers exhibited agency by developing specific consumption skills to manipulate the meanings of their fashion narratives for identity-generation purposes (Murray, 2002).

Consequently, in managing their style projects, local youngsters preferred to shop in the small boutiques in *Yuexiu District*, even though the lesser-known local private labels or imported brands were much more expensive, as indicated by 22-year-old Si. Another 22-year-old female student, Ming, similarly shared that locals did not care much about the brand names and prices, as long as the style looked fashionable and trendy enough.

For our informants, the “guerrilla tactic” and mix-and-match fashion choices are the means through which local consumers dissociate themselves from the acculturation of migrant consumers. More importantly, these separation strategies offer insight into the way consumers demarcate physical and ideological spaces in the marketplace to enact social exclusion in a rural–urban relationship by justifying and developing a different set of aesthetic preferences and fashion consumption practices (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013).

Self-assertion: Self-deprecation and Fashion Choices

While urbanization has prompted extensive migration from rural areas into the city, some local youngsters admitted that the real challenge did not stem from the need to adapt to the migrants’ acculturation into the urban lifestyle, but rather from the realization that Canton culture was losing its socioeconomic dominance at home. Due to the rapid demographic shifts in their city, locals faced numerous socioeconomic problems in their everyday lives, including rapid inflation, high rents, and a highly competitive job market. These issues were exacerbated further by the growing need to use Putonghua in everyday life. This aligns with Sobh *et al.*’s (2013) observation that local youngsters are often threatened by a loss of identity and the growing dominance of migrant population. However, many of our informants chose not to maintain their sense of status quo or cultural superiority of the dominant Canton culture but to self-deprecate in certain areas.

Owing to the rapid urbanization, the migrant population is no longer seen as *others*, as it has become the new majority with a dominant role in both political and economic sphere. Some local youngsters saw the migrants who came to Guangzhou as unwanted invaders aiming to seize and plunder the socioeconomic resources that should rightly belong to the locals. They were also of view that these new arrivals showed no interest in understanding or appreciating the local culture. “Reverse assimilation” thus emerged as a common theme, as many local youngsters complained about being forced to speak Putonghua in their daily lives (Sobh *et al.*, 2012, p.361).

Kong Wa (M_26): We hated them (the migrants) in the past! However, it is now just a term to differentiate them (i.e., migrants) from the native Guangzhou people.... I can't say that we still hate them, as we can't do anything about the situation! Well ... people just get used to it.... You know, the size (i.e., the non-local population) is getting bigger and bigger.... You can feel it when you walk down the street ... even if they do not wish to disturb you.... The city is now less harmonious.... Those from other places turned the city into a mess.... I don't blame them for coming, since the prosperity and city growth will attract people to come ... but the more people come, the poorer the city becomes.... In fact, you cannot prevent outsiders from moving into the city ... all they need to do is buy an apartment here and they become “new locals.”

During his interview, 26-year-old male student Kong Wa shared that the local people felt helpless, as they were unable to change their destiny. In the eyes of the local youngsters, the migrants were “abject-other” (Kinnvall, 2004, p.752), seen as neither subject nor object. Still, dialectally, they were perceived as a reflexive force for the locals to reduce their anxiety and increase their ontological security in the negotiation of their self-identities. Resisting the dominant “modern Chinese cosmopolitan ideal,” some of the locals chose a self-deprecating strategy to

convey their cultural identity, claiming that an authentic local Guangzhou person would pride him/herself in limited Putonghua proficiency, as noted by Chi Pang:

Chi Pang (M_19): My Putonghua is very bad.... My father's is even worse.... Our Putonghua is not accurate.... We are used to speaking in Cantonese and that is easier for us!

Inability to speak another language strengthens one's identification with one's root culture. More importantly, this local discourse also came into conflict with the global Chinese cultural representation of a cosmopolitan ideal dominated by Putonghua. It is also interesting to note that some of the local participants chose to speak ironically about the bad sides of being local as materialistic and calculative. Such self-deprecation also extended to their fashion and consumption choices, whereby the local consumers dedicated extraordinary amount of time and attention to their appearance and materialistic lifestyle.

