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Why Hispanic Women Wear What They Wear

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of how Hispanic women communicate their identity through clothing and how cultural values affect how they shop for clothes. Based on in-depth interviews with Hispanic women in Florida, this study demonstrates that Latinas retain overtime a set of values characteristic of the traditional Hispanic culture. This study also reveals that Hispanic women are high self-monitors and enjoy the experience of discovery when they shop. Specific implications for marketers are offered.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000 after the Census revealed the fast growth of the Hispanic population in the U.S, with the purchasing power of this group projected to be about a trillion dollars by 2010, marketers started taking this group seriously. The need to understand these consumers has created targeted strategies and marketing communication efforts. The interest continues to grow as marketers try to understand the importance of acculturation and other lifestyle factors in the segmentation of this group. Food, banking, insurance, and automotive are among the most developed categories targeting this group. Marketers also acknowledge the critical role of women in the shopping decision making in the household, particularly for products and services that involve the family. But there is relatively little research on how Hispanic women shop for clothes and what decisions lie behind the clothes they buy and wear.

Hispanic women are very concerned about their appearance and the image they present. This focus on how they look is inherent to the culture and makes them an attractive target for marketers and retailers of clothing. However, to better connect with this group of consumers, marketers need to understand the sets of values, attitudes and beliefs that underlie how they put their look together and ultimately, how they decide what to buy.

This study is an exploration of some of the cultural factors that shape the way Hispanic women dress. Here I examine how Hispanic women construct and communicate their individual, social, and cultural identity through the way they dress, how this changes with acculturation and how this affects the way they shop for clothes. The findings presented in this paper can help gain insights useful in product development, segmentation, and creation of marketing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Clothes not only serve to protect us from the heat, cold and accidents, to cover parts of our bodies that we consider shameful or private, or to help us increase attractiveness with

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adornments. According to the social-psychological and cultural perspective, one of the main reasons for dressing the way we dress is to differentiate ourselves proclaiming uniqueness (Kawamura, 2005). Through clothing we express our egos (Sapir, 1931), feel narcissistic pleasure (Flügel, 1930) and create self-symbols (Anspach, 1967). Conversely, we wear what we wear to achieve or maintain social approval and gain a sense of belonging to a certain social group (Sproles & Burns, 1994).

Additionally, clothes also help us indicate social status in dimension such as gender, age, and prestige (Barnard, 1996; Flügel, 1930; Lurie, 1981; Sproles & Burns, 1994). Overall, cultures use clothing to differentiate males from females, and younger from older individuals. In Westerns cultures, for example, trousers and heavy materials are traditionally associated with masculinity, whereas high heels, skirts and delicate materials are coded as feminine (Sproles & Burns, 1994).

Clothing can also indicate the status an individual has in the economic system of a given society by reflecting her occupational role (Roach & Eicher, 1979). The point here is that clothes and fashion communicate meanings that go beyond functional characteristics.

This way of communication is possible because clothes are symbols; that is, they are material entities that represent some other non-material entity (Morris, 1955).

We can link elements of clothing with elements of meaning. For example, angular design has been conventionally related to masculinity and curvilinear design to femininity; dark colors are linked to formal occasions while light colors are typically linked to casual occasions (Davis, 1992). There are different approaches to explain how individuals learn about symbols, and ultimately how they consume based on the symbolic meaning of objects. The symbolic consumption perspective, explains how products serve as symbols and how the symbolic meaning products may drive the decision-making process. This means that very often, individuals select clothes because they are symbolic of who they are or who they would like to be (Sproles & Burns, 1994). This self-symbolic nature of clothes—or any material good—is based on the idea that individuals are what they own because their possessions are perceived as a part of their extended selves (Belk, 1988). If from the individual perspective “to be is to have,” from the social perspective “to have is to belong” (Wattanasuwan, 2005). By acquiring and displaying certain possessions we express our group identity.

Little research has been done studying this phenomenon as related to Hispanic women. Some studies, however, have demonstrated that in cultures with an individualistic orientation such as the American culture, consumer are more likely to choose products that convey how different they are, whereas individuals in cultures that are more collectivistic such as the Hispanic culture, tend to choose what will convey how similar they are to the group they belong to (Aaker, 1998; Korzenny and Korzenny, 2005; Valdes, 2000). Another cultural characteristic that influences how Hispanic consumers behave is the traditional view on gender roles. Think about *Machismo*, characterizing the harsh male who also is sensitive and the provider for the family, and *Marianismo*, defining the obedient, powerless but also nurturing woman, devoted wife to her husband and kids (Korzenny and Korzenny, 2005).

