THE RELEVANCE OF MINORITY ETHNIC GROUPS FOR MARKETING: A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK [1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a research framework to examine cultural diversity from a marketing perspective. This is achieved by analysing the demographics, history, networks and resources proprietary to the largest minority ethnic groups in Sydney, Australia, whose ancestral language is other than English; by establishing that marketing theory about service provider selection by consumers concurs with the process followed by the members of each group; and by examining similarities and differences between and across groups, and relative to the mainstream population. The findings will establish whether groups can be aggregated for marketing purposes.

BACKGROUND

The uniqueness of minority ethnic groups within culturally diverse societies is widely embraced across a variety of discipline areas. In health research, for example, a recurring finding is that, not only do ethnic minorities have greater need for healthcare than mainstream groups, they also have greater difficulty in accessing health services (Phillips et al. 2000; Mayberry, 2000), receive inferior primary care (Shi, 1999), are less satisfied with their physicians' style (listening skills, explanations and thoroughness) (Doescher et al, 2000) and have lower rates of heath insurance (Derose et al. 2007). Language is documented as a major but not the only barrier (Weech-Maldonado et al. 2003) and ethnicity is deemed a significant predictor of type of service use (Mui and Burnette, 1994).

Most of the studies referenced above deal with aggregates of ethnic groups (such as, Hispanics, Whites, African-Americans and Asians) in the US, but other studies found significant differences when the focus is on subgroups within those aggregates (Hjern and Grindefjord, 2000). For example, Williams and Flora (1995) disaggregated an Hispanic audience to examine heterogeneous behaviours and lifestyles that could guide planning for public information campaigns, concluding that the subgroups require unique campaign planning strategies. Other studies illustrating the relevance of narrowly defined ethnic groups for marketing within culturally diverse societies, include studies of specific minorities in the US (Shanmuganathan, Stone and Foss, 2004; Mandese, 2003), in Canada (Holliday, 1993), in Australia (Pires and Stanton, 2005), in the United Kingdom (Ram et al. 2000; Nwankwo and Lindridge, 1998). Overall these studies point to the need for unique marketing strategies when ethnic minority consumers have unique needs that cannot be fulfilled by the products designed for majority consumers and when they can not be reached through traditional channels (Cui, 1997).

The variable focus of research on narrowly defined minority ethnic groups or on aggregates of some of those groups may be explained by demographic, socio-economic and lifestyle heterogeneity within the groups, combined with the realisation that consumers have multiple identities, often belonging to multiple cultural groupings, such as ethnic, linguistic and religious groups (Douglas and Craig, 1997: 388). For example, Stanton, Miller and Layton (1994, p.126) posit that ethnic (or migrant) groups may be viewed as a large market made up of many smaller segments because subculture is not a sufficient basis for market segmentation. The rationale here is that marketing to individual ethnic groups within culturally diverse countries, treating each as a segmentable market separate from the macro market, is potentially appealing but raises the spectre of higher marketing costs in departing down the micro-marketing road (Cui and Choudhury, 1998). This may provide a justification for aggregation of groups, particularly when the members of different groups share demographic, socio-economic and lifestyle characteristics.

In any case, the marketing relevancy of narrowly defined minority ethnic groups, or of particular aggregates of these groups, must hinge on effective segmentation practices, depending on the verifiable (identifiability, measurability) and continuing existence (stability) of such groups within the national market, on group uniqueness (heterogeneity relative to other groups) and relative homogeneity in the consumption of goods

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and/or services (intra-group homogeneity) and on accessibility, the use of group specific information and communication channels (Thomas, 1980). Group substantiality, also a requirement for effective segmentation, is an exhortation to evaluate the value of a segmenting opportunity and needs to be consistent with stakeholder objectives, whether business, Government or other (Pires and Stanton, 2005).

The greatest theoretical challenge to the need for marketing strategies with a focus on particular groups of ethnic minority consumers, or ethnic marketing, arises intertwined with perfect acculturation or assimilation theories, which question the stability requirement for effective ethnic market segmentation. Consistent with the traditional (linear) assimilation model (Kim, 1979; Berry, 1990; Roberts and Hart, 1997), the argument is that, up to three generations after migration occurs, migrants are absorbed into the host-country population, a view that underlines Hofstede's (2001:449) tenet that national cultures predominate on consumer behaviour in spite of large immigration flows to advanced economies.

