Ethnic-inspired design consumption as a means of enhancing self-view confidence

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Understanding of what drives mainstream consumers to purchase ethnic-inspired designs (EID) is lacking, and even less is understood about the self-centric values (personal values and product values) and the goal pursuits (enhancing self-view confidence) they project by consuming EID. We set out to fill this void, using image theory as a conceptual framework on data collected by a marketing research firm from 1,153 women on its female consumer panel. We found that mainstream consumers' aspirations to enhance self-view confidence (self-enhancement) are a key driver determining their purchase intent toward EID products. We also found that self-enhancement is directly influenced by the product values (perceived aesthetics and novelty) of EID, and the effects of personal values (cultural openness and seeking personal style) on self-enhancement are mediated by product values.

Infusing ethnic colors, patterns, and styles, referred to as *ethnic-inspired designs* (EIDs), into mainstream products has long been in vogue, particularly in the fashion industry (De Jesus & Soriano, 2012). One of the earliest leaders in this regard was Yves Saint Laurent in the late 1960s. Inspired by his travels to Africa and Asia, Saint Laurent incorporated African safari jackets and Persian rug prints into his collections (Wu, 2013). Later, in the 1970s, the luxury brand Kenzo brought ethnic-inspired fashion into prominence, introducing multiethnic collections to the mainstream fashion world that showcased the combination of Japanese flower prints with Scottish checks and Chinese stand-up collar jackets trimmed with country-style ruffles (Reed, 2012). Designer Caroline Herrera integrated the Korean Hanbok motif in her 2011 cruise collection, which was applauded for its exotic beauty (K. E. Lee, 2016). A growing number of fashion brands and retailers at mid-to-low price points also joined the movement of incorporating EIDs into their products (Lynch & Strauss, 2014). For example, Anthropologie embedded African-inspired designs, such as geometric shapes and bold-colored prints, into its clothing to increase its aesthetic value, and Forever 21 adopted the silhouette of Japanese kimono for their tops to attract plus-size consumers. Indeed, EIDs have been one of the dominant fashion trends in the United States targeting mainstream consumers (Chattaraman & Lennon, 2008).

There are a number of reasons for the growing popularity of EIDs among mainstream consumers at the macro level. Increasing ethnic diversity in the United States has heightened the interest in, and acceptance of, ethnic cultures and artifacts (Cui, 1997). The prevalence of the Internet, increased globalization, and international traveling have also decreased prejudice against different cultures and enhanced openness toward culturally embedded aesthetics, tastes, and practices (Gardetti & Muthu, 2016). Further, the

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overheating competition in the fashion market has motivated designers to adopt ethnic aesthetics of countries outside the United States to imbue a sense of novelty and distinctiveness in their collections (K. E. Lee, 2016).

Despite the prevailing practices of incorporating EID for products targeting mainstream consumers, not many researchers have attempted to understand what motivates mainstream consumers to purchase products with EIDs. Much of the extant research is focused on the appeal of ethnic designs to consumers with matching ethnic backgrounds (e.g., ethnic values and ethnic identity), and on the role of acculturation (Forehand & Deshpandé, 2001; Gbadamosi, 2012). For instance, Kim and Arthur (2003) explored the influence of ethnic identity on consumers' attitude toward ethnic apparel products among Asian Americans. They found that Asian Americans with a stronger ethnic identification exhibited more emphasis on ethnic features in apparel products than did those with a weaker ethnic identification. Gbadamosi (2012) indicated that individuals might show a different extent of involvement and preference toward EID products depending on their level of acculturation. Although existing literature provides important insights as to what motivates EID consumption, not much is understood in terms of factors affecting the purchasing intentions for EID by mainstream consumers. Our study addresses this gap in the literature.

