

## TRENDS IN CONSUMER ACCULTURATION STUDIES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the literature and trends related to consumer acculturation. Consumer acculturation applies acculturation theory to consumer purchase decisions. Prior research on acculturation and consumer behavior theorizes that the degree of acculturation displayed by consumers is the primary construct of interest when investigating immigrant consumption patterns. Of interest in consumer acculturation studies is whether decision differences exist between high acculturated and low acculturated individuals in the purchase of products and whether such differences vary by the degree of acculturation an individual exhibits.

### INTRODUCTION

Acculturation and ethnicity are two constructs that dominate the literature on subcultural consumption (O'Guinn, Lee, and Faber 1986; Rossman 1994). The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of literature identifies trends occurring in consumer acculturation research. This paper examines acculturation and ethnicity in a consumer context. Consumer acculturation includes the attitudes, values and behaviors, which collectively comprise buyer behavior (O'Guinn, Lee et al. 1986). Consumer acculturation is a subset of acculturation and consumer socialization. In turn, acculturation and consumer socialization (Moschis 1978) are subsets of socialization. Socialization is the process of learning about and adjusting to one's environment (Ward 1974; Moschis 1978).

The cognitive development model of socialization posits that learning is a cognitive-psychological process that emphasizes the interaction of personal and environmental factors (Ginsburg and Oppen 1987). The social learning model views learning as the result of "socialization agents", which may be a person or organization that is in contact with the learner. These agents transmit norms, behaviors, attitudes and motivations to the learner. Socialization takes place during the course of a person's interactions with these agents and the environment (Brim 1966). A subset of socialization is consumer socialization, defined as the process by which people develop consumer-related skills, knowledge and attitudes (Moschis 1978). Acculturation, also a subset of socialization incorporates culture adaptation processes by which the members of one cultural group adopt attitudes and behaviors of another cultural group (Redfield, Linton et al. 1936). Acculturation and consumer socialization combine to form consumer acculturation, defined by Peñaloza (1994) as "the general process of movement

and adaptation to the consumer cultural environment in one country by persons from another country" (p.33).

The study of culture and marketing has theoretical and managerial implications. A greater understanding of the factors involved in building relationships with markets from a particular cultural background will enhance the ability to predict the amount of resources necessary to devote to marketing efforts. Additionally, the research provides a theoretical frame of reference through which to view multi-cultural marketing. Most significantly research in this area will provide marketers and advertisers with a better understanding of how people from different cultural contexts learn to become American consumers. This understanding can improve strategic planning decisions. For example, if differences are found based on the degree of acculturation experienced by the consumer, it becomes more important for marketers to determine the acculturation degree and to develop marketing strategies that take differing degrees into account.

### RESEARCH ON U.S. SUBCULTURES

Holland and Gentry (1999) used three eras to describe the research on ethnicity and marketing: The first era is pre-1960 when ethnic groups were largely ignored. The second era began about mid-1960 and continued until about 1980. During this period, research focused almost exclusively on differences between African-American and White consumers. The third era, which began in the early 1980s and continues today, is depicted by studies on a wide variety of ethnic groups that examine differences in culture that drive consumption.

Prior research suggests that the degree to which an individual has become acculturated to the United States may be a more important indicator of consumer behavior than country of birth (Kara and Kara 1996).

The international marketing literature is replete with studies that focus on behavioral differences in consumers across nations. Although this research has made significant contributions to understanding differences between nations, a gap exists in the literature about subcultural differences within national boundaries (Heslop, Papadopoulos et al. 1998), and specifically, whether individuals that are more acculturated to the United States' Western values behave differently than those who have assimilated to a lesser degree (low acculturation). Due to immigrant growth over the past two decades, the United States is a particularly appropriate context for the study of acculturation within subcultures. Such questions take on considerable importance to contemporary marketing because ethnic groups constitute a significant part of the economic environment.

### DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

The *United States Census Bureau* reports that African Americans, Hispanics and Asians make up the fastest growing groups in the United States. For the 2000 census, there were 35.3 million Hispanics, representing about 13% of the total population (Grieco and Cassidy 2001). In some major cities, such as Los Angeles and New York City, the minority population outnumbers the "non-minority" population. The growth of ethnic subcultures in the United States is expected to continue. It is estimated that by 2010, one in three American children will be African American, Hispanic or Asian (Schwartz and Exter 1989).

