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# No harm done? Culture-based branding and its impact on consumer vulnerability: A research agenda

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**THOUGHT PIECE**

**No harm done? Culture-based branding and its impact on consumer vulnerability:  
A research agenda**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose**

Brands, as actors participating in the marketplace's social discourse, have the ability to lower and, equally, raise social and cultural boundaries. As such, it is important to understand better effects of brand-related cultural cues on consumer vulnerability, especially given the unprecedented diversification of cultural contexts in society today.

**Approach**

First, we discuss the importance and complexity of cultural identity in the marketplace. Next, we explore the role of brands in creating social identity conflict.

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Finally, based on marketplace complexities and the role of brands as social actors, we offer several suggestions for research that will increase our understanding of how brand-based cultural cues might minimise feelings of consumer vulnerability and lower social and cultural boundaries within society.

#### Findings

We demonstrate that relying on demographic characteristics when addressing cultural diversity in advertising appeals may result in misrepresentations or incomplete representations of complex cultural identities. Advertisers' failure to understand and reflect cultural identity complexities may aggravate consumer vulnerability and result in consumer withdrawal from the marketplace or from a particular brand. This paper calls for the need to deepen our understanding of mono- and multi-cultural consumer identification and behaviour in increasingly multi-cultural marketplaces.

#### Implications

The social role of brands is to represent people's ideas about themselves and the world. An evolution in culture-based advertising and branding is proposed to address multiplicity in cultural identities and limit consumer vulnerability in the new reality of increasing cultural diversification in the marketplace.

#### Contribution

The paper contributes an augmented view of cultural identity that integrates links with multiple national, racial, ethnic groups and other cultural groups not connected to individuals through ancestry. It articulates the main research areas into consumer and brand vulnerabilities in multi-cultural marketplaces. Such a view would enable culture-based advertising and branding to enhance social cohesion in promoting cultural tolerance and diversity.

#### Keywords

multi-cultural marketplaces; culture-based branding; consumer vulnerability

## INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the social implications of a growing mismatch between diverse cultural identities in increasingly multicultural marketplaces and the demographic cultural cues used by advertisers. Recent branding/advertising campaigns have utilised cultural appeals in a manner which has provoked anti-discrimination outcries from consumer groups and contributed to inter-group tensions. It would be easy to dismiss these blunders as sad exceptions resulting from poor marketing practices or poor market understanding, if these blunders were not the campaigns of well-established market leaders. One of the most recent examples is the "Look Like You Give a Damn" campaign by Nivea. While the campaign included two versions of visual adverts, both print ads featured, metaphorically, a man replacing his un-groomed head with a more groomed version. The controversy was sparked by a difference in the copy and a perhaps controversial image. More specifically, the copy of the advertisement featuring an African American male model read "Re-civilize Yourself" with the un-groomed head wearing an afro and beard, while the version portraying a White male read "Sin City isn't an excuse to look like hell." The severity of the negative

publicity generated by this ad led to Beiersdorf USA, Nivea's parent company, issuing a formal apology which termed the ad as "*inappropriate and offensive*" and assured that "...*this ad will be never used again*" (Nudd, 2011). Flawed in their cultural stereotyping, branding and advertising appeals such as this example can exacerbate consumer vulnerability. As a result of consumers feeling that their cultural identity is being threatened, they may withdraw from the marketplace.

This paper is concerned with enhancing the well-being of consumers in increasingly multicultural marketplaces, by considering the role of brands as actors participating in marketplace social discourses that are able to lower and, equally, raise social and cultural boundaries (Arnett, 2002; Penaloza, 1994). This issue is emerging as a prime concern, as the cultural interpenetration brought about by such globalisation forces as global human mobility and internationalisation of media and trade, produces multicultural marketplaces in which individual self-identities and, more generally, social cohesion, are viewed to be expressed through and influenced by the social discourse of brands. The magnitude and demographic profiles of those migrating worldwide increased and diversified exponentially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the period since 1960s. Population projections for the USA, the UK and several other countries suggest that, rather than having a dominant cultural majority, these countries' populations have evolved to consist of several, equally significant subcultural groups (Haub, 2008; Shrestha, 2006; Wamwara-Mbugua, Cornwell, & Boller, 2008; Wohland, Rees, Norman, Boden, & Jasinska, 2010). Furthermore, in addition to the increasing diversity of segments per se, there is also an increasing diversity of inter-cultural convergence and divergence within and across these segments (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Douglas & Craig, 2011).

