

Cultural Psychology of Chinese Brand Meaning and Brand Trust: Cultural Models across Four Southeast Asian Countries

Weixin Zhu

Ningbo University of Finance & Economics

Liaoniao Zhang

Ningbo University of Finance & Economics

Huan Ding

Ningbo University of Finance & Economics

Lan Liu

liulan@nbufe.edu.cn

Ningbo University of Finance & Economics

Article

Keywords: Cultural Model Theory, Chinese brands, brand trust, cultural friction, cross-cultural psychology, latent class analysis

Posted Date: September 7th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10684553/v1>

License:   This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This study examines how consumers organize the cultural meaning of Chinese brands and how these configurations relate to brand trust and future purchase intention across Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Grounded in Cultural Model Theory, the analysis used 940 adult respondents and a mixed-indicator latent class model based on instrumental meaning, symbolic representation, cultural integration, and cultural friction. Five cultural models were retained: Integrative-Affirmative, Symbolically Engaged-Friction Aware, Receptive-Friction Aware, Pragmatic-Moderate, and Culturally Cautious. Their posterior modal distributions differed substantially across the four national samples. Assignment-based ordinal logistic regressions showed that cultural-model membership was significantly associated with brand trust, while higher trust was associated with stronger future purchase intention. A secondary bootstrap analysis also indicated significant statistical indirect associations through trust for all four class contrasts with the Pragmatic-Moderate reference class. The findings extend Cultural Model Theory to a transnational consumer setting by showing that Chinese brand meanings are organized through heterogeneous configurations rather than a single cultural-attitude continuum. Because the design was cross-sectional and full cross-national class-response invariance was not supported, the observed class distributions and indirect pathways should be interpreted as sample-based statistical associations rather than fixed national cultural types or causal mechanisms.

Introduction

The cultural meaning consumers assign to Chinese brands extends beyond immediate functional attributes. Foreign brands can be interpreted through price, quality, and technological capability, but also through symbolic associations, culturally recognizable representations, expectations of appropriateness, and perceived relationships with the local social environment. Cultural psychology treats such judgments as embedded in shared systems of meaning that guide perception and evaluation [1, 2]. Cultural Model Theory (CMT) is particularly relevant because it conceptualizes cultural knowledge as organized structures through which individuals interpret social reality, while allowing these meanings to be shared unevenly within communities [3, 4]. Marketplace behavior can therefore be understood not only as economic choice but also as culturally situated psychological judgment [5].

Chinese brands provide a useful setting for examining this process because their international expansion exposes consumers to products, visual symbols, language, design conventions, and brand narratives originating from China. International branding research shows that consumers distinguish among global, local, and culturally foreign brand meanings, and that perceived globalness and localness are associated with brand evaluation and behavioral responses [6–8]. Digital and social-commerce environments further increase exposure to culturally diverse information, making cultural knowledge and distance relevant to purchase-related interpretation [9]. Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam offer a comparative setting in which consumers may encounter many of the same Chinese brands while interpreting them within different sociocultural environments.

Regional proximity does not imply a uniform organization of brand meaning. Cultural psychology cautions against treating nations as internally homogeneous psychological units because meaningful variation occurs both within and between societies [1, 4]. Consumers may emphasize instrumental attributes, recognize Chinese cultural symbols, differ in their acceptance of Chinese cultural elements and preference for local integration, or experience cultural friction through inappropriate translation, incongruent imagery, stereotyping, or disregard for local conventions. Cross-border consumption research shows that culturally situated consumers can evaluate marketplace communication differently [10], while cultural-model research demonstrates that the same symbolic material can acquire different meanings under different interpretive frameworks [11]. These responses may therefore be better represented as configurations of culturally organized meaning than as national averages or isolated variables.

Such configurations may also matter for brand trust. Trust reflects confidence that a brand can be relied upon [12], and perceived trustworthiness and expertise can reduce uncertainty surrounding brand claims and choice [13]. In cross-cultural consumption, uncertainty also concerns whether an externally originating brand understands local expectations and communicates in culturally compatible ways. Evidence from e-commerce and cross-border settings indicates that cultural context and perceived trustworthiness are associated with purchase-related judgments [10, 14]. Culturally organized brand meanings may therefore provide an interpretive basis for trust, which may in turn be associated with future purchase intention.

Two limitations motivate the present study. First, much international branding research is variable-centered, examining cultural values, globalness/localness, trust, or purchase intention as separate predictors [7, 8], whereas CMT suggests that culturally relevant knowledge is structured through interconnected representations [2]. Second, nationality is often used as the primary representation of culture, potentially obscuring heterogeneous cultural models within countries and similar configurations across national boundaries [4]. The present study therefore identifies configurations of Chinese brand meaning before examining their distribution across Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam and their associations with brand trust and future purchase intention. In doing so, it extends CMT to a transnational consumer setting and treats national context as a sociocultural condition rather than a direct proxy for culture.

Theoretical foundation and research hypotheses

The conceptual framework integrates CMT with a trust-based perspective on consumer judgment. Instrumental representations, symbolic cultural representations, cultural-integration orientations, and experiences of cultural friction provide the empirical basis for identifying cultural models of Chinese brand meaning. Brand trust is positioned as a proximal psychological judgment associated with future purchase intention, while national context is treated as a condition that may shape the prevalence of cultural models rather than as culture itself.

Cultural Model Theory

CMT proposes that cultural knowledge is organized into interconnected representations that help individuals interpret objects, situations, relationships, and expected action [3, 15]. Cultural meaning emerges through the interaction of socially shared representations and accumulated individual experience [2]. Cultural models are therefore psychological in operation but social in origin and distribution: they can be widely shared without being uniform. This perspective differs from approaches that treat culture as a fixed national characteristic. Cross-cultural evidence shows substantial variation in psychological models within as well as across national societies [4], and the same symbolic material can be interpreted through different culturally organized frameworks [11].

This configuration-oriented view is well suited to transnational consumer environments. Foreign brands are interpreted through prior experience, recognizable symbols, expectations of appropriate representation, and locally available cultural knowledge rather than encountered as culturally neutral objects [1, 5]. Accordingly, this study treats cultural models as patterned configurations of brand-related meanings, not national cultural types. It also avoids assuming that a statistical class is automatically a cultural model in the strong cognitive-anthropological sense; instead, configurations of culturally relevant survey responses are treated as empirical representations consistent with hypothesized cultural-model organization.

Cultural models of Chinese brand meaning

Chinese brand meaning is unlikely to be represented by a single dimension. International branding research shows that consumers organize brand perceptions through functional characteristics as well as global, local, foreign, and culturally meaningful positioning cues [6-8]. The present framework therefore distinguishes four related domains. Instrumental brand meaning captures functional associations such as affordability, technological advancement, product diversity, durability, fashionability, and rapid updating. Symbolic cultural representation captures recognition of culturally marked symbols, including Chinese characters, traditional visual motifs, festivals, architecture, or other representations associated with China. Their psychological significance depends on the cultural knowledge through which they are interpreted [11].

