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Home is Where the Heart Finds Peace: The Effect of Ontological Security Threat on Hometown Brand Preference

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Abstract

The acceleration of globalization and the occurrence of trade wars have placed people in a state of ontological insecurity, that is, people's ontological security has been threatened. This paper examines the impact of consumer ontological security threat on hometown brand preference. Results from three studies indicate that individuals whose ontological security is threatened exhibit higher preference for hometown brands compared to those whose ontological security is not threatened, with hometown attachment serving as a mediator. Specifically, individuals experiencing ontological security threat are more inclined to attach to their hometowns, which can provide routine life and construct personal identity, thereby seeking restoration of ontological security and consequently increasing their preference for hometown brands. Experimental results also reveal that exposure to natural habitat contexts moderates the effect of ontological security threat on hometown brand preference. Specifically, when exposed to natural habitat contexts, individuals with threatened ontological security can counter the threat through attachment to natural habitats as a broader place attachment, no longer needing to seek hometown attachment to alleviate the ontological security threat, thus eliminating the difference in their preferences between hometown and non-hometown brands. The findings of this study enrich existing research on ontological security and brand preference, provide a new local marketing strategy for brands, and offer substantial theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

Full Text

Preamble

Hometown is Where the Heart Finds Peace: The Impact of Ontological Security Threat on Hometown Brand Preference

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Abstract

The acceleration of globalization and the outbreak of trade wars have placed individuals in a state of ontological insecurity, threatening their ontological security. This study investigates how consumer threats to ontological security influence preferences for hometown brands. Three studies demonstrate that individuals whose ontological security is threatened exhibit stronger preferences for hometown brands compared to those whose ontological security is not threatened, with hometown attachment serving as the mediating mechanism. Specifically, when ontological security is threatened, individuals become more attached to their hometowns—which provide routine life and construct personal identity—as a means to restore ontological security, thereby increasing their preference for hometown brands. The results further reveal that natural habitat exposure moderates the effect of ontological security threat on hometown brand preference. When exposed to natural habitat contexts, individuals whose ontological security is threatened can counter the threat through attachment to this broader place, reducing their need to seek solace in hometown attachment and consequently eliminating the difference in preference between hometown and non-hometown brands. These findings enrich existing research on ontological security and brand preferences, offering brands a novel indigenous marketing strategy with substantial theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

Keywords: ontological security; hometown brand; hometown attachment; natural habitat exposure

1. Problem Introduction

As globalization accelerates and foreign products flood into China, creating shocks for domestic products and brands, Chinese consumers have paradoxically increased their consumption of local brands rather than reducing it. According to a McKinsey report, from 2012 to 2017, the market share of domestic brands in personal digital products rose from 43% to 63%, while domestic brands in personal care products increased from 61% to 76% (Baan, Luan, Pho, & Zipser, 2017). The China-U.S. trade war that began in March 2018 triggered national concerns about future development environments, while simultaneously increasing Chinese consumers' attention to domestic products. Baidu Index data shows that from January 2017 to March 2018, the average search volume for the term "domestic-made" was 1,968, but from April 2018 to June 2019, as the trade war

escalated, this figure increased to 3,399—a rise exceeding 70%. Additionally, average search volumes for terms like “Made in China” and “Chinese brands” also increased after the trade war began.

Why do citizens pay more attention to indigenous brands under the impact of globalization? This is the research question explored in this paper. Sociological research finds that when events such as globalization or natural disasters occur, people often experience a state of ontological insecurity (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011), meaning their ontological security is threatened. The concept of ontological security, originating from sociology, refers to individuals’ confidence in the continuity of their self-identity and the stability of their surrounding social and physical environment (Giddens, 1990). In 2017, Phipps and Ozanne first introduced the concept of ontological security to marketing, examining how consumers reconstruct meaning to establish new order when their routine behaviors are disrupted (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). However, scant literature has explored the psychological processes through which consumers utilize existing order to cope with ontological security threats. This study approaches this gap by examining the established order between consumers and their hometown—a specific geographical location—to explore the relationship between consumer ontological security threat and hometown brand preference, as well as its underlying mechanisms.

We argue that consumers whose ontological security is threatened will show greater preference for hometown brands. This occurs because individuals experiencing ontological security threat seek to restore their sense of security (Dupuis & Thorns, 2010) and thus become more attached to their hometowns, which provide routine life and construct personal identity. They utilize the stable psychological connection between themselves and their hometown as a resource against ontological security threat, thereby increasing their preference for hometown brands (Debenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014). Furthermore, natural habitat, as a broader geographical concept similar to hometown, can also help individuals resist ontological security threats. When exposed to natural habitat contexts, people establish stable psychological connections with nature that can serve as psychological resources to counter ontological security threats, reducing their reliance on hometown attachment and consequently decreasing their preference for hometown brands.

1.1 Ontological Security

The concept of ontology originates from philosophy, with its etymology derived from the Greek word for being (onto), defined as a description of objective existence in the world (Jacquette, 2002), representing people’ s cognition of their own existence. Giddens’ concept of ontological security measures individuals’ perception of environmental continuity and stability and their psychological state of continuous self-identity (Giddens, 1990). It stems from psychological feelings arising from individuals’ interactions with their environment. On one hand, stable interactions between individuals and their environment foster trust and

stability—confidence that one's environment is stable, orderly, and predictable. On the other hand, this trust and stability help individuals develop confidence in the continuity of their self-identity, believing in continuity between past, present, and future selves, thus achieving a state of ontological security.