Although acculturation can affect one or both cultures, most researchers working with ethnic groups in the United States have assumed that change primarily affects the minority ethnic group, which is expected to become more like the dominant group (Keefe 1980).

Because of the Americanization efforts, in the early 1900s many of the European immigrants quickly assimilated. These early immigrants viewed the adoption of the prevailing culture as necessary for success. In contrast, recent trends indicate that the new immigrants no longer desire to be fully assimilated. Instead, many want to maintain their cultural identities (Miller 1993; Rossman 1994; Alba and Nee 1997; Dittgen 1997). These changes have prompted researchers to drop the analogy of the United States as a melting pot in which all ethnic groups eventually mix their characteristics and traits into one pattern (Hirschman 1983). Analogies such as a salad bowl in which each group maintains significant aspects of identity (Romano 1995) and a mosaic (Rossman 1994), in which different cultures combine to form a diverse country, have been used to describe the changing

attitudes toward assimilation. In addition, changes in immigration policy during the 1980s and 1990s have altered the makeup of immigrants. During this period, Europeans accounted for only ten percent of legal immigrants; Asians made up about one-third and Hispanics nearly one-half of legal immigrants (Dittgen 1997).

One result of the changing demographic and the recognition of differences between subcultures is that major companies are directing more effort toward capitalizing on these growing markets. Take the Hispanic market, for example. Kraft Foods launched its first ever Hispanic targeted flavor, Mandarina (orange flavored Kool-Aid) (Thompson 1998); Frito Lay hired Dieste & Partners to develop ads aimed at Latino consumers (Krajewski 1998), and General Motors' Buick division launched ads aimed toward Hispanics (Gazdik 1998). In addition, retailers such as K-Mart, Sears Roebuck & Co. and J.C. Penney spent about \$110 million dollars in Spanish-language network television (Zipkin 2000).

These trends indicate a need for investigation of differences and similarities among different ethnic segments within the U.S. market and an examination of whether marketing strategies should be adjusted to reach the U.S.'s diverse subcultures.

### CULTURE

Culture impacts the way consumers perceive and behave (Hall 1977; Hirschman 1985; McCracken 1988; Clark 1990; Rossman 1994). This construct, however, is difficult to operationally define because of a variety of definitions, each reflecting different paradigms from varying disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.) (Kale and Barnes 1992). From a social-psychology perspective, Gordon (1964) defines culture as "...the social heritage of man--the ways of acting and the ways of doing things which are passed down from one generation to the next" (p. 32). More recently, Hofstede (1984), provides a psychological view of culture as "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group to another" (p. 21).

Culture and its associated behavior patterns are constantly changing. As a society is confronted with different forces, its culture adapts (Wallendorf and Reilly 1983; McCracken 1986). The goal of cultural research is to determine differences in the way people adapt. Perhaps, as Brown (1933) put it, "human nature is everywhere the same and everywhere different" (p. 2).

## National Origin

Related to culture is national origin. The definition of national origin employed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission states that national origin refers to the place where a person was born or the country from which a person's ancestors are from (Brady 1996). For many people living in the United States, cultures, beliefs, opinions, and consumer behavior patterns are a result of influences from their native countries and, for those born in the United States, the national origin of their ancestors (Rossman 1994). The level of identification a person feels with a certain group influences their commitment to the group and, in turn, their behavior (Hirschman 1981; Valencia 1985).

## Subcultures

According to Gordon (Gordon 1978), subcultures are subdivisions of a national culture which form "...a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual" (p. 98, italics in original). Subcultures based on race, religion or nationality are referred to as ethnic groups. The term ethnicity comes from the Greek word "ethnos," which means "people" or "nation" (Gordon 1964). Most definitions of ethnicity include a historical commonality. For example, Gordon (1964) defines an ethnic group as "...any group which is defined or set off by race, religion, or national origin, or some combination of these categories," (p.27). Similarly, Parsons (1975) defines ethnic groups as "...a group the members of which have...a distinctive identity which is rooted in some kind of a distinctive sense of its history. It is...a diffusely defined group, sociologically quite different from collectivities with specific functions. For the members it characterizes what the individual *is* rather than what he *does*" (p. 56, italics in original).

