Consumer Ethnic Identity: the Implications of Short Term Exposure to a Similar Culture

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Positioned within the field of consumer culture theory, this research contributes to one of the key questions on marketplace cultures: does a short exposure to a host trans-national consumer culture result in the negotiation of new consumer ethnic identities? Our findings suggest that, even in a short period of time and in a comparable cultural and linguistic environment, both agentic (self-driven) and structural (imposed circumstances) forces have an impact on consumer ethnic identities.

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The concept of ethnic identity is a popular yet perplexing subject among consumer researchers. Unlike the term race, the concept of ethnicity disregards generic heritage and focuses on one’s sociocultural history. Broadly, consumer research considers two main aspects of ethnic identity. First, how can marketers use consumer ethnicity as a segmentation variable (Guilherme, Stanton, and Cheek 2003; Armstrong and Peretto Strata 2004). Second, how does cross-cultural experience impact cultural selves and ethnic identities (Askegaard, Arnold, and Kjeldgaard 2005). Within the second stream of research, acculturation theorists address the impact of cross-cultural adaptation, adjustment, integration, assimilation, and acculturation on cultural selves and ethnic identities (Penaloza 1994). For them, cultural identities are not fixed, but are deconstructed and reconstructed as consumers cross cultural boundaries. Ethnic identities are fluid identities that evolve through processes of acculturation.

Acculturation theorists provide undeniable insights concerning the development of consumer ethnic identities. However, most of their research assumes the idea of a dominant culture; a culture that contrasts with identifiable marginalized other cultures. For example, researchers on acculturation processes have considered dominant cultures such as the United States or the Danish culture and looked at marginalized ethnic groups such as the Mexicans (Penaloza 1994), the francophone Haitian and Haitian Creole (Oswald 1999) and Greenlandic immigrants (Askegaard et al. 2005). Focusing on conflicting or clashing cultures between a dominant and a dominated culture tends to simplify current multicultural environments and accelerated trans-cultural interactions. For example, in contexts such as London or Dubai, the distinction between a dominant and dominated culture blurs in the face of increasing multi-cultural incomers. Our research considers the acculturation process that individuals undergo when immigrating to a culture similar to that of their home country, leading us to ask the question:

**RQ1:** What impact, if any, does relocation to a similar culture exert on consumer ethnic identity?

In addition to focusing on clashing cultures, most studies on acculturation tend to consider cases of permanent or prolonged culture contact. In today’s global arena, consumers can experience multiple and short term cross-cultural living arrangements. For example, individuals often travel abroad for work assignments and students are increasingly required to spend one semester abroad. This then raises the question: