

The Mitigating Effects of Acculturation on Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

This paper looks at a particular aspect of acculturation, specifically, the acculturation of those to a new geographic area (excluding new immigrants from another country). There is a growing multi-theme literature discussing the opportunities for using ethnicity and acculturation to market to “ethnic consumers” within culturally diverse countries (Pires and Stanton 2005; Cui, 2001; Burton 2000). Within this literature, Cui (2001) reveals a dominant focus on consumption patterns, followed by advertising portrayals and associated responses to advertisements and promotions which demonstrate the lack of consideration of ethnicity, identification and overall degree of acculturation. Several studies have confirmed that manufacture/production locations have different levels of influence on consumers’ perception of product quality (i.e., an ethnicity effect relative to foreign manufacturers) and the acceptance of products from certain countries.. In addition, origin of product parts/aspects may influence consumer decision making and behavior (Burton, 2000). This paper is based on a general concept of acculturation. The concept suggests that the purchase outcome of micro-cultures is moderated by two variables: the degree of consumer acculturation and the type of product under consideration. Predicated upon gaps in the literature related to ethnicity and acculturation in consumer behavior research, we propose an acculturation analysis process to facilitate a systems approach to the study of culture and acculturation on consumer purchase decisions. The proposed new concept is intended as an initial prototype to help explain purchase outcomes of micro-cultures. Micro-cultures are not limited to ethnic cultures but also other distinct cultures such as geographic, popular, life-style, age and gender, among others.

The Meaning of Acculturation

The concept of acculturation is the exchange of cultural features that results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact; the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct (Kottak 2007). Acculturation entails two-way processes of change; however, most research and theory has focused on the adjustments and changes experienced by minorities in response to their contact with the dominant majority (e.g., see Moore, Weinberg and Berger, 2010) – essentially, a one-way process.

Acculturation has also been defined as the process of learning and adapting to cultural traits different from the ones with which the person was originally reared (Ownbey and Horridge, 1997). It is the process of acquiring the customs of an alternative society. Acculturation loosely refers to the extent to which ethnic/cultural minorities participate in the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, and practices of their own culture, versus those of the dominant society. In general, the term encompasses intercultural interaction and adaptation and includes assimilation of a new culture, maintenance of the old culture, and/or resistance to both new and old cultures (Penaloza & Gilly, 1999). *Consumer* acculturation is the intercultural contact and the resulting change for consumers in contact with a new culture. Acculturation may include learning a language and adjusting to different lifestyles and mannerisms (e.g., as in shopping behavior). Berry (1990) interpreted acculturation as the cultural transmission experienced by an individual due to his or her direct contact with another culture. The individual must reach some level of accommodation to the ways of the new culture, and decide what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.

Acculturation is a progressive learning process where values may change as contact with a new or dominant culture increases. The more acculturated a person or group is, the greater is the progression toward the norms of the host or dominant culture. Acculturation can be a long or short process, depending on the circumstances. This progressive learning process (Kim, 1979) is sometimes referred to as cultural assimilation. This process asserts that individuals acquire new values and behaviors in an additive manner, where, as interaction with a new culture increases, new values and behaviors are adopted. The greater the exchange between the host/dominant society and the minority group or person, the greater the latter's tendency toward the values of the host society. Acculturation and assimilation are similar, but assimilation is much narrower in scope. With "assimilation," the traits of the host culture are adopted, however, there is some loss of the tenets of the original culture. Acculturation, on the other hand, does not necessarily assume that there is a loss of original culture. In the simplest of terms, acculturation is seen as a continuum from the acceptance of traditional beliefs to acculturated beliefs.

Whereas factors such as socioeconomic and demographic variables can be used to characterize minority groups, most research has paid attention to the influence of cultural factors on minority individuals' consumer behavior. Acculturation is one of two variables most often ~~used to~~ correlated with minority consumers' behavior and assimilation into the mainstream culture, (e.g., D'Rozario and Douglas 1999; Lee 1993; Ownbey and Horridge 1997) along with ethnic identification (e.g., Stayman and Deshpande 1989). These studies found that individuals with different assimilation levels and different ethnic identification tend to exhibit different behavior in consumption areas, such as information search behavior, shopping orientation, and food consumption habits.

Anthropologists Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936, p. 149) developed the often quoted definition:

"Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups".

