

# COMMUNICATING WITH HISPANIC CONSUMERS IN THE UNITED STATES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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*ABSTRACT. Hispanics constitute an important consumer group in the United States because of the group's fast growth and substantial purchasing power. Increasingly, marketers are trying to reach this consumer group using customized communication strategies with mixed results. The purpose of this paper is to examine the current communication theories in the context of advertising targeted toward the Hispanic market and to assess the effectiveness of different advertising approaches directed toward these consumers, paying special attention to use of language and symbols. First, this paper examines the theoretical underpinnings of communication strategies toward Hispanics using the markedness model, the speech accommodation theory, and the distinctiveness theory. Next, the authors report results from a focus group conducted with Hispanic consumers to assess different advertising approaches and to identify effective and ineffective strategies for communicating with the Hispanic market. The results indicate that marketers in the United States need to pay closer attention to this market and make an effort to carefully customize their advertising strategies targeted toward the Hispanic consumers.*

*RESUMEN. La población hispana constituye un importante grupo de consumidores en Estados Unidos debido a su rápida expansión y a su creciente poder adquisitivo. Cada vez son más numerosos los esfuerzos que los especialistas en mercadotecnia están dedicando a captar la atención de este grupo de población aplicando estrategias de comunicación publicitaria con resultados muy variados. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar teorías de comunicación actuales en el contexto de la publicidad dirigida al mercado hispano, y evaluar la efectividad de diferentes enfoques publicitarios dirigidos a estos consumidores, prestando especial atención al uso de la lengua y los símbolos culturales. La primera parte de nuestro estudio está dedicada al examen de teorías actuales tales como the markedness model, the speech accommodation theory, and the distinctiveness theory que analizan estrategias de comunicación intercultural. La segunda parte del estudio está dedicado a la presentación de los resultados obtenidos tras la realización de un focus group integrado por consumidores hispanos con el objeto de evaluar el impacto de diferentes enfoques publicitarios e identificar el grado de efectividad de las estrategias de comunicación empleadas. Los resultados indican que los publicistas estadounidenses deben atender con cautela las necesidades de este segmento de población y desarrollar campañas publicitarias que garanticen el éxito de la comunicación intercultural.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States at 42.7 million in 2005 (Hispanic Fact Sheet 2006). The growth has much to do with the rapid influx of children due to immigration and positive natural birth rate over the years, resulting in a very young market. The rising generation of young Hispanics controls the majority of consumer influence of this group. Moreover, it is the demographic of 18-34 year olds who are mainly contributing to the Hispanic purchasing power. According to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce's 2005 report, the U.S. Hispanic purchasing power has surged to nearly \$700 billion and is projected to reach \$1 trillion by 2010. To put it in better perspective, Hispanic purchasing power is 8.5 percent of the U.S. total, but will reach 11 percent by 2010 (Statistics: Population and Economic Strength 2006).

Ethnic marketing efforts are being made to reach out to the growing Hispanic population, and major service companies, such as Allstate, Western Union, and Sprint, have created special divisions within their marketing departments specialized in targeting ethnic groups (Torres and Brigs 2005). The top three advertisers to Hispanics –Procter & Gamble CO, Sears Roebuck & CO, and General Motors Corp- spent between 5.2 and 21 percent of

their budgets in the Hispanic market (Wentz 2004). Overall, advertisers spent over 5 percent of their advertising budgets to advertise in Hispanic-targeted media in 2003 (Danton 2004).

The Hispanic market constitutes a significant opportunity for advertisers. However, marketers have learned that the U.S. Latino community is very diverse, and that they cannot treat Hispanics uniformly, without acknowledging the uniqueness of their heritage (Breyer 2006). It seems clear that merely translating or adapting marketing materials from English to Spanish without addressing cultural nuances is not effective in reaching the Hispanic market (Green 2004). This highlights the importance of connecting to Hispanic consumers through insight and emotion, and through culture and context. The level of connection that Hispanics establish to different brand messages is directly related to their level of acculturation (Lopez Negrete 2005).

It is interesting to point out that the more U.S. Hispanics increase in population, the farther they are from assimilating. Hispanics, instead, are acculturating. *Acculturation* allows young Hispanic individuals to preserve their heritage and adopt an American identity. At the root of this process is the ability to communicate in two languages, Spanish and English, and switch between the two as needed.

Focusing on a semi- and fully acculturated Hispanic 18-34 year olds, general marketers are still having difficulty effectively targeting this group. These consumers are brand conscious and web savvy and are in complete control of their likes and dislikes (Navarro 2006). However, the Hispanic heritage is important to this segment and its identity connection is very strong. Thus, these young consumers live in a hybrid world of the mainstream American culture and the values rooted in their Hispanic family and cultural upbringing. Thus, they expect that their hybrid world to be reflected in the marketing campaigns targeted toward them (Winslow 2006).