Unlike general security, which forms in early life and emphasizes physical or psychological protection (Freud, 1936/2009), ontological security is more closely related to personal development. Rather than focusing on single environmental interactions, ontological security emphasizes long-term, stable, orderly, and predictable continuous interactions between individuals and their daily external environment, and the security developed through such relationships (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Moreover, from the perspective of self-construction rather than mere subjective experience, ontological security emphasizes the connection between this stable, continuous environmental interaction and individuals' self-continuity.

Ontological security typically remains implicit in daily life and is seldom consciously perceived. However, when dramatic external changes threaten it, this latent concept becomes salient (Skey, 2010). External upheavals disrupt daily routines and stable interactions between individuals and their environment, undermining the psychological security state formed in stable environments and reducing confidence in self-identity continuity (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011). Research shows that individuals whose ontological security is threatened tend to seek various methods to regain it, such as seeking stable housing (Padgett, 2007) or reconstructing routine life order (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011).

Unlike concepts related to the self such as sense of control, self-esteem, or social exclusion, ontological security—while involving the self—emphasizes the interactive relationship between the self and the routine living environment, highlighting how the living environment affects individual existence and development (Giddens, 1990). Furthermore, although ontological security may involve events with significant human impact such as natural disasters or wars, the concept focuses on how these events disrupt individuals' routine life order, triggering anxiety and concerns about stable self-development rather than threats to life itself (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011).

1.2 Hometown Brand Preference

Hometown brands are those originating from consumers' hometowns. Hometown refers to places where people have long resided and lived (Huang, Hung, & Chen, 2018). However, in reality, people's cognition of hometown can be ambiguous. Hometown can range from a village or city to an entire country (Huang et al., 2018). For instance, for overseas immigrants facing cultural shocks, hometown is more likely to be a country rather than a specific town; for a college student studying in a different province, hometown may refer to their home province. Therefore, this study defines hometown as the location (village, town, or country) of long-term residence activated in individuals' minds in specific

contexts. Based on this, we define hometown brands as those originating within the boundaries of the activated hometown, including domestic brands (Zhang, 2015) and local brands (Davvetas & Diamantopoulos, 2016).

Research on hometown brand preference has primarily focused on brand internationalization, examining factors influencing consumers' hometown brand preferences (Hsu & Nien, 2010; Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998; Sharma, Shimp, & Shin, 1995; Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Existing studies indicate that preferences for hometown brands stem from two main drivers: national consciousness behind hometown brands (Zhang & Zhang, 2010; Sharma et al., 1995; Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and product quality symbols associated with hometown brands (Klein et al., 1998). However, these studies overlook the specific emotional connection between the geographical information of hometown highlighted in hometown brands and consumers, and how this emotional connection influences brand preferences.

1.3 Ontological Security Threat and Hometown Brand Preference

Ontological security develops from the interactive relationship between individuals and their external environment (Giddens, 1990). When the external environment is stable, stable interactions help individuals form stable daily routines and develop confidence in the continuity of their surrounding social-physical environment and self-development, placing them in a state of ontological security (Mitzen, 2006). When fundamental changes occur in the external environment, daily routines are disrupted (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011), making it difficult to predict future developments and reducing confidence in the social-physical environment and self-development, thereby threatening ontological security (Skey, 2010).

When individuals' stable self-development is threatened by environmental changes, they often seek solace in hometown brands. This is because the hometown information displayed in hometown brands serves an indexical function, linking individuals to their past routine lives (Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010; Liu & Smeesters, 2010), helping them quickly retrieve and restore the stable, secure sense of order from past lives, thereby helping them cope with the psychological threat caused by decreased ontological security.

Based on this, we propose: **H1:** When consumers' ontological security is threatened, their preference for hometown brands increases.

1.4 The Mediating Role of Hometown Attachment

The concept of hometown attachment derives from place attachment theory. Based on previous definitions of place attachment, this study defines hometown attachment as the emotional bond formed through long-term interaction with one's hometown during life and growth. We argue that when ontological se-

curity is threatened, individuals are more likely to develop attachment to their hometown. First, the geographical concept of hometown contains numerous routine practices, expressions, and symbolic forms (Skey, 2010) that can serve as important support for ontological security. People are born and raised in their hometowns, forming autobiographical memories and emotions through extensive long-term interactions, which generate attachment and generalize hometown as “home.” Previous research indicates that a homely atmosphere helps individuals develop basic trust in the external environment and maintain the continuity of this trust (Ratnam & Drozdowski, 2018). In this context, hometown attachment helps individuals extract or develop environment-related stability (Afshar, Foroughan, Vedadhir, & Tabatabaei, 2017), thus helping them cope with ontological security threats.

Second, hometown provides individuals with collective identity, closely connecting them with local groups (Li & Xu, 2016) and providing psychological stability. Hometown attachment is a prerequisite for obtaining stable hometown identity, which helps improve individuals’ stable cognition of the social world and reduces the psychological threat from decreased ontological security.

Due to this emotional attachment to hometown, people prefer hometown brands. Because hometown brands serve as symbols maintaining intimate connections with hometown, they are often used to express hometown emotions (Huang et al., 2018). Consequently, individuals tend to support and protect hometown brands to gain a sense of emotional belonging.

Accordingly, we propose: **H2:** Hometown attachment mediates the relationship between ontological security threat and hometown brand preference.

1.5 Natural Habitat Exposure

When ontological security is threatened, the psychological need to restore a stable environment may be directed not only toward hometown but also toward the broader geographical concept of natural habitat. Natural habitat exposure refers to providing individuals with natural habitat contextual stimuli that evoke psychological connections with nature (Chow & Lau, 2015). Research from healthcare and psychology shows that exposure to specific natural contexts can improve physical (Ulrich, 1984; Mao et al., 2012) and mental health (Kaplan, 2001; Pretty et al., 2007), as these natural contexts help individuals recover from daily emotional and physiological-psychological stress (Feng et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2010).

