

**Cultural experiential goal pursuit, cultural brand engagement,  
and culturally authentic experiences:  
Sojourners in America**

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**Citation:** Vredeveld, Anna J. and Robin A. Coulter (2019), “Cultural experiential goal pursuit, cultural brand engagement, and culturally authentic experiences: Sojourners in America,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 47, 274–290.

**Keywords:** consumer journeys, cultural experiential goals, brand engagement, experiential consumption, cultural authenticity, sojourners, American popular culture, emerging adulthood

**Acknowledgments:** The authors thank Jill Avery, Kelly Herd, William T. Ross Jr., Susan Spiggle, and Yuliya Strizhakova for helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

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**Abstract**

Our research uses an interpretive approach to explore the consumer journeys of sojourners, temporary residents of a new country, with attention to cultural experiential goal pursuit and cultural brand engagement. Depth interviews with students from nine countries studying in America document that home country access to American popular culture impacts cultural experiential goals; the temporary nature of sojourners' stay engenders instrumental brand use (vs. brand attachment); and cultural brand engagement relies on indexical/iconic brand meanings inextricably tied to the desired cultural experience. Three cultural experiential goals and their brand engagement emerge: the "imagined American" cultural experience is grounded in American myths and stereotypes and iconic brand meanings; the "unique Americana" experience is grounded in Americana symbolism and indexical brand meanings with American symbolism; and the "life like the locals" experience is grounded in observed realities in America and indexical brand meanings. We discuss theoretical and managerial implications related to our findings.

Over the past two decades globalization and consumer movement across borders has significantly impacted global and local consumer culture (Giddens 1991; Ritzer 2004) and consumption practices (Alden et al. 2006; Arnould and Price 2000; Guo 2013; Olsen 2002; Ritzer 2004). As consumers traverse borders, their journeys are complicated by their pursuit of acculturation, self-development, experiential, and cultural experiential goals (Bardhi et al. 2012; Bradford and Sherry 2014; Belk 1997; Luedicke 2011; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), and by the negotiation of brand meanings at home and abroad (Bengtsson et al. 2010; Coulter et al. 2003; Dong and Tian 2010; Guzmán and Paswan 2009; Peñaloza 1994). Past research in marketing on border crossers has focused on consumption practices and product choices of immigrants with acculturation goals (Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994), sojourners (e.g., expatriates with long histories of international work) with self-development goals (Bardhi et al. 2012; Bradford and Sherry 2014; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), and cosmopolitan travelers seeking immersion in the core values of the host country, believing that “the authentic culture is just down the road being traveled” (Thompson and Tambyah 1999, p. 237). In the main, extant research has focused on adult border crossers and their consumption practices, choices, and possessions, but has not fully explored border crossers’ cultural experiential goals and brand choice and use.

In this research, we explore the consumer journeys of sojourners, temporary residents of a new country, with attention to two questions: (1) What are sojourners’ cultural experiential goals? and (2) How are these cultural experiential goals linked to cultural brand engagement? We define cultural experiential goals as desired experiences within a cultural context, and we define cultural brand engagement as the instrumental use of brands to enact cultural experiential

goals. Our interpretive approach involved depth interviews (two, scheduled three to four months apart) with 16 students from nine countries who were studying in America.

Our research and findings make important contributions to work on consumer journeys, cultural experiences, brand engagement, and global consumer culture. First, whereas past research on sojourners has focused on self-development and experiential goals, our research draws attention to cultural experiential goals and shows that goals of sojourners to America are grounded in American stereotypes and myths, Americana symbolism, and observed realities on the ground; our work also documents that our sojourners engage in the creation of their own “authentic” cultural experiences (Arnould and Price 2000; Cohen 1988). Second and importantly, these sojourners’ cultural experiences are intrinsically linked to iconic and indexical meanings of brands; specifically, the “imagined American” cultural experience is grounded in American myths and stereotypes and iconic brand meanings; the “unique Americana” experience is grounded in iconic Americana symbolism and avoidance of brands with indexical home culture brand meanings; and the “life like the locals” experience is grounded in observed realities in America and indexical brand meanings. Thus, our work provides novel theoretical insights into the instrumental use of brands to engage in cultural experience construction, thereby moving beyond past research which has documented consumers use of brands to communicate identity (cf. Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003) and to build long-term brand relationships (cf. Fournier 1998). Third, and in contrast to past work in the global consumer culture domain which has focused on adult border crossers, we offer a unique lens by focusing on young adults, international students studying abroad. This cohort is interesting to study because they are at a transformative stage in their lives; they are more likely to attend to global media (Arnett 2002; Strizhakova et al. 2012), be engaged with American and transnational

consumer culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), and pursue self-exploring experiences of young adulthood and changing traditions (Arnett 2002; Furstenberg 2010; Weinberger et al. 2017). Fourth, although a majority of recent research on border crossers has examined host countries around the world, our context is America, with unique cultural frames related to both “America” and “the American college experience” that are shaped into authentic cultural experiences (Bayles 2014; Crothers 2018; Sanders 2011). Finally, from a managerial point of view, our work addresses the global youth, with attention to the under-investigated international student segment which annually contributes an estimated \$31 billion to the U.S. economy (Xia 2016).

In the following sections, we theoretically ground our work in cultural experiential goals of border crossers, and brand meanings that invoke cultural brand engagement. We follow with details on our research context, methodology, analyses, and emergent findings. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications and future research opportunities.

## **Conceptual overview**

### **Cultural experiential goals and border crossers**

Research in marketing and consumer behavior has documented that border crosses have various desired experiences within a new cultural context, including acculturation, self-development, experiential, and cultural experiential goals. Acculturation goals, the desire to be integrated into a new country and culture and adapt consumption patterns, are primarily associated with immigrants, who expect a permanent relocation in the host country and seek “a better life” with identity-relevant outcomes (Askegaard et al. 2005; Luedicke 2011; Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983). Self-development goals

focus on self-improvement related to life, work, or education, and these goals have been linked to numerous types of border crossers, including immigrants (Peñaloza 1994), migrants who are relocating within a country to find a better life (Üstüner and Holt 2007), and sojourners who have work-related assignments in a host country (Bardhi et al. 2012; Bradford and Sherry 2014) or who are studying abroad (Nyaupane et al. 2010; Sanchez et al. 2006). The broad experiential goals of novelty, excitement, and escape (Belk 1997; Li and Cai 2012) have been linked to tourists, study abroad students, and other short-term border crossers who experience the new culture through a sightseeing lens and “often expect fakery and appreciate when it is well done” (Lindholm 2008, p. 43). Given their interest in transnational consumer culture and global media (Arnett 2002; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Strizhakova et al. 2012), young adult border crossers may be particularly likely to pursue novelty and excitement as part of their cultural experiences. However, emerging adulthood is inherently transformative and self-development is therefore central to experiential pursuits (Arnett 2002; Furstenberg 2010). Weinberger et al. (2017) note that young adults often seek to go off the beaten path “observing and interacting with locals to gain a deeper understanding of a place in a shorter period of time... to maximize learning through the novel experience” (p. 338).