Recent evidence suggests that consumers in multi-cultural marketplaces negotiate their identities between several ancestral (national, ethnic, racial) cultural groups and/or develop affiliative ethnic and cultural identities that are not connected to one through ancestry (Clark & Maas, 2009; Jiménez, 2010; Johnson, et al., 1997; Oberecker, Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2008). These complex identity processes may lead individuals to 1) identify with a single cultural group (whether through ancestral or affiliative links) while distancing oneself from other groups (Arnett, 2002; Mueller, Broderick, & Kipnis, 2009; Perlmutter, 1954); or 2) simultaneously identify with several ancestral and/or affiliative groups (Kipnis, Broderick, & Demangeot, 2011; Holliday, 2010). Thus, in this paper we argue that the societal impact of culture-based cues integrated in branding and advertising needs to be revisited in light of such unprecedented diversification of cultural contexts that can be present in a single marketplace. A failure to understand the evolution of the notion of cultural diversity beyond the diversity of distinct demographic segments of populations may explain why some marketing and branding campaigns are being harmful for consumers.

The social implications of advertising targeting culturally diverse consumer groups co-residing in one given country has received much attention from marketing academics and practitioners alongside the interrelated implications of shock advertising practices and of the portrayal of sensitive issues in advertising (such as promotion of food and eating behaviour, advertising to children, financial advertising etc). Research on advertising self-regulation has long established that private organisations act as "*agents of public policy*" and "*generate moral adhesion*" to the community standards (Boddewyn, 1989 p.20). Undoubtedly, organisations and policy makers have recognised that the contemporary marketplace has evolved into a multi-cultural reality where several cultural groups co-exist. There is an increasing trend of marketing and advertising agencies who operate divisions that specialise

in a particular demographic group of consumers, i.e. White, Hispanic, African-American, Muslim etc. (Bush, 2011; Cui & Choudhury, 2002). Several advertising campaigns demonstrate sensitivity to the issues of cultural diversity by centering their advertising message on the 'togetherness' brought to people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds by common consumption of a brand. One example is the print advert by Coca-Cola that features arms of different skin colour all raising a bottle of Coca-Cola followed by a strap line "celebrate together". Advertising regulatory bodies in many countries have introduced guidelines and codes of conduct that aim to safeguard the interests of diverse consumer groups. For instance, some of the principles that form the basis for Section 15 (Faith, religion and equivalent systems of belief) of the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising Practice "seek to strike a balance between freedom of speech and prevention of advertising that could be harmful..." and "to reduce the social harm that can result from damage to inter-faith relations" (Advertising Standards Authority, Committee of Advertising Practice, 2009). Such a sustained and sensitive appreciation of the needs of diverse consumer groups in a given marketplace is a welcome development. However, without an understanding of how culture-based branding and advertising interacts with evolving cultural identities in multi-cultural marketplaces, self-regulation will not prevent the unfortunate occurrences of flawed advertising and targeting resulting in harmful consequences for consumers, sometimes those very consumers that they would have initially aimed to win over.