From an evolutionary psychology perspective, the emotional connection individuals develop with specific natural contexts stems from primitive humans’ dependence on natural habitats, which provided food, resources, and shelter (Bailey & King, 2010), helping improve survival chances and generate positive developmental value (Ulrich, 1993; Gagliardi & Piccinini, 2019). Therefore, when exposed to natural habitat contexts, individuals unconsciously activate perceptions of stable interactive connections with natural habitats (Wilson, 1984), viewing nature

as part of the self (Naess, 1993) and establishing intimate emotional bonds. This emotional connection can be seen as a stable psychological attachment between individuals and a broader location (habitat as a quasi-hometown). Since natural habitat derives from perceptions of stable environment and continuous development formed through evolution, activating the natural habitat concept helps individuals establish stable cognition of their existence and self-development, thereby helping them cope with ontological security threats. When natural habitat can spontaneously activate individuals' stable interactive perceptions with the environment as a clue for threatened individuals to rebuild security, the psychological need to seek hometown attachment to counter ontological security threat decreases, and preference for hometown brands consequently diminishes.

However, not all natural contexts qualify as natural habitat contexts. Natural contexts that are unsuitable for human survival and development or evoke awe are not the contexts humans depended on during evolution and cannot help individuals obtain stable interactive order with the environment. Moreover, threatening (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015) or awe-inspiring natural contexts (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012) also create feelings of uncertainty and instability. When individuals' ontological security is threatened, such non-natural habitat contextual stimuli cannot serve as psychological resources against ontological security threat, and individuals' psychological attachment to hometown and preference for hometown brands will not be affected by such exposure. Additionally, non-natural geographical contexts (such as cities or artificial landscapes) are often associated with short histories (Chen, Wang, & Zhang, 2016), high mobility, and rapid urbanization (Chow & Lau, 2015), creating associations with uncertainty and instability. When ontological security is threatened, non-natural geographical contextual stimuli are unlikely to quickly activate individuals' stable interactive perceptions with the environment; therefore, consumers still need to rely on hometown psychological attachment to cope with ontological security threat, thereby increasing preference for hometown brands.

Based on this, we propose: **H3**: Natural habitat exposure moderates the effect of ontological security threat on hometown brand preference. Specifically, when exposed to natural habitat contexts, the difference in preference between hometown and non-hometown brands among consumers whose ontological security is threatened will diminish.

2.1 Experimental Purpose

To ensure that the manipulation of ontological security effectively elicits consumers' perception of ontological security threat, we conducted a pretest on the variables involved in the main experiment (ontological security threatened vs. not threatened).

2.2.1 Experimental Design and Subjects

Following Giddens' (1990) definition of ontological security, we selected two different scenarios (economic globalization and cultural globalization) as stimuli for participants' ontological security threat. Globalization contexts were chosen for three reasons. First, conceptually, ontological security originated from Giddens' observations of individuals under globalization waves; thus, using globalization materials to manipulate ontological security aligns with its theoretical roots. Second, globalization is universal, with extensive and profound impacts that change not only people's living environments but also their interaction patterns with the environment, significantly disrupting established daily routines and order, thereby affecting ontological security. Third, unlike manipulations of major disasters or accidents that may trigger death anxiety, globalization is unlikely to evoke fear of death, thus avoiding confounding explanations involving life security.

The pretest employed a mixed design of 2 (ontological security state: threatened vs. not threatened) \times 2 (scenario: economic globalization vs. cultural globalization), with ontological security state as a between-subjects variable and scenario as a within-subjects variable (all participants read both scenario materials).

Seventy undergraduate and graduate students from a Wuhan university participated (65.6% female, $M_{age} = 22.33$, $SD_{age} = 2.36$) and were randomly assigned to two experimental groups.

2.2.2 Experimental Procedure

First, all participants read one text about economic globalization and one about cultural globalization. Based on the definition of ontological security (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017), descriptions of the threatened condition emphasized globalization's disruption of routine life, while the non-threatened condition emphasized convenience and opportunities brought by globalization. Materials for both conditions were matched in length and word count as closely as possible.

After reading each text, participants completed the ontological security threat perception scale. As no existing scale directly measured ontological security, we developed one based on its definition and characteristics, drawing from previous interview content (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017; Hawkins & Maurer, 2011). The 7-point Likert scale measured individuals' perceived stability of their surrounding environment and continuous self, with items such as "At this moment, I find it difficult to feel that the world around me is reliable and consistent," "At this moment, I believe the socio-physical environment around me is in an unstable state," and "At this moment, I feel it is difficult to maintain consistency between my present and past self." Exploratory factor analysis using principal component analysis with varimax rotation extracted two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1; all items loaded above 0.7 on the first factor (ranging from 0.71 to 0.82) and below 0.3 on the second factor, indicating good scale validity. The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.823, demonstrating good internal consistency reliability.

Additionally, the experiment measured participants' emotions. Based on previous research on anxiety and fear following ontological security threat (Kinnvall, 2010), we selected four items: "anxious," "pleasant," "excited," and "worried." Finally, demographic information including gender, age, and education level was collected.

