A Conceptual Model Linking Acculturative Stress to Consumption for Symbolic Self-Completion among First Generation Immigrants in the U.S.

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Introduction and Purpose

Over the last two decades, studies have focused on understanding acculturative stress and its impacts among various immigrant populations in the U.S (Thomas & Choi, 2006; Utsey & Chae, 2002). In the context of first generation Asian-Indians in the U.S., studies have reported that those with high ethnic identity experience acculturative stress when there is an interruption in the process of self-defining as an Indian (Farver, Bhadha, & Narang, 2002; Rumbaut, 1994). First-generation Asian-Indians also experience acculturative stress when their second-generation children identify more with the U.S. culture as compared to their ethnic culture (Rumbaut, 1994). Despite the importance of acculturative stress on mental health outcomes of immigrant populations, there is little research on how individuals experiencing acculturative stress cope through the usage of symbols for ethnic self-definition. The purpose of the present study is to propose a conceptual model (see Fig. 1) based on symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) to delineate: (i) the influence of commitment to ethnic-identity on acculturative stress; (ii) the moderating roles of duration of stay in the U.S. and perceived feelings of incompleteness in ethnic identity in the above relationship; (iii) the influence of acculturative stress on the usage of symbols for ethnic self-definition; (iv) influence of usage of symbols for ethnic self-definition on purchase intention for Asian-Indian identity-related apparel products.
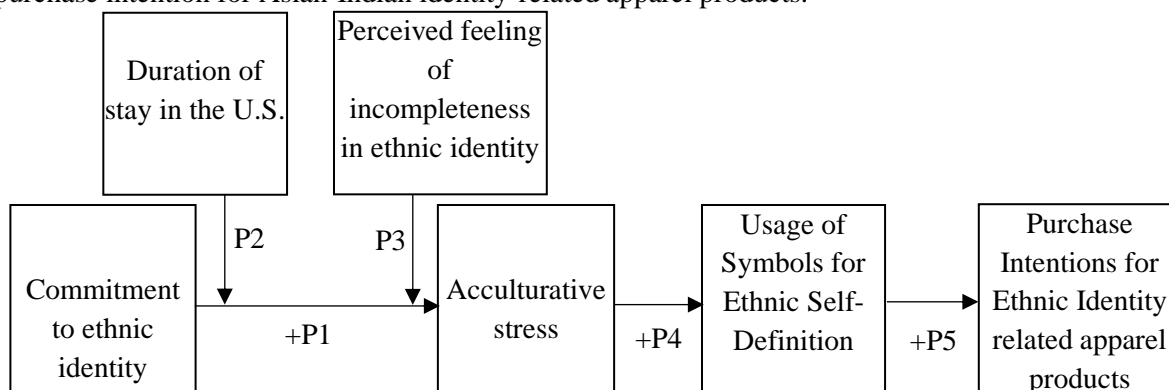

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Theory and Literature

The symbolic self-completion theory by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981) posits that when individuals commit in defining themselves through an identity, they use identity-related self-completion symbols to complete their self-definition. The theory further proposes that when individuals experience disruption in self-completion, they enhance their symbolic consumption to compensate for their feelings of incompleteness (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Mehta and Belk (1991) suggested that the newly immigrated Indians have higher ethnic identity as compared to the prior generations of immigrated Indians in the U.S.; and can experience acculturative stress when they cannot maintain ties with their

cultural roots (Krishnan & berry, 1992). As such, they try to maintain their Indian ethnic identity through the usage of various symbols of self-completion such as eating Indian food, wearing Indian ethnic apparel, and celebrating Indian festivals (Mehta & Belk, 1991). First generation Asian-Indians, who have high ethnic identity, but feel their American-born children are incomplete in their ethnic identity, tend to incorporate Indian ethnic symbols in the child rearing process, such as participating in Indian cultural events, practicing Indian religious rituals, and visiting India at least once a year (Farver et al., 2007; Inman, 2006; Inman et al., 2007). Asian-Indians also feel acculturative stress due to the constant battle between the need to integrate into the U.S. culture and maintain ties with Indian culture (Rumbaut, 1997). Disruptions can be experienced in the process of maintaining ethnic ties when there is a perceived neglect for cultural maintenance in the mainstream culture (Athique, 2005). In dealing with this stress, Asian-Indians use various symbols to ward off any influence that could threaten their self-completion as Indians (Inman et al., 2007) by enhancing identity-related consumption.

Propositions

Based on the above theorizing, the following propositions were developed for the role of acculturative stress in consumption related to symbolic self-completion among first generation Asian-Indians in the U.S. (see Fig. 1):

P1: Commitment to ethnic identity positively influences acculturative stress.

P2: When the duration of stay in the U.S. is less (more), higher commitment to ethnic identity predicts higher (lower) acculturative stress.

P3: When the perceived feeling of incompleteness in ethnic identity is higher (lower), higher commitment to ethnic identity will predict higher (lower) acculturative stress.

P4: Acculturative stress positively influences the usage of symbols for ethnic self-definition.

P5: Usage of symbols for ethnic self-definition positively influences the purchase intentions for ethnic identity-related apparel products.

Significance of the Model

Asian-Indians in the U.S. have the highest income levels among the Asian population, followed by Filipino and Japanese (Lopez et al., 2017). The median household income of Asian-Indians in the U.S. was 107,000 USD in the year 2015 (Zong & Batalova, 2017), hence this group constitutes an important consumer segment with respect to purchasing power. Creating deep insights on first generation Asian-Indians will facilitate catering to their specific needs in a more meaningful way. For example, in terms of the societal and managerial significance, future studies applying the proposed conceptual model could help generate implication for alleviating acculturative stress for this group by identifying appropriate symbols of self-completion. Increasing the availability of such products, symbols, and avenues of consumption and purchasing can help these consumers cope with the acculturative stress, while simultaneously benefiting retailers that source these products.

In terms of the theoretical significance, the conceptual model proposed in this study will contribute to theory building related to symbolic self-completion, in the context of ethnic identity self-definition among first-generation Asian-Indians in the U.S. The proposed model extends the theory by extrapolating the relationship between the usage of symbols for ethnic self-definition and purchase intentions for Asian-Indian identity-related products. Further, the model contributes to the theory of symbolic self-completion by delineating the important role of acculturative stress in ethnic identity self-completion among the Asian-Indian immigrant population in the U.S. Moreover, the model proposes an important boundary condition, the duration of stay in the U.S., which may play an important role in influencing the degree to which first generation Asian-Indians experience acculturative stress and how in turn, it translates into symbolic consumption.

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