For more effective and sensitive culture-based advertising and branding practices to emerge, it is pertinent to broaden our understanding of the complexities of consumer identity discourse in a (given) multi-cultural marketplace. With this in mind, this paper reviews the literature on the underlying factors that contribute to diversification of consumer identities: It demonstrates that in a multi-cultural marketplace, the notions of national, ethnic, cultural identity and social group belonging have become significantly more intricate and at times quite distant from the mere ethnicity or nationality labels commonly used as segmentation criteria. Next, the paper argues that marketplace failure to recognise these complexities leads to flawed branding and advertising appeals continuing to be culturally stereotyping and exacerbating consumer vulnerability, i.e. a state of powerlessness that arises from asymmetric marketplace exchange (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2005). Importantly, the state of vulnerability causes some consumers to perceive their identity as being threatened by the marketplace and to withdraw from the marketplace and society overall to cope with this threat (Askegaard, Arnould & Kjeldgaard, 2005; Melnikas & Smaliukiene, 2007; Penaloza, 1994). To illustrate how and why these vulnerabilities may be aggravated, the paper considers several examples of cultural appeals in branding and advertising. Finally, it outlines a research agenda for culture-based consumer behaviour research that would assist managers in developing new, more socially inclusive and responsible approaches to culture-based branding and advertising.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Cultural identity in a multi-cultural marketplace*

Cultural identity is a form of social identity which entails a person's recognition of the differences in cultural characteristics of groups in society, construction of self-concept through a sense of belonging and affiliation (i.e., affective attachment) to a

group or groups, and the knowledge that particular characteristics of one's self are shared by the group(s) (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Hogg, Cox, & Keeling, 2000; Jameson, 2007; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Triandis, 1989; Turner, 1982). The sense of self derived from identifying as a member of a given cultural group directs people to delineate behavioural norms that are considered acceptable for cultural group members and to judge behaviour of non-members, and therefore to selectively pursue some lifestyles and consumption experiences while subordinating others (Frideres & Goldenberg, 1982). Thus, understanding cultural identity enables marketers to predict consumption behaviours and develop products and brands that appeal to the needs of a particular group.

Whilst marketing science has long established that "culture is not co-terminous with society" (Segall, 1986 p. 525), marketing practice approaches to culture-based segmentation have largely relied on implicit assumptions of cultural values, beliefs and practices held by a particular demographic (national, ethnic, racial) group of consumers. As such, marketing to ethnic or racial minority groups has been considered a highly specific niche marketing activity. However, multi-cultural marketplaces have witnessed a drastic change of demographic makeup, as well as accelerated cultural interpenetration, i.e. the blending of several cultural contexts within the societies (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Steenkamp, 2001). Consequently, multi-cultural marketplaces have led to the emergence of new forms of social realities (Pieterse, 1995), or new, distinct, facets of a reality constructed and maintained by individuals within a given society, alongside other existing cultures (Arnett, 2002; Holliday, 2010). The chairman of Ogilvy & Mather North America described the challenges of addressing the new realities of multi-cultural marketplaces very vividly:

*Instead of thinking of discrete segments in a multicultural world...we're saying the new reality is that it's more of a cross-cultural world, a mash-up of cultures. If there has been a weakness in the marketing communications industry generally, it's that the makeup of agencies is not reflective of the consumers to whom they advertise (Elliott, 2011).*

Thus, for cultural identity to remain an effective basis for segmentation, our understanding of the cultural identity concept needs to take account of the changed inter-cultural dynamics of multi-cultural marketplaces.

Extant literature identifies several facets of cultural identity, such as ethnic, racial, and national identity (Huntington, 1996; Keillor & Hult, 1999; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). These must not be confused with the notions of ethnicity, race and nationality. Unlike ethnicity, race and nationality that are characteristics one is born in to (nationality also can be acquired through immigration to a different country), cultural identification is "achieved rather than simply given" (Phinney, 1990 p. 500). That is, cultural identification is a complex psychological developmental phenomenon of one differentiating the distinct features of a given group (whether ethnic, racial or national) and, most importantly, selecting to affiliate (i.e. developing a sense of affective attachment or commitment) with this group. In a multi-cultural marketplace, understanding this process of self-selection and the underlying factors that drive cultural identity development becomes prominent. As a consequence of the diversification and multiplication of cultural identities within individual ethnic, national or racial groups, it becomes necessary to question and review our assumptions of consumer behaviour based on the readings of people's physical demographic cues.