2.3 Results

All 70 participants completed the entire procedure. Repeated measures ANOVA revealed no significant interaction between ontological security state and scenario ($F(1, 68) = 1.07, p = 0.31$), but a significant main effect of ontological security state on perceived threat ($F(1, 68) = 28.54, p < 0.001$). Specifically, participants in the threatened group perceived higher ontological security threat ($M_{economic} = 4.07, SD_{economic} = 0.68; M_{cultural} = 4.17, SD_{cultural} = 0.69$) than those in the non-threatened group ($M_{economic} = 3.53, SD_{economic} = 0.49; M_{cultural} = 3.59, SD_{cultural} = 0.71$). Additionally, no significant interaction was found between ontological security state and scenario on anxiety and worry ($F(1, 68) = 0.58, p = 0.45$), but a significant main effect of ontological security state emerged ($F(1, 68) = 8.12, p = 0.006$). The threatened group reported significantly higher anxiety and worry ($M_{economic} = 3.54, SD_{economic} = 1.41; M_{cultural} = 3.71, SD_{cultural} = 1.38$) than the non-threatened group ($M_{economic} = 2.88, SD_{economic} = 0.90; M_{cultural} = 3.04, SD_{cultural} = 1.05$).

These results demonstrate that the two scenarios (economic and cultural globalization) effectively manipulated participants' perception of ontological security threat. Therefore, we used the same approach to manipulate ontological security in subsequent formal experiments.

Experiment 1

The primary purpose of Experiment 1 was to test H1—that individuals whose ontological security is threatened would increase their preference for hometown brands. To examine this effect, the experiment compared differences in attitudes toward tourist destinations (hometown vs. non-hometown) between participants whose ontological security was threatened versus not threatened. We predicted that compared to participants whose ontological security was not threatened, those whose ontological security was threatened would show higher preference for hometown tourist destinations.

3.2.1 Experimental Design and Subjects

This experiment employed a 2 (ontological security: threatened vs. not threatened) \times 2 (tourist destination: hometown vs. non-hometown) between-subjects design. A total of 134 participants recruited from a professional survey platform participated (47% female, $M_{age} = 31, SD_{age} = 0.501$). Educational backgrounds included: graduate degree or above (3.7%), undergraduate (38.1%), junior college (43.3%), technical secondary school (6%), high school (7.5%), and

below high school (1.5%). Hometown locations: urban (16.4%), town (32.8%), and rural (50.7%). Monthly income distribution: below ¥2,000 (6.7%), ¥2,000-4,000 (18.7%), ¥4,000-6,000 (57.5%), ¥6,000-8,000 (13.4%), and above ¥8,000 (3.7%).

3.2.2 Procedure

Participants were informed they would complete two unrelated tasks: scenario imagination and tourist destination evaluation. First, all participants read a text about globalization selected from the economic globalization scenario in the pretest. The threatened group read material emphasizing globalization's disruption of routine life, while the non-threatened group read about convenience and opportunities.

Subsequently, participants learned about a newly developed scenic area in a tourist destination described as uniquely beautiful. The destination was recruiting tourism experience ambassadors who could visit for free but were required to submit experience reports with suggestions. The hometown group was told the destination was in their hometown, while the non-hometown group was told it was in a location similar to their hometown.

After reading the description, participants indicated their willingness to visit the scenic area (7-point Likert scale: 1 = very unwilling, 7 = very willing). Considering the pretest results showing emotion effects, we also measured participants' emotions using the same four items. Finally, demographic information was collected, and no participants identified the experiment's true purpose.

3.2.3 Results

A 2 (ontological security: threatened vs. not threatened) \times 2 (tourist destination: hometown vs. non-hometown) ANCOVA on visit intention was conducted, controlling for age, education level, and emotion. Results showed that after controlling for these variables, the interaction between ontological security and destination significantly affected visit intention ($F(1, 127) = 7.45, p = 0.007$). Simple effects revealed that when ontological security was not threatened, no significant difference existed between hometown and non-hometown destinations ($F(1, 127) = 0.36, p = 0.55$). However, when ontological security was threatened, participants showed significantly higher willingness to visit the hometown destination ($M = 5.66, SD = 0.48$) than the non-hometown destination ($M = 4.27, SD = 1.44; F(1, 127) = 19.78, p < 0.001$), as shown in [Figure 1: see original paper].

Experiment 1 used hometown tourist destinations as a representative of hometown brands, finding that when ontological security is threatened, consumers prefer hometown brands (higher willingness to visit hometown destinations). This provides initial support for H1. However, Experiment 1 did not examine why ontological security state affects hometown brand preference. Therefore,

Experiment 2 tests the mediating role of hometown attachment. Additionally, while globalization scenarios avoid survival fear and differentiate from life security manipulation, they cannot directly compare the effects of ontological versus life security on brand preference. Thus, Experiment 2 adopts a new manipulation of ontological security threat and includes a life security threat group to distinguish between the two concepts.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 had three main objectives. First, it used natural disaster events to manipulate ontological security threat and employed different hometown brand types to further validate H1 and establish robustness. Second, it tested H2—the mediating role of hometown attachment in the effect of ontological security on hometown brand preference. Third, it added a life security threat group to differentiate the effects of ontological versus life security on brand preference.

Theoretically, although both ontologically and life-threatened individuals may purchase domestic (hometown) brands, the psychological meaning differs: for ontological security threat, domestic brands satisfy hometown place attachment; for life security threat, they satisfy needs for national cultural inheritance. We further propose that when hometown information is less likely to serve as a cultural symbol—for example, when hometown is defined within smaller boundaries (such as a province or region rather than a country, where hometown’s meaning as national identity decreases because smaller boundaries less represent a nation or culture)—ontologically and life-threatened individuals will differ in hometown brand preference. Therefore, this experiment defined hometown brands within provincial boundaries. We predicted that life-threatened individuals would not show significant hometown brand preference (as hometown information would not carry cultural inheritance symbolism), while ontologically threatened individuals would (as specific hometown identity better satisfies needs for stable environment).