Herche and Balasubramanian (1994) found that consumers, within a given ethnic background, are likely to display similar shopping behaviors, such as using the same information sources and patronizing the same type of stores. Other studies echo the premise that the differences between ethnic groups significantly affect buying behavior resulting in a need for different marketing efforts (Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986; Donthu and Cherian 1994; Peñaloza 1994; Webster 1992).

## SOCIALIZATION AND CONSUMER ACCULTURATION

Zigler and Child (1969) define socialization as the process by which individuals develop patterns of

socially relevant behaviors. In a consumption context, investigating children's consumption patterns, Ward (1974) coined the term "consumer socialization" as a "process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (p. 2). The difference between consumer socialization and consumer acculturation is the multicultural context in which consumption and acculturation take place (Peñaloza 1989).

## Acculturation and Assimilation

The concept of acculturation originated in the field of anthropology and has been studied extensively in anthropology as well as sociology and psychology. Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936) define acculturation as "...those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (p.149). In 1954, the Social Science Research Council defined acculturation as,

...culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems. Acculturative change may be the consequence of direct cultural transmission; it may be derived from noncultural causes, such as ecological or demographic modifications, induced by an impinging culture; it may be delayed, as with internal adjustment following upon the acceptance of alien traits or patterns; or it may be a reactive adaptation of traditional modes of life. Its dynamics can be seen as the selective adaptation of value systems, the processes of integration and differentiation, the generation of developmental sequences, and the operation of role determinants and personality factors (Barnett, Siegel et al. 1954 p.974).

Although changes may occur in either the dominant culture, the subculture or both groups, according to Berry (1997), in practice acculturation tends to produce more change in one of the groups. Although both the immigrant and the host culture undergo changes, the impact of immigrant cultures on the mainstream host culture is relatively insignificant compared to the influence of the host culture on the individual (Kim 1985). The immigrants need to adapt to the host culture is greater than the host cultures need to include aspects of the immigrant culture due to the larger number of people in the host culture compared to the number of immigrants and to the dominant resources of the host

society that inhibit the immigrant culture from having the greater influence.

Many researchers have used the term acculturation and assimilation interchangeably, or in some cases, the meanings have overlapped (Gordon 1964). To add to the confusion, different disciplines use the terms to mean different concepts (Berry and Annis 1974; Padilla 1980). For example, sociologists like Gordon (1964), typically use the term “assimilation” to describe the process of meetings between ethnic groups. In contrast, anthropologists prefer the term “acculturation” to describe the same process (Gordon 1964). A review of the consumer acculturation literature reveals a similar inconsistency. Therefore, it is important to relay the *predominant* difference between assimilation and acculturation in terms of their usage in the consumer acculturation context. While assimilation occurs when an immigrant fully adopts mainstream values and gives up his/her cultural heritage, acculturation can occur when some elements of the mainstream culture are added without abandoning the native culture (Berry 1980; Padilla 1980; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983; Jun, Ball et al. 1993; Rossman 1994). Thus, the traditional view is that acculturation is more of a continuum, where there are varying levels of acculturation in each subculture. At one end of the continuum is the unacculturated extreme where the consumer’s heritage is the strongest in influencing behavior. At the other end is the acculturated extreme, where the consumer is fully assimilated to the host culture and has adopted the prevailing consumer behavior of the host population (Hair and Anderson 1972).

Acculturation simultaneously occurs at both group and individual levels (Berry 1980). Literature in anthropology and sociology focus on the group factors of acculturation, such as relationship to socialization, social interaction, and mobility (Olmedo 1979). The psychology literature emphasizes individual characteristics such as change in perception, attitudes, values and personality (Berry 1980; Peñaloza 1989).

### Measurement of Acculturation Constructs

Measure of acculturation typically attempt to determine the extent to which a person has adapted to a new culture (Magaña et al. 1996) and the resulting behavioral changes that occur as a result of the contact (Ward and Arzu 1999). There has been a great deal of variation in the measurement of acculturation and ethnicity in both the social sciences and the consumer behavior literature. Some factors, either individually or in combination, that have been considered in the measurement are language, reference groups, intermarriage, identity, culture (Laroche, Kim, and

Tomiuk 1998; Lee and Um 1992; Peñaloza 1989; Valencia 1985), and religion (Hirschman 1981). Communication based measures, such as media usage, have also been used (O’Guinn and Faber 1985; Kim, Laroche et al. 1990). Because language is the primary medium for the flow of cultural elements (Barnett, Siegel et al. 1954), it is viewed as one of the most important indicators of acculturation, has been the most widely used factor in measuring acculturation (Olmedo 1979). Language-based scales contain questions about where, and to what extent, one’s native language versus English is spoken.

