

Regional differences in Chinese consumers' product purchase criteria and evaluation of Chinese versus Western brands

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Abstract

Purpose – Country-level marketing strategies are increasingly unreliable in emerging markets, and treating nationally diverse consumers as homogeneous might be misleading. This study examines how intra-national market heterogeneity shapes consumer evaluations by comparing Chinese consumers' product purchase criteria and their evaluations of Chinese versus Western brands across Beijing (Tier 1), Wuhan (Tier 2), and Harbin (Tier 3). It also tests whether the city tier moderates the link between purchase criteria and brand evaluations.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey of 1,585 adult consumers was collected via stratified sampling across the three cities. Product purchase criteria and perceived brand evaluations were measured on five shared attributes (quality, trust, reliability, image, price). Regional differences were assessed with MANOVA/ANOVA, and moderation was tested with regression-based interaction analysis.

Findings – Consumers in higher-tier cities (Beijing and Wuhan) reported significantly higher product purchase criteria than those in Harbin. Perceived evaluations of Western brands were highest in Beijing, whereas Wuhan consumers rated Chinese brands more favorably. City tier significantly moderated the criteria-to-evaluation link: Tier 1 consumers exhibited higher criteria but relied less on them when evaluating brands, while Tier 2 and Tier 3 consumers relied more heavily on these criteria.

Originality/value – This study reconceptualizes market heterogeneity by shifting from country-level comparisons to intra-national segmentation, demonstrating the intricate interplay between the (1) criteria-to-evaluation link, (2) city-tier variations, and (3) brand origin. It highlights the need for differentiated, region-sensitive marketing strategies in China's tiered urban system and offers guidance for market entry and expansion in emerging markets.

Keywords Market stratification, Market fragmentation, Transitional economy, Comparative research, Brand preference, Consumer culture, Information processing

Paper type Research article

Contemporary brand competition unfolds within nationally heterogeneous markets, making country-level generalizations insufficient for guiding international strategy. China presents a notable empirical context: Western brands' historical advantages have diminished as Chinese domestic brands have rapidly gained ground, propelled by economic growth, digital transformation, and rising consumer confidence (Long *et al.*, 2022). However, most empirical research continues to treat China and other large emerging economies as essentially

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homogeneous markets, underestimating the profound socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity across urban tiers (Hossain *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, fine-grained evidence is still needed on how current Chinese consumers evaluate brands across regions, which product purchase criteria (PPC) they prioritize, and whether the weight consumers place on PPC when forming perceived brand evaluations (PBE) varies across tiered local market structures and different brand origins.

The present study, therefore, frames China as a focal case with mechanisms, such as market sophistication, international exposure, and retail infrastructure, shared with other emerging markets (Bakker, 2016). Specifically, this study aims to examine regional differences in Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Chinese versus Western brands across representative cities spanning different tiers. Under this context, PPC is defined as consumers' attribute-based priorities (e.g., quality, trust, reliability, image, and price) used to appraise products and brands, and PBE refers to the cognitive-affective assessments of brands on those same attributes. Building on the cognitive-affective model of decision-making and brand credibility perspectives, PPC can be positioned as an antecedent of PBE. However, the *strength* of this criteria-to-evaluation link might depend on urban contexts or regional conditions (e.g., market sophistication and international exposure) and may differ between Chinese versus Western brands.

This study establishes two primary objectives. The *first objective* examines regional differences in Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Chinese versus Western brands across representative cities of various city tiers. The *second objective* further investigates whether regional variations among the representative Chinese cities moderate the relationship between local consumers' PPC and their PBE for Chinese versus Western brands. Examining this moderation effect is particularly crucial, as it can reveal whether regional contexts modify how consumers apply purchase criteria during brand evaluations.

This study's contributions are threefold. First, it refines consumer evaluation theory by demonstrating that the link between attribute priorities and brand evaluation can be context-contingent within a single country. Second, it advances global-local branding research by demonstrating that city-tier dynamics can differentially shape evaluations of Chinese versus Western brands, thereby challenging assumptions of uniform Western brand advantages or undifferentiated local preferences. Third, it can inform market segmentation practices by providing evidence that regionally adaptive positioning, rather than one-size-fits-all strategies, is necessary to align with Chinese consumers' heterogeneous PPC and PBE across Chinese city tiers.

Literature review and hypotheses formulation

Evolving Chinese brand preferences

A notable contemporary challenge Western brands face is the changing brand preferences among Chinese consumers. In recent years, preferences among Chinese consumers have shifted significantly across various product categories, influenced by factors such as sustained economic growth, digital transformation, increased international exposure, AI boom, and changing cultural values (Zhao and Zhou, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2026a). While Western brands dominated consumer preferences a decade ago, current trends reflect a growing appreciation of domestic Chinese brands, which could significantly influence the market performance of both Western and local companies (Hossain *et al.*, 2024). Given the dynamic and competitive nature of the Chinese market, Western brands must continually adapt to maintain their appeal and competitive positioning. Companies seeking success in China, therefore, need to remain sensitive and responsive to these changes to meet the evolving demands and expectations of Chinese consumers.

Previous studies have suggested that consumers typically perceive Western brands as superior in product categories characterized by strong functional features and extensive performance-related benefits (Bakker, 2016). In contrast, local brands are often preferred in

product categories rich in cultural symbolism (Steenkamp and De Jong, 2010). However, these earlier findings may no longer be applicable given the rapid evolution of brand preferences among Chinese consumers and notable regional disparities within the country (Zhao and Zhou, 2017). Furthermore, as global competition intensifies and purchasing power expands in emerging markets, companies increasingly focus on expansion opportunities across different tiers of Chinese cities (Thakur and Kaur, 2020). These developments suggest that origin-based generalizations are increasingly insufficient: consumers' brand judgments may hinge less on provenance *per se* and more on the specific attributes they prioritize (Keller and Swaminathan, 2020). This motivates an attribute-centered framework that links PPC to PBE.