4.2.1 Experimental Design and Subjects

Experiment 2 employed a 3 (threat type: ontological security threat vs. life security threat vs. control) \times 2 (brand origin: hometown vs. non-hometown) between-subjects design, with brand purchase intention as the dependent variable. We recruited 291 participants from a questionnaire platform (29.3% female, $M_{age} = 24.45$, $SD_{age} = 7.40$), randomly assigned to six experimental groups. Since the manipulation materials referenced Guangdong Province, all participants were recruited from Guangdong (current residence in Guangdong).

4.2.2 Procedure

Participants were informed they would complete several unrelated tasks: scenario imagination, new product promotion evaluation, and values survey. First, all participants read a text about typhoons. The ontological security threat

group read about frequent typhoons in Guangdong disrupting routine life; the life security threat group read about typhoons threatening life safety; and the control group read about different typhoon prediction methods. A pretest using the same sample pool confirmed that the three scenarios did not differ in perceived typhoon severity ($F(2, 92) = 0.96, p = 0.38$), but differed significantly in perceived ontological security threat ($F(2, 92) = 5.73, p = 0.005$). The ontological security threat group ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.08$) perceived significantly higher threat than the life security threat group ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.03; t(92) = 2.44, p = 0.019$) and control group ($M = 3.59, SD = 1.11; t(92) = 3.14, p = 0.002$). Additionally, the three groups differed significantly in perceived life security threat ($F(2, 92) = 43.39, p < 0.001$), with the life security threat group ($M = 5.39, SD = 0.88$) perceiving significantly higher threat than the ontological security threat group ($M = 3.68, SD = 1.03; t(92) = -7.26, p < 0.001$) and control group ($M = 3.10, SD = 0.99; t(92) = 2.32, p < 0.001$). These results confirmed effective manipulation of different threat types.

Next, participants reported their home province and read a description of a new storage box brand. The hometown group was told the brand originated from their home province, while the non-hometown group was told it came from Zhejiang Province. Zhejiang was selected because 2018 Guangdong population statistics showed low numbers of migrants from Zhejiang, reducing the likelihood of randomly assigning participants whose hometown was Zhejiang to the non-hometown condition. A pretest confirmed no significant differences between provinces in perceived popularity, attractiveness, quality, or price reasonableness (all $ps > 0.40$).

After reading, participants indicated purchase intention (7-point Likert scale: 1 = very unwilling, 7 = very willing) and completed the hometown attachment scale (adapted from Marcheschi, Laike, Brunt, Hansson, & Johansson, 2015), comprising nine items (e.g., “I would feel more belonging in my hometown,” “I am willing to contribute to making my hometown better,” “I feel very attached to my hometown”). Finally, demographic information was collected, and participants guessed the research purpose. No participants correctly identified the purpose.

4.3 Results

We excluded participants whose hometown was Zhejiang (3) and those who failed attention checks (15), leaving 273 participants for analysis. Excluded participants did not differ significantly across conditions, $^2(df = 2, N = 18) = 1.01, p = 0.60$.

Manipulation check. Brand origin manipulation significantly affected hometown brand perception ($F(1, 271) = 26.24, p < 0.001$), with the hometown group ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.52$) perceiving the brand as more hometown-oriented than the non-hometown group ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.62$), confirming effective manipulation.

Main effect analysis. A 3 (threat type: ontological security threat vs. life security threat vs. control) \times 2 (brand origin: hometown vs. non-hometown) ANCOVA

on purchase intention, controlling for emotion, revealed a significant interaction ($F(2, 266) = 3.38, p = 0.036$). Simple effects analysis (shown in [Figure 2: see original paper]) indicated that under ontological security threat, the hometown group showed significantly higher purchase intention ($M = 5.03$) than the non-hometown group ($M = 4.18; F(1, 266) = 12.41, p = 0.001$). However, under life security threat, no significant difference existed between groups ($M_{\text{hometown}} = 4.38, M_{\text{non-hometown}} = 4.21; F(1, 266) = 0.51, p = 0.48$). The control group also showed no difference ($M_{\text{hometown}} = 4.21, M_{\text{non-hometown}} = 4.21; F(1, 266) = 0.00, p = 0.99$).

Mediation analysis. A two-way ANOVA with threat type and brand origin predicting hometown attachment revealed a significant interaction ($F(2, 266) = 10.09, p < 0.001$). Simple effects showed that under ontological security threat, hometown brand participants reported significantly higher hometown attachment ($M = 5.17, SD = 0.12$) than non-hometown participants ($M = 3.94, SD = 0.19; F(1, 266) = 29.78, p < 0.001$). No significant differences emerged under life security threat ($F(1, 266) = 0.09, p = 0.77$) or control conditions ($F(1, 266) = 0.04, p = 0.85$).

We further analyzed the mediating role of hometown attachment using Hayes' (2013) bootstrapping method with 5,000 samples and Model 8. The 95% confidence interval showed a significant indirect effect of threat type on purchase intention through hometown attachment (LLCI = 0.1425, ULCI = 0.5514, excluding zero), confirming mediation. Specifically, when brand origin was hometown, the indirect effect was significant (LLCI = -0.4142, ULCI = -0.1263, excluding zero). After controlling for the mediator, the direct effect became non-significant (LLCI = -0.4098, ULCI = 0.0033, including zero), indicating full mediation (shown in [Figure 3: see original paper]). When brand origin was non-hometown, the mediating effect was non-significant (LLCI = -0.0474, ULCI = 0.2078, including zero), as shown in [Figure 4: see original paper].

Experiment 2 further validated H1, showing that compared to individuals whose ontological security was not threatened, those whose ontological security was threatened preferred brands from their home province over non-home provinces. This occurs because threatened individuals seek to restore ontological security through hometown attachment, which helps retrieve stable feelings of past routine life and collective identity. These results also validated H2, confirming hometown attachment's mediating role. Additionally, the experiment distinguished ontological from life security, finding that life-threatened individuals did not develop stronger hometown attachment or preference.

The next experiment examines the moderating role of natural habitat exposure to further explore boundary conditions.

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 aimed to further validate the main effect and mediation while testing H3 regarding the moderating role of natural habitat exposure. We pre-

dicted that when ontological security is threatened, compared to non-natural habitat and non-natural geographical exposure, natural habitat exposure would help individuals recover from the threatened state, reducing their need to rely on hometown attachment to counter the threat, thereby significantly weakening hometown brand preference.

Experiment 3 used globalization as the manipulation context and defined hometown brands as domestic brands. Given that globalization activates the relationship between national boundaries and the self, using the nation as hometown is appropriate. However, research suggests patriotism and globalism may affect domestic brand preferences (Liu & Smeesters, 2010; Rosenblatt et al., 1989); therefore, we measured patriotism and globalism to rule out alternative explanations.

5.2.1 Experimental Design and Subjects

The experiment employed a 2 (ontological security: threatened vs. not threatened) \times 3 (contextual exposure: natural habitat vs. non-habitat vs. non-nature) between-subjects design. A total of 335 participants from an experimental sample recruitment platform participated (38.5% female, $M_{age} = 25.37$, $SD_{age} = 6.32$), randomly assigned to six groups.

5.2.2 Procedure

Participants were informed they would complete several unrelated tasks: scenario imagination, new product advertising evaluation, and values survey. First, all participants read a globalization text from the cultural globalization scenario in the pretest to manipulate ontological security threat perception.

Next, participants read about Haowei Wine Company and viewed product images. The material described two new wine products from Chinese (hometown) and Turkish (non-hometown) production bases, both with equivalent quality and pricing. A pretest confirmed no significant differences in perceived attractiveness or favorability between the two regions across exposure conditions (all $ps > 0.42$).

After the text, participants viewed product posters with different backgrounds: natural habitat (grass and trees), non-natural habitat (snow mountains), or non-nature (urban high-rises). A pretest confirmed no significant differences in liking, attractiveness, or product-background match across the three posters (all $ps > 0.17$).

Participants then indicated their preference for Chinese versus Turkish wine (7-point scale, higher scores indicating stronger preference for Chinese wine). Subsequently, they completed measures of hometown attachment, patriotism, and globalism (scales in Appendix 5), and manipulation checks assessing perceived brand origin. Positive and negative emotions were also measured. No participants correctly guessed the experimental purpose.

5.3 Results

Fourteen participants were excluded for failing to complete procedures or measures, leaving 321 for analysis. Excluded participants did not differ across conditions, $t(df = 2, N = 14) = 1.01, p = 0.57$.

Manipulation check. Brand origin manipulation significantly affected hometown brand perception ($t(321) = 8.21, p < 0.001$), with Chinese wine ($M = 5.10, SD = 1.55$) perceived as more hometown-oriented than Turkish wine ($M = 3.15, SD = 1.65$), confirming effective manipulation.

Main effect analysis. A 2 (ontological security: threatened vs. not threatened) \times 3 (contextual exposure: natural habitat vs. non-habitat vs. non-nature) ANCOVA on wine purchase intention, controlling for emotion, revealed a significant interaction ($F(2, 314) = 8.68, p < 0.001$). Simple effects analysis (shown in [Figure 5: see original paper]) indicated that under natural habitat exposure, ontological security threat did not significantly affect purchase intention ($M_{threatened} = 4.98, M_{not\ threatened} = 5.02; F(1, 314) = 0.03, p = 0.86$). However, under non-natural habitat exposure, threatened participants showed significantly higher purchase intention ($M = 5.91$) than non-threatened participants ($M = 4.92; F(1, 314) = 28.64, p < 0.001$). Similarly, under non-nature exposure, threat significantly affected purchase intention ($M_{threatened} = 5.83, M_{not\ threatened} = 4.87; F(1, 314) = 19.91, p < 0.001$). These results show that under non-natural habitat or non-nature exposure, threatened participants preferred hometown brands, but this effect disappeared under natural habitat exposure, supporting H3.

Mediation analysis. A two-way ANOVA on hometown attachment revealed a significant interaction between ontological security threat and contextual exposure ($F(2, 314) = 9.52, p < 0.001$). Simple effects showed that under natural habitat exposure, ontological security threat did not affect hometown attachment ($M_{threatened} = 5.04, M_{not\ threatened} = 5.11; F(1, 314) = 0.13, p = 0.72$). However, under non-natural habitat exposure, threatened participants reported significantly higher hometown attachment ($M = 6.00$) than non-threatened participants ($M = 5.02; F(1, 314) = 27.61, p < 0.001$). Similarly, under non-nature exposure, threat significantly affected hometown attachment ($M_{threatened} = 5.97, M_{not\ threatened} = 4.95; F(1, 314) = 22.17, p < 0.001$).