The multiplicity of cultural experiences available in the marketplace offers individuals a multiplicity of identity options, whereby individuals may self-select to identify with one or more cultural groups (Askegaard et al., 2005). More specifically, research on several generations of ethnic migrants and people in diasporic communities establishes that when, in a given subcultural group, identity is negotiated between culture of (ethnic or racial) origin and culture of residence/nationality, the impact of national and ethnic/racial affiliations upon one's identity and behaviour differs. For some individuals, their ethnic/racial affiliations prevail over other forms of cultural identity (such as national identity); other individuals dismiss their ethnic/racial affiliations and instead select the mainstream culture of their new (i.e. host) nation as focus for identity construal; the third group integrates national and ethnic/racial affiliations as equally important facets of cultural identity construal (Berry, 1980; Laroche, Kim & Tomiuk, 1998; Triandis, Kashima, Shimada & Villareal, 1986).

However, a most important feature of multi-cultural marketplaces is that complex cultural identification processes are no longer confined to ethnic minority groups as well, nor to individuals' ethnic, racial and/or national links. Recent research asserts that inter-group contact facilitates the identities of individuals in both mainstream and subcultural groups to be negotiated between multiple cultures. As a result, one's identity can include links to multiple ancestral and/or affiliative (i.e. not connected to an individual through heritage) cultures (Kipnis et al., 2011; Jiménez, 2010; Oberecker et al., 2008; Berry, 2008; Molina, Wittig, & Giang, 2004). One of the most obvious drivers of the development of complex multi-cultural identities that integrate both ancestral and affiliative links is the rise of mixed-race or mixed-ethnic marriages. In the USA for example, the number of mixed marriages has increased by 20% since 2000 (El Nasser, 2010; Frey, 2009; Frey & Myers, 2002). However, the literature identifies that mixed marriages or mixed family upbringing is only one of the many factors that lead to cultural identity complexities. These include regular contacts with cultural groups' representatives in the marketplace, short- and long-term travel and general liking of a lifestyle associated with a particular cultural group (Holliday, 2010; Oberecker et al., 2008). One example of this identity evolution is seen in the adoption of hip-hop culture by the mainstream marketplace. While hip-hop culture is known for its inner city, African-American roots, white suburban youth have developed new cultural identity which reflects their exposure and liking of hip-hop and family upbringing (Watkins, 2005; Stapleton, 1998). This new cultural identity likely has an impact on how these individuals engage with culture-based branding. An exploratory study shows that Caucasian suburban youth respond more positively to ads which used a hip-hop or urban appeal with these ads featuring black models, than to ads featuring white models. The (white) participants also identify more with the black model (Ferguson, 2011).

#### *Marketplace vulnerability as a driver of cultural identity evolution*

The differences in cultural identification have been explained by the differences in individuals' coping with marketplace experiences (Gungor, 2007; Penalzo, 1989, 1994). These experiences may lead individuals either 1) to feel discomfort, or even frustration, with some elements of the marketplace reality, and urge them subsequently to distance themselves from these elements (i.e. selectively develop a mono-cultural identity); or 2) to develop strategies whereby they can comfortably exist in multiple realities (i.e. develop a multi-cultural identity). The former can be illustrated by the example provided by Arnett (2002 p. 780) where young Jewish

women who, having grown up in secular Jewish homes in the United States, when reaching womanhood decide that the secular culture they have been raised in does not provide an adequate foundation for living and turn to (i.e. self-select) Orthodox Judaism as a reference group that offers them "the roots of a long, durable tradition". In a similar vein, research on bi- and multi-culturals provides evidence that individuals that select to identify with several cultural groups may either: 1) engage in identity swapping (i.e. behaving Jewish in one situation and American in another in the case of Jewish-Americans, or behaving French in Francophile environments and American in US-friendly environments in the case of Franco-American bi-nationals), whereby a relevant identity is extracted in response to the cultural cues in the environment which may be viewed as threatening or conflicting with another of the identities; or 2) cohesively integrate facets of their identity if these identities are viewed as compatible (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; Oswald, 1999). Some literature suggests that the interpretation and the strength of identification with a particular cultural group may be dependent on situational contexts. For example, in a qualitative study of Australia-Lebanese youth, Noble, Poynting and Tabar (1999) note that the concept of being Lebanese differed depending on the situation. Deshpandé and Stayman (1994 p. 62) establish that people "are more likely to spontaneously evoke their ethnic identities when they are in a numerical minority rather than a majority".