The aim of our study is to provide a greater understanding of the Hispanic market's reaction to advertising impressions. First, we examine the recent literature in the consumer behavior domain related to the marketing communication strategies targeted toward the Hispanic market. Second, we report results from a focus group conducted to assess how young, educated Hispanic consumers view advertisements geared towards them. The central idea is to discover the perceptions of language use in advertisements and to understand the importance of cultural symbols in communicating with this market.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bilingual speakers often mix languages in conversations with family members and friends. Use of language in a particular situation may depend upon how a bilingual speaker wants to be perceived by others and what particular social meaning is being communicated (Gee 1996; Miller 2000). Consistent with the language use in a private setting, one of the communication approaches in marketing strategies toward Hispanic consumers is *code switching* which involves “*insertion of a foreign word or expression into a sentence (e.g., into an advertising slogan), resulting in a mixed-language message*” (Luna and Peracchio 2005a p. 760).

Research on the effects of code switching provides evidence that consumers activate language-specific associations related to their attitude toward the particular language. More specifically, if consumers' attitude toward the language is negative, then the response elicited by the slogan will lead to negative associations, and thus, result in lower evaluations of the advertised brand or product. This outcome is due to activation of cognitions associated with the meaning of the word carried by the language (Luna and Peracchio 2005a).

The mechanism of the effects of code switching in the context of advertising has been examined in the literature using *the markedness model* (Luna and Peracchio 2005a, 2005b).

The markedness model can be used to explain how a mixed-language message is decoded and elaborated upon by the receiver. A mixed-language message includes a foreign word or phrase as emphasis in the background of a majority language (for example a Spanish word inserted into an English sentence in U.S.-based magazine targeted toward Hispanic consumers). This foreign, code-switched word is referred to as a *marked element* because, by being contrasted in the sentence, it becomes a focal element that activates cognitive processing about the message. Thus, if a Spanish word (marked element) is used in an English sentence, it results in thoughts related to the Spanish language and the ethnic heritage of the person processing this message. The markedness model research has shown that Hispanic consumers exhibit more favorable attitudes toward products advertised using minority-to-majority code switching, where an English (a majority language) word or phrase is used as the marked element in the background of a Spanish (a minority language) sentence (Luna and Peracchio 2005a, 2005b). This effect, called the *code-switching direction effect*, is illustrated by the persuasion superiority of minority-to-majority messages over the majority-to-minority code switching.

Past research has also shown that cultural aliens often experience a linguistic inferiority complex. Bilinguals who speak a minority language tend to have less favorable attitudes toward their language compared to the majority language of the country they live in. The majority language evokes more positive associations because it reflects the culture of the group that has the economic and political clout in the country (Grosjean 1982). Indeed, past studies have provided evidence that U.S. Hispanics perceive English as the language of integration and high vitality (Clachar 1997, Barker et al. 2001), while associating Spanish with low socio-economic status. For example a consumer research study, using *the speech accommodation theory* (Giles et al. 1991) as a framework, has shown that Hispanic consumers appreciate the ethnic sensitivity of companies who use Spanish language in their advertising because it communicates solidarity and recognition of the importance of this cultural group (Koslow et al. 1994). Consistent with the speech accommodation theory, Spanish language advertising is perceived as more attractive by Hispanic consumers through the reduction of linguistic dissimilarity. However, the same study indicated that using Spanish language exclusively (that is, without English marked elements) resulted in deterioration of the attitude toward advertisements, thus, confirming that consumers might be experiencing a linguistic inferiority complex as well (Koslow et al. 1994). The findings of the Koslow's et al. study are consistent with the minority-to-majority code-switching direction effect, where an English-language marked element evokes favorable feelings about the advertised brands.

Another body of work in consumer research indicates that the use of Hispanic spokespersons in advertising to Hispanic consumers may have a positive influence on attitudes toward the advertised brands (Deshpande and Stayman 1994). This research employed *the distinctiveness theory*, which predicts that a person's unique traits will be more salient for him or her than the common traits present in the majority group (McGuire 1984). Consistent with this prediction, Deshpande and Stayman (1994) show that minority consumers (Hispanics) who perceive themselves as *distinct* from the majority population in which they live (the United States) exhibit greater levels of trust toward their minority spokespersons, resulting in improved attitudes toward the advertised brand. However, this study also showed that Hispanics who live in a Hispanic-dominated community in the U.S. (San Antonio, TX) exhibited less positive attitudes toward a brand advertised by a Hispanic spokesperson than consumers living in a less Hispanic community (Austin, TX). This can be explained by the fact that Hispanics in a Hispanic majority community do not perceive themselves as distinct. This finding is also consistent with the idea that Hispanicness may evoke certain insecurities of the members of this ethnic group.