Bootstrapping analysis (5,000 samples, Model 8) revealed a significant indirect effect of ontological security threat on purchase intention through hometown attachment (LLCI = -0.8741, ULCI = -0.3534, excluding zero), confirming mediation. Specifically, under non-natural habitat exposure, the indirect effect was significant (LLCI = -0.7853, ULCI = -0.3998, excluding zero), with the direct effect becoming non-significant after controlling for the mediator (LLCI = -0.1414, ULCI = 0.0453, including zero), indicating full mediation. Under non-nature exposure, the indirect effect was also significant (LLCI = -1.3693, ULCI = -0.8210, excluding zero), with the direct effect non-significant (LLCI = -0.2019, ULCI = 0.0680, including zero), again showing full mediation. However,

under natural habitat exposure, the mediating effect was non-significant (LLCI = -0.3854, ULCI = 0.2222, including zero).

To rule out alternative explanations, we tested patriotism and globalism as mediators. Bootstrapping analyses showed non-significant indirect effects for both patriotism (LLCI = -0.1510, ULCI = 0.0515, including zero) and globalism (LLCI = -0.0104, ULCI = 0.0756, including zero), ruling out these alternative mechanisms.

Experiment 3 further validated H1 and H2, demonstrating that ontological security threat increases hometown attachment and consequently hometown brand purchase intention. It also ruled out patriotism and globalism as alternative explanations, showing that threatened individuals' brand preferences were not due to stronger patriotic emotions or needs to protect national culture. Additionally, Experiment 3 validated H3, confirming that natural habitat exposure moderates the relationship between ontological security threat and hometown brand preference. When ontological security is threatened, natural habitat exposure helps individuals recover by building emotional connections with nature, reducing their need for hometown attachment and eliminating preference differences between hometown and non-hometown brands.

6.1 Research Conclusions

By extending ontological security theory from sociology to consumer brand preference research, this study explores and demonstrates the impact of ontological security states on hometown brand preferences, its mediating mechanisms, and the moderating role of natural habitat exposure.

Three studies examined the effect of ontological security state on hometown brand preference. Results show that individuals whose ontological security is threatened exhibit higher hometown brand preference than those whose security is not threatened (Experiments 1, 2, 3). This occurs because threatened individuals rely on hometown attachment to cope with security threats, increasing hometown brand preference (Experiments 2, 3). However, when exposed to natural habitat contexts, threatened individuals can build psychological connections with nature to form broader place attachments, reducing their need for hometown attachment and eliminating differences in hometown brand preference (Experiment 3).

Across three studies using different manipulations (economic globalization, cultural globalization, natural disasters), product types (tourism services, functional products, hedonic products), hometown brand constructions (city, province, country), and samples (student and non-student), results show high consistency, providing strong empirical support for the relationship between ontological security state and hometown brand preference.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several theoretical contributions. First, it enriches ontological security research. Existing ontological security studies, primarily sociological, have focused on environmental factors affecting ontological security and psychological stress responses (Skey, 2010; Hawkins & Maurer, 2011), showing that threatened individuals seek stable housing (Padgett, 2007) or reconstruct routines (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011; Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). However, these studies have rarely examined psychological or behavioral changes in other domains like consumption. Phipps and Ozanne (2017) first introduced ontological security to marketing, but few studies have explored how consumers use existing order to cope with threats. This study examines the established order between consumers and hometown, exploring the relationship between ontological security threat and hometown brand preference. It is the first to connect ontological security theory with brand research, extending its application. Methodologically, while previous research primarily used interviews and qualitative methods, this study experimentally manipulates ontological security state, providing quantitative empirical support for exploring relationships with brand preferences.

Second, this study explicitly proposes and empirically tests hometown attachment as the mediating mechanism. Although ontological security literature suggests threatened individuals may seek connections with stable residences (Padgett, 2007), no research has directly examined hometown attachment's role. Building on place attachment theory, this study defines hometown attachment and refines research contexts. While place attachment emphasizes psychological connections between individuals and places, it has rarely addressed the origin of such connections from stable person-environment interactions. Focusing on hometown attachment, this study understands its psychological origin from the perspective of stable interactions, identifying its role in reshaping stable psychological environments to cope with ontological security threats, thereby establishing a mediation model. Thus, another contribution is identifying the theoretical link between ontological security and hometown attachment, connecting this implicit psychological perception with the explicit economic behavior variable of hometown brand preference.

Third, this study uses natural habitat—a broader quasi-hometown variable—to examine the role of activating stable person-place interactions in coping with ontological security threats, extending natural context exposure literature. Existing research has focused on health and psychological benefits (Ulrich, 1984; Pretty et al., 2007), rarely exploring effects on consumer behavior. This study is the first to identify natural context exposure's positive role in addressing consumer ontological security threats, specifying that only natural habitat contexts that establish psychological connections have this moderating effect. We propose that natural habitat exposure activates emotional connections formed through evolution about stable person-habitat interactions, substituting for or weakening hometown attachment (which similarly counters insecurity through

stable person-place connections), thereby reducing the hometown brand preference effect.

6.3 Managerial Implications

This research offers important implications for brands targeting consumers whose ontological security is threatened. Generally, residents of countries facing globalization shocks or major crises, as well as immigrants and elderly individuals, are most likely to experience ontological security threats. Therefore, companies can emphasize domestic packaging styles and forms in marketing campaigns, highlighting hometown information and emotional experiences behind brands to help these consumers extract stable factors and restore ontological security.

Second, companies can leverage the internal mechanism of hometown attachment in the “ontological security threat–hometown brand preference” relationship, triggering consumers to retrieve stable information about their hometown to positively promote hometown brand preference. During escalating trade wars, emphasizing national stability may be more effective than patriotic campaigns.

Finally, for non-hometown brands, natural habitat contextual cues (e.g., displaying natural habitat-related product and brand images in advertisements, emphasizing brand-natural habitat associations) can help consumers build broader place attachments, reducing their focus and dependence on hometown brands.