From product purchase criteria (PPC) to perceived brand evaluation (PBE)

Consumers typically structure brand preferences and evaluations around attribute-based standards that function as cognitive benchmarks. In line with the cognitive-affective model of consumer decision making, such cognitive appraisals can shape affective responses and overall judgments (Caro and García, 2007). Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes PPC as a set of essential evaluative standards or attributes that consumers often apply to determine a brand's overall value and suitability relative to their needs and expectations (Keller and Swaminathan, 2020). Additionally, PBE entails the cognitive and affective appraisal of brand attributes that often subsequently guide consumers' purchase intentions (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Therefore, positioning PPC as an antecedent to PBE follows directly from this theoretical logic (Kotler and Keller, 2016).

Accumulating evidence suggests that PPC may inform PBE, which in turn shapes purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and consumer-brand relationships (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Specifically, consumers routinely utilize criteria such as quality, trust, reliability, image, and price as cognitive benchmarks to interpret and evaluate brand attributes (Erdem and Swait, 2004). For example, a consumer prioritizing reliability will favor brands that consistently deliver dependable performance. Similarly, consumers who value brand image highly will perceive brands that cultivate prestigious or socially desirable images positively. Consequently, alignment between brand attributes and consumer purchase criteria can significantly impact consumer attitudes and perceptions, shaping overall brand evaluation and loyalty, purchase intentions, and consumer-brand relationships (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Keller and Swaminathan, 2020). Nevertheless, the extent to which consumers apply these criteria is unlikely to be uniform across contexts. Instead, it may largely depend on market experience and urban contexts. In China, pronounced heterogeneity across city tiers can be a salient context in which the PPC-PBE linkage may vary.

City-tier heterogeneity in China

Over the past several decades, China's accelerated economic growth has led to the establishment of tier-based classifications for cities, reflecting significant economic, social, and cultural disparities. These tiers, often categorized as Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3, demonstrate pronounced differences in economic development, international exposure, infrastructure development, and consumer purchasing power (Bilby *et al.*, 2020). Tier 1 cities, exemplified by Beijing, represent highly developed economic hubs characterized by substantial global integration, sophisticated consumer behaviors, and mature retail environments. Tier 2 cities, such as Wuhan, typify transitional economic environments balancing emerging dynamism and moderate international exposure. Tier 3 cities, exemplified by Harbin, typically reflect relatively lower economic development levels, limited global brand penetration, and more traditional, localized consumer behaviors, distinguishing them from their higher-tier counterparts (Barton *et al.*, 2013; Bilby *et al.*, 2020).

China's rapid urbanization and increasing regional differentiation call for tailored marketing strategies that can effectively address consumer heterogeneity. This heterogeneity also requires both scholars and practitioners to treat city tiers as a pragmatic segmentation lens

for theorizing and examining systematic variation in Chinese consumers' marketplace responses across urban contexts (Bilby *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, consumer behavior frameworks emphasize that behavioral intentions and evaluative judgments should be embedded in socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions rather than formed in a vacuum (Liu *et al.*, 2026b). The theory of planned behavior, for example, remains a leading intention-based framework in consumer research. It has continuing explanatory value across purchase domains and contexts, particularly when contextual contingencies are incorporated instead of assuming uniform decision-making rules (Rozenkowska, 2023). Similarly, consumer culture theory highlights how market-mediated meanings, culturally patterned identities, and local social structures jointly shape what consumers perceive as valuable and trustworthy, thereby conditioning how brand information is interpreted and translated into brand evaluations (Arnould *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, investigating whether and how PPC and PBE differ across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 cities can yield actionable insights for strategic brand management and market targeting, especially in a market where consumer aspirations, value orientations, and competitive landscapes are evolving rapidly and unevenly across locations. Although the importance of city-tier segmentation is widely acknowledged, empirical evidence remains comparatively thin regarding the specific mechanisms through which city tiers shape Chinese consumers' PPC and PBE, particularly when comparing Chinese versus Western brands on shared attribute dimensions (Hossain *et al.*, 2024; Bilby *et al.*, 2020). To address this gap, the present study focuses on five shared evaluative attributes, quality, trust, reliability, image, and price, so that PPC and PBE are aligned at the attribute level. These attributes are consistently identified in the literature as core elements of brand evaluation and consumer-based brand equity (Rojas-Lamorenna *et al.*, 2022; Zhao *et al.*, 2021).

Grounded in contemporary perspectives on consumer knowledge accumulation and information processing, the present study considers and hypothesizes the moderating role of city tier. Specifically, Tier 1 market environments often expose consumers to denser brand touchpoints, broader product assortments, and richer informational infrastructures throughout the consumer decision-making process. These conditions are likely to accelerate the development of marketplace knowledge and brand familiarity (Santos and Martins Gonçalves, 2021). As knowledge and familiarity increase, brand evaluation tends to become more schema-based and experience-driven. In other words, consumers are more likely to rely on stored beliefs, prior usage experiences, and brand-related narratives, thereby reducing the incremental diagnostic value of applying a general set of purchase criteria when evaluating a specific brand (Garrido-Castro *et al.*, 2025). In addition, high-variety environments tend to encourage simplifying decision strategies that conserve cognitive resources, making consumers more inclined to depend on heuristic cues and category-level expectations rather than systematically re-weighting multiple criteria for each judgment (Chernev *et al.*, 2015).