While conclusive statistics about the absorption or assimilation of third generation immigrant descendents are largely lacking, the assimilation view appears demonstrated in the existence of countries such as Australia, Canada and United States, which are important examples of countries historically determined by immigration flows, today with generally recognised national cultures. Notwithstanding, these countries are also universally recognised as multicultural societies, providing an abode to indigenous populations as well as to a plethora of minority ethnic groups resulting from a long-term history of immigration. Minority ethnic groups continue to exist in these countries, often after the immigration impetus has passed. The issue is whether ethnic group resilience implies continued marketing relevance.

The view that ethnic minorities inevitably become part of the mainstream is rejected by Berry and Sam (1997) and many others, who question the linear assimilation model (e.g. Wallenforf and Reilly, 1983; Mendoza, 1989). There is, in fact, evidence that ethnic identity is neither dependent on continuing immigration, nor does it necessarily disappear with successive generations. In Canada, more than half of Canadians participating in a large ethnic diversity survey indicated a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group, variable between groups and between generations (57 per cent of first generation, 47 per cent of second generation and, importantly in the present discussion, 48 per cent of third generation), suggesting a plateau effect rather than a linear assimilation (Statistics Canada, 2003). This supports Berry and Sam's (1997) reference to continuous cultural diversity, such that countries can no longer be viewed as a set of separate entities, characterised by their own distinctive value-systems, traits and customs.

Together with the evidential support provided in the literature for the marketing relevance of minority ethnic groups, and sometimes for particular group aggregates, there is no evidence to support questioning the continuing existence of these groups within culturally diverse societies. Instead of looking to assimilate, it is reported that certain ethnic groups such as African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics have fought to maintain their own cultural integrity, and the melting pot concept that has typified American society is being displaced by a multiethnic mosaic -- the new majority (SBA, http://www.sba.gov/gopher/Business-Development/Success-Series/Vol8/ -- accessed 15 February 2008). In Australia, the adoption of multiculturalism from 1972 formally recognised and endorsed the co-existence of minority groups with mainstream population. By 1973, minority groups were forming state and national associations to promote the survival of their language and heritage. In recognising Australia's cultural diversity the Government endorsed the principles of the 1989 National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, dimensioned by cultural identity, social justice and economic efficiency. Implied were the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth, and the right of all Australians to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion (DIMA, 1997).

While the potential marketing importance of narrowly defined minority ethnic groups in a culturally diverse Australia is endowed with substantive theoretical support and promoted by celebrations such as the annual Multicultural Marketing Awards, currently this diversity has a relatively minor influence on marketing strategies, at the macro or the micro levels. A reason for this may be the difficulty in reaching unity in terms of the definition and measurement of ethnicity and in understanding what an aggregate of ethnic groups entails.

ETHNIC GROUP AGGREGATES AND ETHNICITY

Ethnicity has been identified as part of a micro-cultural set of variables that is highly correlated with religion, regional identity, urbanisation of dwellings, language and social class (Hassan et al., 2003). Even more expressive of the multiplicity of meanings, the term 'ethnic' may refer to a speech group or loosely, also to a race; to the origin, classification and other group characteristics; to members of a community who are migrants or descendants of migrants and whose native language is not that of the host country; or to a group recognisable as coming from an identifiable culture (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 3rd Edition, 1997). Drawing from sociology, ethnicity is a far more complex concept than "nationality" or "race" and its sources and measurement have been subject to considerable debate (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Langer 1998; Melucci, 1989). The study of

ethnicity has identified several dimensions, including the sense of common descent extending beyond kinship, political solidarity vis-à-vis other groups, common customs, language, religion, values, morality and etiquette (Deshpande *et al.* 1986). An objectivist or audit perspective identifies ethnicity by some observable measure such as surname, country of origin, paternal or maternal ancestry, language spoken at home or area of residence (ABS 2000). Emerging from the sociology literature, a subjectivist perspective sees the ethnic group as a primary social construct, with its boundaries constructed through ascription by the dominant group and/or reflecting self-ascription (Langer 1998; Vasta 1993).

It is apparent that the discussion of ethnicity above, for example regarding the sense for a common descent, does not accommodate easily the aggregation of distinct minority ethnic groups for macro or micro purposes. It is necessary to understand the specificities of cultural diversity within a country, involving a profound understanding of the similarities and differences within and across minority ethnic groups in that country, before the targeting of aggregates of such groups, or the separate targeting of the individual groups can be justified.