Cultural integration orientation concerns how consumers negotiate cultural distinctiveness and contextual compatibility. Acceptance of Chinese cultural elements does not necessarily imply a preference for unchanged representations; consumers may value recognizably Chinese content while expecting adaptation to locally meaningful forms. Evidence on brand globalness/localness and cross-cultural social commerce similarly suggests that consumers can respond to multiple cultural positioning cues at once [8, 9]. Cultural friction captures perceived incompatibility between external cultural representation and local expectations, including inappropriate translation, incongruent colors or imagery, stereotyping, or disregard for local conventions. It is conceptually distinct from general dislike because it refers specifically to culturally interpreted mismatch [10, 11].

These domains may combine in qualitatively different ways. Strong symbolic recognition may coexist with high cultural acceptance, predominantly instrumental evaluation, or repeated friction. The theoretical question is therefore whether distinguishable configurations emerge across individuals rather than whether a single indicator is high or low. Because CMT does not specify the number or form of such configurations in advance, the study uses an exploratory configuration approach rather than imposing predefined consumer types.

RQ1: What distinct cultural models of Chinese brand meaning can be empirically identified among consumers in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam?

Cultural models and brand trust

Brand trust provides a psychological link between culturally organized meaning and consumer evaluation. Trust reflects confidence that a brand or exchange partner is reliable under uncertainty [12, 16], while brand credibility research shows that trustworthiness and expertise influence consideration and choice [13]. Relational-exchange research likewise positions trust as a basis for value and behavioral loyalty [17]. In cross-cultural consumption, uncertainty concerns not only product performance but also whether a foreign brand understands local expectations and communicates culturally meaningful material appropriately. Thus, configurations combining functional confidence, positive cultural recognition, integration, or friction may correspond to different levels of trust rather than any single cultural indicator determining trust.

Cross-cultural evidence supports this expectation: cultural context and perceived trustworthiness interact in e-commerce environments [14], and global/local brand perceptions are associated with downstream evaluations [8]. Because the substantive cultural-model profiles are not specified a priori, the hypothesis concerns differences among empirically identified configurations rather than predicting a direction for each class.

H1: Membership in distinct cultural models of Chinese brand meaning is significantly associated with different levels of brand trust.

Brand trust and future purchase intention

Brand trust and future purchase intention are conceptually distinct: trust concerns confidence in brand reliability, whereas purchase intention concerns expressed willingness to buy in the future. Trust can nevertheless reduce uncertainty surrounding anticipated interaction and is consistently associated with relational and behavioral outcomes [12, 17]. Cross-cultural e-commerce and branding research likewise links trustworthiness and culturally relevant brand evaluations with purchase-related intentions [8, 9, 14].

H2: Higher brand trust is positively associated with stronger future purchase intention toward Chinese brands.

Trust may also occupy an intermediate psychological position between cultural-model membership and future purchase intention. Culturally organized meaning concerns how consumers interpret brand-related information; trust summarizes an evaluative judgment about reliability and appropriateness; purchase intention represents a subsequent behavioral orientation. The proposed pathway is therefore statistical rather than causal because the present study is cross-sectional.

H3: Brand trust accounts for a significant indirect association between cultural-model membership and future purchase intention toward Chinese brands.

National context and cross-national heterogeneity

Cultural knowledge is socially distributed, so the prevalence of particular models may vary across environments in which people encounter different symbolic systems, practices, discourse, and expectations [2, 15]. National context can therefore influence the circulation and accessibility of cultural meanings without producing a uniform psychological response. Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam are treated here as sociocultural environments rather than fixed cultural personalities: the same configuration may occur in several countries, and multiple configurations may coexist within one country [4]. Cross-cultural consumer research similarly suggests that national setting can be associated with culturally meaningful brand interpretations [8, 9, 14]. Because the available evidence does not support directional predictions about which configuration should dominate in each country, the comparison is formulated as a research question.

RQ2: How does the prevalence of the identified cultural models of Chinese brand meaning vary across Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam?

The cross-national analysis therefore examines differences in class prevalence while treating nationality as contextual information rather than a direct measure of culture.

Methods

Study design and participants

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine cultural models of Chinese brand meaning and their associations with brand trust and future purchase intention across Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Country-specific survey versions used parallel item content and response structures; item mapping across datasets was harmonized using the common Chinese-language anchor labels retained in the survey exports. The four national samples are treated as sociocultural contexts for comparison rather than as homogeneous representations of culture.

The raw datasets contained 945 responses. For the present adult-consumer analysis, five respondents reporting ages below 18 years (Malaysia, $n = 1$; Vietnam, $n = 4$) were excluded because guardian-consent information was not available in the analytical export, yielding a final analytical sample of 940 respondents: Malaysia ($n = 206$), Thailand ($n = 288$), Indonesia ($n = 232$), and Vietnam ($n = 214$). Two

additional implausible age entries (1,800 and 2,008) were retained as cases but coded as missing for age-adjusted analyses.

Survey measures and variable operationalization

The questionnaire contained categorical, multiple-response, and ordinal items rather than conventional multi-item reflective psychological scales. The four conceptual domains were operationalized through six summary dimensions and 30 observed indicators used for latent class analysis: instrumental brand meaning (six Q11 binary items), traditional-cultural acceptance (five Q17 endorsement indicators), symbolic cultural recognition (ten Q18 binary indicators), cultural integration orientation (Q19, five categories), preferred Chinese-element proportion (Q20, five categories), and cultural friction (seven Q21 binary indicators). Brand trust (Q12) and future purchase intention (Q13) were each measured with a single 1–5 ordinal item and were not used to define the latent classes.

For latent class estimation, the six Q11 attributes, five Q17 endorsement options, ten Q18 cultural-symbol indicators, and seven Q21 friction indicators were retained as binary indicators, while Q19 and Q20 were modeled as five-category indicators. This treatment preserved the multi-response structure of Q17 observed in some country exports rather than forcing it into a single reflective scale. For descriptive summaries only, selected Q17 response levels were coded from 5 (very positive) to 1 (negative) and averaged when more than one option had been endorsed. Higher Q12 and Q13 scores indicated greater brand trust and stronger future purchase intention, respectively.

Age, gender, Chinese-brand familiarity (number of listed brands recognized), and prior Chinese-brand experience (number of product categories previously purchased) were included as covariates in adjusted models. Income was not included in pooled regression models because the country-specific income categories were expressed in different currencies and non-equivalent ranges.

Data collection, harmonization, and ethical procedures

Survey responses were collected between 22 June and 31 July 2026, with country-specific collection windows. Participants were recruited through online survey distribution and local social networks in the four countries using a non-probability convenience sampling strategy, and participation was voluntary. Country-specific questionnaire versions were developed from a common source questionnaire and retained parallel item content, response options, and coding structures. A formal back-translation protocol was not implemented; therefore, complete cross-language equivalence was not assumed and is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. Before pooled analysis, multiple-response fields were harmonized into common binary indicators, ordinal response directions were standardized, and category labels were aligned across the four survey versions. Platform metadata such as IP address and completion time were retained for data-quality inspection but were not used as stand-alone post hoc exclusion criteria. Analytical datasets were de-identified before statistical analysis. Cross-national response-structure comparability was evaluated empirically with the multi-group latent class analysis rather than assumed from parallel survey wording alone.