Besides the individualistic/collectivistic orientation, De Mooij (2004) refers to uncertainty avoidance and power distance as additional cultural characteristics that explain people’s need for appearance. In collectivistic cultures such as the Hispanic culture people dress well in order to maintain harmony and conform to the social group.

Similarly, in cultures with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance, such as the Hispanic culture, people need to structure the confusing world, and a way to do it is by ritualizing life through dress.

If women in different cultures see appearance with different eyes, the research questions in this study about Hispanic women are:

RQ1: How do Hispanic women communicate their identity through clothing?

RQ2: How does culture influence how they shop and what they buy?

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on one-on-one interviews conducted in participants' houses. The analysis involved a close reading of a sample of 10 conversations of 3-4 hours each. The interview guide used in these semi-ethnographic sections comprised questions designed to have women explain clothing choice and meaning, right there in their closets. Respondents were recruited using a purposeful sampling screening Hispanic women trying to match the average Hispanic woman. Participants were 21-40 years old and lived in Florida. In order to ensure cultural variety, I interviewed women with backgrounds from six Latin American countries. The screener used also identified the level of acculturation of the participant and her interest in fashion and clothes. I interviewed women from different levels of acculturation, women who had been in the U.S. for just five years, women who came to the country as adolescents and women who were born here from first generation Hispanics.

Another sampling strategy used in this study was referral sampling. Once a respondent was located and interviewed, she facilitated the contact information of a friend that they considered information-rich respondents.

After collecting the data (recorded interviews and pictures), I started the analysis by organizing responses and observations according to the research questions. Next, to identify concepts and themes through commonalities and contradictions, I followed the constant comparative method, which entails coding and grouping of the data, then contrasting and comparing it (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman 1994; Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

Each of these women had innumerable stories about the role of clothes in their lives. Here I encapsulate some of the main insights.

FINDINGS

One main conclusion is that participants in this study are similar in one fundamental way: when it comes to clothing and appearance, they are driven by the values and beliefs that come from the Hispanic culture. The way they give meaning to clothes and express their identities through appearance show that the Hispanic cultural values are deeply rooted in their hearts and minds, persisting over time and generations.

Traditional Gender Roles Define Femininity

Women in this study communicate gender and femininity through traditionally coded elements. In their minds, there is a need for an unambiguous differentiation between male and female. They reject looks and fashion styles that don't accentuate this dichotomy. When talking about femininity and the way they dress, it becomes clear that details are what makes a piece of clothing feminine. Ruffles, gems, glitter or some combination of these are the elements that carry the meaning of femininity in their dressing code.

My white shirt with white lace and embroidery, with different types of collars, with ruffles are very feminine, I love them. Also, my new cashmere sweater looks very feminine because it has longer sleeves that end with little ruffles and it is light blue. (Ana)

For many of the Latinas I interviewed the constant variation of styles is another way of communicating that they are women. For them, the example of a non-feminine woman would be one who looks the same day after day. They feel that being playful with appearance and avoiding repetition differentiates women from men. The need for differentiation between male and female is not exclusive for the Hispanic culture. In the everyday life of many cultures we use appearance to shape our understanding of what is to be male or female (Kaiser, 1997). However, it can be said that the American culture has an orientation towards equality, which includes expectations about appearance. In contrast, the traditional Hispanic culture has an orientation toward gender differentiation. Therefore, the degree to which women are expected to show a concern for appearance tends to be higher in the Hispanic culture. Marketers who show an understanding of femininity in traditional terms are likely to connect with this group of consumers.

Age Categories As Used In Stores Are Irrelevant

Not too different from American women, Latinas express youth through clothing that is revealing (tighter, shorter), and maturity through clothing that covers the body and the signs of aging. But while American women have clothes preselected by age categories at the store (junior or misses, ladies, etc.); some Hispanic women find themselves in a predicament because this categorization doesn't suit their needs. Hispanic women in their 30s and 40s have difficulties finding clothes that fit how they want to look for women their age.

That is why when I go to Dillard's or Sears, the clothes [I see] are like for old ladies, or sexy like the clothes for black women, like Baby Phat, that are too small, too tight, too over the top, and not elegant. (Sonia, 40 years old)

The clothes for misses have some details that don't work for me, for example, the fabrics are too light and thin. As I get older, that type of fabric doesn't work for my body. I have to wear pants with thicker fabrics. Then, the pants with those

fabrics have cuts that are too straight. As for the blouses, they are also too loose and the prints are boring and too serious. (Ana, 40 years old)

To target women in this age category, marketers may do well offering clothes that are young in design but more mature in the quality and materials used.