In so doing, we approached the consumer demand for EIDs based on two notions. First, building upon the long-standing tenet that consumers wear fashion to reflect who they are and to communicate to others what they value (Evans, 1989), we investigated the extent to which consumers' self-values drive their purchase decisions toward products with EIDs. Second, we subscribe to the notion that consumers' product choice is not merely driven by their desire to match self-values to a product but, more importantly, is directed by their aspirations to enhance their self-view confidence (i.e., self-enhancement) through what they buy and consume (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009).
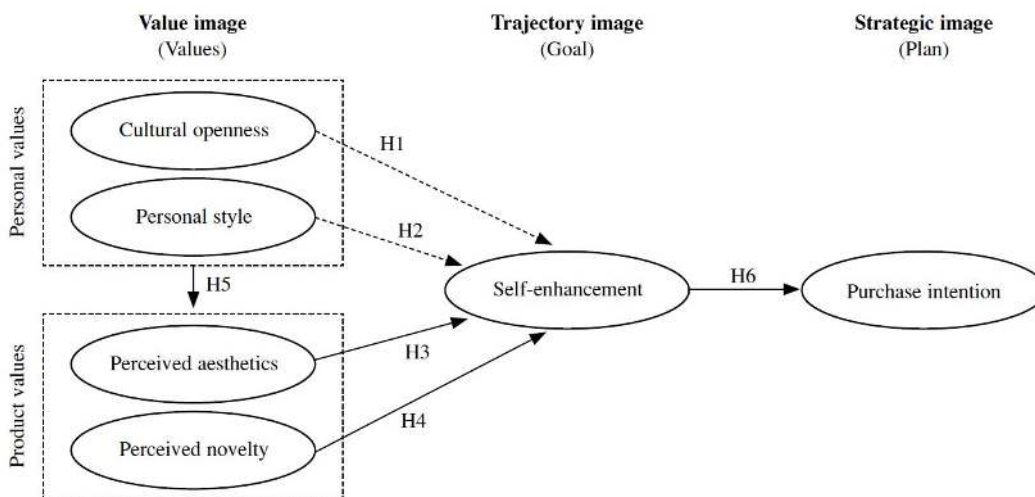

Figure 1. *Conceptual model.*

Trajectory Image (Goal): Self-Enhancement

Much of consumer behavior is goal oriented (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999). When consumers face a situation in which they must decide which products or brands to buy, they make a consumption decision based on an account of the goal they are attempting to pursue (Kopetz, Kruglanski, Arens, Etkin, & Johnson, 2012). When such a goal is aligned with self-concept, people are motivated to behave in a way to maintain (i.e., actual self), enhance (i.e., ideal self), or project their own self-image to significant others (i.e., social self;

Malhotra, 1988). Image theorists also argue that consumers' decision making is directed at choosing an option that expresses and ultimately improves their self-image (Beach & Mitchell, 1987; Liedtka, 1989). In this vein, we proposed self-enhancement as the key trajectory image (i.e., goal) affected by value image in our context. *Self-enhancement* refers to the degree to which individuals are motivated to increase their self-view confidence, which includes thoughts related to themselves and the certainty they have in their self-concept (Gao et al., 2009).

Self-image is a critical construct for explaining consumer choice and has been shown to influence one's product preferences and purchase intentions (Park & Yoo, 2016). Consumers often assign meanings to products or brands that they possess in order to reflect or reinforce their self-image. They are also motivated to consume the product associated with meanings they aspire to obtain in order to enhance their self-image. People will be motivated to purchase products with ethnic designs for such purposes, particularly when they perceive that the product with EID has meaning that enhances their self-view confidence (Chattaraman & Lennon, 2008). In other words, consumers may project their goal pursuit of self-enhancement to products with EIDs by consuming them to reach their desired self-image.

Effects of Value Images (Personal Values and Product Values) on Trajectory Image

Individuals' goal pursuits are guided by their values (Nelson, 2004). In particular, proponents of image theory argue that the selection and maintenance of the self-directed goals that an individual strives for are heavily influenced by self-oriented values (Beach & Mitchell, 1987). In this vein, the degree to which consumers perceive that the consumption of EIDs enhances self-view confidence is affected by their value images, both concerning personal values (i.e., value images important for their lives) and product values (i.e., value images they desire in a product).