Olmedo (1980) suggests a multivariate approach when measuring acculturation. Berry (1980) advocates independent measurement at the group level in terms of history and purpose of contact and at the individual level in terms of the interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences. Although researchers agree that multidimensional measures are necessary, several researchers have circumvented the use of these scales and opted for a self-judgement with regard to strong or weak identification to the original culture (Dana 1996). This trend also has appeared in the consumer acculturation research. Dana (1996) argues that self-judgements are too simplistic and are insufficient for the accurate measure of acculturation

The majority of acculturation scales used in consumer acculturation studies have focused on behavioral indicators. There are indications that psychological scales are being developed in the social sciences (Tropp, Erkut et al. 1999), which may lend themselves to consumer studies exploring the psychological aspects of consumption and acculturation.

### Consumer Acculturation

As mentioned previously, consumer acculturation is a subset of acculturation and socialization. While acculturation is more general, consumer acculturation is specific to the consumption process. Consumer acculturation can be seen as a socialization process in which an immigrant consumer learns the behaviors, attitudes and values of a culture that is different from their culture of origin (Lee 1988).

The study of ethnicity in consumption is relatively new in marketing literature, and there is debate on whether the constructs of ethnic identity and acculturation are identical because they both rely on similar measures such as language, reference group influence, adherence to cultural customs, and food preferences to operationalize them (Hui, Joy et al. 1992 377; Webster 1994). Although some researchers support the idea that these constructs are independent, the prevailing practice

in consumer research has been to use the same set of indicators to operationalize both the ethnicity and acculturation constructs (Hui, Joy et al. 1992). Peñaloza (1994, 1995) suggests that ethnic affiliation is negatively related to consumer acculturation such that the more a person affiliates with his or her ethnic community, the less are his or her chances to adapt to and adopt mainstream values and behaviors. Hui et al. (1992) disagree that ethnicity is opposite to acculturation. They contend that some immigrants can be somewhat acculturated to the dominant culture but still maintain strong ethnic identification. In a study of Korean sojourners in the United States, Jun et al. (1993) found support that acculturation is different from cultural identification and that both dimensions are influenced by different factors. Webster (1994) views ethnic identity as a subset of acculturation and assimilation as a mode of acculturation. Laroche, Kim and Tomiuk (1998) state that the primary difference between the two constructs is that ethnic identity measures focus on maintenance/retention of the culture of origin and acculturation measures focus on acquisition of the host culture.

#### **ETHNICITY AND ACCULTURATION IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR RESEARCH**

An earlier study that combined ethnicity and consumer behavior was carried out by Hirschman (1981). This research identified relationships between Jewish ethnicity and levels of consumer innovativeness. Hirschman concluded that ethnicity may be a useful determinant of consumption patterns. Her research suggests that ethnic norms may influence competency in making purchase decisions.

Hispanics. Webster (1990-91) found differences in attitudes toward marketing practices between Anglos and Hispanics who possessed varying degrees of subcultural identification. These differences were present even after social class and income effects were removed from the analysis. In another study, Webster (1992) found significant differences between Hispanics who identified more closely with their subculture and Hispanics who did not in information search patterns associated with reference groups, advertising, in-store search and miscellaneous readership. The research concludes that different strategies are required to reach language-based segments within the Hispanic subculture.

Kara and Kara (1996) found that Hispanics high in acculturation were more similar to Anglos in terms of the utilities placed on product attributes of selected products. In addition, differences in advertising effectiveness and media preferences between Hispanics

low in acculturation and Hispanics high in acculturation have been found. For example, Ueltsch (1997), when researching preference for language and ethnicity of the models in advertisements, found that Hispanics low in acculturation preferred advertisements in Spanish compared to high-acculturated Hispanics who preferred English language advertisements. A surprising finding in this research was that Hispanics low in acculturation preferred advertising personalities that were Anglo instead of Hispanic. This finding indicates a need for further research.

O'Guinn and Faber (1986) conducted a study to determine if Hispanics and Anglos differed in their rating of the importance of different product attributes. When the product was a nondurable (detergent), few significant differences were found between the groups. In contrast, when the product was a consumer durable (television sets), significant differences were found between Anglos and Hispanics in their ratings of attribute importance. Additionally, there were also differences between low and high-acculturated Hispanics.