We further explore cultural experiential goals which we define as desired experiences within a cultural context. These goals focus on “the primary intention of acquiring life experience” (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003, p. 1194), and these experiences may be considered extraordinary or special because they occur “beyond the realm of everyday life” (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014, p. 2). Notably then, what is seen as ordinary within a home country can be perceived as extraordinary by a border crosser visiting another country. Yet, most work examining cultural experiential goals has focused on sojourners and tourists who are looking for

an “authentic” cultural experience in the sense of how locals actually live (Lindholm 2008; MacCannell 1976; Thompson and Tambyah 1999); they are seeking “the real deal” and want to capture cultural diversity with attention to and immersion in the core values of the host country. This traditional conceptualization of cultural authenticity as only attainable through full cultural immersion has resulted in a focus on “cultural traditions” (e.g., food, dance, and participation in cultural rituals) and what is “primitive” and untouched by Western values (Lindholm 2008). As a consequence, the meaning of (and desire to pursue) cultural authenticity in a Western setting has been largely overlooked. Moreover, by focusing on cultural rituals and traditions, extant work has also underestimated the role of border crossers as creators of cultural authenticity (Arnould and Price 2000; Olsen 2002).

### **Border crossers, consumption practices, and cultural brand engagement**

Brands serve as key communicative devices in global consumer culture, and hence are critical to cultural experiential goals (Bengtsson et al. 2010; Coulter et al. 2003; Dong and Tian 2010; Guzmán and Paswan 2009). Yet, the marketing literature examining border crossers’ consumer journeys has focused on consumption practices and possessions. More specifically, work on immigrants, migrants, and sojourners has examined home and host country possessions, as part of identity construction (Askegaard et al. 2005; Bradford and Sherry 2014; Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994; Üstüner and Holt 2007; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983). Table 1 documents that these studies have examined an array of home countries (including Mexico, India, Haiti, Turkey, Greenland, and the U.S.) and host countries (including the U.S., South Africa, Turkey, and Singapore). All of these studies have linked consumption practices and possessions to the border crossers’ identity projects. Interestingly, however, Bardhi et al.

(2012) who study sojourners (i.e., global nomads, expatriates who experience serial relocations with self-development goals) provide a different lens: for these border crossers, possessions are “liquid;” that is, they are characterized by their instrumental use value, not by identity relevance.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Importantly, we draw needed attention to the role of brands in cultural experiential goals. Brands carry multifaceted symbolic meanings (Solomon 1983; Ger and Belk 1996) and are a “major source of subjective, internal consumer responses” (Brakus et al. 2009, p. 53). Consumers’ brand knowledge and meanings stem from personally using the brand (Fournier 1998), from watching others use the brand (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003), from the brand’s availability across different sociocultural or cultural contexts (Strizhakova et al. 2011), and from associations with other people (including celebrities), media, and marketing of the brand (Keller 2003; Mazodier and Merunka 2012). Existing work on consumer-brand engagement reflects consumers’ purposeful use of brands (Brodie et al. 2013; van Doorn et al. 2010; Warde 2005) in pursuit of articulated goals (Hollebeek 2011). With brands as important symbols of globalization, consumerism, and Americana (Crothers 2018; Ger and Belk 1996; Holt 2004; Sanders 2011; Strizhakova et al. 2011), we expect border crosses will make instrumental and goal-directed use of brands to enact their cultural experience goals (Fournier 1998).

Within a new cultural context, border crossers may rely on different culturally anchored brand meanings to assess a brand’s instrumental value to the construction of the cultural experience. Iconic cultural meanings are imbued in iconic brands via marketing communications and popular culture. Iconic American brands (e.g., Coca Cola, McDonald’s, Levi’s) have strong socio-cultural-historical roots in America (Crothers 2018; Holt 2004), and these iconic brand meanings are globally disseminated and “available” to consumers around the world. Other



brands have indexical cultural anchoring; that is, they have real world anchoring in “an objective, real (nonmental) world” (Grayson and Shulman 2000, p. 18), as reflected by cultural locals’ actual use of brands. Such brands are “local” in that they lack iconic prevalence in American media available globally, but are frequently used by cultural locals.

## **Research questions and method**

Our research examines consumer journeys with attention to cultural experiential goals and cultural brand engagement, exploring two focal research questions:

RQ 1: What are the cultural experiential goals of sojourners, and how are these goals framed?

RQ 2: How are sojourners’ cultural experiential goals linked to culturally specific activities and cultural brand engagement?

We use an interpretive research approach, particularly well-suited for research that aims to discover new and complex phenomena within a social context, capturing informants’ emic perspectives (Miles and Huberman 1994; Olsen 2002). Our research involves international students studying in the American college context, a particularly interesting research site because it includes both cultural “American” meanings and specific sociocultural activities that shape the experience of being enrolled in an American college (Crothers 2018; Moffatt 1991).

## **Research context**

The United States is a place of meanings, and in this globally connected world, “America” and “American” meanings are promulgated via movies, television programming, news, social media, celebrities and politicians, and marketing communications focused on companies, products, and brands (Bayles 2014; Crothers 2018; Sanders 2011). For sojourners,

including international students studying in the U.S., the desired American cultural experience is likely to be influenced by prior knowledge of American culture and access to American symbolism within the home culture. As Sanders (2011, p. 12) argues, “Everybody has their own America,” a fantasy, a bricolage garnered from movies, brands, personal travels, social media, and their imagination. Inevitably, derived meanings of America are part reality and part myth (Firat and Venkatesh 1995); the American cinema, television, and mass media have delivered not only images of American life (Appadurai 1996; Sanders 2011), but also images of and access to iconic American artifacts (e.g., hamburger, blue jeans; Hunter and Yates 2002). Importantly, the degree of media censorship and access to American and global media and brands varies considerably across countries (Bayles 2014; Crothers 2018; Sanders 2011); hence, as border crossers come to the U.S., their expectation and cultural experiential goals are likely shaped by the co-mingling of “American” imagery and their imagination (Appadurai 1996; Chun et al. 2017; Weinberger et al. 2017). Moreover, the American college experience is a microcosm within the broader American culture, and carries its own symbolism, consumption practices, and identity referents (Moffatt 1991).

### **Study informants and analyses**

Informants were recruited at a large public university using an undergraduate and graduate international student list-serve provided by the university’s Education Abroad office. Similar to other work focused on consumption experiences and branding (e.g., Coulter et al. 2003; Fournier 1998; Üstüner and Thompson 2013), an all-female sample was selected to focus on cultural (vs. gendered) differences in their cultural experiential goals and cultural brand engagement. To capture a range of sojourners’ cultural experiential goals, we purposefully

recruited students from countries with less (e.g., United Kingdom, France) and more censorship (e.g., China, Iran) of American media and brands (Bayles 2014; Sanders 2011). Specifically, the sample included 16 informants, aged 20 to 30, who had resided in the United States from three months to three years prior to participating in our research. At the time of their interviews, all informants indicated that they expected to return to their home country after completing their study at the university. Their expected stay in the U.S. ranged from eight months to five years. Table 2 provides summary demographic data for each informant.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Each of the 16 informants participated in two semi-structured interviews. Interviews were held in a meeting room on the university campus; both interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded (Lincoln and Guba 1985; McCracken 1988). All interviews were conducted in English; English was the second language for most informants (with the exception of informants from the U.K. and Ireland). The first interview included questions pertaining to the sojourners' cultural experiential goals in America, including expectations of what it means to experience America and American college life, as well as questions regarding home culture, and similarities and differences in consumption behavior and brand preferences between home and the U.S. Approximately three months after the first interview, informants completed a questionnaire reporting on their familiarity with global and/or American brands and their meanings. The second interview built upon the first interview and information provided in the questionnaire, with increased attention to probing on American cultural symbolism, brand usage, brand meanings, and brand relationships. The transcribed interviews resulted in 555 pages of single-spaced transcribed text (292,287 words).

