The Fallacy of a Pure Sample: Beyond the Myth of Cultural Homogeneity in Immigrant Consumer Acculturation Research

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
INTRODUCTION

A recent resurgence of interest in immigrant consumer acculturation among marketing researchers reflects the accelerated flows of people, capital, technology, media images, and ideologies across local and national boundaries (Appadurai 1997). An increasing number of the world’s nations can presently be characterized as multicultural, with many consumer communities negotiating identities in relation to more than one ‘homeland’ (Trendwatching 2003). Clearly, it is imperative to understand migrant consumer identities and multicultural consumption environments, which are emerging as significant phenomena for consumer cultures globally.

While marketing research in immigrant consumer acculturation has been marked by several important advances, there remains a current fixation with the construction of ‘pure’ ethnic or national groups when sampling. We contend that this approach to sampling is based on a myth of cultural homogeneity which still operates in immigrant consumer acculturation research today. Instead of attempting to locate consumers within the relatively stable cultural entities of home and host culture, this article emphasizes that we would more accurately represent our consumers by considering the multiple “webs of belonging” (Calhoun 2003, 536) in which they are embedded. This additional lens shifts our view of immigrant consumer acculturation to a process of reconfiguration within complex and dynamic webs of belonging, which are broader than the imaginaries of home and host culture and comprise multiple social groups, places, and histories. We consider the implications of this additional lens for our theoretical conceptions of culture at the macro level as well as the conceptions of cultural identity at the level of the individual consumer. As an example, we consider Southeast Asian immigrant consumers in New Zealand, whose point of commonality is not race, nationality, or ethnicity, but paradoxically their disjuncture and diversity.

WEBS OF BELONGING: BEYOND THE MYTH OF CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY

To address the current limitations in immigrant consumer acculturation research, we draw on extant interdisciplinary insights to re-lens our assumptions about culture. Moving from a dyadic border crossing involving the polarities of home and host culture, we propose a broader theoretical lens which emphasizes that consumers are embedded in multiple and shifting “webs of belonging” (Calhoun 2003, 536). While immigrant acculturation studies in marketing have assumed the home and host cultures to be relatively stable entities, this additional lens sees immigrant acculturation as a process of re-positioning, re-embedding, and reconfiguring in relation to complex and dynamic webs which comprise multiple social groups, places, and histories.

At the macro level of cultural analysis, the concept of multiple webs of belonging draws attention to intersections and entanglements across cultures. The predominant lens of border crossing between a home and a host culture, while producing important insights, is limited by the underlying metaphor of cultures as autonomous islands which are internally homogeneous, externally separated, exclusively ‘owned’ by a particular people, and which inevitably collide when in contact (Welsh 1999). However, this primordial model of separate cultures is confounded by the inner differentiation and complexity within modern cultures as well as new forms of entanglement between and across cultures today (Robertson 1992; Welsh 1999). Because of the accelerated flows of consumption practices, ideologies, and people resulting from global economic forces (Appadurai 1997), the notion of cultures as autonomous islands gives way to the alternative metaphor of cultures as cross-cutting webs, which are complicatedly

The term [monocultural] is meaningless, because there never has been such a society. All cultures are the result of a mishmash, borrowings, mixtures that have occurred, though at different rates, ever since the beginning of time. Because of the way it is formed, each society is multicultural and over the centuries has arrived at its own original synthesis.

In this view, the overlaps between cultures render it difficult to draw a clear line between what belongs to ‘self’ and what belongs to ‘other’ (Ganguly 1992), as the foreign and the familiar are always implicated in every form of cultural production (Ang 2003).

At the micro level of the individual, the concept of multiple webs of belonging emphasizes the complex constitution of consumers’ cultural identities and asserts that ethnic origin is only one of many forms of social solidarity through which consumers organize their lives. For example, Fijian-born Indians negotiate a different sense of being ‘Indian in Australia’ compared to Indians born in India (Ghosh 2000) while Malaysian-born Chinese immigrant consumers negotiate complex webs of belonging which include ethnic affiliations with diverse Chinese communities, regional affiliations derived from Malaysia’s position as a Southeast Asian nation, and a national identity inflicted by a history of British colonialization. Seeing consumers as embedded in multiple webs of belonging thereby resists the common trope of using ethnic origin as a marker and determinant of cultural identity. Brubaker (2004) proposes a necessary shift away from the fallacy of ‘groupism’, in which we treat ethnic groups as concrete entities, towards a view of group-making as an ongoing project. Similarly, Calhoun (2003, 547) observes that “it is important to think of solidarities in the plural, avoiding the illusion that plagued much earlier thought of ethnicity and nationalism that there was some one basic identity common to all members of a group.” Thus, we need to consider the multiple and shifting cultural connections and forms of social solidarity which are implicated in cultural identity formation.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN IMMIGRANT CONSUMERS IN NEW ZEALAND: AN ‘IMPURE’ SAMPLE

If cultures and cultural identities are far from pure, how should researchers of immigrant consumer acculturation approach sampling? As an example, we consider Southeast Asian immigrant consumers in New Zealand, whose point of commonality is not race, nationality, or ethnicity, but paradoxically their disjuncture and diversity.

Firstly, Southeast Asian immigrant consumers experience a double disjuncture (Bhabha 1990) in that Southeast Asian identities are both ‘foreign’ and invisible in New Zealand’s national imaginary. The category ‘Asian’ is stereotypically associated with people from Northeast Asia, predominantly China, Japan, and Korea. Despite the increasing numbers of Southeast Asian immigrants in New Zealand, particularly from the Philippines and Malaysia (Bedford and Ho 2007), representations and stereotypes of people from Southeast Asia have less popular currency than representations and stereotypes of people from Northeast Asia. This relative invisibility is reflected in State nomenclature, where Southeast Asians are frequently subsumed under the ‘Other’ category (e.g. Bedford and Ho 2007).

Because Southeast Asian immigrant consumers remain relatively invisible in New Zealand’s national and geopolitical imaginary, they may experience an ambivalent identification with the category ‘Asian’. Thus, how do Southeast Asians inhabit an ‘Asian’ identity in New Zealand? Is it possible to self-caricature or make ethnic jokes about one’s own cultural background (Boskin and Dorinson 1985; Leveen 1996) if the invisibility of Southeast Asian identities renders such performances unrecognizable or unintelligible? Is it easier to strategically downplay one’s ethnicity (Li et al. 1995) if one does not fit the popular stereotypes associated with Asians in New Zealand?

Secondly, Southeast Asian immigrant consumers have been primarily acculturated to discourses of Southeast Asian regional identity (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Hefner 1998) which emphasize diversity. As Hefner (1998) asserts, Southeast Asian cultures resist being described as uniform Chinese, Malay, or Vietnamese cultures, but are more astutely described using a pluralized and distributional model of culture. In this vein, Cayla and Eckhardt (2008, 220) found that regional Asian brands constructed a “mosaic Asian culture” which invoked an assortment of cultural references rather than emphasizing cultural homogeneity.

As such, discourses of Southeast Asian cultural diversity resonate strongly with interdisciplinary...
views of cultures as heterogeneous (Boyne 2002; Szanton 1998) and entangled (Ang 2003; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Welsh 1999). These discourses are also resonant with interdisciplinary views of cultural identities as more broad and complex than nationality and ethnic origin (Calhoun 2003; Dwyer 1999). Constant slippages between race, nationality, and ethnicity occur within the “mosaic Asian culture” (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008, 220) which constitutes Southeast Asian identities. Given that this mosaic culture is likely to be held in common at a regional level, it is necessary to move the sampling frame beyond a singular focus on an immigrant consumer’s country of origin and beyond the intercultural dyad of home culture and host culture.

CONCLUSION
Reflecting on our theoretical lenses to date, we have observed that a current fixation with the construction of homogeneous national or ethnic samples is based on a myth of cultural homogeneity which still operates in immigrant consumer acculturation research today. Instead of attempting to locate consumers within the relatively stable cultural entities of home and host culture, this paper emphasizes that immigrant consumers are embedded in multiple “webs of belonging” (Calhoun 2003, 536). As an example, we considered Southeast Asian immigrants in New Zealand, whose point of commonality is not race, nationality, or ethnicity, but paradoxically their disjuncture and diversity.

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