In contrast, Tier 2 and Tier 3 contexts often involve comparatively fewer brand encounters and less exposure to international markets, which may widen knowledge gaps and heighten perceived uncertainty. Under such conditions, consumers are more likely to rely on observable, attribute-based standards (e.g. quality and trust) as decision rules and to engage in more effortful information processing to mitigate perceived risk (Tajdini, 2021; Kitchen *et al.*, 2014). This reasoning suggests that PPC may translate more strongly into PBE in lower-tier cities. Conversely, the PPC-PBE linkage may be weaker in higher-tier cities, even when consumers report higher overall standards, because brand evaluations are more readily supported by accumulated familiarity and low-effort processing routes (El Hedhli and Zourrig, 2023; Cacioppo *et al.*, 2018).

Beyond documenting regional differences in PPC and PBE, this study aims to show that city-tier context shapes how strongly consumers translate their evaluative standards into brand judgments, thereby extending consumer evaluation theory from static cross-group comparison to context-contingent judgment formation. Accordingly, the theorized role of the city tier extends beyond mean-level differences in Chinese consumers' standards and evaluations.

It also concerns how strongly consumers convert those standards into brand judgments across distinct urban market contexts. To integrate these predictions, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the present study, summarizing the hypothesized relationships among product purchase criteria (PPC), perceived brand evaluation (PBE), and city tier.

Building on this framework, the study's first objective is to examine regional differences in Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Chinese versus Western brands across the representative cities of various city tiers, and proposes three hypotheses:

- H1.* Significant differences exist in Chinese consumers' PPC among the three cities.
- H2.* Significant differences exist in Chinese consumers' PBE of Chinese brands among the three cities.
- H3.* Significant differences exist in Chinese consumers' PBE of Western brands among the three cities.

The second objective further investigates whether regional variations among these three representative cities moderate the relationship between consumers' PPC and their PBE of Chinese versus Western brands. Therefore, two additional hypotheses are proposed:

- H4.* Regional differences among the three cities moderate the relationship between Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Chinese brands.
- H5.* Regional differences among the three cities moderate the relationship between Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Western brands.

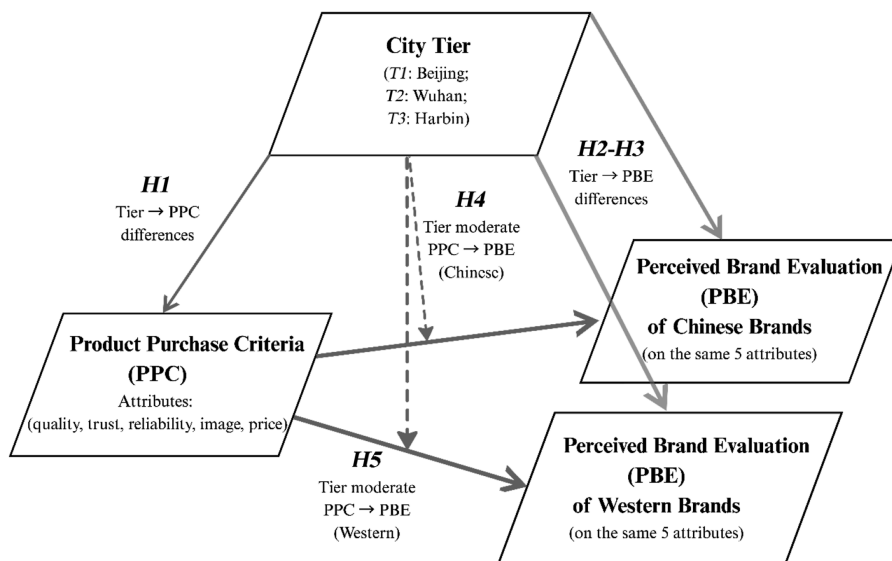


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking product purchase criteria to perceived brand evaluation across Chinese city tiers. **Note(s):** Solid arrows indicate direct effects tested in the hypothesis set, as well as the main effects of PPC on PBE for Chinese and Western brands. Dashed arrows denote moderation (interaction) effects in which city-tier conditions the strength of the PPC-PBE relationship, separately for Chinese and Western brands. PPC and PBE are assessed on shared attribute dimensions to ensure construct alignment at the attribute level (quality, trust, reliability, image, and price)

Methods

Participants

To determine the appropriate sample size for the current study, a power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Version 3; [Faul et al., 2007](#)); the detailed procedure and results are presented in [Appendix A](#). The predetermined sample size was achieved, resulting in a final sample comprising 1,585 participants ($N_{\text{Female}} = 1,036$, $N_{\text{Male}} = 549$) from three cities in China: Beijing ($N_{\text{Tier } 1} = 234$), Wuhan ($N_{\text{Tier } 2} = 480$), and Harbin ($N_{\text{Tier } 3} = 871$). The sample included adult consumers aged between 18 and 80 years ($M = 23.38$, $SD = 7.55$). Eligibility criteria of participants required Chinese nationality and purchase experience with branded products from either Chinese or Western brands. The three focal cities were selected because they are widely recognized as prototypical representatives of their respective tiers and provide meaningful variation in market maturity, infrastructural development, and international exposure ([Bilby et al., 2020](#); [Rogoff and Yang, 2024](#)). In other words, the three cities were analytically selected as fixed contextual cases rather than treated as a random sample of all Chinese cities. The sampling process was stratified by city to ensure sufficient observations for regional comparisons, and the resulting city-level N s supported both statistical power and estimation precision for the planned analyses. The unequal city sample sizes reflect allocation decisions commonly used in stratified designs, in which oversampling is employed to increase the precision of subgroup estimates and to capture better within-stratum heterogeneity ([Lohr, 2021](#); [Valliant et al., 2018](#)). Specifically, this study oversampled the Tier 3 city because consumer experiences and brand encounters in lower-tier markets can be more variable across individuals and retail contexts, and increased sampling density in such strata improves the stability of estimated effects and facilitates more conceptually meaningful comparisons with higher-tier cities ([Rogoff and Yang, 2024](#); [Valliant et al., 2018](#)). As the survey was distributed online, the resulting sample was disproportionately young and female. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted with caution, since they are based on an adult online consumer sample rather than population-representative estimates for Chinese consumers at large.