Transcripts of the depth interviews served as the basis for our data analyses. Both authors conducted a within-case and across-case analysis of informants' transcripts with attention to our research questions and relevant theory. Based on the within-case analysis, we identified two informants (Aarti and Amira) who concentrated primarily on self-development goals (vs. cultural experiential goals), and hence, given our research focus, were not included in further analyses. For the within-case analyses, each set of the informant's transcripts was analyzed to understand her overall journey and to identify the nature of the sojourner's cultural experiential goals within the American cultural context and the American college context; we also tracked on the linkages between the informant's goals, activities, and the indexical and iconic meanings of brands. Further, during our across-case analysis, we tacked back and forth between our data and relevant literatures (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Spiggle 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990) to more clearly differentiate cultural experiential goals and develop an understanding of our informants' activities and use of brands in pursuit of these goals. Both authors were present on the campus for at least two years prior to the data collection, and thus, familiar with the college context in this research.

## **Emergent findings**

Our within- and across-case analyses reveal that our sojourners, with temporary residency in the U.S., explicitly desire to maintain their home cultural identity while in pursuit of three prominent cultural experiential goals: the "imagined American" experience, the "unique Americana" experience, and the "life like the locals" experience. In relation to these goals, we observe sojourners calling upon experiences and brands in America as key in the enactment of these goals. Our findings indicate that iconic American experiences, iconic brands, and iconic

brand meanings are essential to the pursuit of the “imagined American” experience.

Alternatively, when a sojourner pursues a “unique Americana” experience, attention is focused on Americana symbolism and iconic American experiences and brands, as well as brands in use (i.e., indexical brand meanings) that represent Americana, but that are not necessarily iconic.

Finally, when a sojourner is in pursuit of a “life like the locals” experience, brands that are used by the locals are instrumental to the experience construction (i.e., brands with indexical meanings). Importantly, all sojourners are in pursuit of “authentic” cultural experiences that align with their specific cultural experiential goals.

In the following sections, we draw upon multiple informants’ stories to showcase the sojourner’s emic perspectives related to cultural experiential goals, authenticity, and brand engagement. Importantly, it is the characteristics of sojourners’ cultural experiential goals and their reliance on indexical and/or iconic brand meanings that influence how brands are used as part of the cultural experience, not the characteristics of a given brand. Hence, as illustrated in our findings, one brand (e.g., Walmart) can be linked to multiple cultural experiential goals. Figure 1 illustrates the specific linkages between the sojourner’s cultural experiential goals and indexical and iconic brand meanings.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

### **Pursuit of the “imagined American” cultural experience**

Sojourners who are seeking an “imagined American” cultural experience have their cultural experiential goals grounded in iconic imagery and the fantasy of the “authentic” America as depicted in global media and by American brands available globally (Crothers 2018; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Sanders 2011). In planning for their American experience, our

sojourners have constructed a “bucket list” of desirable activities, traditions, and brands they hope to experience. On the ground in the U.S., enactment to fulfill this cultural experiential goal involves the purposeful sampling and assemblage of a predetermined set of culturally symbolic American activities and iconic American brands (see Figure 1). Their narratives show a surprising degree of specificity in expected participation in “authentic” American holidays (Halloween, Thanksgiving), specific college-related activities (parties, football games), and use of brands. For example, Lin [25, Taiwan] articulates a desire to experience Thanksgiving as depicted in American TV shows: “Thanksgiving is on [my list]... We see a lot of TV shows in [Taiwan], like Friends. Every season, they have a Thanksgiving special. They eat together and there is turkey.” Similarly, Sarah [20, UK] describes her predetermined experiences in America based on media depictions: “It is fun seeing the stereotypes of a country... [They] become familiar to you through TV... I am going to New York for Christmas... to go ice-skating at Rockefeller Center and things like that. It feels like quite a Christmassy place to go.”

When in pursuit of the “imagined American” cultural experience, sojourners often refer to stereotypical America meanings derived from home media and access to American brands at home. As such, Abercrombie & Fitch, Solo, Urban Outfitters, Victoria’s Secret, and Walmart are considered ideal props for realizing the imagined and prototypical “American experience.” The iconic American themes, fantasies, and myths depicted in traditional and social media facilitate border crossers’ imagination of their cultural experience “before (or as well as) actually experiencing them, drawing them out from our already-formed sense of America and reassembling them as a new collage” (Campbell 2011, p. 208). Sarah expresses, “I didn’t come over here to permanently change my shopping habits or permanently change where I live,” rather

her cultural experiential goal in the U.S. is to engage with American activities and brands that she already knows. She affirms her enthusiasm for Walmart and her desire to shop there:

“I was quite excited about [going to Walmart], because Walmart is a very American brand. It was very big. I was surprised by Walmart in some ways. There’s a gun section in there. I was, ‘Oh, my gosh!’ because that just seemed crazy. But again, it kind of fit in with American stereotypes.”

Similarly, Lin is excited to shop at Abercrombie & Fitch because, to her, the brand is associated specifically with stereotypes of how Americans dress:

“I was so excited the first time I went to [an American mall] because I could go to an Abercrombie store...some of their clothes are my stereotype of American clothing, like casual, t-shirt, and jeans.”

Although general iconic and stereotypical American imagery is embraced, the American college experience is particularly central to the narratives of our international student sojourners in pursuit of the “imagined American” experience. On the ground in the U.S., sojourners with this cultural experiential goal strive to locate and complete specific college activities; there is a “right way” to consume American college through participation in activities and use of brands. Although Mary [22, Ireland] is “not really into sports,” she wears college-branded apparel and is excited to attend a college basketball game because it feels like a “classic” college experience. She remarks, “It was just in my mind what you see on TV...the huge stadium and all the fans that go. [It is] a college thing.” The “college thing” is conceived of specific traditions and “must do” activities that need to be specifically assembled according to media depictions, illustrating how the “imagined American” experience is anchored in the college microcosm (Moffatt 1991).

Notably, not all stereotypes and desired cultural experiences are favorable depictions of the U.S. In particular, American college activities are often framed around movies and TV shows about the “wild side” of American college life. Elise [21, France] speaks to how negative stereotypes (e.g., filthy parties, tasteless food) are embraced and actively pursued. She is adamant about participating in the American college “party life:”

“I wanted to [experience a] party on campus...like the stereotypes I had about America and campus life...The very filthy parties. Jell-O on the floor...Like the first American Pie [movie].

“Filthy” refers to the ambience of the stereotypical college party, often including sexual interactions as depicted in movies. To facilitate the realization of her imagined college party performance through enactment, Elise acquired an arsenal of branded clothing and cosmetics (e.g., Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister, Maybelline, Urban Outfitters) that she believes American students wear, based on symbolism acquired from watching American TV shows at home in France: “I bought a lot of party clothes that I won’t wear in France. Very flashy, shiny, not good taste, short, very short, very like close to the skin, yeah, and high heels. I mean I wear heels in France but not crop tops, I bought a bunch [at Urban Outfitters].” To pursue the “imagined American” experience, Elise relies on expected brand usage meanings, rather than observed brand usage by locals. She actively situates her lived experience in relation to her deterministic cultural experiential goals, and refers to her cultural experience as an “undercover operation” where she dresses the part to access desired activities. Importantly, her American brand collection is instrumental to her construction of the cultural experience; they facilitate this temporary dramatic enactment and allow her access to iconic activities on her bucket list:



“I had heels, and mini denim shorts, and the bright kind of shiny purple tank top that I had never worn before...I was looking transformed into the American party girl. So that was really fun. I wasn’t being serious about it. I was like undercover, or like wearing a costume, because it wasn’t me at all. But it was really fun anyways.”

