

Website Designing Technologies

Abstract

We advance the argument that a culture-laden retail website design elicits multiple mental categorizations in consumers: categorizations in relation to the consumers' own culture and categorizations in relation to the product category. We study interactions of these mental categorizations and examine which of the two types dominates the other in terms of the strength of its impact on attitude toward the website and purchasing intentions. Further, we challenge the relevance of the well-known "identity accessibility effect" as we demonstrate that successful activation of a chronic cultural identity through exposure to a culture-laden website design is contingent on the suitability of the product category to accommodate cues of that culture. The tests of the study's hypotheses rely on data from an initial thought listing test, and a subsequent experiment using data gathered from French mainstream and Maghrebian minority consumers living in France.

Introduction

Increasing cultural diversity is among the most important drivers of social and economic change in Western countries and is thus a force that marketers must consider (Jamal, 2003, Jamal et al., 2015, Kizgin et al., 2020). Recent US census data shows that Hispanic and Black residents together comprise almost 40% of the population, while Whites are in decline (Frey, 2020). Moreover, marketing to ethnic diasporas is very attractive. Contrary to the popular perception, ethnic consumers such as Chinese or Indian Americans are highly affluent and report higher household incomes than the overall US median (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2013). Not surprisingly, ethnic retailers such as Superior Grocers, Bodega Latina, or Tawa Supermarket are among the fastest-growing chains in the US (Ibanez, 2014). Mainstream retailers are catching up to this trend as they are growing their selection of ethnic products and striving for authentic exposure (Caley, 2018), recognizing that also mainstream consumers consider the uniqueness of ethnic products increasingly attractive (Crawdorf, 2017). A recent industry report finds that 32% of consumers are willing to pay extra for authentic ethnic fare (Technomic, 2018).

As marketers serve increasingly culturally diverse consumers with more culturally diverse products, it is ever more important for them to understand how and why culture-laden communication affects consumer attitudes and purchasing behavior (e.g., Chattaraman et al., 2009). For example, to target consumers from different cultures, online marketers frequently display cultural markers on their websites, such as ethnic models, national symbols, or colors that are typical for a certain target culture. However, research seeking to explain why and how culture-laden marketing communication affects consumer behavior has produced only few generalizable findings with limited practical guidance. We argue that one reason for this limitation is that authors overly rely on ideas outlined in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and related work on social-identity-based consumption (Forehand et al., 2002), notably on what Zhang and Khare (2009) coined as the “identity accessibility effect.” A central idea in that stream of research is that consumers are positively biased toward communication that they mentally categorize as belonging to their own cultural in-group (Aaker et al., 2000, Cleveland and Bartsch, 2019, Zhang and Khare, 2009). Marketing practitioners have largely adopted these ideas. For instance, a study with culturally diverse US consumers found that 45% of participants consider “Advertising is made for me if it reflects my cultural values” (The Center for Multicultural Science, 2018). Similarly, a recent article published in *Forbes* magazine suggests that consumers “... feel their current [brand or retailer] options may not fully reflect their cultural background and identities” (Mizrahi, 2021). Hence, both academics and practitioners draw significant attention to the notion that a match in culture between consumers and marketing communication elicits feelings of similarity and identification, and that such feelings lead to liking and attraction. However, some authors have pointed to potential limitations of identity-based explanations of consumer behavior and thus call for further studies to address when and how individuals’ identity links with consumption behavior (Cleveland and Bartsch, 2019, Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013).

We contribute to this debate by offering a revised understanding of how and why culture-laden marketing communication affects consumer behavior, as well as by clarifying the role of consumers’ cultural identity in this process. We draw from established theories on mental categorizations (Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989, Rosch, 1978) as a more general theoretical framework than identity-based explanations, and argue that consumers categorize culture-laden communication

in at least two ways: on one hand internally, in relation to their own cultural identity and, on the other hand externally, in relation to factors such as the product category. We next posit that identity-based categorizations of culture-laden communication (i.e., the identity accessibility effect) must not be seen independently of other mental categorizations that culture-laden communication may elicit to co-shape consumer reactions. Surprisingly, research efforts to date have failed to develop a conceptual framework clarifying how multiple mental categorizations of culture-laden marketing communication affect consumer behavior. In this paper, we address this important gap in the literature.

Focusing on the context of culture-laden website design, we consider two types of mental categorizations: Website Cultural Congruency (WCC) and Website Cultural Authenticity (WCA). While WCC denotes the fit between a culture-laden website design and consumers' cultural identity (Bartikowski et al., 2020, Ko et al., 2015, Singh et al., 2015), WCA reflects the fit between a culture-laden website design and the product category. Considering WCA is novel and relevant because studies demonstrate the importance of authenticity in many other contexts, including products, brands, tourism destinations, celebrities, or retailers (Moulard et al., 2016, Napoli et al., 2014). For example, Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020) note that consumers consider marketing offerings as authentic if they are "the original" or "the real thing," and show that authenticity increases perceived product quality.

We offer several contributions of interest to authors concerned with identity-based consumption phenomena in particular, and to authors concerned with the impact of culture-laden marketing communication on consumer information processing and behavior in general. First, adding to the research which suggests that a piece of information is diagnostic only if it can be assigned to one (and only one) cognitive category (Herr et al., 1991, Hoch and Deighton, 1989), we focus on situations in which one and the same piece of information (here: culture-laden website design) prompts multiple mental categorizations. Instead of discounting such information as ambiguous or non-diagnostic (Herr et al., 1991), we advance the argument that culture-laden website design elicits multiple mental categorizations (i.e., WCC and WCA) that interact to affect consumer reactions. While studying interactions of WCC and WCA, we also compare the relevance of these mental categorizations as drivers of consumer reactions. Second, by considering the aforementioned mental categorizations, we challenge the

relevance of the identity accessibility effect to predict consumer reactions. Notably, for the context of online retailing, we expect and confirm that successful activation of a chronic cultural identity through exposure to culture-laden website design (i.e., effects of WCC) is contingent on the suitability of the product category to accommodate cues of that culture (i.e., effects of WCA).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We first review the literature on the identity accessibility effect in relation to culture-laden marketing communications, as well as the literature on mental categorizations which we consider a more general theoretical framework. We then discuss some fundamental theoretical expectations and develop a set of new hypotheses based on them. The subsequent tests of our hypotheses rely on data from an initial thought listing task, coupled with experimental data from consumers living in France. To corroborate the empirical tests of our hypotheses, we consider participants' ethnic culture (mainstream French vs. ethnic Maghrebian) as a replication factor in our empirical assessments. We finally discuss the study's theoretical and managerial implications, as well as its limitations and future research directions.

Identity accessibility effect

Social identity theory posits that people are intrinsically motivated to increase their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and therefore show in-group favoritism and out-group derogation behaviors. People tend to favor aspects of social in-groups (i.e., their members, characteristics, or products) over those of out-groups, as doing so helps them achieve a positive distinctiveness of the self (Brewer, 1999, Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Zhang and Khare (2009) coined these psychological mechanisms

Hypothesis development

The conceptual model shown in Fig. 1 illustrates our theoretical developments. We argue that culture-laden website design elicits multiple mental categorizations (WCC and WCA) that interact to affect consumer reactions. For a stringent test of our hypotheses, we consider two different yet related types of consumer reactions of theoretical and practical importance: attitudes toward the website and purchasing intentions. Attitudes toward the website reflect consumers' feelings and emotional

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