Many local youngsters were willing to spend considerable amounts of money on clothing as a means of managing their style projects (See Image 3). This was particularly true for the female research participants, most of whom wore makeup, consumed skincare products, and regularly bought trendy clothing. For example, 22-year-old Ming opined that looking good was highly important for the members of the local community, as it allowed them to make friends and blend into the daily life more easily. She loved window-shopping and would try out different clothing styles when hanging out with her friends. Another 22-year-old female student, Si, similarly argued that some of her local friends liked travelling to Hong Kong for shopping, as this allowed them to buy fashion that cannot be found in Guangzhou. Shopping in Hong Kong also gave them a sense of cosmopolitan lifestyle they strove to emulate. Similar views were shared by male informants. For example, 19-year-old Chi Yeung saw having a fashion sense and caring about personal image as an essential element of the city culture.

---- Insert Image 3 about here ----

As noted previously, many local youngsters stressed that they were not loyal to any particular fashion brand. Instead, they dedicated considerable effort to developing personal mix-and-match image to exhibit personal fashion taste and aesthetic sense. For example, they would rely on layering and color matching, and would use different fashion accessories to create a subtle but fashionable outfit. Some of them took references from the images portrayed in fashion magazines and online blogs, trying to emulate Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese styles in particular. While these young local consumers responded to rapid urbanization by introducing and calibrating new sets of cultural knowledge, they liberated themselves through fashion practices and choices to embrace a Western market-based liberal ideology emphasizing individual life-projects and obligatory freedom (Jafari and Goulding, 2008). This, however, suggests that the locals helplessly enact consumption practices to escape from their growing personal problems and to resolve identity tensions arising from having to confront the socioeconomic changes brought by excessive rural-to-urban migration.

Conclusion

Rural-to-urban migration is an increasingly frequent border-crossing phenomenon that has resulted in extensive growth of many cities and rapid changes in urban population characterized by high socioeconomic and cultural diversity (Beckstead, 2010). While prior consumer research has shed light on the challenges and related acculturative behaviors of rural migrants in adapting to their new life in the city setting, our study focused on how local urbanites perceive and respond to the impact of rural-to-urban migration on their identity projects and everyday life. Our analysis showed that local consumers in Guangzhou engaged in identity politics due to social tensions imposed by the rural migrants' acculturative forces. While the youngsters felt threatened and

helpless in response to the state-led urbanization policy, they exhibited a sense of consumer agency in devising three dissociative strategies to cope with the identity conflicts as revealed in their fashion consumption choices and practices to differentiate from the “unwanted otherness” migrant consumers exemplified. It is thus noteworthy that this investigation revealed that acculturation process is always interwoven with local consumers’ struggles and agency to (re)configure the urban–rural relations in a market-mediated physical and ideological space.

Hence, this research offers threefold contribution to the consumer acculturation theory. First, our findings contribute to the current understanding of the locals’ emotional and dissociative responses to the acculturation of migrant consumers. While it has long been believed that the citizens and institutions in the “host culture” exhibit a welcoming and caring attitude toward the guests (i.e., migrants) (Luedicke, 2011), our research shows that local consumers continually observe, change, and react to the acculturation of the migrant population. More importantly, local consumers selectively use their fashion choices and develop brand literacy to resolve identity conflicts and differentiate themselves from the migrants (Luedicke, 2015). Our findings also indicate that the generalizations imposed on the unwanted acculturating group could be highly fluid and subjective, reflecting the locals’ changing perceptions of the migrant population. Second, we also demonstrated that hostile emotions may arise among locals when threatened by a loss of identity and cultural dominance in their home city (Sandicki *et al.*, 2006; Sobh *et al.*, 2013). However, such resentment and sociopolitical helplessness does not necessary lead to a social sense of shame or feelings of failure (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Instead, as our findings reveal, local consumers may choose to acquire new cultural capital and alter the habitus in the consumption sphere (e.g., brand literacy, aesthetic sense, fashion choices, shopping locations) to renegotiate their identities in their style projects. Unlike Wang *et al.* (2019), who focused on the luxury consumption practices