Although Elise participates in these college girl role enactments, facilitated by her use of specific clothing and cosmetic brands, her cultural experiential goal is not about self-transformation.

Elise maintains her French cultural identity, and her experience of American college life involves active reflection of the self as an “undercover agent” in experience construction that together tell a story about the “American college experience.”

Similarly, with regard to the “imagined American” college party experience, Sarah arrived in the U.S. with a precise idea of the branded red Solo cup. Interestingly, the Solo brand is deemed instrumental because it fits naturally with the idealized cultural performance script of the college party. Sarah reflects:

“[Solo cups] are very much affiliated with America back home...they’re a very visible product that is very intimately related with American culture, and especially like college culture and parties...When I first got here I was, ‘I really have to drink out of a red cup.’ So, yeah, I think of it as very directly an American brand...Drinking out of red cups is associated with fun and...part of the college experience...Yeah, it was definitely on my list of things to do...It has to be red. Over Halloween they had different colored ones and [my friends and I] were like, ‘no, please, can we have the red ones?’...Yep, has to be red... It’s more the feeling that ‘I’m in America.’ I’m only here for [the academic] year, [and] I’m very conscious of trying to get the American experience, and to me that is very intimately linked with the American experience of being at university.”

By using the red Solo cup at American college parties, Sarah experiences American college life the way she imagined before arriving in the U.S. Thus, in addition to being instrumental to the creation of a predefined cultural experience, brands contribute directly to the experience of a new culture because they make the sojourners feel connected to what they are experiencing; the assembled activities align with the “imagined American” college experience. Stereotypes are central to this “fantasy hyperreal” (Lindholm 2008, p. 44) because they allow the sojourner to align what they imagined with what they are experiencing. Thus, for those in pursuit of the “imagined American” cultural experience, authenticity can be found in stereotypes that are purposefully contrived or even fake (Rose and Wood 2005).

### **Pursuit of the “unique Americana” cultural experience**

Sojourners seeking a “unique Americana” cultural experience are attentive to American symbolic imagery and consumption traditions, not because they carry meanings related to stereotypes, but because they symbolically represent America and they are culturally “different” from what is experienced and consumed within the home country. This cultural experiential goal is framed around an escape from the ordinary, an opportunity to experience something different (Belk 1997; Cohen and Taylor 1992; Weinberger et al. 2017) ~ specifically, something American ~ but carefully protecting home culture ties to brands and the emotional meanings inherent in what is familiar from the home culture. In the process of assessing American uniqueness, sojourners who are seeking the “unique Americana” cultural experience directly compare American cultural traditions and brands deemed to have “American only” meanings (e.g., American Eagle, Burt’s Bees, Cover Girl, DKNY, Gap, JC Penney, Taco Bell). These brands are particularly useful to consume “Americana” more generally as they carry such visible

clues of cultural anchoring (e.g., logos, advertisements, store atmosphere). Importantly, when in pursuit of “unique Americana,” the sojourner does not have preconceived notions of which specific brands to use, but rather observes on the ground use of brands in the U.S. (see Figure 1).

Elisabeth [20, UK] is very focused on a “unique Americana” cultural experience with attention to iconic Americana imagery, brands, and products. Brands with iconic American attributes or usage meanings (e.g., American Eagle, Abercrombie & Fitch) are deemed particularly instrumental to her experience construction in America because they lack indexical home culture anchoring in terms of usage. Elisabeth’s identification of uniquely American brands while in the U.S. is exciting for her, and her engagement with these brands is anchored in both first-hand observation and iconic imagery in the U.S. Elisabeth had not heard of the American Eagle brand prior to coming to the U.S., but the obvious Americana connotations provide the American Eagle brand with instrumental value to her experience construction:

“I like the style of clothes [at American Eagle]. But then the second thing is, not only the clothes are nice, but it...has America in the [brand name]. It’s got the Eagle; it’s again about the imagery...you’re kind of reassured that you’re in America, and it makes it a separate [experience].”

Elisabeth further expresses her attention to consumption practices, using the heuristic of symbolic branding, as essential to fulfilling her “unique Americana” cultural experiential goal:

“So I keep making sort of random purchases of American foods, foods that we have at home, but [now buying] American branding just to see what it’s like. So for instance, I’d never heard of Kraft before...It’s obviously a huge corporate giant. So, I’ve tried some Kraft products, which is obviously American.”

Daiyu [28, China] has a goal of the “unique Americana” cultural experience evident in her discussion contrasting holiday experiences at home versus in the U.S. In her appraisal, she draws upon iconic Americana symbolism related to holidays and compares it to home practices (i.e., indexical evidence of home culture anchoring). Daiyu is fascinated with and excited about Halloween in the U.S. because it carries no home associations:

“In China we have similar holidays [Thanksgiving and Christmas], for family members should get together and give gifts... Halloween [is different]... We never had it before when I was in China. So I have no [nostalgic] feeling about Halloween. It’s just a, a little bit different for me... I prepare for it... I already bought the candy!”

Thus, the “unique Americana” cultural experience shares similarities with traditional depictions of travelers in pursuit of the “exotic lifestyle of the natives,” which traditionally have involved the desired experiences of Westerners traveling to the “unexploited” East rather than the commercialized West (Costa 1998, p. 322; Lindholm 2008). Clearly, part of the desired “unique Americana” experience builds on “the appeal of the unknown and the otherness” (Belk 1997, p. 40). For Daiyu, the unique appeal of Halloween is derived from how it is different from her home experience. Her contrast between home and the U.S. is similarly evident in how she distinguishes brands and her brand use, enabling her to protect home culture brand relationships.

Daiyu’s fast food experiences also illustrate the home-host country distinction. She describes her home experience with American fast food brands, KFC and McDonald’s, as inherently interlinked with her Chinese family identity, and she clearly articulates her interest in compartmentalizing these home experiences from her experiences in America. Thus, in America, Daiyu rejects KFC and McDonald’s in favor of Taco Bell, which she perceives as representing Americana and being exclusively American. She explains:

“When I was five or six, [KFC] already started to enter the Chinese market...So we went to KFC in the New Year. We ordered some fried chicken, the smashed potato...And they give me like a very funny toy for kids...It’s my first experience of the fast food...and then we know, ‘Okay, KFC is an American brand,’ and later ‘McDonald’s is an American brand’...I will not go [to KFC or McDonald’s in the U.S.] because I think my experience with them was all back at home...I would rather go to [Taco Bell in the U.S.] instead of McDonald’s and KFC...For Taco Bell, I’m thinking at least it’s unique. I haven’t tried it at home.”

While in the U.S., Daiyu seeks out Taco Bell, which she has identified as a uniquely American brand to fulfill her desire for a symbolic Americana fast-food experience, one that does not interfere with her committed and nostalgic relationship with KFC in China. Daiyu is careful to manage the relationship she has with American brands, negotiating and distinguishing between the home and host country meanings with a desire to experience brands that are uniquely American (without home country meanings) while in the U.S.