In marketing context, cultural identity evolution may be seen as triggered by a situation of marketplace vulnerability, defined as a state of powerlessness that arises from asymmetric marketplace exchange (Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg 2005). That is, when a consumer feels vulnerable because of real or perceived misunderstanding of his/her cultural identity, this consumer will likely withdraw from the marketplace or avoid similar marketplace scenario. However, whilst marketing activities of the firms are an integral part of the marketplace experiences that have a significant impact upon individuals' cultural identification (Jamal, 2003; Penalzo & Gilly, 1999), the specific role of cultural cues in branding and advertising appeals in driving cultural identification remains less understood. Research in the realm of attitude functions (Petty & Wegener 1998), distinctiveness (Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994), and social identity (Mackie, Worth & Asuncion, 1990) indicate that when information aligns with or matches an individual's psychological states or personal characteristics, individuals will expend more effort in processing that information. Individuals who elaborate on cultural cues are likely to generate more cognitive responses and to make attributions as to the cultural cue's meaning (Dimofte, Forehand & Deshpande, 2004; Holland & Gentry, 1999). That is, they are likely to consider what the cue means for the brand and to them individually. This has implications for understanding consumer responses to cultural appeals, especially for individuals who possess multiple cultural identities. In fact, while culture-based branding and advertising appeals are designed to reflect the cultural identity of a given consumer segment, representation of cultural cues in a brand's identity may also serve as a catalyst of cultural identification conflicts which can lead to either mono-cultural identity radicalisation or multi-cultural identity integration. Consider, for example, a UK-residing person of a mixed African-White origin who has a Polish partner and also holds strong identity links to Indian culture that were developed through friendship. Polish and Indian cultural identity links of this person would not be identifiable using demographic profiling. However, it is likely that this person would respond negatively to an advert that is perceived to be disrespectfully humouring one of these cultures and its members. The next section presents a brief overview of the use of

cultural cues in branding and advertising appeals and, using examples, outlines a research agenda towards a deeper understanding of the types of consumer cultural identity vulnerabilities that may be caused or aggravated by these appeals.

## CULTURAL MEANINGS OF BRANDS AS ACTORS IN THE MARKETPLACE: DEVELOPING A RESEARCH AGENDA

### *Cultural cues in branding and advertising appeals: an overview*

The role of consumption in social and cultural discourse is long established (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Reed II, 2002; Reilly & Wallendorf, 1984; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Consumer goods are viewed as tangible evidence of self-identity, and consumers use symbolic cultural meanings derived from branding and advertising appeals to construct, reconstruct and enact identities and group belonging (Belk, 1988; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; McCracken, 1986; 1990). Cultural identity can be activated by cultural cues integrated in branding/advertising appeals (such as visual, linguistic, and cultural values' appeals) and can affect the interpretation of these appeals and subsequent brand or advertisement perceptions. Specifically, multi-cultural individuals differ from mono-cultural individuals in terms of their processing of advertising claims (Luna & Peracchio, 2001; 2005); their response to persuasion appeals (Lau-Gesk, 2003; Luna & Peracchio, 2005); and the acceptance or rejection of brand values (Sekhon & Szmigin, 2009). Thus, if using cultural cues when developing branding/advertising strategies aimed at a particular cultural or subcultural group, understanding the directionality (i.e. which cultural affiliation is prevalent) and dimensionality (i.e. whether mono- or multi-cultural affiliations are prevalent) of cultural identification within this group is essential to predict consumer response and ensure success.