Procedures

Prior to the commencement of data collection, the study protocol was reviewed and approved by an academic ethics committee to ensure full compliance with institutional ethical research guidelines in China. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. The consent process included an introduction to the purpose of the survey, assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, and confirmation that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Data were collected through a structured online survey administered between August and October 2023. The survey link was disseminated via multiple channels, including widely used social media platforms (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) and popular e-commerce websites (e.g., Tmall and <http://JD.com>), to reach a diverse pool of respondents. To ensure data quality, responses were screened for completeness, and entries exhibiting evident response biases (e.g., invariant answers across all items) were excluded from the final analysis.

Measures

[Appendix B](#) presents the survey instruments used to assess product purchase criteria (PPC) and perceived brand evaluation (PBE) for both Chinese and Western brands. These constructs were measured using a contextually adapted version of a 15-item scale developed by [Hossain et al. \(2024\)](#). All survey items were closed-ended and employed a 5-point Likert scale. Specifically, PPC was assessed by asking participants to indicate the importance they assign to five key attributes, product quality, brand trust, brand reliability, brand image, and product price, when purchasing branded products, using a scale ranging from (1) “highly unimportant” to (5) “highly important”. PBE was measured by asking respondents to evaluate both Chinese and Western brands on the same five attributes, using a scale from (1) “very low” to (5) “very

high". Consistent with the study's attribute-centered framework, quality, trust, reliability, image, and price were operationalized as shared and aligned dimensions across both PBE and PPC measures. However, because these attributes are conceptually distinct rather than reflective of a single underlying construct, they were analyzed separately in the inferential analyses rather than combined into a single latent factor.

Results

Data screening and preliminary analyses are presented in [Appendix C](#), detailing the means, standard deviations, observed ranges, and correlations among various attributes (quality, trust, reliability, image, and price) of Chinese consumers' product purchase criteria (PPC) and their perceived brand evaluation (PBE) of Chinese and Western brands, respectively. All correlations were statistically significant. Specifically, the attributes of PPC showed moderate to strong correlations with PBE of Chinese brands (ranging from 0.44 to 0.62), and weak to moderate correlations with PBE of Western brands (ranging from 0.29 to 0.57). Additionally, attributes of PBE of Chinese brands demonstrated weak to moderate correlations with those of Western brands (ranging from 0.27 to 0.48). Since each attribute was examined as its own outcome throughout the analyses, the positive inter-attribute correlation pattern is interpreted as showing that some consumers tend to apply consistently high standards across multiple purchase criteria (i.e., a general evaluative strictness), rather than implying that the attributes are interchangeable or measuring the same underlying construct.

Regional differences in consumers' PPC across three cities

As the first set of hypotheses concerned mean differences across three independent, theoretically selected city groups on observed evaluative attributes, one-way MANOVA followed by attribute-level one-way ANOVA was used as the principal inferential framework. [Hypothesis 1](#) posits significant differences in Chinese consumers' PPC across the three cities (i.e., Beijing, Wuhan, and Harbin). To test this hypothesis, a one-way MANOVA was conducted to examine the regional variations of the combined attributes of Chinese consumers' PPC. The results indicated a significant difference in Chinese consumers' PPC across the three cities in general ($F(10, 3154) = 45.73, p < 0.001$; Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.76$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.13$).

Subsequently, a series of follow-up one-way ANOVAs was conducted for each PPC attribute to determine which attributes were linked to regional variations. The results demonstrated significant differences in quality ($F(2, 1,582) = 44.05, p < 0.001$), reliability ($F(2, 1,582) = 73.34, p < 0.001$), image ($F(2, 1,582) = 6.61, p = 0.001$), and price ($F(2, 1,582) = 54.73, p < 0.001$) across the three cities. However, no statistically significant difference emerged in trust ($F(2, 1,582) = 1.33, p = 0.27$).

For further clarity, post hoc Tukey HSD tests were conducted to examine regional distinctions for each PPC attribute (see the detailed results in [Appendix D](#)). The comparisons indicated that consumers from Beijing and Wuhan had significantly higher criteria in quality, reliability, image, and price than those from Harbin; their trust ranking remained non-significant. Nevertheless, the differences between Beijing and Wuhan were not statistically significant across all attributes.

Regional differences in consumers' PBE of Chinese brands across three cities

[Hypothesis 2](#) posits significant differences in Chinese consumers' PBE of Chinese brands among the three cities. To test this hypothesis, a one-way MANOVA was conducted to examine the regional effects on the combined attributes of consumers' PBE. The results indicated a significant difference in consumers' PBE of Chinese brands across Beijing, Wuhan, and Harbin in general ($F(10, 3154) = 3.71, p < 0.001$; Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.98$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$).

Subsequently, a series of follow-up one-way ANOVA was conducted for each PBE attribute to identify specific attributes associated with regional variation. The results demonstrated significant differences in quality ($F(2, 1,582) = 3.77, p = 0.02$), trust ($F(2, 1,582) = 3.55, p = 0.03$), reliability ($F(2, 1,582) = 6.32, p = 0.002$), and image ($F(2, 1,582) = 7.67, p < 0.001$) across the three cities. However, the exception is a statistically non-significant variation in price ($F(2, 1,582) = 1.60, p = 0.20$).

Post hoc Tukey HSD tests were conducted to explore detailed regional distinctions for each attribute (see detailed results in [Appendix E](#)). The comparisons indicated that consumers from Wuhan evaluated Chinese brands' quality, trust, reliability, and image significantly higher than those from Beijing and Harbin, except for price, which remained non-significant. Nevertheless, the differences between Beijing and Harbin were not statistically significant for any PBE attribute.

Regional differences in consumers' PBE of Western brands across three cities

[Hypothesis 3](#) posits significant differences in Chinese consumers' PBE of Western brands among the three cities. To test this hypothesis, a one-way MANOVA was conducted to examine the regional effects on the combined attributes of consumers' PBE. The results indicated a significant difference in consumers' PBE of Western brands across Beijing, Wuhan, and Harbin in general ($F(10, 3156) = 3.19, p < 0.001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.98$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$).

Subsequently, a series of follow-up one-way ANOVA was conducted for each PBE attribute to identify specific attributes associated with regional variation. The results demonstrated significant differences in quality ($F(2, 1,582) = 7.72, p < 0.001$), trust ($F(2, 1,582) = 4.06, p = 0.02$), reliability ($F(2, 1,581) = 11.46, p < 0.001$), and image ($F(2, 1,582) = 5.86, p = 0.01$) across the three cities. However, the exception was a statistically non-significant variation in price ($F(2, 1,582) = 1.60, p = 0.49$).

Post hoc Tukey HSD tests were conducted to explore regional differences in each attribute (see detailed results in [Appendix F](#)). The comparisons indicated that consumers from Beijing evaluated Western brands' quality, trust, reliability, and image significantly higher than those from Wuhan and Harbin, respectively, except for price, which remained non-significant. Nevertheless, the differences between Wuhan and Harbin were not statistically significant for any PBE attribute.

Moderating effect in the relationship between PPC and PBE of Chinese brands

[Hypothesis 4](#) posits that regional differences among the three cities moderate the relationship between Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Chinese brands. Because this hypothesis focused on whether the PPC-PBE association differed across city groups, the moderation effect was examined using regression-based interaction analysis, with city specified as a multi-categorical moderator. To test this hypothesis, Model 1 of Hayes' Process Macro (version 5.0) for SPSS was employed. First and foremost, for every attribute, the analyses indicated a significant positive direct relationship between the consumers' PPC and their PBE of Chinese brands for the attribute: quality ($B = 0.38, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001$), trust ($B = 0.31, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$), reliability ($B = 0.26, SE = 0.09, p = 0.003$), image ($B = 0.31, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$), and price ($B = 0.19, SE = 0.09, p = 0.008$).

Notably, the regional variations between Beijing and the other two cities (Wuhan and Harbin) significantly moderated the relationship between the PPC and PBE of Chinese brands across all five attributes: quality ($B = -0.20, SE = 0.09, p = 0.02$), trust ($B = -0.18, SE = 0.08, p = 0.02$), reliability ($B = -0.28, SE = 0.10, p = 0.003$), image ($B = -0.16, SE = 0.07, p = 0.02$), and price ($B = -0.30, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001$). This pattern implies that consumers in Beijing place relatively lower weight on these attributes when their PPC forms PBE for domestic Chinese brands than in other cities (Wuhan and Harbin).

In contrast, the differences between Wuhan and Harbin did not significantly moderate the relationship between the PPC and PBE of Chinese brands across all five attributes: quality ($B = 0.01, SE = 0.04, p = 0.87$), trust ($B = -0.06, SE = 0.09, p = 0.06$), reliability ($B = 0.02, SE = 0.05, p = 0.73$), image ($B = -0.07, SE = 0.05, p = 0.11$), and price ($B = 0.05, SE = 0.05, p = 0.32$). These results indicate that the strength of the PPC-PBE relationship for Chinese brands is mainly consistent between Wuhan and Harbin, suggesting a comparable pattern of cognitive brand evaluation process in these two cities. Figure 2 presents an example of a simple slope analysis for the attribute reliability. Appendix G presents the remainder of the simple slope analysis, including more detailed results.

Moderating effect in the relationship between PPC and PBE of Western brands

Hypothesis 5 posits that regional differences among the three cities moderate the relationship between Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Western brands. Similarly, Model 1 of Hayes' Process Macro for SPSS was employed to test this hypothesis. First and foremost, the analyses indicated a significant positive direct relationship between Chinese consumers' PPC and their PBE of Western brands for the attribute: quality ($B = 0.36, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001$), trust ($B = 0.37, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$), reliability ($B = 0.31, SE = 0.09, p < 0.001$), image ($B = 0.27, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$), and price ($B = 0.10, SE = 0.09, p = 0.01$). However, the exception was a statistically non-significant direct relationship for the attribute price ($B = 0.10, SE = 0.09, p = 0.23$).

