

# Brand Avoidance in Local Businesses: The Interplay between Symbolic Incongruence and Negative Emotions

GEMA MUHAMMAD RAMADHAN, ELFINDAH PRINCES  
Management Department, BINUS Business School,  
Bina Nusantara University,  
Jakarta, Indonesia 12190,  
INDONESIA

*Abstract:* - This paper discusses a research gap that is related to the influence of symbolic incongruence on brand avoidance in cases of businesses that associate with Korean Flower Men. Previously, research has studied the influence of “dislike emotion” to brand avoidance, yet a limited effort has been dedicated to exploring the phenomenon in the context of symbolic incongruence. This is particularly true with regards to the impact of Korean culture on local businesses. This research aims to deliver decision making insights for businesses that wish to leverage the influence of Korean culture within their marketing tactics by applying the Social Identity Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Psychological Reactance Theory. Online surveys were used to gather 226 valid responses which were analysed using the PLS – SEM statistical tool to study the relationships between brand – specific symbolic incongruence and negative emotions. The results show that all negative emotion dimensions, excluding anger, significantly mediated the relationship between symbolic incongruence and brand avoidance with a mediation value of 0.620. The limitations of this study is due to the constraints of non – probability sampling methods. Future research would benefit from studying this phenomenon cross – culturally. Furthermore, this research contributes to the current literature by studying brand avoidance in the more modern context of the Korean Wave. Practically, this study shows that it is crucial for local businesses to ensure that their target market is symbolically aligned with Korean Flower Men traits, prior to any advances towards collaborations with Korean male artists.

*Key-Words:* - Brand avoidance, Symbolic incongruence, Negative emotion, Korean wave, Cognitive dissonance, Social identity, Psychological reactance.

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## 1 Introduction

With the ever-growing global influence of Korean popular culture, the traditional idea of masculinity seems to be under siege due to the phenomenon of the South Korean Flower Men. The Flower Men of Korea, also known as “*kkotminam*”, refers to South Korean men who are characterized by their pretty appearance and a strong attentiveness towards their looks. This attentiveness drives them to maintain their appearance through means which were traditionally considered to be feminine, such as through the application of beauty products, the practice of eyebrow plucking, cosmetic surgery, and others, [1]. This form of “soft masculinity” is a characteristic held by most male Korean artists, [2]. Yet, the prettiness of these men appears to play a major role in their international success, as this element plays a key factor when attracting their predominately female fanbase, [3], [4]. Furthermore, K-Pop fan bases are of particular interest for modern marketing practitioners, as they

have been shown to express support toward their Korean idols through financial means, [5].

However, despite the increased attraction in utilizing male Korean artists in modern advertising, subsegments of the Indonesian population seem to display a certain symbolic incongruence when confronted with Korean culture’s feminized representation of men, [2], [3]. Symbolic incongruence describes a condition in which brands convey values or attributes that are incongruent to the symbolic identity requirements of consumers, [6]. This incongruence is evident when Indonesian men, who’s conceptions of manhood are generally associated with traditional masculine traits, are confronted with Korean cultures’ more feminine portrayal of men, [2], [3]. This phenomenon is exemplified in a study by [3] whereby several men considered male Korean artists to be lacking in masculinity, describing them as too “feminized”, “pretty”, “soft”, or “queer”. Some even consider the feminine representation of Korean men as a threat to

their ideal conception of masculinity. Recent study by [2] conveyed similar findings, showing individuals who associate male Korean artists with words such as “gay” and “sissy”. Both studies represent the mismatch between how Indonesian men view manliness and the representation offered by male Korean artists. This may present a problem for businesses that have invested in such men to represent their brand, as symbolic incongruence may lead to the development of negative consumer – brand relationships and its subsequent outcomes, [6], [7], [8], [9], [10].

The literature pertaining to consumer – brand relationships have recently pivoted to delve into its more negative aspects, resulting in studies that address the many outcomes of negative consumer - brand interactions, [11]. One possible outcome relates to the phenomenon of anti-consumption, which in itself manifests in a variety of behaviors, most notably, brand avoidance, [6], [12]. Brand avoidance refers to a form of anti-consumption in which there is a deliberate decision to reject a brand despite it being available, affordable, and accessible to the consumer, [6], [7], [13], [14], [15]. Furthermore, similar to other studies of negative consumer – brand relationship outcomes, the brand avoidance literature partly investigates the concept’s causal factors, [6], [7], [12], [16]. Early research by [6] established a foundational explanation of brand avoidance antecedents, linking brand avoidance to three particular stimulus: unmet expectations (experiential avoidance), ideological incompatibility (moral avoidance), and symbolic incongruence (identity avoidance). However, subsequent studies proved the process leading to brand avoidance more complex, incorporating additional variables, such as country of origin originality and negative emotions as mediating factors, [7], [16]. Relevant to this study, the mediating role of negative emotions in the relationship between stimulus and brand avoidance have been a matter of much debate, [7].

Early research by [17], [18] demonstrated how negative emotions toward brands may initiate a variety of unfavourable consumer behavior. Multiple research also shows negative emotions to have a mediating role between stimuli and behavioral reactions, [6], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23]. Nonetheless, due to the lack of research on brand avoidance, coupled with the literature’s scarce quantitative outlook, further study was needed to arrive at the same conclusion with regards to brand avoidance behavior. [7] aimed to fill this gap by quantitatively studying the relationships between brand – related stimulus, negative emotions toward brands, and brand avoidance. However, it seems that

their finding has yet to provide a clear conclusion, as it partly contradicts those that were established in past studies. For instance, in opposition to [17], [18], [7] indicate insignificant relationships between brand avoidance and most negative emotion dimensions, including anger, worry, and embarrassment. Furthermore, contrary to early literature, [7] show how certain stimuli, such as symbolic incongruence, unacceptable trade – offs, and unmet expectations were not shown to provoke certain negative emotion dimensions, [6], [12]. Yet, despite the inconsistencies, subsequent quantitative/qualitative studies dedicated to further our understanding of the relations between brand-related stimuli, negative emotion, and brand avoidance, are limited. Nevertheless, this is to be expected, as the broad topic of brand/product avoidance itself remains a relatively unexplored aspect of the anti-consumption literature, [15]. In addition, limitations of the brand avoidance literature could be seen from a geographical perspective, as past studies are underdeveloped in emerging economies, including Indonesia, [7], [11]. Moreover, studies of negative consumer brand relationships are considered to be limited in contextualization, [11]. Therefore, this study pursues to remedy the aforementioned limitations whilst studying brand avoidance and negative emotions in a modern context, relating it to the ever-growing Korean Wave phenomenon that is penetrating the Indonesian market. Specifically, this study aims to study the relationships between Korean Flower Men – induced symbolic incongruence, negative emotions toward brands, and brand avoidance within the Indonesian population.