AIMS AND CONTRIBUTION

The purpose of this paper is to elicit discussion on the development of a research framework that, once implemented, will produce unambiguous conclusions about the relevance for marketing purposes of narrowly defined minority ethnic groups, or their aggregate, within culturally diverse countries. Applying a linked-emic approach to ethnic marketing assessment, the project outlined in this paper aims at achieving three complementary objectives. The first objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of the demographics, history, networks and ethnic resources proprietary to narrowly defined minority ethnic groups, in the present project, the largest minority ethnic groups in Sydney, whose ancestral language is other than English.

The second objective is to establish that contemporary marketing theory explaining how consumers select providers of service-products is a correct representation of the process followed by the members of each minority ethnic group being investigated. More specifically, guided by the method and findings of a similar study conducted in 2000 with a focus on the Portuguese community in Sydney (Pires, 2001), the research proposes using an Integrated Model of Decision-Making Process for Goods and Services - a model integrating various models of the buyer decision process, notably the EKB model (Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, 1968), with service models, notably the Fisk Model (1981) – to examine the service provider selection process of the distinct ethnic groups.

Pires (2001) found that as long as the general theory of service provider selection is kept general, it may apply to the generality of the consumers. However, when attention focuses on who do consumers turn to for advice and why, and on the implications from this choice, the model may need to be adapted to a shorter process to accommodate a decision making process model for ethnic minority consumers. Hence, particular attention is given to identifying the specific information sources used by the ethnic minority consumers to attain market information and recommendation as this may reveal the interdependence between these consumers and their ethnic group of affiliation. This interdependence is a means of making minority groups actionable by marketers because it can be used as a predictor of consumption behaviour and, ultimately, as a demonstration of the potential relevance of different minority ethnic groups for marketing.

The proposed study examines a sub-set of the service-products used by Pires (2001) to examine service provider selection. The choice of service-products, classified relative to the dominance of the tangible element and ease of evaluation (figure 1 in the Methodology section below), as the basis for examining the decision making process, is theoretically appropriate because it allows consideration of most product types, from highly tangible search service-products (essentially goods) to experience service-products (for which evaluation is only possibly during or after consumption), to highly intangible (essentially credence services for which evaluation may be difficult even after consumption). As noted earlier ethnic minority consumers are more challenged than mainstream consumers when health (credence) services are concerned. Hence analysis based on different types of service-products may provide useful insights into ethnic minority consumption patterns.

The third objective is to examine similarities and differences in service-supplier selection between and across groups, and relative to the mainstream population. Establishing differences and similarities between groups provides support for tailoring strategies to cater for differences between groups within Australia and the circumstances when it is permissible to aggregate groups.

From a business perspective, greater understanding of the decision processes of persons from different ethnic backgrounds is a prerequisite for addressing the sensitive issues of whether and how to deal with the ethnicity of current and potential clients. The viability of a marketing strategy focused on a particular ethnic group within a multi-ethnic economy is dependent, among other things, upon establishing whether members of each group differ in their information search processes, whether they use and value similar criteria when selecting a provider or product, and whether there are similar motivations that may cause them to switch providers.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The proposed research adopts a linked-emic approach (Douglas and Craig, 2006) that accounts for the context of each of the groups being examined. The significance for marketing strategy development of distinct minority ethnic groups within a country, or cultural diversity, reinforces the need for a conceptual research framework that examines group distinctiveness. The use of etic frameworks to describe and compare different ethnic groups, faces significant difficulties in establishing conceptual and functional equivalence. Consequently, theories and constructs developed in one context (such as the researcher's home culture) are sometimes assumed to be applicable universally, a "pseudoetic" (Douglas and Craig, 2006) or "imposed-etic" (Berry, 1990) approach. It is for these difficulties that market research instruments adapted to each national culture (the emic approach) offer more reliability and provide data with greater internal validity than "etic" instruments that are applicable to several cultures (Usunier and Lee, 2005).

In seeking to improve conceptual frameworks used in cross-cultural marketing research, Berry (1990) suggested a three-stage sequence whereby imposed-etic constructs are filtered using emic insights about the other culture to eliminate unfamiliar or meaningless elements, resulting in derived-etic constructs that can subsequently be tested. A weakness of this approach is that it ignores what is different to make use of what is the same across cultures, and this may erroneously endorse combining groups simply based on common language.