Participation was voluntary and the data were used only for academic research. Ethical approval was obtained under approval number NBUFE-SAD-REC-2026-001. Participants were informed of the study purpose, confidentiality protections, and their right to discontinue participation before submitting the questionnaire. The analyses reported here use only the adult analytical sample described above.

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted in Python 3.13 using NumPy, SciPy, and statsmodels. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics and the observed cultural indicators. Cross-national differences were examined using chi-square tests, Cramér's V, and Kruskal–Wallis tests as appropriate, and Spearman correlations were used for preliminary associations among the core variables.

A mixed-indicator latent class analysis (LCA) was estimated by maximum likelihood with an expectation–maximization algorithm implemented in Python. The model included 28 binary indicators (Q11, Q17, Q18, and Q21) and two five-category indicators (Q19 and Q20). One- through six-class solutions were compared using AIC, BIC, sample-size-adjusted BIC (aBIC), entropy, class size, and substantive interpretability. Thirty random starts were used for each solution to reduce the risk of local maxima. The five-class solution was retained because it produced the lowest BIC, high entropy, and no very small class.

For cross-national comparability, a multi-group five-class model with common class-response probabilities but country-specific class prevalences was compared with a fully country-specific specification. Information criteria and likelihood-ratio evidence did not point uniformly to complete invariance: BIC and BIC favored the common-response specification, whereas AIC and the likelihood-ratio test favored greater country-specific flexibility. Full cross-national invariance was therefore not assumed; the pooled five-class solution was used as a parsimonious descriptive comparison framework with context-specific expression.

Posterior modal class assignments were used in downstream regression analyses because classification quality was high (entropy = 0.927). Classification uncertainty was not propagated into the regression standard errors; H1 and H3 estimates are therefore interpreted as assignment-based associations rather than uncertainty-corrected latent-class effects. H1 was tested with ordinal logistic regression predicting brand trust from modal cultural-model assignment while controlling for country, age, gender, Chinese-brand familiarity, and prior Chinese-brand experience. H2 was tested with an ordinal logistic model predicting future purchase intention from brand trust while retaining modal cultural-model assignment and the same covariates. For H3, a secondary regression-based indirect-pathway analysis treated the observed 1–5 trust and purchase-intention scores as ordered numeric variables so that class-specific $a \times b$ indirect coefficients could be estimated on a common scale; 5,000 bootstrap resamples were used to obtain 95% confidence intervals. Because this secondary analysis uses a different coefficient scale from the ordinal-logit H2 model, its indirect coefficients are interpreted as scale-specific statistical associations rather than odds ratios or causal mediation effects.

Results

Sample characteristics and data quality

The final analytical sample comprised 940 adults from Malaysia (n = 206), Thailand (n = 288), Indonesia (n = 232), and Vietnam (n = 214); 65.4% were women. Among 938 respondents with plausible age values, mean age was 29.64 years (SD = 8.45; median = 28). Five respondents younger than 18 years were excluded, and two implausible age entries were treated as missing in age-adjusted analyses (Table 1).

The national samples also differed in demographic composition and prior Chinese-brand exposure. Brand familiarity and prior product-category experience were therefore included as covariates in adjusted models.

Table 1. Sample characteristics across the four national samples.

Characteristic	Malaysia	Thailand	Indonesia	Vietnam	Overall
Sample size, n	206	288	232	214	940
Sample proportion, %	21.9	30.6	24.7	22.8	100.0
Age, M (SD)	29.94 (8.57)	29.53 (8.03)	34.20 (8.53)	24.51 (5.38)	29.64 (8.45)
Female, n (%)	137 (66.5)	237 (82.3)	116 (50.0)	125 (58.4)	615 (65.4)
Chinese-brand familiarity, median (IQR)	6 (5–8)	3 (2–3)	4 (2–7)	4 (2–5)	3 (2–6)
Prior Chinese-brand product categories, median (IQR)	4 (3–4)	2 (2–3)	2.5 (2–4)	2 (1–4)	3 (2–4)

Note. Five respondents younger than 18 years were excluded from the adult analytical sample. Age statistics exclude two additional implausible age values treated as missing. Brand familiarity is the number of listed Chinese brands recognized; prior experience is the number of Chinese-brand product categories previously purchased.

Cross-national descriptive and association analysis

Cross-national differences in cultural indicators

All six descriptive cultural-model dimensions differed across countries (Supplementary Table S1). The largest difference concerned symbolic cultural representation, $H(3) = 241.65$, $p < 0.001$, $\epsilon^2 = 0.255$, with Malaysian respondents recognizing the broadest range of Chinese cultural symbols. Cultural friction also differed substantially, $H(3) = 172.97$, $p < 0.001$, $\epsilon^2 = 0.182$; Malaysia showed the lowest median friction, whereas Thailand and Indonesia showed the highest. Significant differences were also observed for instrumental meaning, preferred Chinese-element proportion, traditional-cultural acceptance, and cultural

integration orientation. The pattern was therefore multidimensional rather than reducible to a single local-foreign evaluation [8, 10].

Associations among core variables

Core-variable associations were generally consistent with the conceptual framework (Supplementary Table S2 and Supplementary Figure S1). Instrumental and symbolic meaning were moderately related (Spearman’s $\rho = 0.516$, $p < 0.001$), as were traditional-cultural acceptance and integration orientation ($\rho = 0.400$, $p < 0.001$). Cultural friction was negatively related to preferred Chinese-element proportion ($\rho = -0.301$, $p < 0.001$). Brand trust was positively associated with integration orientation ($\rho = 0.325$), traditional-cultural acceptance ($\rho = 0.288$), and instrumental meaning ($\rho = 0.210$), and negatively with friction ($\rho = -0.121$; all $p < 0.001$). Trust showed its strongest outcome-related association with future purchase intention ($\rho = 0.382$, $p < 0.001$) [14].

Identification of cultural models

Latent class enumeration

One- through six-class models were compared (Table 2). Fit improved markedly through the five-class solution, which produced the lowest BIC (33,525.68), high entropy (0.927), and no very small class. Although AIC and sample-size-adjusted BIC were lower for six classes, the five-class model was retained because it provided the best balance of BIC, classification quality, class size, parsimony, and substantive interpretability.

Table 2. Fit indices for the latent class models.