In particular, this study presents the following research questions:

How do the representation of Korean Flower Men in brands relate to symbolic incongruence? How does symbolic incongruence relate to negative emotion reactions (anger, embarrassment, dislike, worry)? How do negative emotion reactions (anger, embarrassment, dislike, worry) relate to brand avoidance?

The importance and uniqueness of this research is highlighted through the following contributions to the brand avoidance literature. First, this research provides further quantitative evidence to derive a conclusion for the existing dilemma regarding the relationships between stimuli, negative emotions and brand avoidance. Second, this research significantly contributes to the knowledge of brand avoidance in emerging economies by focusing on a geographically unique population in Indonesia, a departure from prior literature that predominantly

centered on developed countries. Third, this study enhances the contextualization of brand avoidance literature by uniquely adapting its model to investigate a pertinent and culturally specific cross cultural phenomenon in Indonesian society – The Korean Wave, a dimension hitherto unexplored in the existing brand avoidance literature. Fourth, this study provides managerial considerations for practitioners who are inclined to pursue collaborations with Korean male artists. Lastly, this study contributes to the literature which studies the Korean Wave phenomenon by investigating how the feminine portrayal of Korean male artists would impact consumer-brand relationships in Indonesian society.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Theories Related to this Research

#### 2.1.1 Cognitive Dissonance Theory

“Cognition” is a term used to describe any belief, opinion, or knowledge regarding one’s self, behavior, and environment, [24]. An individual may hold pairs of relevant cognitions which either support or contradict one another, [25]. Illustrating the latter phenomenon, [26] postulated a theory termed cognitive dissonance, a theory which explain the condition in which an individual experiences pairs of inter-related cognitions that are on opposition to one another, resulting in a feeling of psychological discomfort and subsequent attempt to alleviate it, [24], [25], [26], [27], [28]. The alleviation may be achieved through an individual’s change in belief, action, or perception of action, [24]. Relevant to this study, the change of action, implies changing a particular course of action or behavior that is a cause of dissonance, thus, suggesting a form of avoidance that restores a consonant state of cognitions.

Cognitive dissonance could be regarded as a theory that attempts to explain the relationships between symbolic incongruence, negative emotion reactions, and brand avoidance. Symbolic incongruence represents a form of cognitive dissonance in which brands convey attributes or cues that are incongruent to one’s self-identity, [6]. This study identifies such dissonance in the incompatibility between Korean popular culture’s feminine representation of men and the traditionally masculine depiction of men held by a segment of the Indonesian population, [2], [3]. The dissonance would theoretically result in psychological discomfort, hypothetically in the form of negative

emotions, that would motivate the subsequent alleviation of negative emotions. Furthermore, deriving conclusions from the cognitive dissonance theory, this study proposes that the alleviation of negative emotions caused by prior symbolic incongruence may come in the form of behavior change, specifically, brand avoidance, [24], [25], [28]. Nevertheless, despite this coherent narrative, [29], formulated the Self – Perception theory which may be seen as a direct challenge to the theory of cognitive dissonance. The self – perception theory suggests that dissonance effects are not a consequence of the motivation to remove psychological discomfort, [25]. As a consequence, it may be implied that this theory deems the relationships between dissonance derived - negative emotions and brand avoidance as insignificant. Therefore, further studies need to be conducted to address these conflicting theories in the context of consumer-brand relationships.

#### 2.1.2 Social Identity Theory

Coined by [30], social identity is defined as an individual’s knowledge of his/her belonging to certain social groups along with his/her evaluation of the group membership’s emotional and value significance. Individuals belonging to social groups hold shared identities formed by the group’s particular prototype, [31]. A prototype refers to the mixture of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that forms the identity of a group and provides distinction between an in-group and relevant out-groups, [32]. Furthermore, the role of intergroup distinctions extend into consumer-brand relationships, as consumers tend to accept brands with meanings that are associated with an in-group and reject those that are representative of an out-group, [33]. This indicates that the display of out-group meanings by brands risk invoking brand avoidance behavior in consumers, [32]. Moreover, this explanation of brand avoidance is highly relevant in illustrating the argument posited in this research with regards to the utilization of male Korean artists in marketing efforts. Viewed from the lens of social identity theory, the feminine traits of male Korean artists in brand advertisements may be conceived as an out-group value by segments of the Indonesian population who’s in-group hold traditionally masculine beliefs. This conflict in value would lead to a form of anti-consumption, hypothetically in the form of avoidance, with subsequent search of alternative brands that display values that are more congruent to those held by the in-group, [33].

### 2.1.3 Psychological Reactance Theory

Derived from Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, the psychological reactance theory attempts to explain how individuals react to threatened or eliminated freedoms, [34], [35]. According to the theory, each individual possesses a set of freedoms, behavioral, and attitudinal, which they may choose to partake in the future or present. For example, a person has the freedom to select a style of fashion to wear or to hold any opinion on a particular matter. However, behavioral and attitudinal freedoms may be subject to threats, some in the form of social influences that exert pressure toward behavioral or attitudinal change, [36]. Furthermore, if freedoms are threatened or eliminated, the individual would develop a motivation to act in a way that would restore it. This state of motivation is termed as psychological reactance, [34], [35], [36]. Moreover, this study suggests that the relationships between symbolic incongruence and brand avoidance could be explained through the framework of psychological reactance theory. Presumably, a segment of the Indonesian population expresses attitudinal freedom by holding a traditionally masculine opinion on what constitutes appropriate male conduct and traits, [3], [4]. In consequence, the feminine portrayal of men displayed by Korean male artists poses a threat to freedom, as it may act as a form of social influence that changes societal standards with regard to what is deemed acceptable male conduct and traits. Subsequently, the motivation to eliminate the threat would emerge and be satisfied through the avoidance of brands that associate with male Korean artists.