Across sojourners interested in a “unique Americana” cultural experience is the need to protect home culture brands and focus on brands that are “different from home.” Su-Wei [28, Taiwan] expresses her excitement related to buying brands that are not available in her home country and, in particular, the excitement inherent in first experiencing an American brand:

“I love to buy the brands that we don’t have in Taiwan...for cosmetics, Cover Girl. Yeah, those are the kinds of brands I would prefer to explore...My most memorable shopping experiences [was] grocery shopping in Walmart. We don’t have Walmart in Taiwan...You can buy anything there!”

Importantly, unlike the “imagined American” cultural experience, sojourners in pursuit of “unique Americana” do not have a bucket list of what brands to consume or what activities to partake in. The use of specific brands is anchored in the first-hand observation of and/or experience with iconic imagery in the U.S., combined with assessment of a brand’s uniqueness relative to the home culture. Overall, compartmentalization appears to be an important component of the pursuit of the “unique Americana” experience during this temporary residency. The inevitable comparison of what is “here” with what will happen upon “return to home” is central to brand use decisions. Zehra [26, Turkey] buys Turkish coffee at home, but buys coffee in the U.S. at Starbucks, referring to this “on the go” coffee brand as uniquely American (even though it is available in Turkey):

“I will always have the opportunity to have the Turkish style coffee [at home]. But now, I’m going to Starbucks. But when I go home, I want to have the original thing again. That’s how it is structured in my mind I guess, unconsciously.”

In summary, sojourners seeking a “unique Americana” cultural experience are in pursuit of “Americana” that is symbolic of and specific to the U.S. (i.e., different from home). Thus, in one sense, sojourners with this goal are similar to foreigners engaging with American popular culture in their own countries (Dong and Tian 2009; Izberk-Bilgin 2014), and immigrants to New Zealand scheduling tourist visits to the country’s iconic images and experiences (Cruz and Buchanan-Oliver 2017). Although sojourners seeking a “unique Americana experience” may be aware of iconic American experiences and brands (e.g., American holidays, McDonald’s, KFC, and Walmart) prior to coming to America, these iconic brands and meanings serve as a basis of departure from their lived experience in America. Seeking a “unique Americana” experience is

not focused on the enactment of predetermined experiences, but rather exploration on the ground in the U.S., seeking a new and distinct (from home) Americana experience.

### **Pursuit of a “life like the locals” cultural experience**

Sojourners who pursue a “life like the locals” cultural experience are in pursuit of the traditional definition of an “authentic” cultural experience; that is, an experience without contamination by American myths and stereotypes (Lindholm 2008). In particular, these sojourners desire to discover the American culture serendipitously, without deciding on what to do or what brands to use before arriving. Keeping an open mind is central to intellectualizing the experience; and given the pursuit of the “authentic” and cultural immersion, the “life like the locals” experience shares similarities with the “cosmopolitan” experience (Bradford and Sherry 2014; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Because of the pursuit of serendipitous cultural discovery and cultural authenticity, sojourners who pursue this cultural experiential goal want to participate in cultural activities that reflect how the locals experience everyday life. Thus, they actively search for brands that carry indexical brand meanings, defined in terms of evidence of usage by locals. Although some brands with these indexical meanings are of American origin (e.g., Apple, Nike, North Face), others are non-American global brands (e.g., Samsung, UGG, H&M).

Stephanie [21, France], in her quest for the “life like the locals” experience, devotes significant effort to decoding brands of the college student outfit. She believes that brands are key and instrumental to constructing a “real” cultural experience because specific brands allow her to look the part, and hence to gain access to college activities:

“[College students at this university] wear The North Face [jackets and backpacks], UGGs, and Minnetonka shoes. What else? They have like a typical outfit... sweatpants [and] hoodies. I got UGGs and Minnetonkas to look like a college student here.”

Stephanie sees these brands with indexical meanings as key communicative devices; her own degree of cultural immersion and usage of these brands makes her believe that she is “one of the American students.” The assessment of a brand’s instrumental value to the construction of her “life like the locals” experience is contingent upon understanding why specific brands are used by the locals. For Stephanie, such assessments imply deliberate attempts to reflect on and understand American college students’ use of North Face, UGG, and Minnetonka brands by linking these brands’ attributes and meanings to the college lifestyle. She states:

“[These brands] make life easier...UGGs are very comfortable and they’re warm in the winter. Minnetonkas are also comfortable and they’re pretty easy to wear. And, North Face, their backpacks are very practical, and they have sweaters also from the North Face. [These] brands are very practical...and go with American college [life]...

[American students] are studying. They’re not here to make a fashion show.”

This “decoding” of indexical usage meanings is very common among sojourners who pursue a “life like the locals” cultural experience. Reliance on cultural locals for advice and connection is also evident. Stephanie’s American friends provide her with information that allows her to emulate American consumption practices:

[My American friends] really enjoy talking about the American culture. [They] told me about Black Friday, I didn’t really know about it before coming here. For Halloween, how many costumes I should get...which stores should I go to.”



Similarly, Meili [27, China] observed how American students drink a lot of coffee because they “work hard” and are “always in a hurry.” Per her American friends’ recommendation, she tried Dunkin Donuts blueberry flavored coffee and has continued to drink it. This consumption practice has helped her to further connect with her American friends and the American experience:

“Just one of my [American friends] told me [Dunkin Donuts] is very good. Like they are very famous for its coffee...Keep you awake for the morning, things like that.

[American] people work hard...They need to have a coffee to keep them awake and keep working...students and people are always in a hurry...”

Catherine [21, UK] is interested in a “life like the locals” cultural experience and is “paying attention to the experience” to “see what American students are doing.” She actively befriends American students, avoids spending time with other international students, and pursues activities that are happening around campus:

“A lot of the international students are kind of staying together, but I wanted to make American friends while I am in America...I have a group of like six to seven [American] girls...We hang out in each other’s rooms and stuff...There is always something to do on [campus], you don’t need a plan...I don’t want to see a thing just to check off the list like ‘things to do while I am in America.’”

Catherine engages with American college students, gaining cultural insider status. As she learns more about brands from these cultural locals, she begins to reconcile the differences between the myths and realities about some American brands. For example, prior to coming to the U.S., Catherine believed that Lucky Charms was a popular cereal brand in America. During her stay, however, she finds little evidence of actual usage by American students, and consequently, she

embraces this “truth” about Lucky Charms, reporting how this awareness contributes to her discovering the truly authentic American culture:

“[I thought] of Lucky Charms as the ‘American cereal.’ I thought everyone would be eating them here on [campus], but not a lot of people go for it...I guess somewhere in my head I was like, ‘they all eat Lucky Charms cereal obviously,’ but then they [did not]. I don’t really feel bad about that...Now, I know better what goes on here. It’s better to know what is [actually] popular.”

Catherine also expected that Cover Girl would be a frequently used cosmetics brand among her college classmates. Based on her interaction with her American friends, however, she realized this brand does not enact a “life like the locals” experience. Consequently, she rejects the Cover Girl brand in favor of Almay and Maybelline because Cover Girl’s iconic global brand meaning (from home) is not consistent with its indexical brand meaning (in America):

“I was just asking my [American college] friends, ‘Is Cover Girl actually good?’ And they were like, ‘It’s not the best; it’s just there.’ So I just took [their] word for it, that it wasn’t the best makeup you could get, [because] they don’t like [the brand].”