### 3. FOCUS GROUP

#### 3.1. *Research Objectives*

The purpose of conducting the focus group was to seek the qualitative responses of Hispanic consumers who are the target market for advertising. In this research we were particularly interested in analyzing ethnic identifiers in advertising to Hispanics. Our goals were to assess whether the Spanish or English was the preferred language of communication, and to observe the attitudes exhibited toward cultural icons and symbols.

#### 3.2. *Focus Group Procedure*

Prospective participants were contacted by e-mail and asked to be part of a focus group about an important study of their culture. The participants for this exploratory study were selected from a Latin American student organization at a small college in the northeastern part of the United States. The group was comprised of five college students (four females and one male), of Hispanic heritage, in the age group of 19-22 years old. During the focus group, the participants were presented with a selection of print advertisements from Spanish-language magazines, such as *People en español*, *Latina* and *Marie Claire en español*. The ad samples included three product categories: idea (fundraising for health research and education), services (Internet and phone), and goods (cosmetics, cars, food, liquor, shoes, and household and personal care products). The focus group, which lasted for approximately thirty minutes, was videotaped and transcribed.

#### 3.3. *Summary of the Findings*

Based on the analysis of the video recording and the transcript, three recurrent themes were identified: importance of Hispanic characters as ethnic identifiers, use of stereotyping in advertising, and positive response to advertisements for service companies.

First, it was found that participants were drawn to the images as opposed to the written content in the ads for goods. For instance, an ad for the fragrance *Calvin Klein Euphoria* evoked a positive reaction because the model appeared to reflect Hispanic traits, even though she was not explicitly Hispanic. On the other hand, the *Giorgio Armani Code* ad evoked a less positive response because of the use of clearly Caucasian models. Consistent with the distinctiveness theory, the participants of our focus group have shown preference for Hispanic identifiers. This preference can be explained by the fact that they are part of a minority group in the largely Caucasian population of the college.

The second theme involved the stereotypes used in advertising. One stereotype was identified in an ad for *Latinas* footwear. Mixed feelings arose on the appearance of scantily-dressed women in their dress shoes. Some participants alluded to the sexual undertone prevalent in this ad, and to the stereotypical portrayal of the uninhibited behavior among Hispanics. Other participants commented that this uninhibited behavior is indeed intrinsic to the Hispanic culture: “*we are colorful, we like to go out, have fun, dance, and you know, the women are very stylish in what they're wearing so.*”

Our participants have also identified another stereotype in an ad for McDonald's. Negative socioeconomic connotations were pointed out as the ad implied that Hispanics' buying power is weak, and that they make poor nutritional choices by consuming fast food. These findings are consistent with the inferiority complex perspective, and show that Hispanic identifiers might evoke negative associations in consumers. Because Hispanics in the United States are an ethnic minority group, and they often feel insecure of their Hispanic

heritage, advertisers should avoid linking this consumer group explicitly to products and services associated with low socio-economic status. This is particularly important when targeting Hispanic consumers in the higher socio-economic group. In sum, these results show the disconnect that can be created with marketing campaigns that are insensitive to the consumer or somehow disrespect consumers based on ethnicity issues.

The third recurrent theme was exemplified by the positive reactions evoked by the ads for services that affect consumers' daily communication and monetary security. Participants agreed that by using the Spanish language in its campaigns, companies such as Cingular or Sovereign Bank can effectively connect with Hispanic consumers. In accordance with the speech accommodation theory, these results show that Hispanics feel valued and respected by advertisers when Spanish is used in their marketing campaigns for services that are associated with higher socioeconomic status. Again consistently with the inferiority complex perspective, Hispanics feel validated when the Spanish language is used in advertising the more prestigious products and services.

In sum, ethnic identifiers seem to help connect the Hispanic consumer with the brand in the ads for goods, while the use of Spanish in the ads for services seems to create a sense of comfort and security. However, stereotypes perceived in ads for some of the products undermine the respect toward ethnic consumers. Understanding the culture does not necessarily mean literally translating the message into Spanish. In order to generate positive attitudes toward brands, the advertisers need to be sensitive towards Hispanic traditions and values. Indeed, recent innovative advertising strategies toward the Hispanic market have implemented humor to play with and against the stereotypes (Kiley 2006). There is also an increasing trend to diversify ad agencies by designating internal departments solely committed to the Hispanic markets (Wentz 2005).

Our future research will involve a more systematic content analysis of advertising targeted to Hispanic consumers in the United States, and will also examine strategies used by advertising agencies which specialize in the Hispanic market.

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