## 2.2 Variables Related to this Research

### 2.2.1 Brand Avoidance

As early studies on positive consumer behavior became increasingly refined, research started to realize the importance of observing its antithesis: reasons for brand rejection, [6], [7], [37], [38], [39], [40], [41], [42], [43]. The term "brand avoidance" appeared in studies as early as those conducted by [43] and [44]. However, the use of this term was done without much clear description of its definition. Soon, a proper definition was established by [6], stating brand avoidance as "the conscious, deliberate, and active rejection of a brand that the consumer can afford, owing to the negative meaning associated with the brand." This proposition, which seems to be the standard to which brand avoidance is defined, describes the behavior as an act of anti-choice, that is the deliberate rejection of certain brands, rather than an act of no-choice, in which the

motives are influenced by factors such as product unavailability, unaffordability, and inaccessibility, [7], [12], [13], [15], [45], [46], [47].

Brand avoidance is considered a subcategory of anti-consumption, alongside other concepts such as consumer resistance, boycotts or consumer activism, symbolic consumption, voluntary simplicity, and sustainable consumption, [7], [15], [16], [46]. Despite the similarity between these concepts, brand avoidance is distinguished by being a form of specific anti-consumption, directing its efforts towards specific brands only, and its anti-choice nature, [12], [48], [49]. Brand avoidance also differs from boycotts, particularly as it is a phenomenon that occurs at an individual level, contrary to boycotts which occur at a group level, [46], [50]. Furthermore, brand avoidance differentiates itself from brand hate (intense dislike, aversion, or loathing towards a specific brand), due to feelings of hatred not being a prerequisite for brand avoidance, [45], [46].

Several classification systems have been developed that categorize brand avoidance based on its motivational frame, [7], [48], [51], motivating stimuli, [6], [7], [12], [19], and duration and expression, [7], [14]. Of these early research, the most relevant to this study is that by [6]. Their findings provided the basic framework that explains particular stimuli that predict brand avoidance. According to their study, brand avoidance is the result of several motivating stimuli, including unmet expectations (experiential avoidance), ideological incompatibility (moral avoidance), and symbolic incongruence (identity avoidance). This theory became widely acknowledged, being mentioned in most subsequent studies on brand avoidance, [7], [15], [16], [46]. Nevertheless, several of these studies also began proposing more complex reiterations of the original framework to explain the relationships between brand avoidance and its stimulus, [7], [16]. Notably, in 2015, a study by [7] contributed by incorporating the Negative emotion towards brands (NEB) set, formulated by [18], as a mediating factor that bridges the relationships between motivating stimulus and brand avoidance. It is important to acknowledge that prior research has not demonstrated this relationship explicitly. For instance, [20] has previously suggested the mediating role of negative emotions in the relationship between an environmental stimulus and reactionary behavior. Yet, this is not a direct demonstration of the NEB set's role in mediating the brand avoidance framework proposed by [6].

Nevertheless, despite the advancements in understanding brand avoidance relations, further

research on the topic is scarce. This is particularly underwhelming since the study by [7] demonstrated findings that partially contradict early research on stimulus, negative emotions, and reactional behavior relationships. This provides a knowledge gap that ideally needs to be filled. Moreover, a distribution of reviewed publications presented by [15] showed that brand avoidance only made up 10.9% of the total reviewed publications on anti-consumption theory, releasing only 13 reviewed articles by the year 2019. This puts brand avoidance as the fourth lowest topic on anti-consumption in its reviewed publication output, placing it behind boycotts, voluntary simplicity, sustainable consumption, and consumer resistance. Recent studies also seem to shift its attention more toward brand hate, rather than brand avoidance, [9], [10], [47], [52], [53], [54], [55]. Additionally, the brand avoidance literature is known to have a limited number of quantitative research, as most of its studies are conducted qualitatively, [7], [15].

### 2.2.2 Symbolic Incongruence

Multiple views are available to define the term “brand”. One of which, offered by [56] describes brands as tools that convey a constellation of values. Accordingly, if brands were to communicate values that are incongruent with that of the consumers, a desire to avoid the brand would occur. This category of avoidance is associated with the concept of “symbolic incongruence”, often represented as the phenomenon in which brands could not satisfy the consumer’s symbolic identity requirements, [6], [7], [46], [57]. Throughout the literature, explanations of symbolic incongruence were often delivered through theories of self-concept, self-identity, undesired self, and disidentification, [6], [7], [16], [46].

The development of consumers' self-concepts and self-identities was derived from both the act of consuming brands that convey positive symbolic values and rejecting those that are perceived to have a negative symbolic meaning, [6], [7], [8], [12], [37], [41], [58], [59], [60]. According to disidentification theory, people may also develop their self – concept by disidentifying with institutions that are not aligned with their values and self-image, [61], [62]. Furthermore, some people practice self-expression through the purchase of products that match their identity, while others tend to express their self – identities through the avoidance of certain brands which could pose a threat to their self-esteem, [37]. This is under the proposition by [45] stating that consuming certain brands could potentially weaken and undermine

individuality, rather than enhancing its meaning, [46].

Furthermore, undesired self-concept is the identity that an individual least desires, composed of negative traits, unhappy memories, embarrassing conditions, fear-inducing events, and undesired emotions, that is constantly avoided, [16], [63], [64]. The undesired self is said to be the psychological construct that is most related to brand avoidance. Scholars even argue that a person may have a clearer understanding of what they do not desire to be, and this may produce a “push” away from the undesired self that is more potent than the “pull” towards the ideal self, [6], [16], [63]. Moreover, within an undesired self, people attempt to avoid services, products, or brands that are associated with certain negative reference groups, [6], [12], [13], [37], [41], [60]. However, it is important to note that despite the similarity between the concept of the negative reference group and undesired self, slight differences exist – consumers undesired selves are commonly apprehended clearly, whereas their view on negative reference groups usually consists of a highly stereotyped depiction due to the inaccurate or insufficient information on that group, [6], [7], [60].

Additionally, consumers tend to avoid brands perceived as inauthentic, [6], [12]. These usually consist of popular brands that have become too commercialized, resulting in the loss of their authenticity and uniqueness which are relevant for developing an idiosyncratic self-identity, [6], [12], [65]. Further, brands that make promises that are seen as fake or inauthentic, and brands that are mainstreamed, are also avoided by consumers for similar reasons, [6], [7], [12], [43].

