



Learning to navigate the American retail servicescape: Online forums as consumer acculturation platforms and consumer gift systems



Hope Jensen Schau ^{a,*}, Yan Mandy Dang ^b, Yulei Gavin Zhang ^b

^a Eller College of Management, The University of Arizona, United States

^b W. A. Franke College of Business, Northern Arizona University, United States

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ABSTRACT

With consumer mobility on the rise, marketers need to understand how to best serve the increasing number of immigrants, expatriates, and foreign nationals. We examine an independent (non-corporate, brand agnostic) online forum that operates as a consumer acculturation platform and a consumer gift system, where Chinese-speaking consumers assist one another with navigating and even exploiting the American retail servicescape. Forum participants bestow the gift of experience on the collective to enhance the market-oriented communicative competence of forum participants necessary to master the American retail environment. Consumers on the platform systematically employ American English to reference brands and describe retail marketing promotions in a forum dominated by Chinese language. Specifically, we find that code switching, typically expected in early stages of language acquisition, becomes a robust norm to communicate specifically about American retail phenomena (metaphorical code switching) and bridge the gulf between home and host cultures. We offer firms four tactical strategies to attract and retain Chinese-language consumers.

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1. Introduction

More than half the countries in the world are multi-lingual (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), making it common to have services conducted in the service provider's or service consumer's second language. Complicating matters, the rules and norms that govern market exchanges are often not intuitive. Marketplaces in the United States are governed by a host of contradictory situational norms that can confuse even the savviest American consumers. In some retail circumstances consumers pay full asking price (i.e., grocers and department stores), haggle (i.e., automobiles, and bundled goods and services), bid (i.e., antiques and eBay), barter (i.e., co-operatives), and tip (i.e., restaurants and bars). Consumers may pay in advance, pay at the time of purchase, pay in installments, pay a third party over time, or even lease. A consumer is unlikely to have perfect market information, therefore, the most favorable price or “best deal” on a given product across stores is virtually unknown (Urbany, Dickson, & Sawyer, 2000).

Consumers less familiar with the rules and norms of the American retail servicescape (i.e., immigrants and visitors) are at a severe disadvantage. Things are exponentially complicated when the service

provider and service consumer do not share a common language; confusion and disengagement or market abandonment result. Conversely, a common language increases understanding of service roles and enhances willingness to engage, and firms that use the consumer's native language increase positive word-of-mouth and efficacy in service recovery (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). Prior research shows how language impacts interactions between providers and consumers and shapes service outcomes (Holmqvist, 2011), yet relatively little is known about how language in consumer-to-consumer interactions shapes service encounters and outcomes. We aim to illuminate the use of language within peer-to-peer market-oriented interactions and the impact of these interactions on service encounters.

Immigrants account for 13.3% of the United States' total population, which is the largest share in 105 years (Camarota & Zeigler, 2015). The Department of Homeland Security indicates that there were 160 million nonimmigrant admissions to the United States in 2010 (Monger & Mathews, 2011). They consist of foreign nationals granted temporary legal entrance and usually refer to business travelers, tourists, students, and temporary workers. These staggering figures only reflect legal, documented entrants. It is estimated in 2010, despite Homeland Security's efforts, almost 11 million “unauthorized immigrants” reside in the US (Hofer, Rytina, & Baker, 2011). Regardless of formal status, these immigrants, expatriates and foreign nationals must learn to navigate the intricacies of the American marketplaces and in many cases do not have fluency in English.

* Corresponding author at: Eller College of Management, The University of Arizona, 1130 E. Helen Street, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States.

E-mail addresses: hschau@eller.arizona.edu (H.J. Schau), yan.dang@nau.edu (Y.M. Dang), Yulei.Zhang@nau.edu (Y.G. Zhang).

The US Census estimates that in 2013 2.9 million individuals residing in the US spoke Chinese as a primary language with 1.6 million of these indicating that they spoke English “less than very well” (American Community Survey, 2014). Since 2012, there has been a dramatic uptick in the number of Chinese, and specifically wealthy Chinese, coming to North America. In 2014, applicants for the U.S. immigrant investor program hit an all-time high, and 85% of the applicants were Chinese (ChinaFile, 2015). The sheer volume of Chinese-speaking consumers living in the US and their increasing financial resources makes these consumers an important market segment; understanding their needs is a competitive advantage.

We posit three research questions: 1) what do Chinese immigrants and visitors do in online forums to learn the rules and norms of the American retail servicescapes? 2) why are forum participants motivated to actively educate newer entrants to exploit American retail promotions? and 3) how is language strategically employed in the forums to facilitate consumer acculturation and market mastery?