of affluent locals and Mainland tourists, we offer an alternate lens through which to explore how young consumers, often with limited economic resources, develop specific consumption skills in manipulating fashion choices and brands for identity purposes. Third, the present study sheds light on the acculturation process prompted by rural-to-urban migration. Authors of extant studies in this field tended to focus on the cross-border experiences in the context of international migration. To complement these findings, in this work, consumer acculturation was examined from the perspective of urban locals who shared the same ethnic background with the rural migrants (i.e., in the rural–urban context). The local youth that took part in the present study revealed that they hold different ideologies and power positions that differentiate the urbanites from the rural population. Ample body of empirical evidence indicates that, in China, urbanization has not only intensified social stratification between urban and rural communities, but has also awakened regional cultural identities. This has prompted many locals to adopt new symbolic consumption practices and fashion narratives to defend their dominant cultural position in the region.

The findings reported in this work provide valuable managerial insights for fashion retailers, indicating that they should rethink their market segmentation strategies to address population mobility in the marketplace and better understand how it alters the in-between social relationship that results in different consumption patterns and practices. In analyzing the data gathered as a part of this study, it became apparent that locals' hostile attitudes toward migrants have prompted them to alter their brand usage and fashion choices as a means of dissociating or even isolating themselves from the unwanted groups of customers they perceive as inferior. Existing market segmentation approach is largely predicated upon geographical, demographic, and psycho-behavioral factors, which this static approach largely disregards the dynamics of internal migration and rural-urban relationship in shaping marketplace structure and the consumption

patterns therein. In this sense, our findings are also valuable to brand managers, as they offer insights into the most beneficial communication and positioning strategies. By highlighting the importance of understanding the rural–urban relationship and its influence on consumer behaviors and brand choices, we argue that fashion, as one of the many consumption domains and the most “visible” identity marker, provides a unique context for examining the intersection of taste and identity that has emerged due to the growing internal migration across mainland China. Fashion marketers should capture and monitor the changing consumption patterns, brand knowledge and preferences, and fashion tastes between the local and migrant populations. In formulating marketing strategies and for product development purposes, marketers should take into consideration of how the two groups of consumers constantly learn and adapt each other’s shopping habits and develop their own shopping patterns and fashion preferences.

The analyses reported here were conducted from the perspective of young consumers living in Guangzhou, as the aim was to offer insight into how locals distinguish themselves from migrants and negotiate their identities through their everyday lived fashion discourses. We identified some limitations of the present study and lead to a number of future research directions. First, bounded by the nature of interpretive research, which rests upon the comprehensiveness and saturation of qualitative data from a small sample size, future research can extend to using quantitative measures and a larger sample to verify the impact of rural-urban relationship on fashion consumption behaviors. Second, our study offered a single perspective on the response of local consumers to acculturation. Thus, it would be beneficial to endorse and extend Luedicke’s (2015) dyadic view that integrates the adaptation of locals and migrants to each other’s consumption “choices, behaviors, ideologies, and status ambition” (p.110). Authors of future studies can also expand their informant base to other groups of consumers (e.g., different age groups, ethnicities, consumers in

rural settings). Moreover, as all our informants were students, the acculturation experiences and practices of locals and migrants of different demographic backgrounds (e.g., in terms of age, occupation, generational affiliation, and duration of migratory experience) should also be investigated. Although our sample comprised of both male and female consumers, no gender-specific analyses were conducted. Thus, it would be beneficial to examine whether identity goals and perceptions toward social groupings and demarcation are gender-specific. Finally, our focus was on local youth's narrations of their identity projects and their sense of belonging to the home culture, as inscribed in participants' fashion consumption experiences in response to migrants' attempts at acculturation. Hence, our research can be extended to other lifestyle consumption practices or product types in order to increase the generalizability of the findings reported here. In conclusion, we argued that consumers' lived experiences and the constructed fashion discourses are embedded in social interactions and are contextualized by ongoing dialogues between *us* and *them* or the *self* and the *other*. Thus, analyzing them further would augment our understanding of the complexity of the fashion market in urban China.

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