Thus, acculturation, from a minority perspective, can be conceived to be the processes of cultural learning imposed upon minorities by the fact of being minorities. If enculturation is first-culture learning, then acculturation is second-culture learning.

Literature Review

Studies of acculturation in consumer research began in the early 1970s (Hair and Andersen 1973; Pruden and Longman 1972). Acculturation has been defined differently in these areas. One widely cited definition of acculturation was given by the Social Science Research Council (1954, p.974): "...acculturation may be defined as culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems." O'Guinn, Imperia and MacAdams (1987) defined acculturation as "the process by which those new to a society adopt the attitudes, values and behaviors of the dominant host culture." Berry et al. (1992) interpreted acculturation as the cultural transmission experienced by an individual due to his or her direct contact with another culture. Within the area of consumer research, acculturation has been defined as immigrants' "acquisition of traits of the host culture" and "maintenance of traits of the culture of origin" (Laroche et al. 1997, p.34).

Acculturation is the resocialization of accepted prescribed ways of doing things, whether they be communication, media usages, product and service usage or any other aspect that includes consumption. There is a relationship between acculturation and consumer behavior.

An acculturating individual's consumption experience is understood from a consumer resocialization perspective and from the struggle between change and continuity of the individual's self-identity. Laroche et al. (1997) argued that acculturation consists of three dimensions: media exposure, social interaction and participation, and (in the U.S.) the English language use with family members.

When people of any culture (e.g., popular culture, racial culture, geographic culture, etc.) move or interact with a culture other than the dominate culture of their lives, acculturation is ongoing and impactful in every aspect of consumer behavior. Johnston (1963) distinguished between two aspects of acculturation, the behavioral part he called external assimilation and the attitudinal part named internal assimilation. Under this structure, the individual may take on the behaviors expected by the host culture, including speaking the language of the culture, dressing like most people in the culture and eating what these people eat. Obviously, this has direct application to acculturation of many people today, regardless of their ethnic or racial affiliation. For example, In the U.S., we might look at an individual who acculturates after moving from the west-coast to the east-coast culture, or, from a colder climate to a warmer climate.

Twenty-first Century Acculturation

Studies on acculturation are limited to looking at those who come from another country. Perhaps the interest in the acculturation of immigrants is more valuable or more impactful. However, a new dialogue about acculturation is necessary when we consider that *everyone* acculturates: for example, from high school to college, from college to work, from one job to another, from single to married, from city to suburb, from own-home to retirement community, etc. Acculturation can be defined as the process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs in any type of "change"/"new environment" situation. This represents a new way of considering acculturation.

Our concept includes assimilation and ethnic identification in a broader concept. It is argued that acculturation is a multidimensional construct. One dimension of acculturation is the acceptance of the host culture or the mainstream culture. Another dimension is the individual's maintenance of his or her original or ethnic culture, which is closely related to the concept of ethnic identification. A person adopting many aspects of the main culture does not necessarily have a low degree of ethnic identification, and vice versa. Key aspects are the interest and acceptance of new values (new for that culture), and change and acquisition of things (i.e., things seen as more value to one cultural group than to another).

Moving to a new geographic location may automatically dictate new shopping behaviors. For example, there may be different foods, different housing infrastructure, different architecture, different shopping areas and stores, etc. However, as more new members come into a city, area or region, old values and buying behaviors can be mitigated along a continuum from *what once was* to what *currently is* the normal behavior. This may lend itself to the growth and opportunity for new products and new product ideas.

Implications of Acculturation

For the most part, we think of acculturation and its impact on immigrants from one country to another country. Those new to a geographic area acculturate to that new environment. However, individuals also acculturate when they relocate to different regions and parts of a country. For example, those native to the United States acculturate when they move to a foreign country, absorbing and accepting the common customs, habits, laws and procedures unique to a culture is the way to successfully make the transition from living in one environment to another. Anthropologist Franz Boas (1888, pp. 631-632) argued that all people acculturate, not only "savages" and minorities:

"It is not too much to say that there is no people whose customs have developed uninfluenced by foreign culture, that has not borrowed arts and ideas which it has developed in its own way", giving the example that "the steel harpoon used by American and Scotch whalers is a slightly modified imitation of the Eskimo harpoon".

With the extensive "vagabondism" and mobility, it can be seen that the adolescent culture of today's more recent college graduates has added additional meaning to the term 'acculturation' and its implications. Workers of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s were accustomed to working for the same company and subsequently living in the same community, moving only 2-4 times in a lifetime. Not only did they not change jobs as frequently as is the case today but more likely a promotion kept them in the same location.