### 2.2.3 Negative Emotion Reaction

It is evident from past literature that the complexity of emotion has given rise to multiple views in which to understand it, creating various definitions of emotion that have been proposed by scholars throughout the years. This poses a problem in that a widely accepted and common definition of emotion is non-existent, [7], [66], [67], [68]. Furthermore, due to this diverse interpretation of emotion, a consensus on the classification of negative emotion in past literature is also absent, particularly on those that are brand-related, [7], [54]. Nevertheless, several attempts have been made to classify consumer negative emotions, which include the classification proposed by [17], [18], [20], [69] and [70].

An early classification of consumer emotions was first presented by [69] who introduced the Consumption Emotion Set (CES) which consists of

17 emotions including both positive and negative emotions. Additionally, the classification offered by [70] soon followed, organizing consumer emotions into a hierarchy of 4 positive and 4 negative basic consumer emotions. Yet, it is important to notice that the classifications proposed by [69] and [70] described emotions based on experiences in general consumption. Thus, several of the emotions mentioned may be irrelevant when focusing on consumer negative emotions that are directed toward specific brands. This led to the introduction of the Negative Emotion toward Brands (NEB) classifications, developed by [17], [18] and [20]. As the name suggests, this set addresses emotions specifically directed towards brands. The NEB classifications also include a very important brand-related emotion, embarrassment, which was not mentioned in previous classification systems, [7]. Furthermore, [7] concluded that the NEB set is the ideal classification system to study the relations between brand avoidance and negative emotions. This research is highlighted due to its relevance to the present study and the absence of recent research that addresses the same topic.

The research conducted by [7] on the relationship between brand-related stimuli, negative emotional reaction, and brand avoidance utilized the latest NEB set presented by [18]. The set includes the negative emotions anger, dislike, embarrassment, worry, and discontent. However, their study seems to disregard discontent with no further information as to their reasoning for the exclusion. Furthermore, definitions of each emotion of the NEB set are provided as follows: dislike is represented as feelings of revulsion, contempt, and hate; anger involves brand descriptors that initiate feelings of annoyance, indignance, and resentment; sadness emotion dimension is associated with heartbroken, sorrowful, and distressed conditions; embarrassment is described by ridiculous, sheepish, and embarrassed; discontent by unfulfilled, dissatisfied, and discontented, [18]. In addition, it is important to recognize that recent studies have attempted to differentiate hate from dislike, describing hate as an emotion of higher intensity, [9]. Yet, due to the lack of consensus on the terminology of negative emotions, it is difficult to estimate how crucial this distinction is [54].

### 3 Hypothesis Development

#### 3.1 Brand-Related Stimuli, Negative Emotion Reaction, and Brand Avoidance Relations

The relationship between brand-related stimuli, negative emotion reactions, and brand avoidance is a topic that has rarely been studied quantitatively throughout the brand avoidance literature, [6], [7], [12], [71]. Furthermore, the latest study on this topic by [13] showed several findings that are inconsistent with past literature. Nevertheless, despite the inconsistencies, recent studies appear to have yet built upon this study, as most are focused on brand hate, rather than brand avoidance [9], [10], [15], [47], [52], [53], [54], [55].

Inconsistencies are found in past literature regarding the relationships between symbolic incongruence and negative emotional reactions [7]. The study by [7] confirmed that brand-related symbolic incongruence is positively related to most negative emotion dimensions, except anger emotion. This is a curious finding since the symbolic incongruence between Indonesian men and male representations of Korean popular culture is perceived to have provoked emotions presumably associated with anger, [2], [3], [7]. Furthermore, the majority of past literature agrees that the relationship between environmental stimuli and behavioral reactions are mediated by negative emotions, including anger, [17], [18], [20], [21], [22], [23], [68]. Therefore, symbolic incongruence, as an environmental stimulus, should be positively related to anger emotion, which ultimately leads to a behavioral reaction, such as brand avoidance, [7]. Given the majority support for the significance of relationships between symbolic incongruence and all negative emotion dimensions, including anger, this study proposes several hypothesis that describes the relations shown in Figure 1.

**H1a:** The greater the symbolic incongruence towards Korean Flower Men, the greater the dislike felt towards the associated brand.

**H1b:** The greater the symbolic incongruence towards Korean Flower Men, the greater the anger felt towards the associated brand.

**H1c:** The greater the symbolic incongruence towards Korean Flower Men, the greater the embarrassment emotions felt towards the associated brand.

**H1d:** The greater the symbolic incongruence towards Korean Flower Men, the greater the worry felt towards the associated brand.



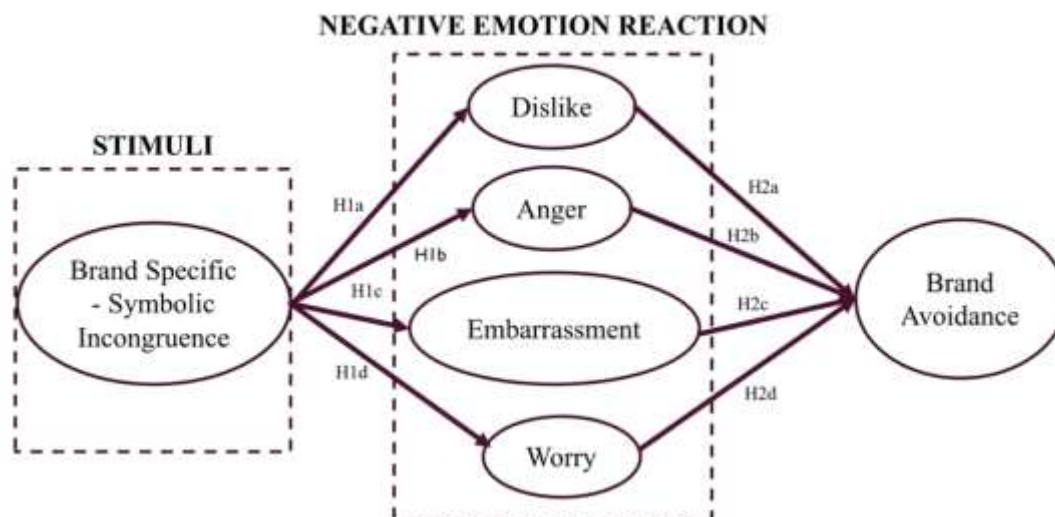


Fig. 1: Relations between brand-specific stimuli, negative emotion towards brands, and brand avoidance

Moreover, previous study indicates a correlation between the strength of negative emotions and brand avoidance among consumers, [17], [18], [72], [73]. [17], [18] agrees that the components of NEB, that being anger, worry, dislike, and embarrassment, have influence on brand rejection or switching behaviour. Nevertheless, the latest findings of [7] did not entirely match with those past conclusions.

