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Investigating the Consumption of Ethnically Disparate Products

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Introduction. Ethnic diversity of the U.S. population has continuously been increasing during the past decade. Accordingly, U.S. retailers have been communicating to specific ethnic groups by offering culturally accommodated products. However, recent market trend in the U.S. suggests that such products are appealing to consumers beyond its target ethnic group. That is, an increasing number of U.S. consumers are purchasing products that are ethnically disparate. Despite the above, no study to date has investigated the specific behavior as a separate and independent phenomenon, thus the drivers of the phenomenon is yet to be fully identified. The current study attempted to resolve the research gap by addressing the following research questions; what values do consumers seek when purchasing ethnically disparate products (EDPs)? and what are the antecedents of those values?

Theoretical Framework. In line with the research questions, the current study adopted the Consumption Value Theory (Sheth et al. 1991) and proposed perceived emotional, social, and epistemic values to influence the intention to purchase EDPs. In addition, attitude-toward-the-ethnic culture (AttEC), cultural discrepancy (CD), and diversity seeking (DS) were hypothesized to antecede the three consumption values. AttEC was proposed based on the Country-of-Origin literature which commonly state that attitude toward a country influences the evaluation of the product made in that country (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). CD was proposed by applying the Self-Discrepancy Theory (Carver et al., 1999) to a cultural context. DS was proposed based on Grier et al. (2006) who mentioned that 'diversity seeking' captures consumers' preference for products that are related to disparate ethnic cultures. It should be noted that the formation of AttEC and CD require prior knowledge or experience toward the ethnic culture associated with the EDP. Accordingly, the two antecedents were not hypothesized to influence perceived epistemic value. Lastly, ethnic-embeddedness (EE), the degree to which a product is associated with an ethnic culture (Grier et al., 2006), was proposed to strengthen the positive relationship between the antecedents and the consumption values. In all, a total of ten main effect and seven moderating effect hypotheses were proposed.

Method. An online questionnaire format was used to collect data from 581 U.S. based online consumers. Respondents were asked to answer a series of questions after reviewing one of the six scenarios [three cultural treatments (Asian, Latin American, African) x two levels of EE (high, low)]. Manipulation check results showed that the two levels of EE were manipulated appropriately. CD was measured by adopting a modified version of the method Carver et al. (1999) utilized to measure self-discrepancy. All other constructs (AttEC, DS, emotional value, social value, epistemic value) were measured using established scales. Measures were assessed via exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Results from both analyses provided support for the construct validity of the individual constructs in the model. In addition, convergent and

discriminant validities were confirmed based on average variance extracted, composite reliability, and correlation values between all constructs.

Results. Multi-group structural analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. However, prior to separating the data according to the two levels of EE, two a-priori analyses were conducted. First, a critical ratio of difference test was run to confirm that the hypothesized paths do not differ across the three cultural treatments. Second, a multi-group analysis of invariance was run to establish measurement invariance between the two levels of EE. Multi-group structural analysis supported nine out of the ten main effect hypotheses. The effect of AttEC on social value was not supported. An explanation for the insignificance may be that having a positive AttEC does not necessarily lead individuals to perceive the ethnic culture to match one's life themes, hence the failure to become highly involved in the ethnic culture and to perceive social value. As for the moderating effects, high EE was shown to strengthen three out of seven hypotheses; AttEC → emotional value, CD → emotional/social values. Insignificances in some of the moderating effects were believed to be due to the uncertainties surrounding Grier et al.'s (2006) definition of diversity seeking. In all, out of 17 total hypotheses, 12 were supported. To answer the research questions stated earlier, the results suggested that consumers perceive emotional, social, and epistemic values when purchasing EDPs. Also, it was found that those values are positively influenced by the attitude and cultural discrepancy one may hold toward the ethnic culture associated with the EDP and the tendency to seek diversity. Level of EE was found to moderate some of the positive influences.

Implications. In line with the popularity of culturally accommodated products, many U.S. retailers have recently been offering EDPs to the general U.S. consumers. However, many of those products are often accompanied by culturally inaccurate product cues, presumably because retailers are focused mainly on providing a sense of exoticness with minimal regards to the embedded ethnic culture. According to the findings of the current study, such strategy may be effective for diversity seekers that are simply looking for something ethnically different. Nonetheless, retailers should consider the fact that consumers' interest towards disparate ethnic cultures is constantly increasing and that consumers will become more knowledgeable about specific ethnic cultures. That is, the strategy of simply providing something exotic may gradually become less effective. In order to avoid such potential risks, retailers of EDPs should 1) consider utilizing product cues that are culturally accurate, thus appealing to consumers with positive attitude towards specific ethnic cultures and 2) consider investigating the cultural discrepancy consumers may hold towards specific ethnic cultures and accordingly modify the product cues.

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