TRIPLE ACCULTURATION: THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE CONSUMER ACCULTURATION OF KENYAN IMMIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

This research extends current consumer acculturation models by incorporating the role of a subcultural group in the consumer acculturation of Kenyan immigrants. An ethnographic study of Kenyan immigrants shows that the immigrants are influenced by acculturation forces from: a) their culture of origin; b) the dominant culture and potentially c) a subcultural group culture. Our research extends Berry’s (1980) model of acculturation and Penaloza’s (1994) model of consumer acculturation by incorporating acculturation forces from the subcultural group. The research reports respondent experiences regarding one critical consumer incident and two progressive consumer learning patterns that require an understanding of subculture influence.

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Triple Acculturation: The Role of African Americans in the Consumer Acculturation of Kenyan Immigrants

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The U.S. is a nation of immigrants and the study of immigrant adaptation process has been undertaken in different fields. These research efforts have concentrated on examining the movement of the immigrant towards the dominant group. Studies of this genre include among many others, Gordon (1964) who examined assimilation of life in America. Berry (1980) developed a typology that examined the degree to which immigrants desired to have a positive relationship with the dominant culture. In this research Berry develops four acculturation strategies that an immigrant can adopt. These strategies are: assimilation, separation, marginalization and integration. Cross cultural psychologists have shown that immigrants who adopt an integration strategy have the best mental health. The examination of immigrant acculturation to dominant culture was adequate when the majority of immigrants to the United States were white. Changing demographics in the United States are resulting in research efforts that examine the differences between the acculturation of white immigrants and those from other ethnic groups.

In order to survive in the new environment, new immigrants must quickly “learn” new consumption habits, where to shop, what brands to consider, and/or how to evaluate different products and services (Tse and Lee 1994). Marketers have sought to understand immigrant consumer behavior by investigating different aspects of ethnic consumer behavior. For example, Hirschman (1981) looked at Jewish-American innovativeness. One of the classic studies on consumer acculturation was conducted by Penaloza (1994) who examined Mexican consumer acculturation in the United States. Oswald (1999) examined the experiences of Haitian immigrants in the U.S. All of the aforementioned studies examine consumer acculturation of immigrants to the dominant group. Researchers (see Hirschman 2001) have questioned the adequacy of existing acculturation models in examining the experiences of non-white immigrants. This research is offered in this genre. As stated elsewhere acculturation models do not examine the role of a subcultural group such as African Americans in the consumer acculturation of immigrants. It is our contention that the experience of black immigrants in the United States is different from that of other non-white groups because of the existence of a large African American population and the complexities of race relations. Historically, the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination has shaped the experiences of African Americans in the United States. This research introduces subcultural group acculturation by extending Berry (1980) and Penaloza (1994).

Thirty interviews were conducted with Kenyan immigrants in a metropolitan city in the Southern United States. Interviews were conducted one on one and respondents were provided with anonymity and confidentiality. All of the interviews were conducted in English and respondents were recruited using the snowball method. In our interviews we examined progressive learning (Tse and Lee 1994) of the immigrants but we also utilized a modified critical incident technique (Flanagan 1954) to understand their experiences in the consumption environment.

Reported here is one critical incident and two progressive learning patterns. The critical incident of interest across respondents was that of accessing hair-care services. The two progressive learning patterns discussed are with regard to choice of music and dressing style. Our findings suggest that one of the ways that Kenyans learn about the importance of African Americans in their consumer acculturation is when they first look for a hair dresser or barber. They find out that there are dual delivery systems of services in the United States. In sum, recognition of the need for triple acculturation may come with a first critical incident that alerts the immigrant to subcultural requirements.

The musical tastes of the immigrants have changed. In a sense their consumption of music has been redefined. The immigrants expressed the fact that they no longer listen to country music because it was not considered appropriate to enjoy this music as a black person in the United States. There was a clear movement towards appreciation of African American music. Some of the immigrants have begun to appreciate their tribal music as a result of being away from home, expressing some nostalgic attachment to this music. They have progressively learned what music is appropriate in what sphere of interaction. An interesting finding of this research is that the immigrants’ sense of style has been changed. There was a definite movement towards the subcultural group, i.e. the respondents described their sense of style to be in alignment with African American notions of style. Our data clearly shows prevalent subcultural acculturation with regards to clothing.

Our findings highlight the role of critical incidents in shaping the immigrant’s understanding of potential subcultural acculturation requirements. From the critical incident, the immigrants progressively learn of the necessity to acculturate to the subcultural group. The findings of this research have implications for marketers and public policy makers.

REFERENCES