No. of classes	Log-likelihood	AIC	BIC	aBIC	Entropy	Smallest class (%)
1	-17672.58	35417.16	35591.61	35477.28	—	100.0
2	-16920.09	33986.18	34339.93	34108.09	0.920	23.0
3	-16469.75	33159.50	33692.55	33343.20	0.921	15.9
4	-16305.90	32905.81	33618.15	33151.29	0.909	11.2
5	-16133.02	32634.04	33525.68	32941.31	0.927	12.9
6	-16012.61	32467.22	33538.16	32836.28	0.875	10.5

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; aBIC = sample-size-adjusted Bayesian information criterion. Bold indicates the retained solution.

Psychological profiles of the retained classes

The retained solution contained five configurations rather than a simple high-to-low continuum (Figure 2; detailed means in Supplementary Table S3). The Integrative-Affirmative Model (15.5%) combined strong

instrumental and symbolic engagement, positive cultural acceptance and integration, the highest preferred Chinese-element proportion, and very low friction. The Symbolically Engaged-Friction Aware Model (12.9%) showed the strongest instrumental and symbolic engagement but comparatively high friction, indicating that extensive cultural recognition did not necessarily imply cultural comfort.

The Receptive-Friction Aware Model (19.7%) combined the highest traditional-cultural acceptance and integration orientation with moderate instrumental/symbolic engagement and non-trivial friction. The Pragmatic-Moderate Model (32.1%) combined modest engagement, generally positive acceptance, a more balanced Chinese-local composition, and moderate friction. The Culturally Cautious Model (19.8%) showed the lowest cultural acceptance, comparatively low integration orientation, and the lowest mean brand trust.

Cross-national distribution of cultural models

Cross-national comparability

Multi-group models were used to evaluate whether a common class-response structure could support comparison across countries (Table 3). BIC and sample-size-adjusted BIC favored the shared-response specification, whereas AIC and the likelihood-ratio test favored greater country-specific flexibility; complete equality of class-response parameters was rejected, $\chi^2(540) = 1,799.95$, $p < 0.001$. Full cross-national invariance was therefore not supported. The pooled five-class solution was retained only as a parsimonious descriptive framework, with country differences interpreted as context-specific sample patterns rather than identical latent structures.

Table 3. Comparison of multi-group latent class specifications.

Model	Log-likelihood	Parameters	AIC	BIC	aBIC
Common class-response structure	-15694.97	196	31781.93	32731.72	32109.24
Country-specific class-response structure	-14794.99	736	31061.98	34628.55	32291.07

Note. The constrained model allowed class prevalence to vary across countries while retaining a common class-response structure. Lower values indicate better relative fit.

Class prevalence across Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam

Posterior modal class distributions differed markedly across the four samples, $\chi^2(12) = 737.65$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér’s $V = 0.511$ (Figure 3; detailed frequencies in Supplementary Table S4). The Integrative-Affirmative Model was concentrated in Malaysia (68.0%), Thailand was dominated by the Pragmatic-Moderate Model (52.8%), Indonesia was more dispersed between Pragmatic-Moderate (37.5%) and Receptive-Friction Aware (33.2%), and Vietnam showed the highest prevalence of the Culturally Cautious

Model (39.3%). These modal-assignment differences are descriptive because classification uncertainty was not propagated and the samples were not designed to estimate national population prevalence.

Cultural models and brand trust

Brand trust differed across the five cultural models, $H(4) = 101.39$, $p < 0.001$. In the adjusted ordinal logistic model, modal cultural-model assignment made a significant overall contribution to trust, likelihood-ratio $\chi^2(4) = 81.89$, $p < 0.001$, supporting H1 (Table 4). Relative to the Pragmatic-Moderate Model, higher trust was associated with assignment to the Integrative-Affirmative (OR = 1.86, 95% CI [1.02, 3.41]) and Receptive-Friction Aware models (OR = 1.89, [1.31, 2.73]), whereas lower trust was associated with the Symbolically Engaged-Friction Aware (OR = 0.54, [0.33, 0.89]) and Culturally Cautious models (OR = 0.36, [0.25, 0.52]).

The contrast between the Integrative-Affirmative and Symbolically Engaged-Friction Aware profiles indicates that extensive recognition of Chinese cultural symbols was not sufficient for higher trust when accompanied by greater cultural friction, consistent with context-sensitive accounts of cultural trust judgment [14, 18]. A descriptive visualization is provided in Supplementary Figure S2.

Table 4. Ordinal logistic regression predicting higher brand trust.

Predictor / contrast	OR	95% CI	p
Integrative–Affirmative vs. Pragmatic–Moderate	1.86	1.02–3.41	0.043
Symbolically Engaged–Friction Aware vs. Pragmatic–Moderate	0.54	0.33–0.89	0.015
Receptive–Friction Aware vs. Pragmatic–Moderate	1.89	1.31–2.73	<0.001
Culturally Cautious vs. Pragmatic–Moderate	0.36	0.25–0.52	<0.001
Malaysia vs. Thailand	2.07	1.19–3.62	0.010
Indonesia vs. Thailand	5.57	3.69–8.42	<0.001
Vietnam vs. Thailand	2.17	1.49–3.18	<0.001
Age	0.99	0.97–1.00	0.118
Female vs. male	0.87	0.67–1.15	0.329
Chinese-brand familiarity	0.93	0.85–1.01	0.071
Prior Chinese-brand experience	1.25	1.10–1.42	<0.001

Note. The Pragmatic–Moderate Model and Thailand were the reference categories; male was the gender reference category. OR > 1 indicates greater odds of reporting a higher brand-trust category. Models controlled for age, gender, Chinese-brand familiarity, and prior Chinese-brand experience. Two implausible age values were excluded from age-adjusted regressions ($n = 938$). Class contrasts are

based on posterior modal assignments; classification uncertainty is not propagated into these regression standard errors.

Brand trust and future purchase intention: an indirect psychological pathway

Brand trust was positively associated with future purchase intention after adjustment for class membership, country, age, gender, familiarity, and prior experience: each one-level increase in trust was associated with 1.85 times the odds of a higher purchase-intention category (95% CI [1.59, 2.16], $p < 0.001$), supporting H2 (Table 5).

The secondary bootstrap analysis also supported H3. Relative to the Pragmatic-Moderate Model, significant statistical indirect associations through trust were observed for the Integrative-Affirmative (0.060, 95% bootstrap CI [0.001, 0.125]), Symbolically Engaged-Friction Aware (-0.075, [-0.137, -0.020]), Receptive-Friction Aware (0.053, [0.007, 0.101]), and Culturally Cautious models (-0.129, [-0.196, -0.073]). These coefficients are scale-specific statistical associations, not odds ratios or evidence of causal mediation; the pathway is visualized in Supplementary Figure S3.

Table 5. Brand trust, future purchase intention, and bootstrap indirect effects of cultural-model membership.