Personal Values

As people's experience with ethnic groups and cultures other than their own varies, cultural openness is a significant personal value influencing EID consumption. *Cultural openness* refers to an individual's sense of openness to cultural variety, openness to the expectation of cultural differences, and an inclination to experience diverse ethnic-inspired artifacts (Wardle, 2007). It is also defined as an individual's willingness to associate with worldwide issues (e.g., global warming and overpopulation) and people from other cultures (S.-E. Lee & Littrell, 2006). Cultural openness is not only linked to the possession of transposable cultural resources but also to mental flexibility of being willing to embrace what is against one's ingrained beliefs and ideas (Clayton & Birren, 1980). Individuals who are open to new and unconventional experiences tend to view themselves more positively compared to their counterparts (McCrae & Costa, 1987). In this regard, consumers who show greater cultural openness are more likely to evaluate consuming EID as desirable and to deploy it to enhance their self-image. We thus expected that when consumers value cultural openness, they would be likely to perceive that consuming EIDs enhances their self-view confidence. We therefore formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Cultural openness will have a positive effect on the perception that consuming ethnic-inspired designs enhances self-view confidence.

We proposed that seeking personal style would be another significant personal value associated with EID consumption. *Personal style* is defined as a distinct mode of tailoring that embodies one's taste (Cho, Gupta, & Kim, 2015; Ki, Lee, & Kim, 2017). In the context of ethnic products, seeking personal style refers to a consumer's interest in consuming the authentic crafts, exotic beauty, and uniqueness of ethnic products that represent the style sought (S.-E. Lee & Littrell, 2006). It is also defined as a consumer's motivation to use ethnic products to set oneself apart from others, as the aesthetics of ethnic-inspired products serve as a medium to create unique looks and communicate personal taste (Ray & Anderson, 2000). Products with EIDs may also allow consumers to experience different ethnic crafts and expand their worldview, supporting them to express themselves creatively and differently, and to improve further their self-perception (S.-E. Lee

& Littrell, 2006). We thus expected that consumers who appreciate personal style would perceive that consuming EIDs contributes to enhancing their self-view confidence. We therefore formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Seeking personal style will have a positive effect on the perception that consuming EIDs enhances self-view confidence.

Product Values

Aesthetics refers to one's perception of the beauty that lies in an object (Armstrong, 2005). Specifically, it is defined as a positive product-based belief that a consumer builds in response to certain design elements of a product: symbols, motives, colors, and shapes (Littrell, Paff Ogle, & Kim, 1999). Aesthetic value in a product or product design is becoming increasingly important, because many brands can offer seemingly similar utilitarian values (e.g., features, quality, and price) as a result of advanced technology and access to networks and abilities (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). The aesthetic value inherent in EID products (Y. Lee, Kim, Seock, & Cho, 2009) may be one of the significant product values that appeal to consumers. Thus, we predicted that consumers who value the aesthetics of EIDs would perceive products with EIDs favorably. The aesthetic value would not only steer consumers' product preferences, but further serve as a medium by which to achieve their consumption goal of self-enhancement. Choosing a product with high aesthetics influences a consumer's self-enhancement, as this beauty premium in a product spills over and is transferred to enhance her or his self-image (Townsend & Sood, 2012). In particular, design elements embedded in an apparel product influence a consumer's evaluation of self-attractiveness, which, in turn, affects self-esteem evaluation (Bloch & Richins, 1992). Therefore, we predicted that the more likely it is that one perceives the aesthetic value in EIDs, the more likely it is that one would perceive that the consumption of EIDs enhances self-view confidence. We therefore formed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: The aesthetic value of ethnic-inspired designs will have a positive effect on the perception that consuming ethnic-inspired designs enhances self-view confidence.