Empirically, we show how the American retail-oriented board, “PennySaver,” acts simultaneously as a consumer acculturation agent (Peñaloza, 1994) and a consumer gift system (Giesler, 2006). Leveraging netnography (Kozinets, 2009), we demonstrate the PennySaver forum’s distinctive purpose: to share market knowledge and enhance the communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) of Chinese-speaking market actors. The forum plays a significant role in Chinese-speaking immigrants and visitors learning from one another about American retail promotion rules and norms, enhancing service outcomes.

We trace longitudinal discourse on PennySaver to explore the strategic use of language on the forum. We hone in on code switching phenomena, using an established computational linguistics method. The data reveal that code switching behavior occurs at the language-level and at a subcultural level (new Chinese-speaking entrants to the US) with a shared code developed among participants on the acculturation platform (forum) regarding American retail protocols and promotions. We show that code switching, while expected in early learning stages, becomes a robust norm to communicate about specific retail phenomenon (metaphorical code switching). We illustrate the manner in which metaphorical code switching is used to make sense of the retail rules and collaboratively strategize ways of extracting maximum value in retail transactions.

We begin with a review the extant literature on consumer acculturation, language in services, consumer gift systems, market mavens and code switching. Then, we discuss the field site and methodology. Our data reveal the practices, inspirations and outcomes of forum participation, as well as the strategic use of language, specifically code switching, on the forum. Lastly, we offer managerial implications for retailers interested in attracting and retaining Chinese-language consumers.

2. Conceptual development

2.1. Consumer acculturation

Luedicke (2011), describes consumer acculturation as “an intricate process of socio-cultural adaptation to unfamiliar economic (income, status), biological (food, health), physical (urbanization), social (family, friendships, discrimination) and cultural (clothing, religion and language) conditions” (223) that face migrants and visitors. Peñaloza (1994) derives a model of immigrant consumer acculturation, where the process requires agents who know both the culture of origin (home) and the culture of immigration (host). Acculturation agents within an immigrant’s social network act as consumption mentors, navigating new immigrants through the complexities of their host country’s marketplace.

Lerman, Maldonado, and Luna (2009) identify the markers necessary for enhanced consumer market outcomes. Language plays a prominent role in acculturation, accounting for 13 of 28 of the items on the Cultural Life Style Inventory (Lerman et al., 2009, 402). Interestingly,

they assert that “language proficiency is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for language preference (or vice versa)” (Lerman et al., 2009, 402).

Here, we investigate a consumer acculturation platform with extended reach beyond one’s immediate social network and including multiple acculturation agents. We examine an online forum built to facilitate consumer acculturation of Chinese-language consumers to the American retail market, where more knowledgeable market actors explicitly aid novices in navigating markets. We investigate language use on the forum looking for patterns of language choice in the communication threads.

2.2. Consumer gift systems

Giesler (2006) defines a consumer gift system as “a system of social solidarity based on a structured set of gift exchange and social relationships among consumers” that is more than an aggregate of dyadic gift exchanges and which becomes a social fact that contributes to the development and continuity of a society (283). Giesler (2006) identifies three key components to consumer gift systems: 1) social distinctions, 2) reciprocity, and 3) rituals and symbolisms. Here, we demonstrate a forum where knowledgeable market actors gift their experience (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007) to the collective. This specific consumer gift system takes as its goal the education of new market actors in a fashion similar to market mavens.

2.3. Market mavens

Defined by Feick and Price (1987), market mavens are: “individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information” (85). The maven has characteristics that distinguish him/her from other individuals and other types of diffusion portals such as opinion leaders and early adopters. A market maven has awareness of a broad range of new products, brands, and markets; shares information with others about these things; seeks information from diverse sources; engages with enjoyment in the marketplace, pays attention to advertising and uses coupons/deals; and is known to (and is aware of) other mavens.

The construct achieved importance globally as a tool for marketers and managers to examine and promote market diffusion. Market mavens and their impact have been examined theoretically and empirically for retail markets (Abratt, Nel & Nezer, 1995), for couponing (Price, Feick & Guskey-Federouch, 1988), and in industry (Natarajan & Angur, 1997). Mavenhood has been tested across product categories (Slama & Williams, 1990) and across media to include internet mavens (Belch, Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005) and WOM “what goes viral” studies (Ho & Dempsey, 2010; Yang, 2013). The “meta maven” (Barnes & Pressey, 2012) was introduced to theorize mavens across physical and virtual spaces, where an individual also serves as a portal through which knowledge is collected and disseminated. The main contribution of the meta maven construct is showing that the original maven construct holds in real and virtual spaces. Yang, Liu and Zhou (2012) examine the market maven online for Chinese consumers, and show that cultural differences further complicate the online variation.

We posit that the role of maven in Web 2.0 is played not by an individual person per se, but by a socio-technological assemblage of many individuals and technology. Through examination of the Chinese-language consumer acculturation platform and gift system, we find promise in the idea of the collective maven.

2.4. Language in services

Service encounters are generally described as interactions between a consumer and a provider. Language is a critical component of all

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