Figure 1: Integrated Model of Service Provider Selection
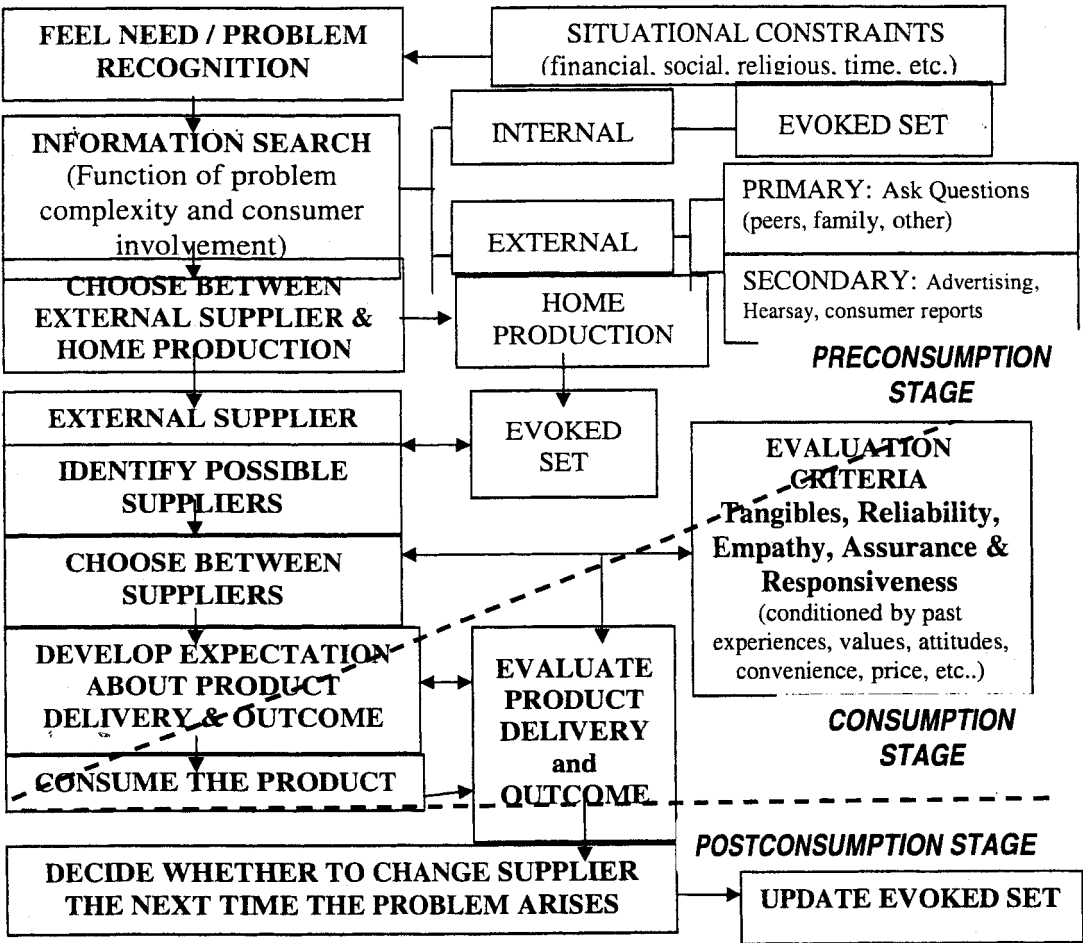
A linked emic approach is adopted for the research here proposed because of its focus on either individual ethnic groups or on comparisons between ethnic groups. Emphasis is still on the differences but,

where possible, it seeks to build generalisations by interpreting findings from each local context. Hence this approach is more likely to avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and pseudoetic bias, recognised as common violations of basic cross-cultural research paradigms (Sekaran, 1983).

Focus of the discussion of cultural diversity, the *unit of analysis*, is the narrowly defined minority ethnic group, corresponding to a set of ethnic minority consumers with the same self-ascribed ethnicity. The project proposes to examine eight groups of consumers, comprising a control group (mainstream consumers) and the largest seven minority ethnic groups in contemporary Sydney, Australia, whose ancestral language is other than English. Valid units will be Sydney permanent residents who are at least 18 years old. The groups to be investigated, the *population*, are the Chinese, the Italian, the Lebanese, the Greek, the Indian, the Vietnamese and the Filipino, identified by count of persons as reported in the Ancestry By Country of Parents, 2006 Census Tables (ABS, 2007).