We proposed novelty as another critical product value associated with EID consumption. *Novelty* refers to the degree to which individuals believe that a product differs from its alternatives (Rosa, Qualls, & Ruth, 2014). Consumers who seek the new and different tend to pursue the novelty value in a product. One of the means of experiencing and consuming novelty is purchasing ethnic-inspired products for their exotic and distinctive design appeal (Y. Lee et al., 2009). Furthermore, as U.S. consumers, in general, consider novelty to be an element that breaks tradition and incorporates an innovative view (Bicen, Kamarudin, & Johnson, 2014), we expected that consumers who appreciate the novelty value in a product would perceive products with EID positively. An individual's need for novelty is closely tied to the need for positive self-reflection (Littrell, 1990). According to Leary (2007), whether an individual is unique enough to put distance between herself or himself and others has a significant impact on self-enhancement evaluation. Also, S. Y. Lee, Gregg, and Park (2013) argued that the novelty and distinctiveness attached to a product, such as "ultraslim genuine leather case" or "limited edition," appeal to consumers because they feel their self-view is elevated through the product consumption. Thus, we expected that a consumer who perceives novelty value in EIDs is likely to perceive that the consumption of EIDs enhances self-view confidence, and formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: The novelty value of ethnic-inspired designs will have a positive effect on the perception that consuming ethnic-inspired designs enhances self-view confidence.

Although the conceptual framework of image theory does not prescribe it, we tested whether individuals' personal values influence what they value in a product. We expected such a relationship, given that *personal values* often serve as a standard or criterion for influencing evaluations of, or choices about, persons, ideas, and objects (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2001). Personal values are found to be significant in these evaluations, as they define the values or attributes that individuals seek in a product (Doran, 2009). Consumers tend to view the value of products that correspond positively to their personal values (Gao et al., 2009). Based on this reasoning, we posited that consumers with cultural openness and seeking personal

style would be likely to evaluate positively the values of aesthetics and novelty associated with EIDs. We therefore formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Personal values (i.e., cultural openness and seeking personal style) will have positive effects on the evaluations of product values (i.e., aesthetic and novelty values) associated with ethnic-inspired designs.

Effect of Trajectory Image on Strategic Image (Plan)

Consumer decision making is guided by a goal (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). Specifically, the motivation to achieve a person's desired goal (e.g., self-enhancement) through relevant cues (e.g., EIDs) drives her or his future behavior toward objects with such cues, for example, fashion incorporating EIDs (Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, & Tanner, 2008). The positive belief that consuming certain products enables individuals to identify and improve their self-view confidence increases their purchasing intention toward such products (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). We thus expected that the more consumers perceive consuming EID as enhancing self-view confidence, the more they would exhibit purchase intention toward EIDs. We therefore formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: The extent to which one perceives that consuming ethnic-inspired designs enhances self-view confidence will have a positive effect on the intention to purchase a product with ethnic-inspired designs.

Method

Participants

We tested our conceptual model in the context of EIDs of women's clothing. We found participants via a web survey distributed by a U.S. marketing research firm to its female consumer panel. Upon completion of the survey, which was approved by the IRB at one of the southeastern universities in the United States, we received 1,153 responses for analyses. Ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 67 years (*Mdn* = 36 years). The majority of respondents were White American (73.7%), with the rest African-American (8.5%), Asian (8.5%), Hispanic (6.0%), Native American (1.6%), and other (1.7%). Marital status among participants was: married (50.0%), single (37.1%), and separated (12.9%). The largest group (37.5%) of the respondents had full-time jobs, followed by being unemployed (35.2%), having part-time jobs (18.6%), and other (8.7%). The participants' income brackets were as follows: $20,000–39,000 (23.4%), $40,000–59,999 (23.2%), less than $20,000 (16.3%), $60,000–79,999 (13.9%), $80,000–99,999 (11.6%), and $100,000 or more (11.6%), with the median income category being $40,000–59,999.

Stimuli

To select visual stimuli for our study, we identified EID images from websites based on overall shapes and motifs, and then obtained 40 images that reflected influences from China, India, Thailand, and Japan. Major portions of faces and legs were excluded from the images because they may have caused possible bias in responses. To ensure that clothing designs were Asian-inspired, we solicited evaluations from experts in consumer science and design areas and reduced the EID images to 16. We also conducted two focus groups in one of the northeastern universities in the United States, with six students majoring in fashion design in each group, and selected the final eight images for the main survey.