Scholars (Cayla & Arould, 2008; Strizhakova, Coulter & Price, 2008; Askegaard et al., 2005) and practitioners recognise that the role of brands in consumers' lives evolved from objects used by people in consumption discourses to actors participating in socio-cultural discourses of the marketplace. For example, Hilton and Gibbons (2002) note that "*brand messages have a social value far in excess of the specific, instrumental factors. Brands represent ideas, stories, social solidarity*". Thus, since at a societal level (i.e. consumer to consumer experiences) cultural identification evolved beyond the boundaries purely pre-defined by national, ethnic and/or racial affiliations, it is pertinent to develop a deeper understanding of how cultural identification is affected at the consumption level (i.e. brand-to-consumer experiences). In other words, implications of consumers' cultural identities being reduced to simplified clichés of demographic population segments rather than reflecting the true nature of their cultural identity links must be addressed from a wider perspective of consumer well-being in marketplace.

### *Agenda for future research*

Based on the complexities of the new multi-cultural marketplace, several avenues for research emerge concerning the proper usage and effectiveness of multi-cultural brand cues. As established above, multiple cultural identity profiles are difficult to capture through the demographic profiling of population. Yet omission of these identity links may result in incoherent (or mistaken) meanings being communicated

through cultural cues in branding/advertising appeals, leading to negative marketplace experiences at the level of consumption and triggering negative coping strategies among consumers with vulnerable or threatened cultural identities. For instance, advertising research conducted by Burrell Communications found that the term "stuffing" led African American consumers to believe that Stove Top Stuffing was not for them. In response, General Foods adapted to the difference in terminology by adjusting the tagline and recipe on the box and saw an increase in sales in that market. Conversely, there are numerous campaigns that do not reference specific cultural identities. Thus, research is needed that would identify whether representation of ancestral and affiliative facets of cultural identity in branding/advertising appeals is of equal importance to individuals.

Also, research should investigate whether omission or misrepresentation (for example, cultural stereotyping) of a particular identity facet (even when cultural cues relevant to other facets of identity have been integrated in the stimulus) may lead to a negative marketplace consumption experience, alienation from a particular element of the marketplace or a particular brand etc. This would raise managers' awareness and provide them with an invaluable perspective on how target segments may react to a misrepresented brand identity, and enable development of effective self-regulation practices in culture-based branding and advertising.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that cultural diversification of the marketplace poses a challenge to consistency of branding/advertising messages which in turn may negatively affect the overall market position of a brand (i.e. strength of awareness, recognition etc) across consumer segments. Given that contemporary marketplaces are represented by multiple cultural groups of substantial buying power only some specific, tailored products and brands can afford not to target several cultural/subcultural groups simultaneously. As a general trend, increasing numbers of mainstream brands and ethnic brands use a multi-cultural cue approach in their branding and advertising. That is, several advertising campaigns appear to address cultural diversity agenda by using ethnically ambiguous models or models of differing races and ethnicities in one advertising campaign. For instance, rather than designing a promotional campaign for each South African cultural group, brands such as Castle Lager (beer), DSTV (satellite TV provider) or Cell C (cellular network provider) target different cultural groups through one unique multi-cultural advertising campaign. In so doing, they attempt to reach a wider population (including the burgeoning black/African market segment) but also to represent a certain universal symbolism by featuring the newly praised cultural and social harmony of post-apartheid South Africa (Johnson, Elliott, & Grier, 2010).

Indeed, developing culturally-tailored appeals for several segments within a given marketplace may be strategically impractical and financially unsustainable for organisations, thus necessitating multiple cultural appeals being integrated in a branding/advertising message. However, knowledge on how mono-cultural versus multi-cultural consumers respond to such integrated appeals is in its infancy. A handful of recent studies establish that since multi-cultural individuals can access (i.e. extract) several cultural identities to process branding/advertising claims they tend to be more amenable to diverse cultural stimuli (Lau-Gesk, 2003; Zhang & Khare, 2009). That is, these studies suggest that through persuasion appeals a particular identity can be activated or made accessible to consumers. Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that if stimuli appeal to inconsistent (i.e. conflicting) elements of one's cultural identity (for example, appealing to two conflicting faiths) the positivity of the experience can be mitigated in a manner similar to that of mono-cultural individuals responding to

stimuli's cultural cues which are incongruent to them (Lau-Gesk, 2003). A lot more work is needed to broaden our understanding of this matter, to prevent development of stimuli that, while integrating multiple cultural cues as an attempt to engage with the needs of a diversified consumer base, achieve the contrary and alienate some consumer groups from the marketplace.