In their study, [7] showed that there was only a single emotion which significantly influences brand avoidance, that being dislike. Anger, worry, and embarrassment were found to be insignificantly related to brand avoidance intention. Other emotions such as anger, worry, and embarrassment did not exhibit a significant relationship with brand avoidance intention. Their study suggested that the intensity of dislike emotion played a role in determining their inclination towards brand avoidance. Nonetheless, differences in outcomes between these studies is thought to be due to several causes. [7] stated that the population of respondents studied could have had more intense feelings of dislike compared to the other negative emotions, such as embarrassment and worry. Furthermore, the study hypothesized that differences in culture may be an influencing factor, as it is well – documented that consumer behavior is partly a product of culture, [64]. [65] further supports this argument by demonstrating how cultures with high scores in Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance and individualism display tendencies towards brand loyalty. In relationship to this study, the Indonesian population, with relatively low uncertainty avoidance and individualism scores, would have weaker brand loyalty, [74]. Thus, based on these insights, the following hypotheses were constructed, supporting the findings of [17], [18] and [72].

**H2a:** The greater the dislike felt towards certain brands, the greater the tendency to avoid the brand.

**H2b:** The greater the anger felt towards certain brands, the greater the tendency to avoid the brand.

**H2c:** The greater the embarrassment felt towards certain brands, the greater the tendency to avoid the brand.

**H2d:** The greater the worry felt towards certain brands, the greater the tendency to avoid the brand.

## 4 Research Methodology

This research quantitatively studied the relationships between brand-specific (Korean Flower Men) symbolic incongruence, negative emotions, and brand avoidance. The quantitative approach was chosen due to several reasons. First, the majority of brand avoidance studies were based on qualitative methods, [7], [15]. Second, there has yet to be a reviewed publication that builds upon the previous quantitative research on the relationships between brand-specific stimuli, negative emotion reactions, and brand avoidance. Third, the previous quantitative research on this topic by [7] resulted in several findings that differed from the results of past qualitative studies. Moreover, due to the lack of quantitative data on the matter, it is difficult to conclude the reasons for these inconsistencies, resulting in certain ambiguity on the nature of the relationships studied.

The data for this research were collected through online surveys. Two online surveys were conducted, the first being a pre-test that examined the construct’s reliability, and the second being the main survey that was utilized for the empirical study. Initially, questions regarding the sample

demographic information were put forth. In addition, a control question was presented, such as “Do the feminine aspects of male Korean artists cause you to feel negative emotions?”. This question confirmed the presence of symbolic incongruence towards the feminine aspects of male Korean artists. Subsequently, the survey posed questions to investigate the relations between the respondent’s brand-specific (Korean Flower Men) symbolic incongruence, negative emotional reaction, and brand avoidance intention.

First, the questions addressing symbolic incongruence were based on scales originating from the study by [73]. Originally, the scales measured several brand avoidance stimuli that were derived from the literature [12]. However, this study utilized a scale that was particularly relevant to symbolic incongruence stimuli. Hence, 5 indicators of symbolic incongruence were proposed, each measured by a 5-point Likert scale which represents a spectrum that ranges from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Second, the questions that concerned emotions measured the respondent’s dislike, anger, worry, and embarrassment response, as these were the emotions associated with brand avoidance. The 12 indicators that were used to measure emotions were adapted from the “Negative Emotion Towards Brands” (NEB) subset proposed by [18]. Each indicator was measured by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much”. Lastly, the questions measuring brand avoidance were composed of 5 indicators derived from the definition of brand avoidance, as explained in the study by [73]. Each of the indicators was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

This research intended to target the population of Indonesian adults who display negative emotions toward brands that use male Korean artists in their marketing efforts. This study utilized the non – probability convenience sampling technique due to it being financially affordable and non-time consuming, [7], [75]. Furthermore, the sample size of this study was determined by the “all you can afford” method which gathers the most responses possible within the available time frame to acquire insights and understanding of the problem at hand, [7], [76]. The pre-test was done beforehand to test the reliability of each indicator. This test was carried out with the same sampling method as the main survey, that is the non – probability convenience sampling. The pre-test collected a total of 123 respondents, however, 62 were eliminated (50.4%) as they did not pass the control question. The remaining 61 respondents were valid, answering all

of the survey indicators. The valid respondents were 56.1% female and 43.9% male. The age groups included individuals under 19 years of age (13.8%), 20 to 29 years of age (37.4%), 40 to 49 years of age (8.9%), over 50 years of age (32.5%), and 30 to 39 years of age. The pre-test was analysed using the software “SmartPLS”. As seen in Table 1 (Appendix), the reliability of each indicator was measured using Cronbach’s alpha, which revealed that all research indicators were reliable. Thus, the final survey will use the same indicators and scales.

#### **4.1 Distribution of Respondents**

The final survey lasted a period of 4 weeks and collected 450 responses. The majority of responses originated from DKI Jakarta, while other responses were collected from areas such as Bandung, Semarang, Bogor, Pekanbaru, and Indramayu. As seen in Table 2 (Appendix), of the 450 respondents, 171 were male and 279 were female.

These respondents were also filtered through a control question which excluded 224 responses from the final data analysis, leaving behind 226 valid responses. Based on the answer to the control question, 64.9% of the male respondents feel discomfort towards the feminine aspects of Korean male artists, while only 41.9% of the female respondents feel the same way. Furthermore, most of the respondents above 40 years of age feel discomfort towards the feminine aspects of Korean male artists, while most of those younger than that do not feel any discomfort.

### **5 Results**

#### **5.1 Validity of Indicators**

The reliability and validity of each research indicator was determined through the measure of its outer loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (C.R.). These measures are necessary to obtain prior to the hypothesis testing, as it decides which indicator may be used in the study. The results revealed that all indicators surpassed the threshold of 0.6, with values ranging from 0.660 to 0.963. Thus, the internal consistencies of each indicator are sufficiently strong. Similar results are shown for the AVE values, with each indicator displaying a value of 0.691 to 0.913, meeting the requirements for convergent validity, [77]. These results are further illustrated in Table 3 (Appendix) and Figure 2.