Data Collection

In the main survey, one set of two images was randomly distributed to each participant to obtain responses to product value image (i.e., aesthetics and novelty), trajectory image (i.e., self-enhancement), and strategic image (i.e., purchase intention). We also obtained responses on personal value image (i.e., cultural openness and personal style) and demographic information. We provided a manipulation check statement, "These styles are designed with ethnic influences," and found a mean score of 5.51 (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 =

strongly agree), indicating the successful manipulation of the stimuli.

Measures

All measures were adapted from prior studies and measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The cultural openness scale items were adapted from S.-E. Lee and Littrell (2006), and Sharma, Shimp, and Shin (1994); personal style from S.-E. Lee and Littrell (2006); perceived aesthetics from Argo and Main (2008), and Bell, Holbrook, and Solomon (1991); perceived novelty from Unger and Kernan (1983); self-enhancement from Rosenberg (1965); and purchase intention from Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal (1991). Table 1 illustrates the measurement items.

Table 1. *Measurement Model*

Construct	Items	SL	CR
Cultural openness	I think about issues that affect the whole planet (e.g., global warming, ecological sustainability, and overpopulation).	.627	.862
	I like learning about ways of life in different parts of the world.	.822	
	I have a strong desire for overseas travel.	.756	
	I would like to know more about foreign cultures and customs.	.903	
Personal style	It is important to me that consumer goods are authentic, rather than imitation.	.551	.845
	When I shop, I want to know where a product came from, how it was made, and who made it.	.645	
	I like to create a unique, personal style for myself.	.856	
	I enjoy having craft and art objects around me.	.737	
	I like creating a unique style in my clothing, rather than following the latest fashion.	.802	
Perceived aesthetics	These styles are nice looking.	.953	.984
	These styles are pleasing.	.966	
	These styles are attractive.	.966	
	These styles are appealing.	.970	
	These styles have good appearance.	.959	
	These styles are beautiful.	.909	
Perceived novelty	I perceive novelty from these styles.	.843	.948
	These styles satisfy my sense of curiosity.	.945	
	These styles offer novel experiences.	.944	
	I feel as though I'm exploring new worlds.	.889	
Self-enhancement	These styles would help me to feel better about myself.	.958	.984
	These styles would help me to be more proud of myself.	.974	
	These styles would help me to have more respect for myself.	.976	
	These styles would enhance my self-esteem.	.953	
	These styles would help me to have a more positive attitude toward myself.	.952	
Purchase intention	I have a likelihood of purchasing these styles.	.965	.979
	I would consider buying these styles.	.966	
	I would buy these styles.	.976	

Note. SL = standardized loading, CR = composite reliability score.

Results

The measurement and structural models were tested by LISREL 8.80 with the maximum likelihood estimation method. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to test our measurement model and evaluated convergent and discriminant validities. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with six constructs and 27 items, and the result indicated a good model fit: the comparative fit index (CFI) = .986, the nonnormed fit index (NNFI) = .984, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .072. Convergent validity was supported by all factor loadings exceeding the threshold of 0.50 and composite reliabilities of all constructs exceeding .70 (see Table 1). Discriminant validity was also supported by the finding that average variance extracted values were greater than shared variances of all possible pairs

of the latent variables (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Average Variance Extracted and Discriminant Validity*

Variable of interest	CO	PS	PA	PN	SE	PI
CO	**.614**					
PS	.396	**.528**				
PA	.208	.149	**.910**			
PN	.276	.203	.575	**.821**		
SE	.183	.157	.406	.699	**.927**	
PI	.230	.165	.591	.699	.706	**.939**

Note. CO = cultural openness, PS = personal style, PA = perceived aesthetics, PN = perceived novelty, SE = self-enhancement, PI = purchase intent. Diagonal entries in bold show the average variance extracted by the construct and off-diagonal entries represent the variance shared (squared correlation) between constructs.