Adriana [28, Iran] seeks a “real” experience in America and is sensitive and attentive to contrasting home and host country brand meanings and brand uses. As she reflects on her shoe choices at home in Iran versus in the U.S., Adriana acknowledges her discovery that Adidas has different meanings and usages in these two cultural contexts. Consistent with her desire for a “life like the locals” cultural experience and her understanding of differing indexical brand meanings for Adidas between Iran and the U.S., she adjusts her usage practices in the U.S. to ensure that she is fitting with the local customs:

Interviewer: “So you said in Iran you can go to a party with Adidas shoes?”

Adriana: “Yes.”

Interviewer: “Can you do that here too?”

Adriana: “No I don’t think so...back home, I mean, I used to wear Adidas or Nike everywhere at the school, at the parties and...it was normal, quite normal for everybody. But here, no, I mean I have changed myself. I know that, okay, if it’s outdoor activity, I wear it, and otherwise no [I do not wear it].”

Notably, unlike sojourners who pursue the “unique Americana” experience, Adriana is not concerned with how her use of the brand in the new cultural context will affect her existing relationship with the brand. She compares usage practices (i.e., indexical meanings) across the two cultural contexts and adjusts her behavior to align with local customs. The desire for immersion, not stereotypical iconic meanings or degree of cultural uniqueness relative to home, is at the core of her cultural experiential pursuits.

In summary, pursuit of “life like the locals” reflects a desire for cultural discovery and cultural authenticity and a reliance on brands that are used by locals (see Figure 1). Those seeking a “life like the locals” cultural experience evaluate and use brands based on observational evidence and personal experiences. Further, sojourners in pursuit of a “life like the locals” cultural experience are engaged with identifying the nuances in brand meaning and use across cultures. They reject iconic American brands that are deemed as inaccurate representations of observed American college life and focus on brands that have the currency for articulating the local culture and can serve as props in the construction of the desired authentic cultural experience.

## **General discussion, theoretical contributions, and future research**

Our research explores consumer journeys and the cultural experiential goals of sojourners with specific attention to the interplay between cultural experiential goals, instrumental brand use, and American popular culture. In the following sections, we discuss our findings with attention to theoretical contributions, specifically related to the authenticity of cultural experiential goals, cultural brand engagement, and sojourners within a global consumer culture. We also address opportunities for future research.

### **Constructing culturally authentic experiences**

Authenticity has become a key marketing concept as consumers increasingly desire consumption experiences that carry genuine cultural and social meanings (Arnould and Price 2000; Beverland 2005; Gilmore and Pine 2007) that can help fight loss of self, due to “ambivalence of the existential conditions of modernity” (Wang 1999, p. 360). Traditional conceptualizations of cultural authenticity have concentrated on “heritage” and “traditions” (e.g., food, dance, and participation in cultural rituals and traditions), with particular attention to cultural associations derived from the “primitive” and untouched by Western values (Lindholm 2008). Relatedly, extant research on border crossers and young adults documents the pursuit of unique cultural experiences to help narrate an individualized identity (Desforges 1998; Luedicke 2011; Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994; Snee 2014) and to achieve self-development goals and acquire soft skills (Bardhi et al. 2012; Ward et al. 2001; Weinberger et al. 2017). Olsen (2002), however, argues that contextual constraints have led researchers to underestimate the role of border crossers as active creators of cultural authenticity.

Our research draws attention to cultural experiential goals and documents that our sojourners engage in the creation of their own “authentic” cultural experiences (Arnould and

Price 2000; Cohen 1988). For our informants, the conceptualization of what the sojourner considers to be “authentic” often differs from the traditional romantic notions of authentic culture as being primitive and pure, uncontaminated by Western values (Lindholm 2008). More specifically, our young adult sojourners, international students coming to America, are agentic in their cultural experiential goals. Our research shows how “the authentic” takes on different meanings depending on the nature of cultural experiential goals (see Figure 1). When in pursuit of a predetermined “imagined American” cultural experience, sojourners draw heavily from American popular culture and stereotypes depicted in home culture media. In contrast, when seeking a “unique Americana” cultural experience, sojourners have no predetermined list of what to do and what to consume within the temporary cultural space; the cultural experiential goal is centered on accessing activities and brands that not only carry iconic Americana symbolism, but also are distinctively American (i.e., different from home). When in pursuit of a traditional “life like the locals” cultural experience, sojourners actively avoid stereotypes because their full immersion into the temporary culture implies actively navigating and emulating the local consumption practices; these sojourners are conceptually similar to sojourners in pursuit of the more traditional “cosmopolitan” travel abroad experience (Thompson and Tambyah 1999).

Although previous research has documented that border crossings are highly symbolic (Belk 1997), our findings clearly illustrate that the symbolic nature of cultural experiential goals have implications for both the degree of immersion and the nature of consumption within the temporary cultural space. For border crossers to the U.S., American imagery and symbolism as depicted in American movies and TV shows are likely to impact their cultural experiential goal setting and what should (and what should not) be explored as part of the consumer journey. Theoretically, our work contributes by explicating sojourners’ “coming to America” cultural

experiential goals which are derived from home country exposure to iconic American activities and brands, as well as indexical cultural and brand meanings in the home country and in the U.S. Our work with sojourners coming to America acknowledges the prominence of American popular culture globally (Bayles 2014; Crothers 2018; Sanders 2011).

Future research on cultural experiential goals and an exploration of cultural authenticity could offer interesting perspectives across specific border crossers, including tourists, immigrants, migrants, and sojourners. Further, it is interesting to consider whether “imagined” and “uniquely symbolic” experiential goals evident with regard to America would be evident among sojourners traveling to other countries. We speculate that U.S. or German sojourners travelling to the UK, China, and Equador, for example, would likely have imagined experiences related to iconic destinations (e.g., Big Ben, Tiananmen Square, Machu Picchu), but significantly less vividly “imagined” host country experiences related to brands, and possibly less interest in host country symbolism as part of their cultural experiential goals. Certainly, interesting opportunities exist for future investigation of cultural experiential goals across countries by border crossers with different cultural backgrounds, and with regard to brand engagement when, in contrast to globalized American consumer culture, other host country (e.g., UK, China, Ecuador) iconic brand meanings are less prominent in sojourners’ home countries (e.g., U.S., Germany).

### **Cultural brand engagement in cultural experience construction**

Importantly, our work has provided a new lens for examining cultural experiential goals and the use of brands, with their iconic and indexical meanings to understand consumers’ journeys across borders and their construction of culturally authentic experiences. Our research brings needed attention to brands and brand use by border crossers as they construct culturally

authentic experiences, as extant work on border crossers has focused on possessions and consumption practices primarily with a focus on identity-relevance (see Table 1; Askegaard et al. 2005; Bardhi et al. 2012; Luedicke 2011; Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994; Üstüner and Holt 2007). Indeed, significant research to-date has established the importance of brands to communicate identity (cf. Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003) and as relationship partners (cf. Fournier 1998), and that consumers evaluate brand differences across different cultural spaces (Bengtsson et al. 2010). Our research goes beyond this work to examine sojourners' cultural brand engagement; that is, their proactive, instrumental, and goal-directed use of brands as part of their constructed cultural experiences.