Theoretical Framework for Service Provider Selection

The project uses an Integrated Model of Decision-Making Process for Goods and Services that combines the Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968) model with service models advanced in the literature, notably the Fisk Model (1981), depicted in Figure 1 above. The focus of analysis will be on how consumers in each selected minority ethnic group go about selecting their suppliers of six different service activities (distributed across three service-product types – search, experience and credence) identified relative to the dominance of the tangible element and the inherent degree of evaluation difficulty. Figure 2 depicts the selected service-products and their distribution.

Figure 2: Distribution of Service Activities in an Array Relative to the Degree of Domination of the Tangible Element and Evaluation Qualities.
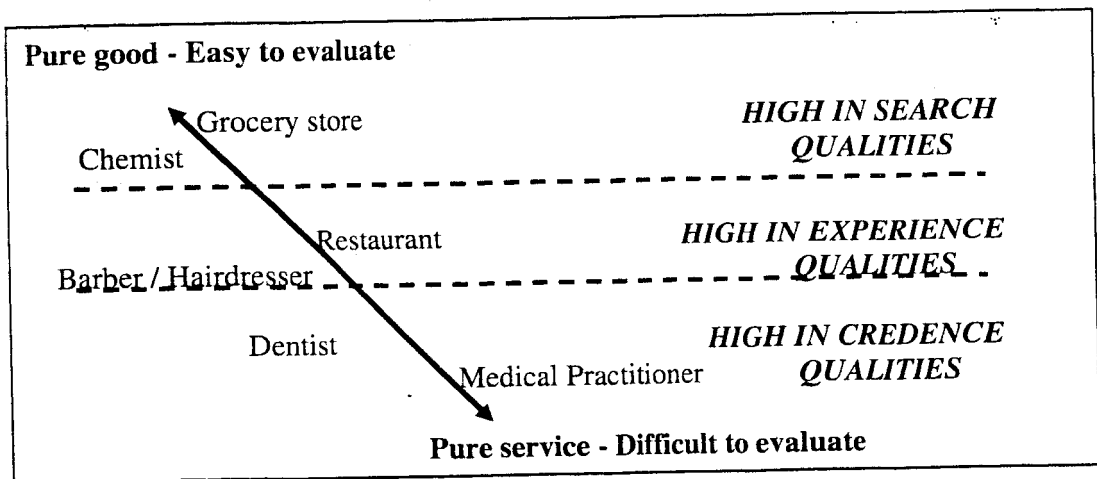
RQ1: Do significant differences exist in the process of service provider selection between persons from different ethnic backgrounds residing in Sydney, Australia in 2009?

RQ2: Do significant differences exist in the process of service provider selection between persons from different ethnic backgrounds residing in Sydney, Australia in 2009, when service-product type is taken into account?

It is envisaged that the research questions will rely on conventional contingency analysis involving categorical data. The decision process is examined relative to pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption stages (Fisk, 1981). A focus on a particular dimension in each stage can capture critical parts of the overall process and establish whether there are significant differences between ethnic groups. In this case, a focus on the search process (preconsumption stage) can inform the need for changing communication strategies; a focus on evaluation criteria (consumption stage) indicates the expectations of persons from different ethnicities; while post-consumption evaluation can indicate common or different reasons for switching (or retaining) the current provider.

The research structure permits inter-group comparative analysis as well as comparison of group aggregates (e.g. East Asian, Southern Mediterranean and Anglo-Celtic) and demographic comparisons, in

general and by service-product type. Key propositions that will be investigated account for the learning from the preliminary exploratory analysis

METHODOLOGY

Preliminary exploratory research will be carried out first, by means of structured in-depth interviews with gatekeepers for each ethnic group. *Gatekeepers* are people that by their knowledge and relationship to the group can facilitate information about group processes, its demeanor, resources and how to best reach its members. To identify gatekeepers, initial information will be obtained from the various Consulates and other official bodies such as the editors of the ethnic press linked with each ethnic group. The number of interviews will be determined by diminishing returns principles.

