

# Guest Editorial

## **The Hispanic Subculture: Subcultural Complexity And Marketing Opportunity**

Culture, the norms and shared beliefs passed between generations, is generally regarded as the most pervasive influence on the individual's values, attitudes and behavior. Culture, quite literally, forms the basis for consumer preference for most products and services.

While one may examine culture at a national or even more macro level, it is in the study of more homogeneous subcultural and ethnic groups that one may develop an understanding of potential market segment. Subculture appears to hold many of the value, attitudinal and behavioral differentiations of importance in marketing. For example, as is often stated, the United States/North American culture is not produced in a "melting pot". The U.S. culture is a mixture of subcultures reflecting the national heritage, language, religious, racial, and geographic diversity of a vast continent populated primarily by waves of immigrants from many diverse cultures and subcultures.

Subcultural and ethnic groups generally gain attention from marketing firms and researchers as their numbers and buying power point to opportunities as

market targets for goods and services. Almost two decades ago, a number of studies examined many aspects of the then socially and economically emerging black subculture. In the last half of the 1980s, it is the Hispanic subculture whose size and unique ethnic and language characteristics have drawn the attention of marketers wishing to find new audiences for their products and services.

Of the various subculturally defined ethnic groups in the United States, Hispanics are second only to Blacks in population, and growing rapidly in size. The number of Hispanics in the United States is estimated to range from 16.5 to 30 million. Although self-identification, terminology issues and undocumented immigration make accurate estimates difficult, a "best guess" of 18 million Hispanics and a growth rate of 3.3% appear to be reasonable (Exter, 1985). Furthermore, geographic concentration is strong, with most Hispanics in the United States living in a dozen or so urban or southwestern areas. It is, however, a subculture about which a number of basic misconceptions and little nondemographically based marketing data exists. In addition, assimilation effects for immigrants, and acculturation effects in the southwest would appear to combine with geographic and background factors to produce both diverse and evolving cultural patterns. The Spanish language is, of course, a major factor in the Hispanic subculture, with over 90% of Hispanics using Spanish at home (Exter, 1985). Language dialect usage, however, is not consistent across geographic regions or nation of origin. Nor do we fully understand bilingual impacts on marketing communications. Even the concept of being Hispanic as a cultural self-identification appears problematic. Self-identification and ethnic orientation could play key roles in marketing efforts. Yet, the term *Hispanic* appears "made up" rather than a natural identifier of some self-described group characteristic.

This basic issue in examining the Hispanic subculture is one of terminology and identification. A number of terms are used to refer to the population segment in the United States whose members usually come from Spanish-speaking countries (Guernica, 1982). *Chicano* may refer to persons born in the United States of Mexican descent. *Latino* identifies individuals of Latin American descent, as well as anyone whose native language is based on Latin, including French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. *Hispanic* is used by the Census Bureau for those with Spanish surnames and Spanish origins. It has not been determined, however, whether the terms used in self-identification follow such supposedly clear-cut bounds (Kassarda 1984).

An examination of the geographic concentration of the Hispanic population provides insight into the target market challenges and opportunities for marketers. Over 50% of the total U.S. Hispanic population live in the states of California and Texas and are primarily Mexican in descent. Much of the Hispanic population in New York and New Jersey (11% of the total U.S. Hispanic population) is made up of U.S. resident Puerto Ricans. Six percent of the total Hispanic population and 60% of the Cuban origin Hispanics live in Florida. Ten markets including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles contain 80% of the nation's Hispanics (Exter, 1985).

While such numbers appear to hold great promise for targeted marketing efforts, there is evidence that psychological and buyer behavior attributes related to geographic location and national origin indicate that Hispanics should be addressed as several separate market groups rather than with regional efforts (Valencia, 1984).

The U.S. Hispanic population is comprised of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and other Hispanics from Latin America, sharing a common native language and perhaps little else, in terms of shared values and beliefs (Valencia, 1984). Given this diversity in nation of origin and other socioeconomic factors inner related to immigration patterns; there is considerable disagreement as to the degree of homogeneity and targetability in the Hispanic market. In fact, assimilation effects for specific subgroups and geographic region may be producing unique consumption patterns. Wallendorf and Reilly (1983) reported culturally unique food consumption patterns for Mexican-Americans in the southwest rather than a more simple mixing of Mexican and American patterns. Yankelovich Skelly and White (1984), however, feel that there is a strong trend toward a generalized Hispanic subculture that the marketers could address as a single segment.

Issues of interest from a marketing viewpoint vary from basic segment definition, and whether Hispanics as marketing targets should receive appeals in Spanish or English for the examination of basic choice process differences which may be tied to Hispanic ethnicity. The five papers in this special issue of *Psychology and Marketing* examine a variety of factors relevant to Hispanic consumptive behavior. Wilkes and Valencia address a number of supposedly differentiating lifestyle and consumptive behaviors for Hispanics vs. blacks and Anglos. After controlling for age and income effects, the study results provide support for only two of ten ethnic/subcultural segment differences hypothesized from prior findings.

As discussed previously, language is a major component in the examination, segmentation and targeting of the Hispanic market. Results reported in Feinberg's experimental study of information overload indicate that information usage is facilitated in one's native language even when the subject is bilingual.

Examination of body care rituals based on household refuse data is reported by Wallendorf and Nelson using an archaeological methodology to study consumptive behavior. The authors report a number of differences both in consumptive patterns between groups of Mexican Americans and Anglos matched for income. Note that the behavioral traces provided by archaeological data require theoretical foundations. The authors examine theoretical perspectives as utilized to explain the subjective meaning of the body care rituals observed.

Finally, given the family's influence in the development and maintenance of culture and culture's impact on the family, two of the papers in the issue address aspects of the Hispanic family and consumption. Gilly and Alaniz review research issues and implications of the Hispanic household as a unit of analysis. They suggest that the Hispanic family may not follow the patterns proposed in

common family life cycle research and explore problems in segmenting Hispanic families. Decision making, purchase behavior and media and communication habits are also examined.

O'Guinn, Faber and Imperia delve further into the consumptive behavior of the Hispanic family by exploring differences between purchasing role perception of Mexican-American and Anglo wives. While role perception differences were determined, they were only significant in important purchase decisions where Mexican American husbands are perceived to have a greater role than Anglo husbands in decision making. The reader should note that differences reported for the survey finding in this study hold up when income, education and employment are considered along with cultural identity.

This issue of *Psychology & Marketing* reflects the work of two dozen ad hoc reviewers and especially the efforts of Jag Sheth whose assistance and council in editing the issue were extremely helpful. The papers in this issue by no means exhaust the questions of Hispanic consumptive behavior. Many issues such as the measurement of ethnic identity, socioeconomic covariation, assimilation and cultural ideals do not appear as major paper topics. These issues, however, are factors in several papers. This special issue does provide views of the challenges and rewards for marketers associated with the study of such a culturally complex and important subcultural group as the American Hispanic.

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