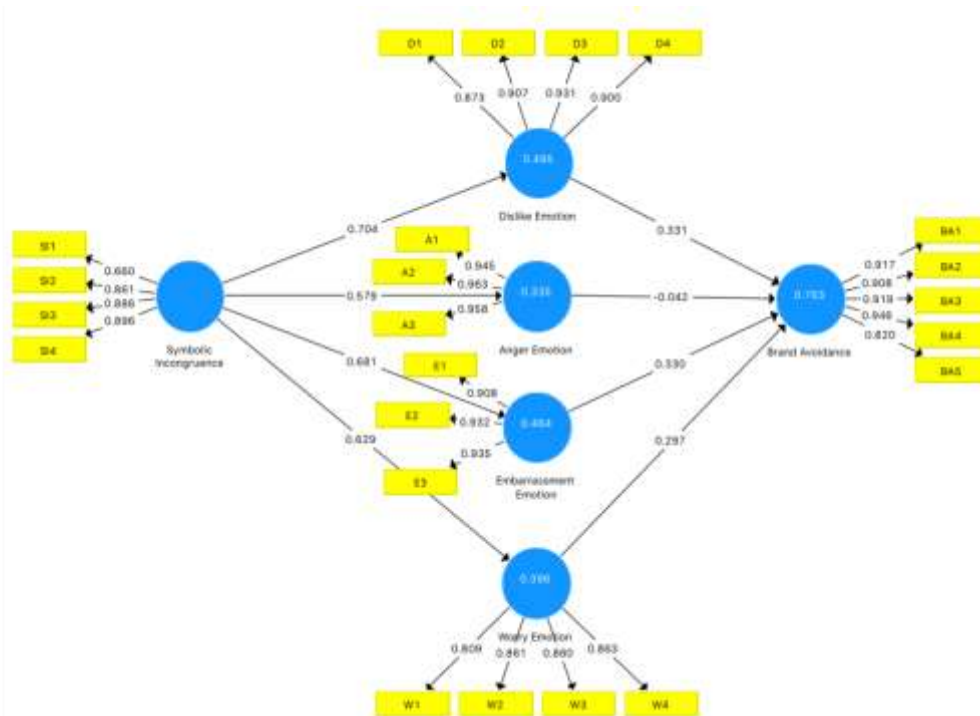


Fig. 2: SMART PLS Algorithm Results

### 5.2 Hypothesis Testing

Utilizing the SMART PLS bootstrapping method, the relationships of each validated variable was analyzed. Bootstrapping is defined as a nonparametric statistical technique by which the significance of intervariable relationships are examined through the calculation of indirect effects, total effects, path coefficients, etc., [78]. T Values exceeding 1.96, along with p-values of below 0.05, indicate significant relationships. In contrast, T – Values and p – values below 1.96 and 0.05 respectively indicate insignificant relationships., [79]. The bootstrapping results and their relationships with the hypothesis proposed by this study is shown on Table 4 (Appendix).

As shown in Table 4 (Appendix), significant relationships are presented that confirm the influence of symbolic incongruence on negative emotion responses. In particular, Symbolic Incongruence positively influences Anger Emotion (T=14.349, p = 0.000), Embarrassment (T=18.104, p=0.000), and Worry Emotion (T=15.938, p=0.000). These results support H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d, respectively. However, the relationship between Anger Emotion and Brand Avoidance was insignificant (T=0.467, p = 0.640), denying H2b. Finally, H2a, H2c, and H2d were confirmed, as Dislike Emotion (T=3.652, p=0.000), Worry Emotion (T=3.335, p=0.001), and Embarrassment (T=4.197, p=0.000) significantly influenced Brand Avoidance.

Moreover, the total indirect effects are shown on Table 5 (Appendix). The indirect relationship of symbolic incongruence and brand avoidance is revealed to be positively significant, with a T-Value of 17.509 and P-Value of 0.000. This indicates that the greater the symbolic incongruence, the greater the brand avoidance intention.

### 6 Discussion

The rise of Korean Popular Culture in Indonesian mainstream media and marketing has popularized a more feminine mode of masculinity, represented by male Korean artists that manifest Flower Men traits. The deviation from traditional masculine values seems to spark a degree of controversy in Indonesian society, as it is accepted by some and rejected by others, [1], [2], [3], [4]. The findings of this research confirm the split in opinions by investigating the phenomenon’s impact on symbolic incongruence. It is shown that 50.2% of respondents experience symbolic incongruence when confronted with the feminine traits of male Korean artists in Indonesian marketing campaigns. Therefore, collaborations with male Korean artists do not fulfill the identity requirements of these individuals, most of whom are men aged below 19 and above 40 years. Furthermore, this research confirms how these individuals would likely experience multiple negative emotion dimensions (dislike, anger, worry, and embarrassment) toward brands that collaborate

with male Korean artists due to symbolic incongruence. Interestingly, similar findings were demonstrated by [80] in their attempt to segment Korean Wave consumers in ASEAN countries. The study described a segment called “Cultural Vigilances” which consists of men aged under 19 or above 40 who demonstrate negative emotions toward K-Pop and Korean drama. Additionally, the segment has little to no experience with the aforementioned art forms, Korean food, and tourism to South Korea. This research enriches the findings of [80] in three ways. First, it suggests that Cultural Vigilances’ negative emotions toward K-Pop and Korean drama may not only be directed toward the entertainment form but also toward the male Korean artists who conduct the entertainment form.

Second, it identifies the possible emotions experienced by Cultural Vigilances (dislike, embarrassment, worry, anger) and one of its root causes (symbolic incongruence). Third, it suggests that one of the possible reasons for Culture Vigilances’ lack of experience with Korean culture is avoidance behavior caused by certain negative emotions (worry, embarrassment, dislike) which are rooted in symbolic incongruence.