Today, it is more commonplace to not only secure a new position in a new city or region (or country, as the case may be) but moving to a new region is expected in order to continue to move up the ladder of responsibility and increased in pay. In this way, an individual will be forced to get familiar with many areas of the country and the world and subsequently other cultures. This of course, adds value to cultural experience. This includes both ethnic cultures and the popular culture of the region or area. Obviously this requires that not only does a person accept the values of the new culture (business culture, city culture, ethnic culture or make-up, and popular culture therein) but also realizes that there will be some mitigation on their part as they adjust the anchors to which they are accustomed toward new dimensions. Those mitigating factors involve two keys:

- A blending of old and new ideas
- Exposure to expectations that will impact the development of future ideas

Value Structures for Strength of Acculturation

The following are areas that determine the strength of affiliation for immigrants leaving their host culture and entering into a new culture. More commitment and deeper relationships in these areas governs the strength of affiliation and the resulting commitment to old ascribed ways and/or acceptance or rejection of new ones. Each of these cultural structures follows a pattern which includes introduction, repeated exposure, reinforcement, and adjustment.

- Family - learning how to abide by house rules and the basics of learning how to live among a family unit.
- Church - learning about morality, faith and beliefs via initial exposure relative to your culture.
- School – the socialized learning process.
- Friends - learning how to care for each other and how to have fun.
- Television – learning about what is happening in the world, and about trends in fashion relative to choices people make of the same culture
- Popular culture – things around us that impact our meaning and understanding both in and out of one’s category (such as age, gender, lifestyle, geographic [rural, suburban and urban])
- Internet - learning about what’s new in games, gadgets, and websites, events and usage
- News stations – learning about how others lives in other parts of the world, learning their economics and politics
- Grandparents (specifically) and parents – learning how things were in the past
- Business establishments – how to act and respond in certain business environments and the changes therein that are necessary

The question then becomes, as people move around, and get exposed to and accept new ideas, how will this change their buying behaviour relative to products and services? More traditional individuals (i.e., less acculturated) are those who remain immersed in many of the beliefs, practices, and values of their own distinct culture, and will remain rigid and not ascribe to new things and ideas. Others are more in the middle and are “moderately acculturated.” These are individuals who have retained the beliefs and practices of their culture or origin, but have also assimilated, to at least a moderate extent, the beliefs and practices of the dominant society. At the other end of the continuum are the highly acculturated individuals who have, to at least some extent, rejected the beliefs and practices of their own culture in favour of those of the dominant society, or who perhaps never learned their own culture’s traditions in the first place

A key consideration in determining the degree of acculturation is that, unlike determining the degree of assimilation, it is not a “zero-sum-game” whereby adopting more tenets of the dominant culture automatically means rejecting a like amount of the minority culture. A few studies in the area of consumer acculturation have shown that immigrants who come to the United States are not homogeneous. Their consumption patterns vary *within* the immigrant group depending upon the degree of acculturation (Faber, O’Guinn and McCarty, 1987; Kara and Kara, 1996). Identifying levels of acculturation becomes more complex when we look at sub-group differences within a culture, such as those that may exist among African-American consumers. Two or more cultures often reside in close proximity to one another with sub-cultures (sub-segments) existing within each culture. Levels of acculturation may be exercised continuously or periodically, for selected products, selected product categories or all products, and may be dependent on a multitude of variables. The variables include language, citizenship status, inter-cultural marriages and relationships, ethnic identity, neighborhood, culture, religion, age, education, income, and others.

Conclusion

As the world becomes more cosmopolitan, and the United States, in particular increasingly multi-cultural, there is a great need to study different cultures as segments of a product's market. A recent paper (Moore, Weinberg and Berger, 2010) continued the sparse literature that demonstrated that it is NOT sufficient to lump all consumers within a minority group as homogeneous. The paper showed clearly that the degree of acculturation of an individual consumer within a minority group (in their paper, Blacks/African Americans) acted differently in several aspects of consumer behavior. This stream of literature needs to continue as described herein. That research only looked at acculturation and ethnic identify.

The transient nature of today's adolescent and adult graduate necessitates an every changing cultural effects which cause the 'new to the culture' to change as well as bring a cultural component that may in fact mitigate those new to the interaction.

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