Departing from the questionnaire used by Pires (2001), which correspond to the imposed etic element of the research, the interviews are used to ensure that all relevant issues in the process of service supplier selection, and only these, are included in the questionnaire. The primary focus of the interviews is to identify aspects that may be circumstantial to the particular minority ethnic group (the emic aspects). This preliminary phase is also important to create awareness about the project, to foster the goodwill of the gatekeepers and, through their endorsement, of the group members towards the project, increasing response rates (Rochford and Venable, 1995).

Since it is envisaged that only one questionnaire will be used for all groups being examined, the final instrument will be subject to the appreciation (for readability and completeness) and comment by the gatekeepers, prior to pre-testing and validation. It is expected that this will minimize response error arising from inaccurate answers by respondents or misanalysis of the answers by the researchers, hence strengthening the findings of the study.

Key information to be obtained from gatekeepers refers to the identification of the major shopping centre preferred by each ethnic group. Identified locations will be assessed by geo-demographic analysis. The survey will be administered by trained interviewers (fluent in both English and the ancestral language, recruited from each ethnic group) using a mall intercept method at the identified shopping centre. Quota, non-probability sampling will be used to ensure that enough valid responses are collected for each group. Respondents will be Sydney permanent residents who are at least 18 years old and the sample will be gender balanced.

An Anglo-Celtic mainstream group will be used as the control group, in order to establish the case for treating ethnic consumers differently. Although minority ethnic groups are selected based on number of persons and non-English ancestral language, self-ascription is the primary basis for determining participants.

Potential respondents approached by interviewers will be screened relative to self ranking of spoken ethnic language fluency. and willingness to identify their self in terms of their ethnicity. Independently of whether respondent agree to participate, responses to the interviewer provide useful insight into identification problems. Support for this approach comes from the importance of language as an initial but not exclusive identifier (Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983) and the need for self-ascription (ABS, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2003).

The survey package will include a project information sheet, consent form and a set of screening questions that captures demographics, macro-cultural dimensions and ethnic identification. A further three pages will consist of a set of questions addressing the service provider selection process for each type of service-product. The questions, repeated for each type of service, address the preferred sources of information used, the reasons for choosing the provider in each class that the respondent uses most frequently, as well as reasons for switching and for supplier retention.

For statistical analysis and to capture a cross section of adult consumers by age and gender balance for each of the eight groups, a group size of approximately 250 respondents per group will be sought (a total sample of 2000 valid respondents). The sample sizes are not proportional to the group populations otherwise a much larger number of mainstream respondents would be required. Data files will be created using the statistical package SPSS, with analysis focusing on the verification of propositions developed after the in-depth interviews with gatekeepers. Data analysis will involve a two-way analysis of variance to test the effects of ethnic group and type of service-product separately, as well as the interaction of these two variables. In addition, if the convenience samples across the ethnic groups are found to be unmatched in terms of other relevant variables such as income and educational attainment, an analysis of covariance will also be undertaken.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Despite growing evidence of the importance of narrowly defined minority ethnic groups for marketing within culturally diverse countries, currently this diversity has a relatively minor influence on marketing strategies, at the macro or the micro levels. A reason for this may be the difficulty in reaching unity in terms of the definition and measurement of ethnicity and in understanding what an aggregate of ethnic groups entails.

While ethnicity underpins minority ethnic groups, it is common for marketers to focus on aggregates of these groups, which discount the ethnicity underpinning and, in doing so, appear to question the theoretical integrity of ethnic marketing. With many countries becoming increasingly diverse, there is an urgent need for research that can ascertain variations in consumer behaviour based on ethnicity differences and on consumption of service-products of variable complexity. This is a necessary prerequisite to enable the development of a predictive model of service-product selection within diverse countries, that can assist in identifying environments where ethnic marketing is likely to either excel or lag.

Ethnic marketing is still a relatively recent phenomenon and the need for the research framework and method proposed in this paper is apparent in terms of the inconsistency between attending to the needs of narrowly defined ethnic groups and the focus on aggregates of those groups. Also very important is to establish a research methodology capable of supporting incremental learning. Since all data examined in this proposed project is collected from Sydney residents, there can be no generalization to other cities, to Australia as a whole, or to other countries. But this is a limitation that will be lessened by future replication studies in other contexts. Ultimately, a marketing view of cultural diversity facilitates understanding of population issues, strengthening communities and supporting families and social inclusion. It also contributes for national health strategy, including preventive health and the ageing population. The findings will advance international research on marketing to ethnic groups, consumer behaviour differences between ethnic groups within a country and strategy development with different product involvement.

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