Asians. Research on the acculturation in the Asian ethnic group provides similar findings. Tan and McCullough (1985) found that a high level of acculturation to Chinese values was associated with a high reliance on price and quality, whereas a low orientation was associated with a high preference for image. McCullough, Tan and Wong (1986) found that Chinese values were slowly disappearing because of Western influences. Lee and Um (1992) found that mixed acculturation patterns contributed to differences between Korean immigrants and Anglo-Americans in consumer product evaluations. Specifically, highly acculturated Koreans, as compared to less acculturated Koreans and Americans, were more likely to adopt American cultural styles by observing what their friends buy, taking friends' advice on purchase recommendations and listening to advertising.

#### **TRENDS IN ACCULTURATION STUDIES**

Three trends have appeared in consumer acculturation studies: (1) the concepts of ethnic identity, (2) strength of ethnic affiliation and (3) situational ethnicity. The first trend is the increasing use of ethnic identity to identify ethnic groups. The objective perspective in defining ethnic identity uses sociocultural categories, while the subjective perspective derives ethnicity from the labels that people give to identify their ethnic background (Deshpande, Hoyer et al. 1986). The self-identification of ethnicity evolved from the problems that researchers faced when attempting to classify people into various ethnic groups. Frequently,

assignment to an ethnic group is based on indicators such as surname (Hoyer and Deshpande 1982; Zmud and Arce 1992), area of residence (Wallendorf and Reilly 1983) or city (Saegart, Hoover et al. 1985). This can lead to misclassifications. Because of the potential for misclassifications, many researchers have adopted the self-identification method to measure ethnicity or ethnic identification (Cohen 1978; Hirschman 1981; Valencia 1982; Minor 1992). The assumption of this latter method is that ethnic self-identification reflects the internal beliefs of individuals about their perceptions of cultural reality. Combinations of subjective and objective measures have also been used to study Hispanic consumption (Deshpande, Hoyer et al. 1986).

The second trend has been an increasing reliance on the *degree* of ethnic affiliation, often called strength of ethnic identification (Webster 1994), to operationalize, or in some instances, substitute acculturation measures. This concept was inspired by Padilla's (1980) "ethnic loyalty" which is defined as "...the individual's preference of one cultural orientation over the other" (underline in original, p.48). The degree of ethnic identification has been used in lieu of traditional acculturation scales as an indicator of the degree of acculturation (Kim, Laroche et al. 1990). Using this approach, Hirschman (1981) found that the strength of Jewish ethnicity was positively related to, among other things, consumption innovativeness, and transfer of consumption innovation to others. Deshpande, Hoyer and Donthu (1986) found differences in Spanish media use, attitudes toward advertising and brand purchasing behavior within the Hispanic subculture, all based on the intensity of ethnic affiliation. Donthu and Cherian (1992) found that strong Hispanic identifiers had a higher degree of ethnic pride and were less responsive to coupons than low Hispanic identifiers. Some researchers have used multidimensional dimensions to measure the strength of ethnic identification (Padilla 1980) and others have relied on one measure, such as language usage (e.g., Webster 1992) to operationalize the construct. In addition, some researchers prefer to use a dichotomous measure of ethnicity (i.e., high vs. low ethnic identifiers), while others have utilized multichotomous or continuous measures (Hui, Joy et al. 1992).

The third development in consumer acculturation research has been called situational ethnicity or felt ethnicity (Stayman and Deshpande 1989). Situational ethnicity is based on the notion that the acculturation process may vary depending on the context in which behavior occurs. The underlying premise is that people take different roles in their daily lives and these roles may bring into play different levels of acculturation or

ethnicity (O'Guinn and Faber 1985). Consequently, a consumer's consumption behavior can exhibit a considerable degree of situational variability depending on which personal meanings are salient in a given consumption context (Stayman and Deshpande 1989; Zmud and Arce 1992).

## SUMMARY

The trends in consumer acculturation research indicate a need to come to agreement on definitions and measurement of the construct. With the changing ethnic demographics in the United States, it becomes increasingly important to understand the differences and similarities between and within subcultures. Research on consumer acculturation will continue to shed light on the consumption adoption process of immigrants.

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