

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AND CONSUMPTION BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

There are approximately 500,000 international students attending U.S. universities and the number has grown steadily over the past decade (IIE 1996)¹. Conservative estimates of \$10,000 tuition rates translates into an annual influx of \$5 billion for U.S. colleges and universities. For businesses catering to students, this international student body is also monetarily significant. If just one-quarter of the total international student population purchases a television and a bed (two "crucial" elements of any college student's life) the economic impact would reach \$44 million.² Adding other durable goods, personal goods, food, and beverages could quickly bring the expenditures to over \$1 billion. Despite the presence of this large consumer group, little research has looked at their buying habits or purchase preferences.

The proposed research expands Lee's (1989) findings on the relationships between mass-media exposure and perceptions of consumption realities in an unfamiliar culture by predicting changes in purchase patterns among identified consumer groups. Additionally, we offer a supplementary avenue for the application of Belk's (1984) materialism scale cross-culturally by suggesting how scale ratings may change among consumers of the same nationality in an alien culture for different periods of time. Succinctly stated, the purpose of this paper is to apply theories of cultivation and materialism to a unique, growing population in such a way that adds

to our understanding of influences on consumption behaviors and the acculturation process.

Several research gaps are filled by this inquiry. First, we propose the initial study to interweave two theoretical foundations (cultivation theory and materialism) as explanadums of changes in consumption conduct resulting from international translocation. Second, we address contradictions among studies using the theories as a foundation for explaining cross-cultural consumption behaviors. Third, our methodological suggestions overcome noted limitations of cross-cultural consumer research. Finally, we study an often over-looked population that has significant economic impact for marketing practitioners.

Our paper offers four propositions; three are based on cultivation theory and predict the use of television viewing as a tool for newly arrived (acculturating) international students to understand and emulate what are seen as "typical" American consumption realities. The fourth proposition uses a previous study as a springboard to predicting a change in materialism scores for acculturating international students.

Collecting data and interpreting results are the next steps necessary to test posited relationships. Our effort can be further extended in the future to consider adding dimensions of cognitive processing and other phenomenon underlying cross-cultural assimilation and consumption patterns.

ENDNOTES

¹ This figure does not include the large number of students enrolled in professional and academic English as a Second Language (ESL) programs through-

out the country.

² Estimates for prices come from the author's recent shopping adventures. A "sufficient" TV can be purchased for approximately \$200 and an "average" bed for \$150.

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