In addition, this study contributes to the ongoing dilemma regarding the relationships between stimuli, negative emotions, and brand avoidance. Past scholars agree that negative emotions play a mediating role between environmental stimuli and behavioral reactions, [17], [18], [20], [21], [22], [23], [68]. Thus, as a stimulus, symbolic incongruence’s effect on brand avoidance reactions should be mediated by negative emotions. This hypothesis is further strengthened by Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory, which suggests significant relationships between dissonance, psychological discomfort, and discomfort alleviation actions, [24], [25], [27], [28]. However, [7] posed a challenge to the notion, as their findings only partly support past research. According to their study, symbolic incongruence leads to most negative emotion dimensions, except anger emotion. Therefore, dislike towards a brand is increased in proportion to the increased incongruence between a brand’s expressed value and the individual’s self-identity. Also, an increase in symbolic incongruence would raise consumers’ worry and embarrassment due to the risk of association with an undesired identity. The exclusion of anger emotion was attributed to the similarity between anger and dislike emotion, with consumers feeling the more intense emotion variety, being disliked. Moreover, their study differed from past scholars in that most negative emotion dimensions did not lead to brand

avoidance intention, except dislike emotion. This was thought to be caused by weak emotions and the presence of cultural variations between the population sample of their study and past literature. The former cause suggests that weak emotions fail to lead to brand avoidance intention, while the latter is based on the fact that culture is known to have influences on emotions and consumer behavior, [81], [82].

Nonetheless, this research strengthens the findings of early literature, along with the latest finding by [7], through the contribution of several insights into the study of symbolic incongruence and brand avoidance. First, this study confirms the findings of [17], [18], by revealing the significant influences that symbolic incongruence shows towards the negative emotions proposed in the NEB set, including anger emotion. This study also further supports Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory by affirming the emergence of psychological discomfort, manifested as negative emotions, in the presence of a dissonance-provoking stimuli, [24], [25], [27], [28]. Given the unique cultural circumstances of this research, the findings also demonstrate the stability of Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory when applied cross-culturally.

Secondly, the study exhibits a uniqueness compared to past literatures by showing that most negative emotion dimensions are significantly related to brand avoidance, with the peculiar exception of anger emotion. This finding suggests that these relationships are prone to the influences of cultural variety. It is proposed that due to Indonesian culture’s low scores in Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance and individualism, the level of brand loyalty is relatively lower compared to the cultures studied in previous research. As a result, negative emotions may have a higher likelihood of influencing brand avoidance intentions, [74], [83].

Third, the study strengthens the initial study by [6], revealing a significant indirect relationship between symbolic incongruence and brand avoidance, despite the unique cultural and geographical circumstances. In addition, this study strengthens the theories of Psychological Reactance and Social Identity by providing empirical support for the phenomenon.

## 7 Managerial Implications

Negative consumer-brand relationships are known to lead businesses to detrimental outcomes since consumers seem to be more sensitive and reactive toward brand-related negative emotions and experiences compared to positive ones, [9], [84].

Detrimental outcomes may come in the form of brand avoidance, or worse, actions that actively attempt to denigrate the brand. Denigrating actions may include the dissemination of negative attitudes through social networks, or even the formation of hateful websites targeted toward a specific brand, [84], [85], [86]. Therefore, acquiring knowledge as to the factors which lead to negative consumer-brand relationships is useful to potentially mitigate these unfavorable outcomes, [12]. This study identifies one of such stimuli that is highly relevant in today's frequent use of male Korean artists in marketing campaigns, that being symbolic incongruence, [6]. Specifically, the Flower Men traits of male Korean artists appear to not match the identity requirements of a specific segment of the Indonesian population. As a consequence, this segment is likely to form negative emotions toward brands associating with male Korean artists and demonstrate brand avoidance intention. Therefore, managers need to be familiar with the characteristics of the individuals that make up the segment to make a more informed decision when considering collaborations with male Korean artists. This study concludes several demographic, psychographic, and behavioral traits, derived from the findings of this research and past literature, [2], [3], [4], [80].

Demographically, this segment mostly consists of men, aged under 19 and above 40 years, [80]. In particular, those aged above 50 are most likely to exhibit symbolic incongruence towards male Korean artists, followed by the age group of 40 – 49 years, and under 19. Psychologically, these individuals perceive male Korean artists to be too feminine, using words such as “gay” and “sissy” as descriptors of male Korean artists, [3], [4]. This perception leads them to experience negative emotions in the form of anger, dislike, worry, and embarrassment when faced with the traits of male Korean artists. In addition, these individuals are more likely to hold strong religious and/or traditional cultural beliefs that run opposite to the values of Korean Popular culture. In particular, strong adherence to Islamic doctrines may lead to a certain distaste toward cultural influences of the Korean Wave, [2]. Also, it appears that this segment experiences a particular distaste towards Korean-related travel, food, or entertainment, leading them to have little to no experience in activities related to Korean culture, [80]. In conclusion, collaborations with male Korean artists should be restricted for businesses whose target segment exhibits the previously described characteristics.

## 8 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations are present in this particular research. First, the results of this research cannot be generalized to the general population due to the inherent limitations of non – probability sampling. Second, convenience sampling may result in a sample that under or over-represents certain groups. Third, due to the overlapping meanings of certain ‘emotion-related’ words and the structural differences between languages, survey misinterpretation caused by the translation of survey questions from English to Indonesian is possible. Fourth, the respondents of this study include a wide range of age groups with an uneven distribution. As a consequence, the results of this study may largely be influenced by the age group that is most represented. Lastly, this study does not predict brand avoidance actions, as it only measures brand avoidance intention. Considering the limitations of this research, several recommendations are provided for the initiation of future studies. To begin, future research may utilize a probability sampling method to enable the generalization of research results, [87]. Secondly, future research can examine the impact of other brand-related stimuli (ideological incompatibility or unmet expectations) on negative emotional reaction, and brand avoidance, as past research demonstrates conflicting results with regards to these relationships, [6]. Third, as the Korean Wave is a global phenomenon, it may be of interest for future research to include respondents from a wider range of countries and cultures, [88]. The cultural factors of each region may produce different research results with unique managerial implications for local businesses, [81]. Fourth, future research may replicate this study for a specific age range to avoid biases that could stem from an over or under-representation of certain age groups. Fifth, future studies may form research items that predict brand avoidance action, rather than intention. Finally, this research could be adapted to analyze the relationships between other Korean Wave phenomena, symbolic incongruence, negative emotional reaction, and brand avoidance. For example, it would be provocative to examine how the strong and independent portrayal of Korean female artists relates to symbolic incongruence, negative emotions, and brand avoidance within a population that holds traditional gender beliefs, [89].