Analysis / contrast	Effect	95% CI	OR	p / inference
Panel A. H2: Ordinal logistic regression	—	—	—	—
Brand trust → Future purchase intention	0.617	[0.461, 0.772]	1.85	<0.001
Panel B. H3: Bootstrap indirect pathway	—	—	—	—
Brand trust → Future purchase intention (b path)	0.259	[0.194, 0.323]	—	Significant
Integrative–Affirmative → Trust → Future purchase intention	0.060	[0.001, 0.125]	—	Significant
Symbolically Engaged–Friction Aware → Trust → Future purchase intention	-0.075	[-0.137, -0.020]	—	Significant
Receptive–Friction Aware → Trust → Future purchase intention	0.053	[0.007, 0.101]	—	Significant
Culturally Cautious → Trust → Future purchase intention	-0.129	[-0.196, -0.073]	—	Significant

Note. The Pragmatic–Moderate Model was the reference class. Panel A reports the primary ordinal logistic estimate for H2. Panel B reports the secondary regression-based indirect-pathway analysis using observed 1–5 trust and purchase-intention scores; 95% confidence intervals for indirect associations were derived from 5,000 bootstrap resamples. All adjusted models included country, age, gender, Chinese-brand familiarity, and prior Chinese-brand experience ($n = 938$). Panel B coefficients are on a

different scale from the ordinal-logit coefficient in Panel A and should not be compared numerically. Class contrasts are based on posterior modal assignments and do not propagate classification uncertainty.

Discussion

Cultural models as configurations of Chinese brand meaning

The five-class solution shows that Chinese brand meaning was organized as qualitatively different configurations rather than a single positive-negative continuum. Integrative-Affirmative combined positive acceptance, strong Chinese-element preference, and minimal friction, whereas Symbolically Engaged-Friction Aware combined the strongest instrumental and symbolic engagement with substantial friction. Receptive-Friction Aware further showed that acceptance and integration can coexist with cultural mismatch. These patterns support the CMT view that culturally meaningful knowledge is organized through interconnected representations [2, 3] and complement branding research on multiple functional, symbolic, and identity-related cues [19, 20].

The distinction between cultural visibility and cultural compatibility is therefore central. Symbolic recognition did not guarantee local appropriateness, while cultural distinctiveness could coexist with low friction in the Integrative-Affirmative profile. This interpretation is consistent with research on authenticity, cultural stereotypes, and context-dependent symbolic communication [21–23]. The profiles extend CMT to a transnational brand setting by showing that engagement, acceptance, integration, and friction can be organized differently within the same marketplace.

Cross-national heterogeneity and the negotiation of global–local meaning

The class distributions also differed sharply across Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. These differences should not be treated as fixed national cultural traits; rather, comparable configurations circulated with different prevalence across sociocultural environments, consistent with evidence of substantial within- and between-country psychological variation [4]. The findings also caution against treating localization as a simple choice between more local and more foreign content. Perceived globalness and localness can coexist, culturally appropriate communication matters, and consumer orientation, cultural identity, and country stereotypes can influence responses to imported brands [24–29]. Cross-national differences are therefore better interpreted as differences in the prevalence of meaning configurations than as homogeneous national responses.

Cultural-model membership, brand trust, and behavioral orientation

Cultural-model membership was systematically associated with trust after adjustment for national context and individual background characteristics. Integrative-Affirmative and Receptive-Friction Aware assignments were associated with higher trust than the Pragmatic-Moderate reference class, whereas Symbolically Engaged-Friction Aware and Culturally Cautious assignments were associated with lower trust. This again suggests that cultural exposure alone is insufficient: symbolic engagement accompanied by friction may be less favorable than configurations characterized by acceptance and integration. The pattern is consistent with research linking culturally situated interpretation, authenticity, and trust with consumer evaluation [14, 18, 30, 31]. Trust was also strongly associated with future purchase intention, and all four class contrasts showed significant statistical indirect associations through trust, consistent with trust-based models of relational evaluation [12, 17]. Because the data are cross-sectional, these indirect results are noncausal.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations constrain interpretation. The cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal ordering or causal mediation. Brand trust and future purchase intention were measured with single ordinal items. The convenience samples were not nationally representative and differed in demographic composition and Chinese-brand exposure. Full cross-national class-response invariance was not supported, so modal class distributions are descriptive rather than population prevalence estimates. Downstream regressions used posterior modal assignments without propagating classification uncertainty, and harmonization cannot eliminate all language- or format-related response effects, particularly for Q17 [32]. Future research should use more representative samples, validated multi-item outcome measures, longitudinal or experimental designs, formal cross-language equivalence procedures, and mixture-model extensions that accommodate partial invariance and classification uncertainty.

Conclusion

This study identified five cultural models of Chinese brand meaning across 940 adults in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Their modal distributions differed across national samples, and cultural-model assignment was associated with brand trust, which in turn was associated with future purchase intention. The results extend CMT by showing that transnational brand meaning can be organized through heterogeneous combinations of recognition, acceptance, integration, and friction. Because cross-national invariance was incomplete and the design was cross-sectional, country differences and indirect pathways should be interpreted as context-specific, noncausal associations. Overall, culturally effective brand communication appears to depend less on cultural visibility alone than on compatibility between cultural distinctiveness and locally meaningful expectations.

Declarations

Ethics statement

The study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the **Ethics Committee of the School of Art and Design, Ningbo University of Finance & Economics** (Protocol No. NBUFE-SAD-REC-2026-001). All procedures were performed in accordance with the relevant institutional guidelines and regulations. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. All participants included in the analytical sample were adults.

Data availability

The de-identified analytical datasets and analysis code supporting the conclusions of this article are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Raw survey exports are not publicly available because they contain platform metadata and participants did not provide consent for public data sharing.

Author contributions statement

W.Z. conceived and designed the study, developed the methodology, conducted the formal analyses, performed data curation and visualization, and wrote the original draft. L.Z. contributed to the investigation, resource coordination, validation, and critical revision of the manuscript. H.D. contributed to the investigation, data validation, and review and editing of the manuscript. L.L. supervised the study, administered the project, acquired funding, provided resources, and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

The authors declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

References

1. Markus, H. R. & Kitayama, S. Culture and the self: implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychol. Rev.* **98**, 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224> (1991).

