



Towards a value-based perspective of consumer multicultural orientation

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing importance of multicultural marketplaces, characterised by dynamic and intersecting cultural flows, we draw attention towards the ways in which individual consumers may co-evolve with these markets. Specifically, we draw upon interdisciplinary studies of cultural competences and the theory of basic human values to conceptualise an individual's 'multiculturality' as a value reprioritisation process towards a multicultural orientation. In this endeavour, we offer two distinct contributions to extant discussions about multicultural marketplaces and consumers. First, we conceptualise the relationship between experiences occurring in multicultural marketplaces and basic human values, positing multicultural influences on consumers as a value reprioritisation process. Secondly, we draw on this perspective to develop a consumer-centric concept of multicultural orientation – consisting of cultural awareness, cultural openness, cultural knowledge, and cultural competence. The paper discusses the usefulness of these concepts for better understanding how the conditions of a multicultural marketplace shape consumer values, attitudes and behaviours, and offers several managerial implications for engaging with multicultural consumers.

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Introduction

In a contemporary globalised environment characterised by intersecting cultural flows (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Piacentini & Cui, 2010), it is becoming increasingly important to understand how consumers shape and are being shaped by cultural diversity and multiplicity. Traditional segmentation, targeting, and positioning techniques that impose attitudes and values on consumers based on their national and/or ethnic identities have been criticised for their inadequacy as a means to understand multicultural marketplaces (e.g., McSweeney, 2009; Witte, 2012), where multiple cultural influences often “converge at one point of concurrent interaction” (Kipnis, Broderick, & Demangeot, 2014). A number of approaches have been suggested to deal with these challenges. These include addressing the ways in which markets are influenced by both multicultural conditions (Peñaloza, 2004) and contextual factors (Craig & Douglas, 2006), and the coining of various, at times, overlapping terms such as ‘consumer cosmopolitanism’ (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009), ‘cultural chameleons’ (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2005), and ‘global consumer culture’ (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999).

In this paper, we develop a novel perspective to complement these emerging discussions on multicultural marketplaces by

focusing on the ways individual consumers may co-evolve with the markets in terms of their personal orientation towards multicultural influences. More specifically, informed by the theory of human values (Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992; Williams, 1968) and by interdisciplinary studies of cultural competence and multicultural orientation (Adler, 1977; D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Hernandez, 1991; Owen, Leach, Wampold, & Rodolfa, 2011), we offer a conceptual formulation of consumer multiculturalism as a process of value reprioritisation towards a multicultural orientation, consisting of cultural awareness, openness, knowledge and competence.

At the centre of our conceptualisation is a paradox of universality and change in value reprioritisation, and development of the consumer orientation as an attempt to resolve this paradox. We posit that ‘multicultural’ consumers appreciate the coexistence of multiple social realities, and in doing so acquire knowledge and competencies to integrate diverse cultural norms and values, making these competencies coherently relevant for their own consumption experiences. In this endeavour, consistent with recent developments in international business research that call for traversing the dichotomous separation of emic and etic perspectives of culture (Buckley, Chapman, Clegg, & Mattos, 2014), our approach aims to understand multicultural consumers as both insiders and outsiders in relation to multiple cultural flows operating in a marketplace.

To summarise, our approach aims to develop a formulation of consumer-centric concepts and processes that contribute to an

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individual's 'multiculturality', offering further insights into how the conditions of a multicultural marketplace shape consumer values, attitudes and behaviours. We posit that such an approach increases our understanding of multicultural consumers and their responses to culturally-oriented positioning strategies within a global marketplace (Alden et al., 1999), as well as enabling us to explore how multiculturalism can be related and contrasted to other personal orientations, such as consumer ethnocentrism (Sharma, Shimp, & Shin, 1995) and global citizenship (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008).

Multicultural marketplaces and consumers

Previous studies have addressed a number of aspects of multiculturalism as it relates to organisational management, marketing and consumer behaviour. For instance, in a study on local employees in multinational corporations, Caprar (2011) suggested that host-country nationals can be more or less reflective of their national culture, depending upon the employees' enacted position towards the culture of origin and the cultural landscape of the corporation. In another stream of research, Möller and Svahn (2004) examined how multicultural influences may impact knowledge sharing in the context of different types of organisational networks and their properties. They derived a culture-classification scheme based on the vertical–horizontal and individualism–collectivism dimensions, which suggests that “cultural patterns. . . provide their beholders with special skills in ‘knowledge work’, but simultaneously act as barriers to understanding between different actors” (Möller & Svahn, 2004, 225). In this way, multicultural patterns in a business network may create paradox-like dilemmas that leave managers with the task of finding factors that allow their businesses to overcome these dilemmas.