Notably, the differences between Beijing and the other two cities (Wuhan and Harbin) significantly moderated the relationship between the PPC and PBE of Western brands across four attributes: quality ($B = -0.19, SE = 0.09, p = 0.03$), reliability ($B = -0.26, SE = 0.10, p = 0.008$), image ($B = -0.19, SE = 0.08, p = 0.01$), and price ($B = -0.25, SE = 0.10, p = 0.01$). This pattern implies that consumers in Beijing place relatively lower weight on these attributes when their PPC forms PBE for Western brands than in the other cities (Wuhan

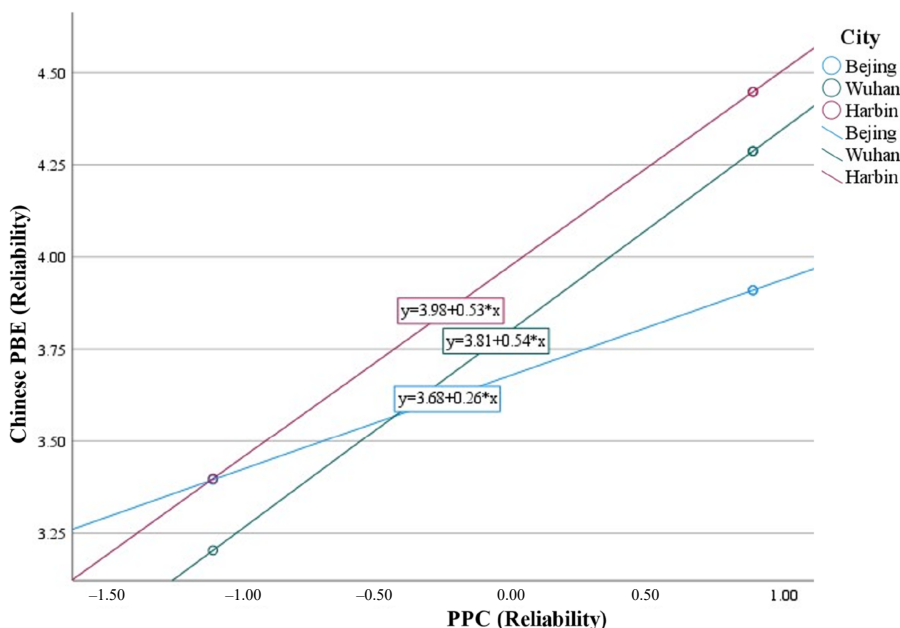


Figure 2. Simple Slope Analysis of Tier City Moderation in the Relationship Between PPC and PBE of Chinese Brands for the Attribute Reliability. **Note(s):** $N = 1,593$; PPC = product purchase criteria; PBE = perceived brand evaluation

and Harbin). The moderation effect above was not found for the attribute trust ($B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.41$).

In contrast, the differences between Wuhan and Harbin did not significantly moderate the relationship between the PPC and PBE of Western brands across five attributes: quality ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.70$), trust ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = 0.46$), reliability ($B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.32$), image ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.92$), and price ($B = -0.04$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.53$). These results indicate that the strength of the PPC-PBE relationship for Western brands is mainly consistent between Wuhan and Harbin, suggesting a comparable pattern of cognitive brand evaluation process in these two cities. Figure 3 presents an example of a simple slope analysis for the attribute image. Appendix H presents the remainder of the simple slope analysis, including more detailed results.

Discussion

The present study aims to investigate regional variations in Chinese consumers' product purchase criteria (PPC) and perceived brand evaluation (PBE) of Chinese and Western brands. Notably, distinct regional differences in PPC and PBE were observed among consumers from Beijing (Tier 1), Wuhan (Tier 2), and Harbin (Tier 3). Moreover, this study found that PPC was positively associated with PBE across all shared evaluated attributes (quality, trust, reliability, image, and price). Notably, the strength of the association varied by city tier, indicating that tier-specific market contexts moderate how consumers translate PPC into PBE.

Regional variation in Chinese consumers' PPC and PBE

The study found that consumers in Beijing and Wuhan reported significantly higher PPC than those in Harbin across key attributes, including quality, reliability, image, and price. This pattern highlights the importance of urban economic development on consumer expectations

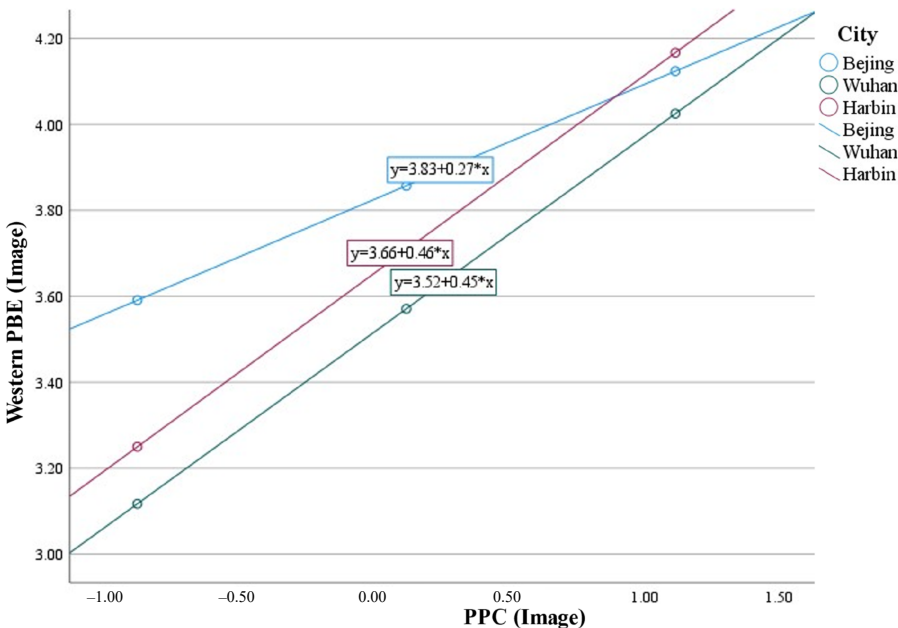


Figure 3. Simple slope analysis of tier city moderation in the relationship between PPC and PBE of Western brands for the attribute image. Note. $N = 1,593$; PPC = product purchase criteria; PBE = perceived brand evaluation

and evaluative standards (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). This finding aligns with the theoretical proposition that greater economic prosperity and broader international exposure tend to elevate consumers' purchase criteria. In economically developed cities, consumers generally experience greater purchasing power, exposure to a diverse range of brand options, and access to advanced retail environments, thereby raising their expectations and standards for product attributes (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, consumers in cities such as Beijing and Wuhan exhibit heightened sensitivity and appear to apply stricter criteria when making product purchases than those in less economically advanced regions, such as Harbin.