Women See The World As A Big Theater

Women in this study perceive their identities as complex and see themselves playing different roles. Some of them describe in dramaturgical terms how they decide what to wear, giving their personal intuitive version of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation approach.

Each stage in my life has been marked by the role that I have to perform. I've been the student, I've been the newspaper journalist, and I've dressed like one. I was the wife, and I dressed like one. I've worn a costume for each role. (Elena)

Because culturally they are expected to show high concern for their appearance, Hispanic women learn very early how to monitor their environment and develop different kinds of looks that they consider fit the particular occasion and the audience. For example, most women mentioned the importance of projecting an image of competence at the workplace, which they convey by creating a more conservative look.

As they weigh the audience they'll encounter, the cultural notions of hierarchy and respect come into play. For example, when they ponder what they need to wear for a celebration, like a baptism or a wedding, they make an extra effort to meet the perceived high expectations of the audience.

Those events deserve people dressing up. It is a matter of respect toward the people who invite you. You are supposed to be consistent with the occasion and you must—even if financially you are not doing well—you have to make the sacrifice to go decent and dressed up. (Celina)

Marketers that acknowledge this theatrical streak and help Hispanic women build up their repertoire by creating different settings for their multiple roles are more likely to connect with this group of consumers.

Women Dress Their Character And Rehearse Their Scenes

Because of their "role-playing" women assign costumes to different roles and an outfit for one role is not used for another.

Here are my skirts. They are for going out only. I rarely wear skirts for work. The working clothes are just for working. I don't use them for other occasions (Norma).

To help separate costumes for different roles, women divide their closet into sections.

Such compartmentalized closets are typical to what has been defined as high self-monitors. Women who are high self-monitors “have a rather large wardrobe with a diversity of styles and accessories, providing sufficient variety to choose from in their quest to present the ‘correct’ or desired image” (Peluchette et al. 2006, p. 48) Self-monitoring as an effort to present a socially acceptable image appears to be an intrinsic characteristic of collectivistic cultures and compartmentalizing their closets facilitate the creation of all the necessary roles.

Another strategy to achieve the desired variation of appearance involves planning outfits in advance. Women in this study rarely improvise their looks. They carefully select the day before what they are going to wear and make sure that everything is clean and ironed. Some of them plan what to wear several days in advance, especially if they are going to a special event. Organizing what they are going to wear is like a rehearsal for them. Many times they actually try on what they are planning to wear; sometimes it is just a mental rehearsal.

The day before I prepare everything in my mind. I know everything I have, so I just think “what am I gonna wear tomorrow?” And I go to bed and I think about different combinations. I’ll form it in my mind. The next morning I like to put it together and find the right shoes for it. (Roxana)

Compartmentalization and rehearsal help them create roles, but this playfulness also helps them guarantee the illusion of infinite novelty and change that is so important to communicate their femininity. They continuously monitor what they have worn in front of an audience and are very careful not to repeat the same look.

There is an opportunity for marketers to connect with Hispanic women by helping them create and rehearse the different roles they perform.

Fit Is The Main Driver

Aside from the winning combination of low price and good quality, fit is the main motivator to buy a specific item. Fit for these women means clothes that are flattering to their body types, but also clothes that match their sense of selves. Finding clothes that fit their bodies and their personal style is more important than being up to date, wearing the latest fashions, or using a particular brand.

I would not wear [skinny jeans]. I like the way wide-leg pants look on me. I don’t care if they are not fashionable now, but [I feel] I shouldn’t wear the skinny jeans. Like they say: “From fashion, only what suits you.” (Maria)

Their idea of fit comes in part from the fact that many of them had mothers or grandmothers who were seamstresses. This means that they grew up not only with an emotional relationship with clothes but also with high expectation of how clothes should fit. As a consequence of living so close to custom-made clothes, the participants demonstrated rather sophisticated knowledge about fabrics and finishing. They were used to having clothes tailored to their exact measures and therefore many times found it

difficult to buy clothes that fit their bodies as well as they wanted. Not having the perfect fit

feels like it is not your own clothes, it is like you are using borrowed clothes. Like it is not even your size or your own clothes. (Norma)

Marketers would benefit from designing and promoting clothes that match Hispanic women expectations of fit.

Shopping Behavior. The Joy Of Exploring And Finding Treasures

The majority of women prefer to shop in discount stores like Marshall's, TJMaxx, and Ross. They like these stores mainly because of the low prices. But another major reason is the variety of styles, models, brands and items that they find there, and the emotional benefit of finding one-of-a-kind piece of clothes. For women in this study a big part of shopping is about exploration, adventure, and the surprise of discovering the unknown.