Several researchers have also highlighted the importance for managers and organisations operating within a multicultural environment of adopting a global mindset (Levy, Beechler, Taylor, & Boyacigiller, 2007), and developing cultural intelligence (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004) and competence (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006). For instance, Johnson et al. (2006, 530) suggest that cross-cultural competence, defined as “an individual's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds” affects the organisation's ability to conduct critical business tasks in a multicultural environment. Finally, a growing body of acculturation literature in consumer research explores the identity transitions experienced by consumers as a result of their interactions with multiple cultural beliefs (e.g., Peñaloza, 2004). In their research on global consumer culture, Cleveland & Laroche (2007, 251) highlight that “consumer acculturation occurs along two – often conflicting – dimensions: that of the original [i.e. the culture-of-origin] and mainstream cultures [e.g., the culture of a host country]”, and that this process confronts consumers with multiple interpretive strategies in relation to their self-identity projects and consumption choices.

Despite their different reasons for, and approaches to, studying multiculturalism, these studies commonly agree that increasing international travel (Alden et al., 1999), the growing importance of multinational corporations (Möller & Svahn, 2004), the flows of international mass media and brands (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004), and complex immigration patterns (Peñaloza, 2004), may all facilitate the emergence of the unique market conditions which can be loosely termed a “multicultural marketplace”. Peñaloza (2004, 89) provides a formal definition of multiculturalism within a marketplace as “the array of cultures within a nation, with an emphasis on relations between various cultural groups as they impact consumer behaviour and market practice and structure”. Similarly, Kipnis et al. (2014: 233) conceptualise a multicultural

marketplace as “a multi-dimensional environment, where multiple cultural forces (local, global and foreign) converge at one point of concurrent interaction with mainstream and migrant consumers alike”. However, although it has been widely agreed how these multicultural marketplaces are being formed, extant theory provides mixed answers to the questions that emerge at the individual consumer level.

More specifically, scholars suggest that the cultural conditions of a marketplace can have important effects on individual consumers, but also that these effects take different forms, as diverse as consumer reluctance to buy foreign products (e.g. Knight, 1999) to the celebration of global consumer culture (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009). For instance, Shimp and Sharma (1987) suggest that the perceived economic threat induced by a foreign culture can make consumers feel more ethnocentric and, therefore, form beliefs about the inappropriateness of buying foreign products. This position is also echoed by Ger (1999, p. 65), who notes that “[the] differentiating impact of globalisation strengthens or reactivates national, ethnic, and communal identities”. On the other hand, Cannon and Yaprak (2002) draw attention to the idea of ‘consumer cosmopolitanism’, whereby they suggest that multicultural consumers are willing to engage with the cultural experiences of globalisation and, therefore, could display a tendency to consume products associated with different cultures.

Most recently, Kipnis et al. (2014) observe that consumer acculturation to multiple cultural beliefs has received much attention in the context of migrant consumers; but the considerations of identity negotiations amongst mainstream (i.e., non-migrant) consumers have generally been limited to the local–global culture dichotomy, calling for a broader understanding of the consumer multiculturalisation process. Accordingly, while the importance of the consumers' personal orientation and multicultural experiences in relation to their consumer behaviour has been mentioned in the past research (e.g. Cannon & Yaprak, 2002; Cleveland & Laroche, 2007), it is under-theorised. Of particular interest in this study is to explore the theoretical underpinnings and sociocultural mechanisms that can inform our understanding of how consumers form attitudes and behaviours in a multicultural marketplace.

As international markets become more dynamic and complex, Lücke et al. (2014) highlight the importance of developing an adequate understanding of multiple cultural systems and analytical tools at the individual level. In our study, we answer these calls by drawing attention to the way in which multicultural consumers can be understood in relation to the values and experiences that emerge in a multicultural marketplace. More specifically, informed by the theory of basic human values (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995), and interdisciplinary studies of cultural competence and multicultural orientation from social psychology and psychotherapy (Adler, 1977; D'Andrea et al., 1991; LaFromboise et al., 1991; Owen et al., 2011), we theorise that multiculturalism at the individual consumer level can be understood as a manifestation of value reprioritisation process towards multicultural orientation within a marketplace.

In this endeavour, we offer two distinct contributions to the emerging theory of multiculturalism. First, we conceptualise the relationship between experiences occurring in multicultural marketplaces and basic human values (Schwartz, 1992), positing multicultural influences as a value reprioritisation process. Second, we draw on this perspective to develop an attitudinal concept of multicultural orientation – consisting of cultural awareness, cultural openness, cultural knowledge, and cultural competence (LaFromboise et al., 1991; Ponterotto, Rieger, Barrett, & Sparks, 1994). The paper discusses the usefulness of these concepts for better understanding how consumers behave in multicultural marketplaces, and suggests managerial implications for engaging with multicultural consumers.

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