Moreover, the study identified distinct differences in the PBE of Chinese brands across cities, with consumers in Wuhan rating Chinese brands highest in attributes such as quality, trust, reliability, and image. This finding suggests that consumers in transitional Tier 2 urban contexts may exhibit heightened nationalistic or regional pride, which, in turn, may enhance their favorable attitudes towards domestic brands (Hossain *et al.*, 2024). In contrast, consumers in Beijing, a Tier 1 city, displayed the highest evaluations of Western brands on attributes such as quality, trust, reliability, and image compared to those in other cities. This finding reflects a more globally oriented, sophisticated consumer profile, driven by extensive international exposure and familiarity with diverse global brands (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). These findings provide important theoretical insights into how varying degrees of urbanization and international exposure differentially shape consumers' brand perceptions and evaluation processes across different tiers of Chinese cities.

Moderation of regional variation in the PPC-PBE relationship

This study revealed that PPC is associated with PBE across all various attributes for both Chinese and Western brands. This result aligns with the cognitive-affective model of consumer decision-making (Kotler and Keller, 2016). This relationship highlights the crucial role that cognitive evaluations play in shaping consumers' affective and behavioral brand responses. Notably, this research advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating that regional variation within China moderates the relationship between PPC and PBE.

Specifically, our study highlights that city-tier-specific dynamics play an essential role in consumer-brand interactions. For example, consumers in Beijing (Tier 1) assigned relatively less importance to the PPC attributes when forming their PBE than those in Wuhan (Tier 2) and Harbin (Tier 3), respectively. Consumers in higher-tier cities, such as Beijing, typically have greater market exposure, including access to a wider variety of brand options, extensive brand interactions, and richer product experiences (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). Such extensive exposure likely enables these consumers to develop greater brand familiarity and confidence in specific brands. Thus, this may enable them to rely more on emotional connections or past experiences with these brands, rather than adhering solely to generally established PPC when evaluating Chinese or Western brands. This observation suggests a shift towards more heuristic or experience-based brand evaluations among sophisticated consumers in higher-tier cities. Therefore, the weaker PPC-PBE slopes in Beijing should not be interpreted as lower standards, but rather as evidence that higher standards do not translate mechanically into brand evaluations in more sophisticated market contexts. This refinement will strengthen the interpretation of the moderation findings.

In contrast, consumers in Tier 2 and 3 cities, characterized by relatively lower international exposure and access to fewer brand options, continue to rely heavily on their traditional and general PPC when informing their PBE. For example, consumers in Wuhan (Tier 2) attributed relatively comparable importance to these criteria when forming PBE, compared with consumers in Harbin (Tier 3). This finding suggests that consumers in transitional urban environments, such as Wuhan and Harbin, consistently apply established purchase criteria without the pronounced differentiation that might be expected with greater global integration, as seen in Tier 1 cities. This observation aligns with consumer culture theory, suggesting that moderate international exposure and evolving economic conditions in lower-tier cities may

lead to the application of standardized criteria rather than heightened differentiation (Lan and Li, 2015).

Collectively, these nuanced regional differences underscore the intricate interplay between the PPC-PBE relationship and city-tier variations. These results enhance our understanding of regional consumer behavior by highlighting how varying degrees of urban development and international exposure within China's city tiers may uniquely shape consumer brand evaluation processes. Consequently, our findings extend theoretical knowledge of regional market segmentation by emphasizing the need to integrate cognitive evaluation processes with socio-economic contextual factors (Zhao and Zhou, 2017). Therefore, these insights call for a refinement of existing consumer segmentation frameworks, advocating for the inclusion of detailed, city-tier-specific dynamics to accurately reflect the differentiated impacts of globalization and economic development on consumer brand evaluation strategies across diverse urban contexts in emerging markets.

Practical implications

The study provides actionable insights for both Western and Chinese branding and marketing professionals seeking to refine their strategies across China's diverse urban markets. Firstly, the clear differences in PPC and PBE across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 cities suggest marketers need to adopt differentiated strategies based on segmented marketing frameworks rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. The significant moderating effects of city tier on the PPC-PBE relationship underscore the importance of considering differences in consumer sophistication and market exposure. For instance, brands in Tier 1 cities, such as Beijing, could benefit from relationship-based marketing strategies that emphasize sophisticated brand narratives and leverage consumer familiarity and brand experience, beyond focusing solely on product attributes. In contrast, in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, such as Wuhan and Harbin, marketing efforts should emphasize explicit, tangible product features and clearly communicate the brand's value propositions (Atsmon *et al.*, 2012). Consumers in these regions tend to rely more heavily on traditional PPC, such as quality, trust, reliability, and image, when evaluating brands. Accordingly, communication strategies that highlight these attributes are likely to be more impactful and resonate with these consumers.