2. Strauss, C. & Quinn, N. *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139167000>
3. D'Andrade, R. G. *The development of cognitive anthropology* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139166645>
4. Vignoles, V. L. et al. Beyond the East-West dichotomy: global variation in cultural models of selfhood. *J. Exp. Psychol. Gen.* **145**, 966–1000. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000175> (2016).
5. Masuda, T. et al. Culture and business: how can cultural psychologists contribute to research on behaviors in the marketplace and workplace? *Front. Psychol.* **11**, 1304.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01304> (2020).
6. Alden, D. L., Steenkamp, J. B. E. M. & Batra, R. Brand positioning through advertising in Asia, North America, and Europe: the role of global consumer culture. *J. Mark.* **63**, 75–87.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299906300106> (1999).
7. Steenkamp, J. B. E. M., Batra, R. & Alden, D. L. How perceived brand globalness creates brand value. *J. Int. Bus. Stud.* **34**, 53–65. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jibs.8400002> (2003).
8. Safeer, A. A., Zhou, Y., Abrar, M. & Luo, F. Consumer perceptions of brand localness and globalness in emerging markets: a cross-cultural context. *Front. Psychol.* **13**, 919020.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.919020> (2022).
9. Hu, S. & Zhu, Z. Effects of social media usage on consumers' Future purchase intention in social commerce: a cross-cultural empirical analysis. *Front. Psychol.* **13**, 837752.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.837752> (2022).
10. Han, L. & Han, X. Improving the service quality of cross-border e-commerce: how to understand online consumer reviews from a cultural differences perspective. *Front. Psychol.* **14**, 1137318.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1137318> (2023).
11. Zou, J., Fuller, C. & Wang, L. The interplay between cultural models and metaphor understanding: a cross-cultural cognitive perspective. *Front. Psychol.* **16**, 1539784.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1539784> (2025).
12. Chaudhuri, A. & Holbrook, M. B. The chain of effects from brand trust and brand affect to brand performance: the role of brand loyalty. *J. Mark.* **65**, 81–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.65.2.81.18255> (2001).
13. Erdem, T. & Swait, J. Brand credibility, brand consideration, and choice. *J. Consum. Res.* **31**, 191–198. <https://doi.org/10.1086/383434> (2004).
14. Tikhomirova, A. et al. How culture and trustworthiness interact in different e-commerce contexts: a comparative analysis of consumers' intention to purchase on platforms of different origins. *Front. Psychol.* **12**, 746467. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.746467> (2021).
15. Holland, D. & Quinn, N. (eds) *Cultural models in language and thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
16. Morgan, R. M. & Hunt, S. D. The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *J. Mark.* **58**, 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299405800302> (1994).

17. Sirdeshmukh, D., Singh, J. & Sabol, B. Consumer trust, value, and loyalty in relational exchanges. *J. Mark.* **66**, 15–37. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.66.1.15.18449> (2002).
18. Hallikainen, H. & Laukkanen, T. National culture and consumer trust in e-commerce. *Int. J. Inf. Manag.* **38**, 97–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2017.07.002> (2018).
19. Gürhan-Canli, Z., Sarial-Abi, G. & Hayran, C. Consumers and brands across the globe: research synthesis and new directions. *J. Int. Mark.* **26**, 96–117. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.17.0063> (2018).
20. Steenkamp, J. B. E. M. Global versus local consumer culture: theory, measurement, and future research directions. *J. Int. Mark.* **27**, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069031X18811289> (2019).
21. Moulard, J. G., Raggio, R. D. & Folse, J. A. G. Disentangling the meanings of brand authenticity: the entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **49**, 96–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-020-00735-1> (2021).
22. Rindell, A. & Santos, F. P. What makes a corporate heritage brand authentic for consumers? A semiotic approach. *J. Brand Manag.* **28**, 545–558. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-021-00243-9> (2021).
23. Davvetas, V. & Halkias, G. Global and local brand stereotypes: formation, content transfer, and impact. *Int. Mark. Rev.* **36**, 675–701. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-01-2018-0017> (2019).
24. Özsomer, A. The interplay between global and local brands: a closer look at perceived brand globalness and local iconness. *J. Int. Mark.* **20**, 72–95. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.11.0105> (2012).
25. Li, D., Kreuzbauer, R., Chiu, C. Y. & Keh, H. T. Culturally polite communication: enhancing the effectiveness of the localization strategy. *J. Cross Cult. Psychol.* **51**, 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022119893464> (2020).
26. Guo, X. Living in a global world: influence of consumer global orientation on attitudes toward global brands from developed versus emerging countries. *J. Int. Mark.* **21**, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.12.0065> (2013).
27. He, J. & Wang, C. L. Cultural identity and consumer ethnocentrism impacts on preference and purchase of domestic versus import brands: an empirical study in China. *J. Bus. Res.* **68**, 1225–1233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2014.11.017> (2015).
28. Halkias, G., Davvetas, V. & Diamantopoulos, A. The interplay between country stereotypes and perceived brand globalness/localness as drivers of brand preference. *J. Bus. Res.* **69**, 3621–3628. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.03.022> (2016).
29. Diamantopoulos, A. et al. On the interplay between consumer dispositions and perceived brand globalness: alternative theoretical perspectives and empirical assessment. *J. Int. Mark.* **27**, 39–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069031X19865527> (2019).
30. Xie, Y., Batra, R. & Peng, S. An extended model of preference formation between global and local brands: the roles of identity expressiveness, trust, and affect. *J. Int. Mark.* **23**, 50–71. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.14.0009> (2015).
31. Riefler, P. Local versus global food consumption: the role of brand authenticity. *J. Consum. Mark.* **37**, 317–327. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-02-2019-3086> (2020).

32. Rodrigues, C., Brandão, A., Billore, S. & Oda, T. The mediating role of perceived brand authenticity between brand experience and brand love: a cross-cultural perspective. *J. Brand Manag.* **31**, 293–309. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-023-00342-9> (2024).