Within the temporary cultural space, our sojourner informants have a pragmatic stance on brand use. Their cultural brand engagement involves a brand's instrumentality to construct an "authentic" experience, without emotionally connecting with the brand, and in many cases, taking extra efforts to ensure that they are not "getting attached" to the brand. Thus, our data speak to liquidity and instrumental brand value (vs. anchors of identity) among sojourners; accordingly, our findings complement Bardhi et al. (2012) who document the instrumental value of possessions (not brands) for global nomads. Our work also contributes to the liquid consumption framework (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) by showing that a brand's instrumental value can stem not only from functional meanings, but also from symbolic meanings.

Our work offers theoretical perspectives on the instrumental value of cultural brand engagement, with attention to iconic and indexical brand meanings and authentic experience construction (Grayson and Martinec 2004). As illustrated in Figure 1, indexical and iconic anchoring (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Schulman 2000) are relevant to examining a brand's fit with cultural experiential goals and instrumental value to the experience

construction. Our sojourners focused on an “imagined American” cultural experience engage with American brands with iconic brand meanings (e.g., Sarah’ red Solo cup; Elise’s branded clothing and cosmetics), whereas those seeking a “life like the locals” cultural experience engage with American and non-American brands with indexical usage meanings (e.g., Stephanie and North Face, UGG, and Minnetonka; Adriana and Adidas). Further, those seeking a “unique Americana” cultural experience engage with American brands with iconic usage meanings and avoid American brands with indexical home culture anchoring (e.g., Daiyu favoring Taco Bell over KFC and McDonald’s). These iconic and indexical brand meanings are powerful and intrinsically tied to the enactment of the sojourner’s desired cultural experience.

Importantly, we observe cultural brand engagement, instrumental brand value, not only for identity-relevant product categories (e.g., clothing and cosmetics; Berger and Heath 2007), but also non-identity relevant categories (e.g., cereal, coffee, fast food) across cultural experiential goals. As related to identity-relevant product categories, for example, Elisabeth (in pursuit of the “unique Americana” experience) finds instrumental value in American Eagle, not because of the identity signaling value of its clothing line, but because of the distinct iconic Americana imagery. Similarly, Elise, in pursuit of the “imagined American” experience, relies on her branded clothing (e.g., Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister) explaining its symbolic, as well as instrumental value, “I was looking transformed into the American party girl. So that was really fun. I wasn’t being serious about it. I was like undercover, or like wearing a costume, because it wasn’t me at all.” As related to non-identity relevant product categories, brands such as Lucky Charms (cereal), Dunkin Donuts (coffee), Walmart (retailer), and Taco Bell (fast food) provide instrumental value because they carry iconic “American” or indexical usage meanings. Hence, our sojourners’ explicated stories indicate that instrumental brand value is evident not only in the



symbolic value of identity-relevant products, but also in non-identity relevant products for brands that carry iconic or indexical meanings and align with cultural experiential goals.

Finally, our sojourners' cultural brand engagement is context-bound, relevant to the here and now in America; they are not interested in developing relationships with brands during their stay, and many specifically report they will not continue to use brands used in America (even though many global brands are available) when they return home. Hence, consistent with the liquidity argument related to possessions posited by Bardhi et al. (2012, p. 519), our sojourners choose brands that carry situational value; these brands are important, "but only in the particular cultural context in which [they are] deployed." This situational value is derived from the interplay of cultural experiential goals and brand meanings and related to their temporary brand use, with no intention to change their identity or brand use at home. To our sojourners, brand meanings are fluid and context dependent; they are "polysemic in nature and not inherent in the brand itself, but dependent on the larger socio-cultural context within which the brand is consumed" (Bengtsson et al. 2010, p. 523). Their brand use in America is motivational (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek 2011, van Doorn et al. 2010), without an interest in long-term personal relationships with brands (Fournier 1998; Escalas and Bettman 2003). Recall Daiyu's nostalgic connection and emotional meanings ascribed to KFC, an American brand used at home, and lack of such attachment to brands used within the temporary cultural space. Indeed, home culture brand relationships are sacred and to be resumed upon sojourners return to their home culture.

Sojourners may rely on different strategies when engaging with brands and the sociocultural context in which the brand is encountered (or expectations that it should be encountered) is likely to influence the sojourner's evaluation of a brand's instrumental value to the cultural experience construction. Future research might explore more direct comparisons of

brand use for different types of border crossers (e.g., sojourners, tourists, immigrants) to further examine how the instrumental value of brand and brand meanings vary as a function of cultural experiential goals across different sociocultural contexts.

### **Consumer journeys of young adult sojourners**

Our research provides a unique addition to the global consumer culture literature on border crosses by investigating young adult sojourners from countries around the world who are studying in the U.S. Our findings reiterate that American popular culture “emerged from specific historical contexts to become globally ubiquitous and culturally powerful both within and outside the United States” (Crothers 2018, p. 186), and that American popular culture meanings and symbolism play significant roles in setting expectations and mythmaking for sojourners coming to America. American brands and media images carry semiotic potential that both feed and constrain an individual’s imagination of what can and should be experienced in America (Crouch et al. 2011).

Our work on young adult sojourners’ cultural experiential goals draws needed attention to this cohort who is engaged in global and American consumer culture and global media (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Strizhakova et al. 2012), and is exploring transformative experiences of young adulthood (Arnett 2002; Weinberger et al. 2017). Our sojourners are young adults (18 to 30), and their international travel involves an educational “milestone” with acknowledged self-development goals. We purposefully recruited our young adult informants from countries with different cultural, political, and economic environments, and thus our work also provides insights about culture and cultural experiential goals in the U.S. An across-informant examination reveals some interesting perspectives on our young adult sojourners and their cultural experiential goals. First, all sojourners articulate self-development goals and

express a desire to maintain their home cultural identity while temporarily in the U.S.; fourteen of our sixteen informants were in pursuit of a dominant cultural experiential goal. Second, each of the fourteen informants focused on one of three cultural experiential goals: the “imagined American,” the “unique Americana,” or the “live like the locals” cultural experience. We acknowledge, however, that sojourners may have multiple cultural experiential goals and that the dominant goal may change as the sojourner spends more time in the country.

We show that informants from countries with uncensored access to American media are more likely to seek an “imagined American” experience that aligns with popular culture imagery, whereas sojourners from countries with less access to American popular culture look to Americana symbolism in their experience construction or pursue a “live like the locals” cultural experience. Specifically, young adult informants from more democratized economies with greater access to American popular culture (U.K., France, Ireland, and Taiwan; Crothers 2018) are in pursuit of all three cultural experiences, whereas informants from countries with more restricted access (e.g., China, Iran, and Turkey; Bayles 2014; Crothers 2018) are in pursuit of the “unique Americana” and the “live like the locals” cultural experiences. Finally, informants seeking the “imagined” American experience are slightly younger, and may be more captivated by American popular culture at home than slightly older informants.

Future research might explore how cultural distance and perceptions of cultural differences (e.g., nationalism, global identity) influence the sojourner’s cultural experiential goals and reliance on brands in experience construction. Further, as our sample was all female, future research should consider mixed gender samples to examine whether there are gendered differences in cultural experiential goals and brand use to enact those goals.