Beyond indicating that differentiated strategies are advisable, the present findings specify how and why the same attribute set needs to be deployed differently across tiers. In Beijing, consumers reported higher criteria; however, the PPC-PBE slopes were systematically weaker (i.e., indicating that attribute priorities translated less directly into brand evaluations). This pattern suggests that, in Tier 1 markets, incremental gains from simply reiterating functional attributes may be limited relative to investments that build brand meaning, experience, and relationship quality. In contrast, in Wuhan and Harbin, the stronger PPC-PBE linkage indicates that clear, attribute-based signals and credible assurances (e.g., warranties, certifications, transparent pricing) are more likely to convert consumers' priorities into favorable evaluations. Therefore, the study's contribution is not only to document tier differences in criteria and evaluation levels but also to demonstrate that tier contexts systematically alter the extent to which consumers treat purchase criteria as applicable, decision-relevant evidence when forming brand evaluations.

Secondly, the distinct brand evaluative patterns identified for Chinese and Western brands suggest that brand positioning should be adapted accordingly (Paul, 2020). Western brands targeting sophisticated consumers in Tier 1 cities such as Beijing may benefit from emphasizing their global appeal, aspirational image, and heritage, as these attributes are likely to resonate with consumers' international orientation (Hossain *et al.*, 2024). In lower-tier cities, however, Western brands should place greater emphasis on communicating clear, functional value and maintaining transparency in their messaging. In contrast, domestic Chinese brands, especially when targeting Tier 2 cities such as Wuhan, may benefit from highlighting cultural relevance and appealing to national pride (Lan and Li, 2015). By aligning

their messaging with local identity and values, domestic brands can strengthen brand loyalty and deepen consumer engagement. Additionally, both Chinese and Western brands seeking expansion into lower-tier cities need to recognize the transitional nature of these regions and invest in trust-building, consumer education, and locally relevant strategies (Atsmon *et al.*, 2012). Consumers in these regions often exhibit moderate levels of international exposure and developing brand knowledge, which calls for communication approaches that are both straightforward and culturally grounded. Consistently delivering core brand attributes may enhance brand evaluations and support the development of long-term consumer loyalty in these emerging markets.

Strengths and limitations

A key contribution of this study is that it moves beyond the common, implicitly national-level assumption of Western brand superiority by demonstrating that brand equity judgments in China are systematically contingent on regional market contexts. Using a large tier-comparative sample from Beijing (Tier 1), Wuhan (Tier 2), and Harbin (Tier 3), the analyses show that city tier shapes consumer responses in two distinct ways, directly observable in our results. First, consumers in the Tier 1 context reported higher overall purchase criteria, indicating more stringent evaluative standards. Second, and more importantly, the PPC-PBE slopes were consistently weaker in Beijing than in Wuhan and Harbin, revealing that higher standards in Tier 1 markets do not translate directly into brand evaluations. Accordingly, the study's practical contribution is not a generic recommendation that "Tier 1 should use narratives and Tier 2/3 should use attributes", but an evidence-based account of why the same attribute set yields different evaluative leverage across tiers. By documenting both tier differences in levels (PPC and PBE) and tier differences in the strength of the criteria-to-evaluation translation, the present study provides a more fine-grained and actionable understanding of regional heterogeneity in the formation of brand equity among Chinese consumers.

Despite these strengths, several limitations warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design does not permit strong causal inference and cannot capture how consumers' PPC and PBE evolve over time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal or repeated-measures design to capture temporal dynamics in purchase criteria and brand evaluations as economic, cultural, and technological conditions change. Second, the study was designed around three analytically selected cities, with one focal city representing each tier. This design is useful for theory-driven contextual comparison, but it does not support robust estimation of city-level random effects and cannot capture the full heterogeneity that may exist within each tier. For this reason, the present study adopted a fixed-comparison framework rather than multilevel modelling. Future research can include a larger number of cities within each tier, which would be better positioned to estimate between-city variance and cross-level interactions. Third, while the overall sample is large, it is disproportionately composed of younger respondents and includes more women than men, likely reflecting the online recruitment channels used. Accordingly, the findings should not be interpreted as demographically representative of all Chinese consumers, particularly older cohorts and less digitally engaged populations. Future work could broaden the age distribution and expand data collection settings to improve population coverage (Zhao and Zhou, 2017). Fourth, the unequal city sample sizes resulted from intentional stratified oversampling, particularly in the Tier 3 city of Harbin, to improve subgroup precision. However, such an imbalance may have asymmetrically affected statistical precision across groups and may have limited the detection of within-group heterogeneity in the smaller Tier 1 sample. Future studies can therefore employ multiple cities per tier, recruit a broader, more balanced demographic sample, and, where appropriate, conduct robustness checks using balanced subsamples or weighting against known population margins. Fifth, future work using broader multi-item reflective scales and larger multigroup samples may profitably examine measurement invariance using SEM-based procedures to complement the

present attribute-level analysis. Sixth, socioeconomic characteristics such as income, education, and occupation were not included as covariates in the current analyses. As these factors may shape both purchase standards and brand evaluations, future research could incorporate individual-level socioeconomic controls to better distinguish macro-level tier effects from micro-level resource constraints and consumption opportunities. Finally, comparative investigations in other emerging economies would help clarify whether the regional patterns identified here are specific to China or reflect more general consumer behavior regularities in developing markets (Paul, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores significant regional variations in Chinese consumers' PPC and PBE across Beijing, Wuhan, and Harbin, highlighting the moderating role of city-tier regional contexts in the PPC-PBE relationship. It emphasizes the necessity for tailored, context-sensitive marketing strategies that reflect distinct consumer expectations, market sophistication, and exposure levels across China's urban tiers. By strategically aligning brand attributes with nuanced regional consumer insights, firms can achieve stronger brand resonance and competitive advantage in China's dynamic and diverse marketplace.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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