All hypotheses were tested by structural equation modeling. The structural model showed satisfactory model fit indices: CFI = .976, NNFI = .973, and RMSEA = .087. Figure 2 depicts the pathways of the structural model. In terms of the effects of personal value image on trajectory image, cultural openness ($\gamma 31$ = -.063, $p > .05$) and personal style ($\gamma 32$ = .124, $p > .05$) did not affect self-enhancement, and therefore did not support Hypotheses 1 and 2. However, the effects of product value image on trajectory image were significant. Perceived aesthetics ($\beta 31$ = .115, $p < .001$) and novelty ($\beta 32$ = .967, $p < .001$) influenced self-enhancement, supporting Hypotheses 3 and 4. The effects of personal value image on product value image were significant, supporting Hypothesis 5. Cultural openness affected perceived aesthetics ($\gamma 11$ = .658, $p < .001$) and novelty ($\gamma 21$ = .745, $p < .001$). Personal style also affected perceived aesthetics ($\gamma 12$ = .212, $p < .05$) and novelty ($\gamma 22$ = .279, $p < .001$) toward EIDs. Finally, trajectory image influenced strategic image; self-enhancement was a significant predictor of purchase intention ($\beta 43$ = .887, $p < .001$) toward EIDs, supporting Hypothesis 6.

We also found that product value images served as important mediators in the structural model, such that the direct paths from personal value images to self-enhancement were not significant ($p > .05$). The role of mediators was further assessed with the bootstrap resampling analysis. As illustrated in Table 3, all path coefficients depicted in Figure 2 were within the confidence intervals of the bootstrap results (Hayes, 2013). Bootstrap confidence intervals of significant paths did not contain zero, except for the path from personal style to perceived aesthetics ($\gamma 12$). While $\gamma 12$ was significant (γ = .212, $p < .001$) with the empirical sample, the confidence intervals of this path included zero for the bootstrap sample. The bootstrap results confirmed the role of novelty as a mediator but did not support the mediating role of aesthetics.
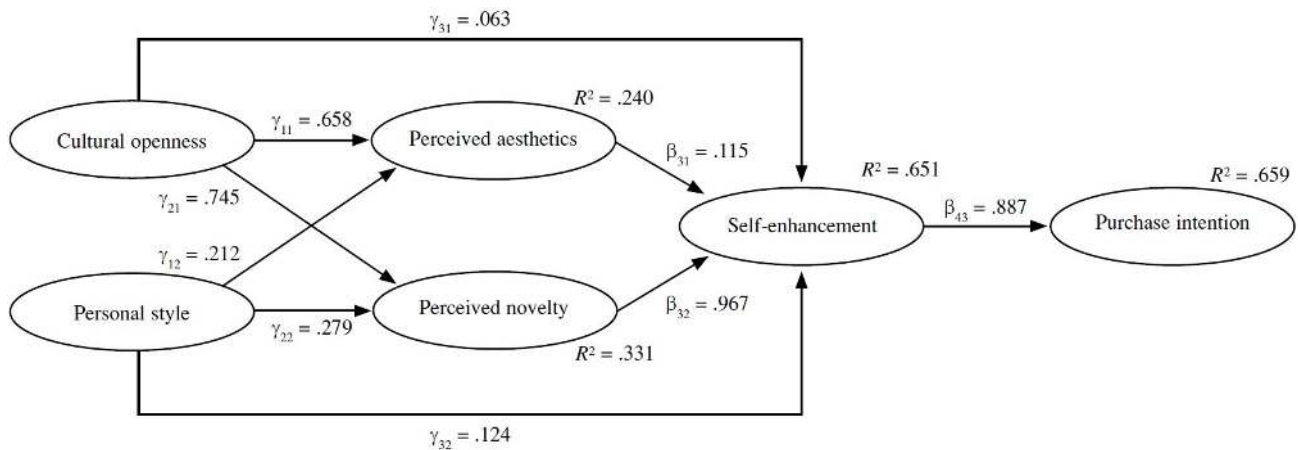
Figure 2. *SEM path diagram.*