## **Managerial implications**

Our research has implications for both marketing strategy and branding strategy. First, our research supports brand meanings as polysemic (Bengtsson et al. 2010), but also finds that international branding efforts by American manufacturers and retailers designed to connect American brands to cultural symbols via, for example, product placement in movies and TV shows, are important sources of brand knowledge for border crossers to America. Iconic brand meanings serve as a basis for creating bucket lists and prompt the purchase of specific brands in a host country. Importantly, stereotypes are not necessarily a bad thing in the context of predetermined cultural experiential pursuits as many sojourners are actively searching for brands that carry iconic meanings. Hence, global advertisements or product placement in “cultural” movies and TV shows appear to be effective marketing tools for reaching border crossers and building non-domestic “local” brand knowledge. Moreover, signaling unique cultural “local” availability within a host country is most effective when the border crosser can verify availability through media consumption (e.g., creating beliefs that these brands are consumed only within a specific culture) or when there is observational evidence of actual usage by cultural locals.

Second, our work provides insights that sojourners are engaged with global and domestic American brands with possible implications for their marketing campaigns. Recent work has argued that “brands are not global or local to a consumer because of their country of origin, but rather, because of the nature of cultural myths that a brand chooses to invoke in a particular context (Kjeldgaard et al. 2015, p. 48). Domestic American brands (e.g., North Face) and retailers (e.g., Target, Forever 21) that are not marketed globally have an opportunity to leverage their “local” American origins for border crossers who are interested in a “unique Americana” cultural experience. Similarly, domestic companies with strong Americana symbolism (e.g.,

American Eagle), by the very nature of their imagery, will be appealing to border crossers seeking a more local experience. Perhaps not surprisingly in a global marketplace, American companies distributing and promoting brands globally (e.g., McDonald's, Lucky Charms, Cover Girl) face challenges in managing their standardized iconic meanings across cultural contexts, particularly in light of possibly different indexical meanings between home and host countries. As is evident in our data, our sojourners are negotiating home and host country indexical brand meanings. In some cases, such as Adriana and Adidas, there is a concerted effort to understand and embrace differences to act accordingly at home and abroad; in other cases, such as Daiyu and KFC, there is a desire to compartmentalize home and host country meanings.

Finally, given the globalization of media, the mobility of consumers, and an increasing young adult cohort with both local and global identities (Arnett 2002; Steenkamp and De Jong 2010; Strizhakova et al. 2012), these international students are a distinct and profitable segment to target with marketing efforts. As reported, approximately 1 million students are enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions (Open Door, Executive Summary 2017) and larger U.S. universities expect to increase the number of foreign students studying at their universities (Doyle et al. 2010). Thus, companies marketing products, both identity-relevant and not identity-relevant, on college campuses with significant international student enrollment may want to consider their "local" marketing campaigns to ensure they are leveraging brand meanings with regard to "imagined American," "unique Americana," and "life like the locals" cultural experiences. Moreover, companies with a presence in young adult tourist destinations in America might also attend to this segment that appears engaged with brands in pursuit of their authentic cultural experiential goals in America.

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**Table 1: Selected research on immigrants, migrants, and sojourners**

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Goal focus and findings</b>	<b>Primary consumption focus</b>	<b>Home country</b>	<b>Host country</b>
Wallendorf and Reilly (1983)	Immigrants	Acculturation: Immigrants' assimilation process Immigrants' consumption practices are a melding of home and host country.	General consumption patterns and possessions	Mexico	United States
Mehta and Belk (1991)	Immigrants	Acculturation: Immigrants use home culture possessions as identity anchors and "security" blankets within the host culture.	Possessions	India	United States
Peñalosa (1994)	Immigrants	Acculturation: Immigrants use multiple acculturation agents including family, friends, and media; they do not necessarily assimilate into the new culture.	General consumption patterns and possessions	Mexico	United States
Oswald (1999)	Immigrants	Acculturation: Immigrants' use of semiotic meanings of goods and the role of goods in ethnic identity construction and expression. Immigrants "culture swap" by using goods to move between and negotiate host and home culture identities.	General consumption patterns and possessions	Haiti	United States
Üstüner and Holt (2007)	Migrants	Acculturation: Migrant women exploring the social patterns of acculturation and the tensions between dominant and minority culture. Poor migrant women experience "shattered identity projects" as they lack the resources for upward social mobility within the urban culture.	General consumption patterns and possessions	Turkey (rural)	Turkey (urban)
Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard (2005)	Immigrants and sojourners	Acculturation: Immigrants and sojourners have multiple ideological positions and consumable socially constructed ethnic identities. Transnational consumer culture is an important acculturation agent.	General consumption patterns and possessions	Greenland	Denmark
Bradford and Sherry (2014)	Immigrants and sojourners	Acculturation and Self-development: Sojourners and immigrants and conflict related to inconsistencies between home and host environment.	General consumption patterns and possessions	U.S.	South Africa
Thompson and Tambyah (1999)	Sojourners	Acculturation and Self-development: Expatriates' identity projects and consumption patterns of those trying to enact a cosmopolitan identity. Cosmopolitan expatriates experience tensions between authentic travel experiences and themes of dwelling (home).	General consumption patterns, possessions, and experiences	Multiple	Singapore
Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012)	Sojourners	Self-development: Global nomads and a reexamination of possessions as identity anchors. Global nomads' relationships to possessions are "liquid." Nomadic consumption is characterized by valuing the instrumentality of possessions (not identity relevance and attachment).	Possessions	Multiple	Multiple

**Table 2: Informant profiles**

<b>Informant (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Home country</b>	<b>Age (Program<sup>a</sup>)</b>	<b>Stay in U.S. before first interview</b>	<b>Expected stay length in the U.S.</b>
Daiyu	China	28 (G)	3 years	5 years
Hualing	China	27 (G)	2 years	5 years
Meili	China	27 (G)	1.5 years	2.5 year
Stephanie	France	21 (U)	3 months	8 months
Elise	France	21 (U)	3 months	8 months
Aarti	India	28 (G)	3 months	8 months
Adriana	Iran	28 (G)	3 years	4 years
Jasmine	Iran	30 (G)	6 months	2.5 years
Amira	Iran	28 (G)	3 months	4.5 years
Mary	Ireland	22 (U)	3 months	8 months
Lin	Taiwan	25 (G)	1 year	2 years
Su-Wei	Taiwan	28 (G)	3 months	2.5 years
Zehra	Turkey	26 (G)	1.5 years	5.5 years
Elisabeth	United Kingdom	20 (U)	3 months	8 months
Catherine	United Kingdom	21 (U)	3 months	8 months
Sarah	United Kingdom	20 (U)	3 months	8 months

<sup>a</sup> U refers to undergraduate; G refers to graduate



Figure 1: Sojourners’ cultural experiential goals and cultural brand engagement

		Cultural experiential goal		
		The “imagined American” cultural experience	The “unique Americana” cultural experience	The “life like the locals” cultural experience
Sojourner	Temporary residency with intention to maintain home cultural identity			
Grounding of cultural experiential goal	<p>Bucket list of experiences and brands derived from home county exposure to stereotypical American popular culture.</p> <p>“I want to experience what I imagine to be true about America and American experiences.”</p>	<p>On the ground attention to American experiences, symbols, and brands.</p> <p>“I want to have a unique Americana experience, an experience that is distinct from home.”</p>	<p>On the ground attention to locals and their lived experiences.</p> <p>“I want be experience life like one of the locals.”</p>	
Cultural brand engagement	<p>American brands with <b>iconic</b> usage meanings.</p>	<p>American brands with <b>iconic</b> usage meanings.</p> <p>Avoidance of American brands with <b>indexical</b> home culture anchoring.</p>	<p>American and non-American brands with <b>indexical</b> usage meanings.</p>	