### Declaration AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the main author used Grammarly in order to detect grammatical errors, specifically for writing the Abstract and Discussion sections. After using this tool/service, the main author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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- Gema Muhammad Ramadhan as the main author, responsible for the research conceptualization, writing of chapters, research methodology, and formal analysis.
- Elfindah Princes as the project advisor, responsible for supervision, reviewing, and editing.

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## APPENDIX

Table 1. The pre-test Cronbach's alpha analysis

| Indicators            | Cronbach's alpha<br>(Pilot Test) | Cronbach's alpha<br>(Final Test) |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Symbolic Incongruence | 0.895                            | 0.847                            |
| Dislike Emotion       | 0.913                            | 0.924                            |
| Anger Emotion         | 0.948                            | 0.952                            |
| Embarrassment         | 0.911                            | 0.916                            |
| Worry Emotion         | 0.852                            | 0.871                            |
| Brand Avoidance       | 0.935                            | 0.943                            |

*Note: Cronbach's alpha >0.7, reliable*

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents Based on Symbolic Incongruence

| Description of Respondents | N   | + Symbolic Incongruence |
|----------------------------|-----|-------------------------|
| Total respondents          | 450 | 226 (50.2%)             |
| <b>Gender</b>              |     |                         |
| Male                       | 171 | 110 (64.9%)             |
| Female                     | 279 | 116 (41.9%)             |
| <b>Age Group</b>           |     |                         |
| <19                        | 37  | 17 (45.9%)              |
| 20 - 29                    | 123 | 54 (43.9%)              |
| 30 - 39                    | 32  | 14 (43.8%)              |
| 40 - 49                    | 91  | 46 (50.5%)              |
| >50                        | 167 | 95 (56.9%)              |

Table 3. Reliability of Indicators

| Dimensions            | Indicators  | Outer Loading | C.R.  | AVE   |
|-----------------------|---|---------------|-------|-------|
| Symbolic Incongruence | Q1: "Korean male artists symbolize the kind of man I would never want to be."           | 0.660         | 0.898 | 0.691 |
|                       | Q2: "I don't want to be seen with brands that are associated with Korean male artists." | 0.861         |       |       |
|                       | Q3: "Brands that are represented by Korean male artists do not reflect who I am."       | 0.886         |       |       |
|                       | Q4: "Brands that are represented by Korean male artists do not fit my personality."     | 0.896         |       |       |

| Dimensions            | Indicators  | Outer Loading | C.R.  | AVE   |
|-----------------------|---|---------------|-------|-------|
| Dislike Emotion       | Q1: "Brands that are represented by Korean male artists cause me to feel negative emotions."      | 0.873         | 0.946 | 0.816 |
|                       | Q2: "I feel contempt towards brands that are represented by Korean male artists."                 | 0.907         |       |       |
|                       | Q3: "I feel revulsion towards brands that are represented by Korean male artists."                | 0.931         |       |       |
|                       | Q4: "I feel hate towards brands that are represented by Korean male artists."                     | 0.900         |       |       |
| Anger Emotion         | Q1: "I am annoyed by brands that are represented by Korean male artists."                         | 0.945         | 0.969 | 0.913 |
|                       | Q2: "I feel resentful towards brands that are represented by Korean male artists."                | 0.963         |       |       |
|                       | Q3: "I feel indignation towards brands that are represented by Korean male artists."              | 0.958         |       |       |
| Embarrassment Emotion | Q1: "Brands that are presented by Korean male artists cause me to feel sheepish."                 | 0.908         | 0.947 | 0.856 |
|                       | Q2: "Brands that are represented by Korean male artists are ridiculous."                          | 0.932         |       |       |
|                       | Q3: "I am embarrassed by brands that are represented by Korean male artists."                     | 0.935         |       |       |
| Worry Emotion         | Q1: "Brands that associate with male Korean artists are a threat to masculinity."                 | 0.809         | 0.911 | 0.720 |
|                       | Q2: "Brands that are associated with male Korean artists cause me to worry."                      | 0.861         |       |       |
|                       | Q3: "Brands that are represented by Korean male artists cause me to feel insecure."               | 0.860         |       |       |
|                       | Q4: "Brands that are represented by Korean male artists cause me to feel unsafe."                 | 0.863         |       |       |
| Brand Avoidance       | Q1: "I do not purchase products that are represented by Korean male artists anymore."             | 0.917         | 0.957 | 0.815 |
|                       | Q2: "I reject services/products that are represented by male Korean artists."                     | 0.908         |       |       |
|                       | Q3: "I refrain from purchasing products or services that are represented by male Korean artists." | 0.919         |       |       |
|                       | Q4: "I avoid buying products or services that are represented by male Korean artists."            | 0.946         |       |       |
|                       | Q5: "I do not use products or services that are represented by male Korean artists."              | 0.820         |       |       |

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results

| Hypothesis | Relationships                              | Sample Mean | Standard Deviation | T Statistics | P Values | Results  |
|------------|--|-------------|--------------------|--------------|----------|----------|
| H1a        | Symbolic Incongruence<br>→ Dislike Emotion | 0.704       | 0.034              | 20.591       | 0.000    | Accepted |
| H1b        | Symbolic Incongruence<br>→ Anger Emotion   | 0.579       | 0.040              | 14.349       | 0.000    | Accepted |
| H1c        | Symbolic Incongruence<br>→ Embarrassment   | 0.682       | 0.038              | 18.104       | 0.000    | Accepted |
| H1d        | Symbolic Incongruence<br>→ Worry Emotion   | 0.629       | 0.038              | 15.938       | 0.000    | Accepted |
| H2a        | Dislike Emotion<br>→ Brand Avoidance       | 0.319       | 0.091              | 3.652        | 0.000    | Accepted |
| H2b        | Anger Emotion<br>→ Brand Avoidance         | -0.032      | 0.090              | 0.467        | 0.640    | Rejected |
| H2c        | Embarrassment<br>→ Brand Avoidance         | 0.331       | 0.079              | 4.197        | 0.000    | Accepted |
| H2d        | Worry Emotion<br>→ Brand Avoidance         | 0.297       | 0.089              | 3.335        | 0.001    | Accepted |

Table 5. Total Indirect Effects

| Indirect Relationships                     | Original Sample | Sample Mean | Standard Deviation | T - Statistics | P Values |
|--|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------|----------|
| Symbolic Incongruence<br>→ Brand Avoidance | 0.620           | 0.622       | 0.035              | 17.509         | 0.000    |