Specifically, it would be of interest to investigate whether mono-cultural individuals' attitudes to outgroups change in response to stimuli that integrates cultural appeals relevant to these individuals' cultural ingroup with other (outgroup) cultural appeals. Also, it is important to understand whether multi-cultural individuals that alternate their cultural identities (i.e. keep each facet separate) respond more favorably to mono-cultural stimuli, and equally whether those multi-culturals that integrate their cultural identities respond more favourably to stimuli that integrate multiple cultural cues. These effects may vary by product category. Certain categories of products may make cultural identities more accessible and salient affecting the diagnosticity of multi-cultural cues (Zhang & Khare, 2009). Products that serve a more functional need may be more amenable to an integrated multi-cultural appeal. Products that serve a more social and symbolic role may not, as these types of products may more readily activate cultural identities and cause individuals to focus on these cues more critically (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Research should address if products with greater social and symbolic benefits make integrated appeals less effective and more likely to offend certain segments.

Further research should analyse whether the order and prominence of cultural cues presented in a stimulus may affect cultural identity disposition and cultural identity conflict for both mono-cultural and multi-cultural consumers. Research suggests that cultural cues that are more prominent will generate more attention and increased elaboration compared to cues that are less prominent (Gardner, 1983). This effect may interact with alignment of cultural cue and social identity. That is, when a cultural cue aligns with an individual's self-identity that individual might process a less prominent cultural cue whereas individuals who do not align with the cue might not. This issue may play a role in creating appeals that are effective, but not threatening to an out-group and potentially lowering cultural boundaries.

Additionally, given the drastic increase of marketing communication reach through satellite media, social networks and online word-of-mouth, research is needed to assess how culture-based branding and advertising appeals developed for a particular consumer segment affect other segments. Aaker, Brumbaugh and Grier (2000) demonstrate that target marketing may result in unfavourable effects with the non-target markets (i.e., non-members of the advertiser's intended audience). That is, while the meaning of the message may be not interpreted negatively by the target group per se, it may be regarded as diminishing and disrespectful by other consumer segments in the marketplace. For example, a print ad of tea that appeared in *Impremedia's El Diario La Prensa* of New York City featured a slim Chinese woman and asked the reader the following questions: "Have you ever seen a fat Chinese woman?" "The reason? Chinese women drink tea all day long". The ad then urged the readers to call 1-877-chinito ("little Chinese") to order a daily fix of tea. The promise of the ad was weight loss without impossible diets, surgery or pills. While this ad was not designed to target Chinese culture-identifying population, increased accessibility of the media content suggests that the likelihood of Chinese culture-identifying consumers being exposed to this ad is high. Some of the content of this ad can be interpreted and perceived as disrespectful to Chinese culture and its members and provoke negative coping response, either directed at this particular tea

brand or/and at the cultural group that is perceived to be engaging with this brand.

Another recent example of how multi-cultural appeals are susceptible to the increased volatility of today's new mediascapes is the recent crisis surrounding the Ramadan promotions at Whole Foods. Whole Foods is an Austin, Texas based grocer that takes pride in being progressive, featuring organic food and a set of core values that includes a "Declaration of Interdependence" that includes a statement of how their business is ultimately tied to the community at large. In August of 2011, Whole Foods became the first American supermarket chain to launch a targeted online Ramadan campaign. As word spread, Whole Foods came under fire from several right-wing bloggers who decried the offering. Compounding the crisis, internal emails were leaked indicating that executives suggested that store employees remove signs indicating the Halal certified food promotion, prompting a backlash from angry customers. To their credit, Whole Foods responded with a statement indicating that the Ramadan promotion "was business as usual" and that it would continue. This event, however, underscores the susceptibility of multi-cultural marketing in today's media environment, especially when related to highly sensitive cultural cues. This controversy exemplifies that diversification of marketing and advertising efforts to appeal to multiple cultural groups may evoke challenging responses from some consumer groups and provoke inter-group tensions. Therefore, it is pertinent to broaden our understanding of the impact of cultural cues in advertising campaigns and branding strategies on inter-group community tolerance and cohesion, to assist managers in developing marketing approaches that will engage brands or organisations with multiple cultural groups whilst retaining the positive relationships with the existent consumer base.