Figures

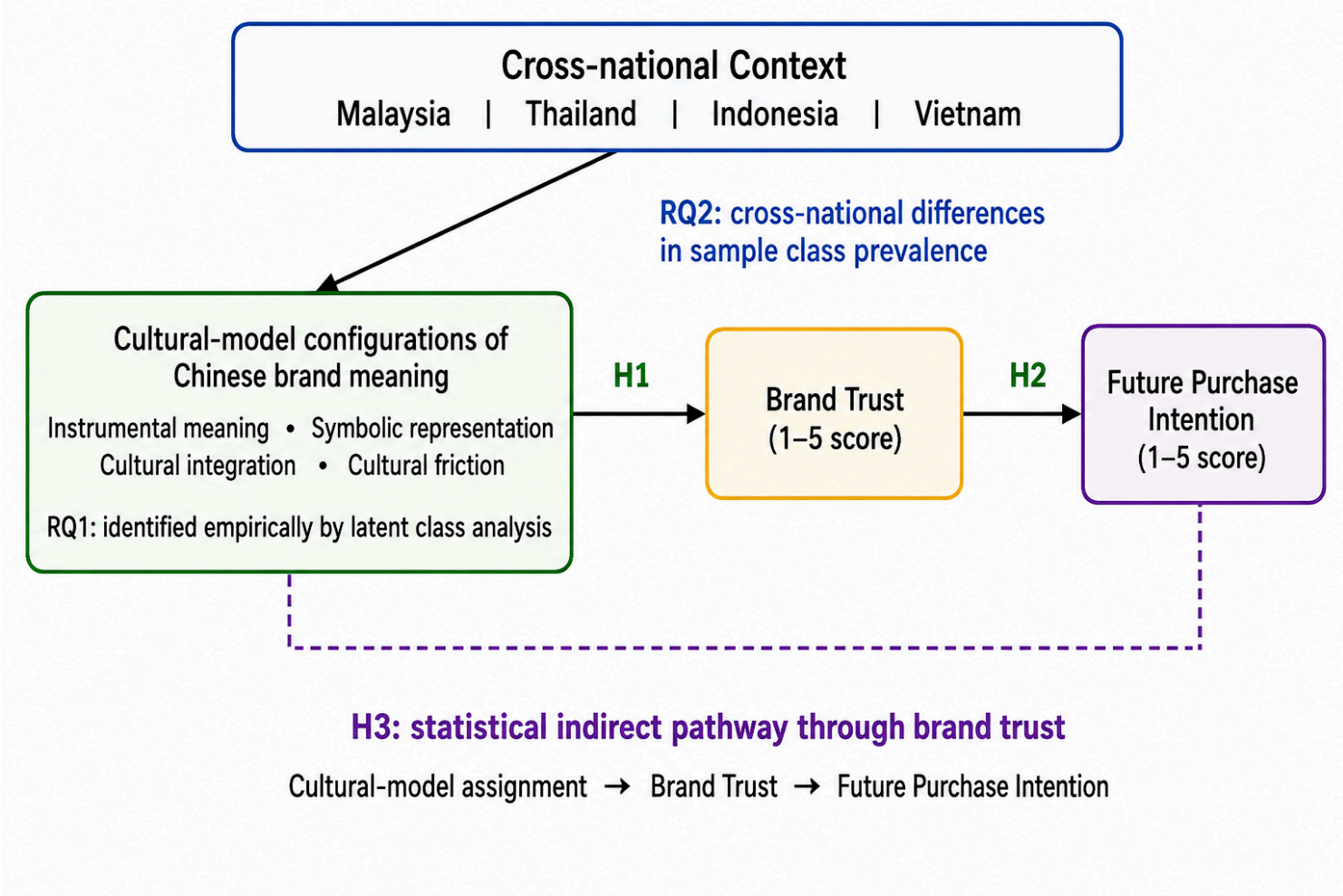


Figure 1

Theoretical framework linking empirically identified cultural-model configurations of Chinese brand meaning, brand trust, future purchase intention, and cross-national differences in sample class prevalence.

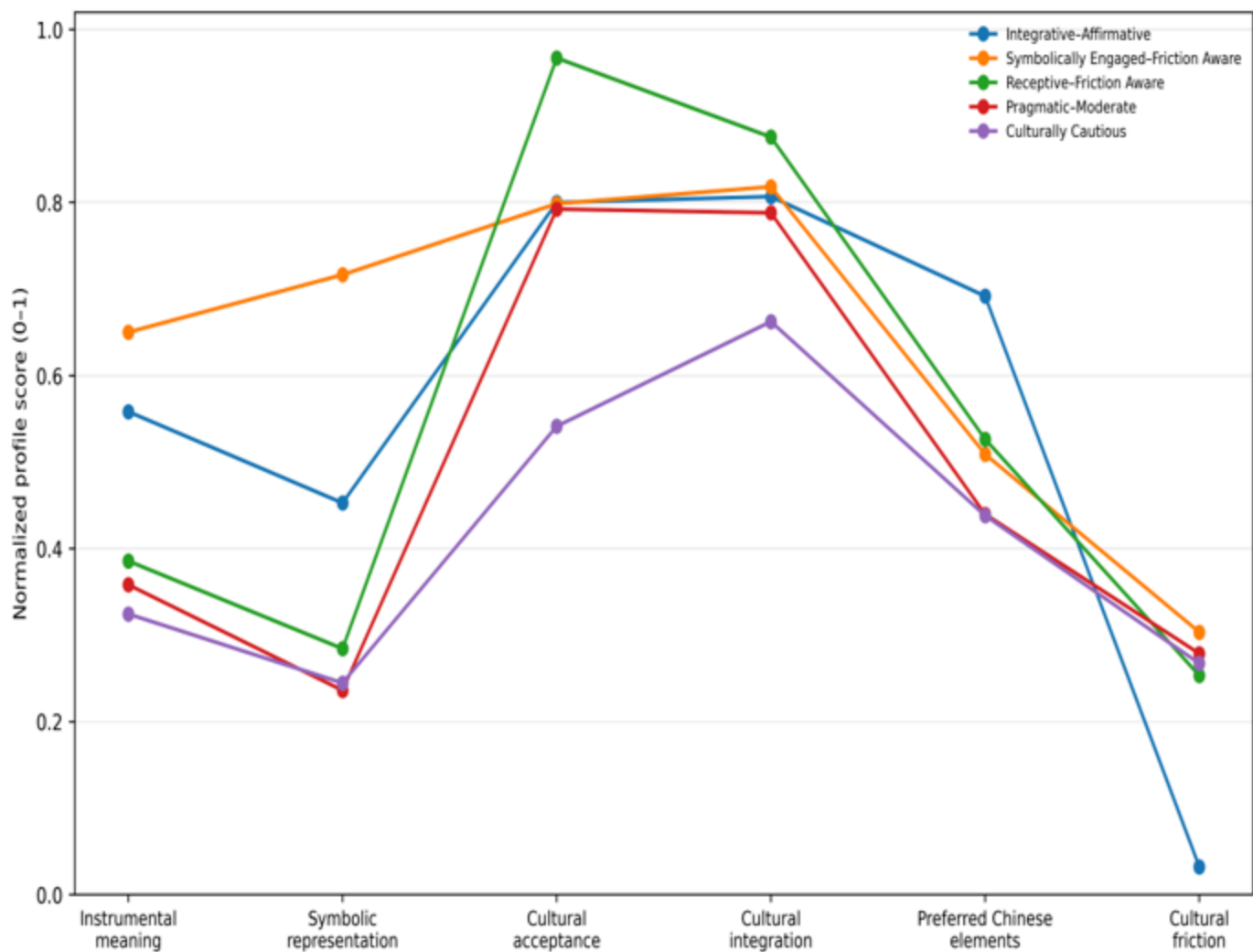


Figure 2

Psychological profiles of the five cultural models. For visualization, indicators were normalized by their theoretical maxima; raw class means are reported in Supplementary Table S3.