6.4 Research Limitations and Future Directions

First, this study only used globalization and natural disasters to manipulate ontological security. In reality, various crises affecting environmental stability perception, such as major natural disasters or social unrest, may threaten ontological security. Future research should expand the concept’s external validity by examining richer threat contexts and testing effects in more realistic settings (e.g., secondary data or field experiments).

Second, beyond hometown brand preference, other consumer psychology and behaviors may be affected by ontological security states. Research suggests that to achieve ontological security, individuals must rely on things—including people, objects, places, and meanings—to maintain tomorrow as today and yesterday (Skey, 2010). This study examined dependence on hometown and its people, events, objects, and meanings when ontological security is threatened, but not dependence on other objects. Future research could explore preferences for other transitional objects among ontologically threatened individuals.

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Appendix 1: Pretest Procedure and Materials

(1) Pretest Procedure:

First, all participants read a text about economic globalization (threatened group read Material 1; non-threatened group read Material 2). After reading, they completed the ontological security threat perception scale and emotion measures.

Next, participants read a text about cultural globalization (threatened group read Material 3; non-threatened group read Material 4) and again completed the threat perception scale and emotion measures.

Finally, participants provided demographic information and guessed the experimental purpose.

(2) Material 1: Economic Globalization Threatening Ontological Security

[Material text about economic globalization disrupting developing countries' economies and causing instability]

(3) Material 2: Economic Globalization Without Threatening Ontological Security

[Material text about economic globalization bringing benefits and opportunities]

(4) Material 3: Cultural Globalization Threatening Ontological Security

[Material text about Western culture challenging traditional Chinese values and creating instability]

(5) Material 4: Cultural Globalization Without Threatening Ontological Security

[Material text about cultural globalization enriching traditional culture and broadening perspectives]

Appendix 2: Experiment 1 Procedure and Materials

(1) Experiment Procedure:

Participants completed two ostensibly unrelated tasks: scenario imagination and tourist destination evaluation.

First, they read a globalization text (threatened group: economic globalization threatening material; non-threatened group: economic globalization non-threatening material).

Then, they read about a scenic area recruiting tourism ambassadors. The hometown group read that the destination was in their hometown; the non-hometown group read it was in a similar location.

After reading, participants indicated visit willingness and completed emotion measures.

Finally, they provided demographics and guessed the experimental purpose.

(2) Hometown Destination Material:

[Description of a new scenic area in participants' hometown]

(3) Non-Hometown Destination Material:

[Description of a new scenic area in a location similar to participants' hometown]

Appendix 3: Experiment 2 Procedure and Materials**(1) Experiment Procedure:**

Participants completed several ostensibly unrelated tasks: scenario imagination, new product promotion evaluation, and values survey.

First, they read a typhoon text (ontological security threat, life security threat, or control versions) and answered comprehension questions.

Next, they reported their home province and read about a new storage box brand (hometown or Zhejiang origin).

After reading, they indicated purchase intention, completed the hometown attachment scale, and responded to manipulation checks.

Finally, they completed emotion measures, attention checks, demographics, and purpose guessing. Participants failing attention checks were excluded from analysis.

(2) Ontological Security Threat Group Material:

[Typhoon description emphasizing disruption of routine life]

(3) Life Security Threat Group Material:

[Typhoon description emphasizing threats to life safety]

(4) Control Group Material:

[Neutral description of typhoon prediction methods]

(5) Hometown Province Brand Material:

[Storage box description emphasizing hometown province origin]

(6) Non-Hometown Province Brand Material:

[Storage box description emphasizing Zhejiang origin]

Appendix 4: Experiment 3 Procedure and Materials**(1) Experiment Procedure:**

Participants completed several ostensibly unrelated tasks: scenario imagination, new product advertising evaluation, and values survey.

First, they read a cultural globalization text (threatening or non-threatening versions).

Then, they read about Haowei Wine Company and viewed product posters with different backgrounds (natural habitat, non-natural habitat, or non-nature).

After reading, they indicated wine purchase preference, completed hometown attachment, patriotism, and globalism measures, and responded to manipulation checks.

Finally, they completed emotion measures, attention checks, demographics, and purpose guessing.

(2) Natural Habitat Exposure Material:

[Wine company description with grass and trees background]

(3) Non-Natural Habitat Exposure Material:

[Wine company description with snow mountain background]

(4) Non-Nature Exposure Material:

[Wine company description with urban high-rise background]

Appendix 5: Experimental Scales**(1) Ontological Security Threat Perception Scale (Pretest)**

[Seven items measuring perceived environmental and self stability]

(2) Hometown Attachment Scale (Experiments 2, 3)

[Nine items measuring emotional connection to hometown]

(3) Patriotism Scale (Experiment 3)

[Twelve items measuring national attachment and pride]

(4) Globalism Scale (Experiment 3)

[Nine items measuring global citizenship and cooperation]

Appendix 6: Experimental Design Summary

Experiment 1: 2 (ontological security: threatened vs. not threatened) \times 2 (tourist destination: hometown vs. non-hometown) between-subjects design

Experiment 2: 3 (threat type: ontological security threat vs. life security threat vs. control) \times 2 (brand origin: hometown vs. non-hometown) between-subjects design

Experiment 3: 2 (ontological security: threatened vs. not threatened) \times 3 (contextual exposure: natural habitat vs. non-habitat vs. non-nature) between-subjects design

Appendix 7: Experiment 2 Participants' Home Province Distribution

[Table showing distribution across provinces for each experimental condition]

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.