Table 3. *Bootstrap Result: Confidence Interval*

Sample	γ_{11}	γ_{12}	γ_{21}	γ_{22}	γ_{31}	γ_{32}	β_{31}	β_{32}	β_{43}
Empirical	.658	.212	.745	.279	-.063	.124	.115	.967	.887
Boot	.665	.206	.751	.278	-.067	.127	.117	.967	.886
CI low	.489	-.049	.590	.039	-.170	.002	.059	.887	.853
CI high	.841	.461	.912	.517	.036	.252	.175	1.048	.919

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Discussion

Conceptual contributions and practical implications of our study are as follows. First, we investigated the value mechanism of EID consumption among mainstream consumers in the United States. Despite the growing trend of EID appealing to mainstream consumers, little effort has been made to understand how and why they purchase fashion items with EID. Further, previous scholars researching EID mostly focused on acculturation (Gbadamosi, 2012; Kim & Arthur, 2003) and hedonic and emotional evaluations of EID, such as pleasure, delight, and satisfaction (Bu, Kim, & Son, 2013; Y. Lee et al., 2009). Not much investigation had been undertaken into understanding the purchase decisions of EID from the perspective of pursuing the goal of enhancing self-view confidence. This omission surprises us, given the significant roles that self-related values and motivations play in consumer decision making (He & Mukherjee, 2007). Our study fills this void.

Our findings confirm that the more an individual perceives that consuming EID enhances self-view confidence, the more likely that individual is to purchase products with EID. This finding corroborates the argument of Gao et al. (2009) that consumers are motivated to purchase products that are expected to enhance their self-perception. This result sheds light on the merit of depicting in advertising and communication strategies the self-enhancement aspect of wearing EID. As much as emphasizing the attribute-level beauties of EID products, storytelling about someone who has become more confident by consuming EID would be an effective way to communicate and promote the value of EID.

Further, we identified how self-oriented values (i.e., personal values and product values) interplay to affect self-directed goal pursuit in the context of consuming EID. First, the results of our study reveal that product

values (i.e., aesthetic and novelty) of EID have direct and positive influences on enhancing self-view confidence via EID consumption. These results are in line with Venkatesh and Meamber's (2006) finding that the aesthetic appeal of ethnic products helps consumers build positive self-perception, and Lynn and Harris's (1977) finding that the consumption of unique products tends to make consumers feel new and different from others, which in turn helps enhance their self-perception. These findings suggest that brands gain by highlighting, as opposed to underplaying, in their merchandise assortment and display the novelty value of EID and their distinctive aesthetics. One way to effect this would be to coordinate items with EID with basic, toned-down colors and everyday staple items. For example, Dior has displayed its ethnic-inspired jackets coordinated with jeans in the show window of its flagship shop, which drew attention to the uniqueness and distinctiveness of EIDs portrayed in their jackets.

We also found direct and significant effects of personal values (i.e., cultural openness and personal style) on judging the product values of EID. That is, those with a high level of cultural openness and of seeking personal style are likely to see EID products as beautiful and novel. This implies that when segmenting and targeting mainstream consumers for EID products, brand managers and retailers need to build strategies to increase cultural openness and the desire to seek personal style. To do this, they could host promotional events featuring arts and artifacts, cultural celebrations, and global issues, along with the history and heritage that EID incorporates. We further investigated the role of product values in mediating the effects of personal values on self-enhancement. Although the mediating role of aesthetic value was not clear, the mediating role of novelty value was found to be significant. This suggests that designers and merchandisers dealing with EID products can benefit from highlighting EID's novelty value, particularly when targeting consumers with high propensities for cultural openness and seeking personal style.

Our study has several limitations that lead us to suggest recommendations for future studies. First, as this study confines its context to female apparel products, it would be interesting to see if our research model could be extended to different retail categories, such as home furnishings and fashion accessories. Second, future researchers could investigate whether male consumers in the United States respond in a similar vein. Future scholars could also consider including consumption goals other than self-enhancement and exploring what other goal pursuits have a significant impact on consumers' purchase behavior toward EIDs. We hope that our findings, along with these suggestions, encourage researchers to explore further the dynamics between mainstream consumers' goal-pursuits and purchase decisions in the context of diverse ethnic products.

Acknowledgements

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