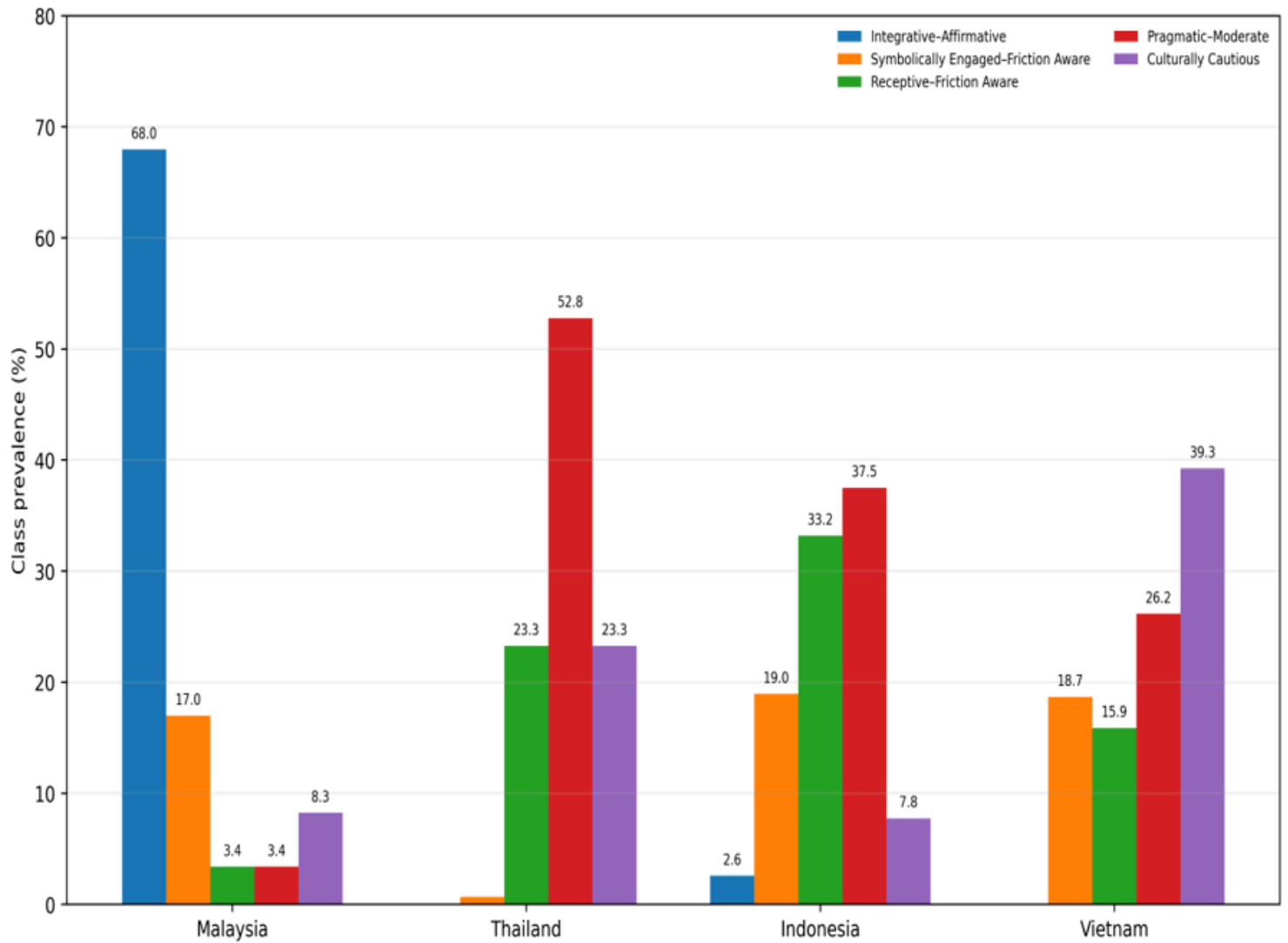


Figure 3

Distribution of posterior modal cultural-model assignments across Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

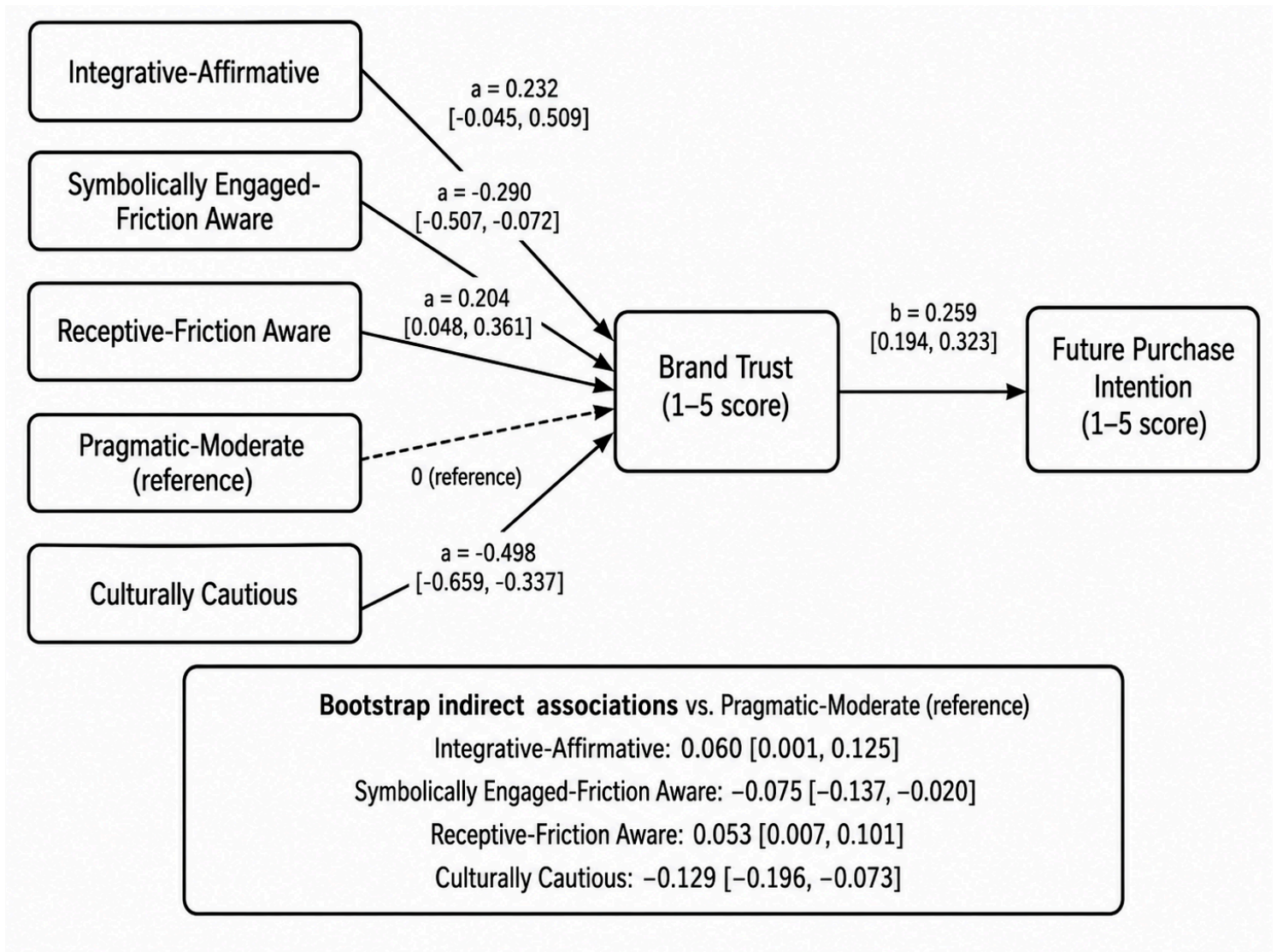


Figure 4

Secondary bootstrap indirect-pathway model linking posterior modal cultural-model assignment to future purchase intention through brand trust.