Finally, while this paper focuses on the forms of cultural identities evolution through links with cultural groups, it is also important to highlight indications in recent literature of cultural identity links evolving beyond the traditional facets of ancestral and affiliative identities with cultural groups, to include other facets such as identification with consumer communities with mental/physical impairment and other communities sharing distinct values, beliefs and practices (Mandiberg & Warner, in press; Padden & Humphries, 2005). Consumer culture theory (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry Jr, 1989; Hannerz, 1992; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Murray & Ozanne, 1991) provides comprehensive theoretical and methodological foundations to explore how multiple facets of cultural identities affect consumer interpretation of and response to material goods in general and branding/advertising appeals in particular. For example, Mick and Buhl (1992) demonstrate that consumer life projects generate multiple interpretations of meanings of advertising messages. It would be a logical step in marketing theory development to consider the potential implications, conflicts and coping strategies arising from consumers' lives integrating multiple life projects that are playing an equally significant role. Furthermore, demonstrating a true appreciation of cultural diversity would also be a responsible step to make for our maturing discipline.

## CONCLUSION

As this paper demonstrates, addressing the issues of cultural diversity and multi-cultural marketing on the basis of the demographic profiling of populations can



generate harmful outcomes, such as aggravated consumer vulnerabilities and consumer revolt against the marketplace overall and brands as social actors in the marketplace. The paper has presented some initial perspectives on the social implications, in the context of increasingly multi-cultural marketplaces, of cultural identities being misrepresented in culture-based branding and advertising appeals. We argue that recurring incidents of public outcries provoked by culture-based blunders in branding and advertising point out a need to move culture-based advertising and branding beyond the mere use of ethnic and racial labels. Increasingly multi-cultural realities call for a conceptual and operational shift in marketing science and practice towards an in-depth exploration of diverse mono- and multi-cultural forms of cultural identities developed through multiple ancestral and affiliative links.

In fact, this move is aligned with the argument articulated by one of the world's leading marketing practitioners Ken Muench, Draftfcb, Chicago:

*These new societies are comprised of many nationalities, skin colors, ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic strata, in effect very complex communities that are self governed and interestingly enough, not segregating. This presents a unique opportunity to address the new consumer, not as a segment of a market, a minority, a majority, or other dividing classification, but as a human being....that forms a diverse [multi-cultural world] [as quoted in Aceves, 2011, emphasis added].*

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## SOCIAL BUSINESS

an interdisciplinary journal

### Safe Water System<sup>1</sup>

The NSMC, UK

#### ABSTRACT

##### Purpose

The Safe Water System (SWS) is a simple, inexpensive water quality intervention, appropriate for the developing world and proven to reduce diarrhoeal disease incidence in users by 22 to 84 per cent. The objective is to make water safe through disinfection and safe storage. The intervention includes point-of-use household water treatment with sodium hypochlorite (chlorine-based) solution, safe water storage and behaviour change communication.

In particular, the initiative aims to reduce diarrhoeal diseases in children under five and other vulnerable populations.

##### Approach

Society for Family Health (SFH), an affiliate of Population Services International, partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to launch SWS in Zambia in 1998. The solution is locally manufactured, then distributed and marketed as 'Clorin' to consumers, various non-governmental organisations and other partners involved in community mobilisation activity.

##### Outcomes

Since its commencement, SFH has sold or distributed more than 17 million bottles of Clorin, each of which protects a family of 6 for a month. Since national introduction in 1999, both reported incidence of diarrhoea among children under-five and child mortality has reduced.

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