I shop in Marshall's a lot. You have to be lucky. But for a collector like me [that is perfect]. I just go to see what they have and I'm not going to find two of the same thing. (Maria)

I like discount stores such as Marshall's, Ross, TJMaxx. They have different brands and styles and a lot of options to buy something special in contrast to a store like GAP that has a single style and it's very boring. (Elena)

Marketers may attract more Hispanic consumers by recreating at the store the experience of discovery and introducing the element of surprise.

Fashion According To Seasons Is Limiting

All my interviewees came from tropical countries where it is relatively warm all year round. Many of them bought boots and jackets for the first time only in the U.S. They resist certain fashion norms related to the seasons because they find them limiting. For instance, even if they are aware of the popular rule "no white after Labor Day" they don't follow it because they prefer to use every color and almost every fabric all year round.

In terms of materials, during the spring and summer you have to wear linen and cotton. I learned that by watching [people]. Also people say things to you. During summer I went to work wearing a corduroy skirt, and the secretary told me "you must be dying of heat." It was a short skirt. I wasn't dying. People [here] are too square because [they say] corduroy should not be worn in the summer. [I think] one should use corduroy whenever one wants. (Ana)

Because they don't necessarily follow the colors and materials of the seasons, they would like to buy any style any time of the year. This generates some dissatisfaction and protest against retailers:

Here colors are by season. Of course you could wear red all year round if you wanted to, but people here use more red during the holidays, more white during the summer, brown during the fall. It is crazy how people [in the U.S.] buy clothes several months before they need them, just to be ready for the next season. It has happened to me that I go to the store and want to buy something that I need in the middle of a season and it is no longer available. We are still in winter and stores already have springtime styles. (Ana)

Marketers need to understand that marketing clothes based on the seasons may not be the most appealing way to attract less acculturated Hispanic women.

CONCLUSIONS

Marketers who understand where Hispanic women come from and what motivates them are more likely to offer this group a shopping experience that is relevant and meaningful. Traditional values that emphasize femininity, collectivism, meeting others' expectations, and conforming to social hierarchy dominate Hispanic women in the U.S. even as after years of living in the country. The importance of self-presentation and managing their appearance determines their choice of clothes and how they communicate their identity. Overall, women in this study fall into what Peluchette and colleagues (2006) call high self-monitors. According to these scholars, self-monitoring is a trait that explains why individuals try to exert control on how they present themselves to others. High self-monitors are especially sensitive to cues about the appropriateness of their behavior and appearance. They have rather larger wardrobes with a diversity of styles and accessories that help them choose the desired image. They invest more time, energy and money in creating a repertoire of self-images. Self-monitoring and appearance management are considered universal behaviors (Kaiser, 1997). However, if cultural differences are a matter of degree of universal behaviors, it is possible to conclude that individuals in a collectivist and other-oriented culture, like the Hispanic culture, are going to be the highest self-monitors, because for them it is important to fulfill social expectations. In communicating with clothes, having a large wardrobe is like having a rich vocabulary. Clothes give women the tools to communicate nuances adapting the "speech" according to the audience.

What This Means To Marketers

Designers and manufacturers need to pay more attention to the need for fit. Because Hispanic women value the fit of tailor-made clothes, retailers that offer alteration services may attract more of these consumers. Also, promoting the product by emphasizing how much care is put into making it, showing the process and the technical details, may attract Hispanic women.

Clothing is not perceived as separate from other elements of appearance such as make-up, hair, accessories, and nails. This represents an opportunity for cross-promotion. Hispanic women cultivate different roles they perform in life and like meeting the expectations of their audience. Marketers can take advantage of the need for change and variation by explicitly using dramaturgical imagery. Retailers may use this imagery to

create a theatrical experience in the store, allowing women to be playful and rehearse their roles. Emphasizing the variety of styles and brands that the store carries is likely to appeal to Hispanic women.

Marketers and retailers need to take into consideration that the perception of how women should dress by age may not be the same in the Hispanic market as in the general market. It is important to re-evaluate how relevant the age categories (Junior, Misses, etc) are for this market.

Because they don't necessarily follow the colors and materials of the season, the permanent presence of an off-season rack may gain fans among Hispanic consumers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

It is necessary to acknowledge this study's limitations. First, the data was based on the accounts of only 10 Hispanic women. This convenience sample is not representative of the overall Hispanic female population. Second, the participants belong to the middle class, not allowing for comparison among socio-economic levels. Third, most interviews were conducted in Florida where the influence of the Hispanic culture is prevalent and the seasons are almost non-existent.

A potential area for future studies is a comparison between Hispanic women to Non-Hispanic Whites, African-Americans, and Asian women. Such cross-cultural approach seems promising to better understand the cultural variables that affect how women shop.

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