Salesperson preference among Hispanic and Asian immigrants

Lynn Eunjung Kwak
The Patton College of Education and Human Services, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA, and
Jane Z. Sojka
College of Business, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine differences between Hispanic and Asian immigrants and their preferences in the appearance of and interaction with salespeople.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 171 female Hispanic and 153 Asian female retail consumers in a midwestern city, who immigrated to the USA, were surveyed. Salesperson-customer interaction and preference for salespeople with a similar ethnic appearance were assessed.

Findings – Findings from $F$-tests indicated that in this study Asians have a significantly greater preference for a salesperson similar in appearance to themselves and Hispanics have significantly greater preference for salespeople who offer attentive service.

Practical implications – Retailers will benefit by understanding and capitalizing on differences which will encourage customer loyalty to their retail stores.

Originality/value – Extending the observable characteristics facet of the buyer-seller similarity model, the research results suggest that buyers from different ethnic groups will assess salesperson characteristics differently.

Keywords United States of America, Immigrants, Consumer behaviour, Women, Salesperson preference, Hispanics, Asians

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
The premise of buyer-seller similarity is that common characteristics between buyers and sellers will increase the likelihood of a sale (Evans, 1963). Debated for over 40 years, researchers investigating the power of buyer-seller similarity on sales have obtained mixed results (Lichtenthal and Tellefsen, 2001). Past studies examining the impact of age, gender, dress, and race on sales performance suggest cautious support for the positive influence of buyer-seller similarity on sales (Jones et al., 1998; Kang and Hillary, 1998; Smith, 1998). Furthermore, in a global economy, cultural adaptations (such as hiring appropriate salespeople) are essential for business success (Eckert, 2006).

Lichtenthal and Tellefsen (2001) advanced the study of buyer-seller similarity with their model classifying salesperson traits as internal or observable. According to their model, observable characteristics of a salesperson help a customer quickly determine if the salesperson is similar to them. Salesperson appearance and interaction are among observable characteristics found to be used by buyers to determine similarity to salespeople (Lichtenthal and Tellefsen, 2001). Yet all buyers may not necessarily value
these attributes equally. Research investigating differences between immigrant populations and their perceptions of salespeople has been lacking. The purpose of this study is to examine Hispanic and Asian immigrants' preferences for retail salespeople who are similar to them with regard to appearance and interaction mannerisms.

Examination of Hispanic and Asian immigrants in this study was based upon both practical and theoretical reasons. Hispanics and Asians comprise two of the fastest growing minority groups in the USA. Based on (US Census Bureau, 2004), the Hispanic population is projected to reach 73 million by 2030 and 102.6 million by 2050. By the year 2050, approximately one quarter of the US population will be identified as Hispanics. Likewise, the Asian population is expected to grow to 22.5 million by 2030 and 33.4 million by 2060 (US Census Bureau, 2004). Furthermore, the combined purchasing power of these two groups makes them an attractive market for retailers. Recent statistics found the Hispanic population's annual purchasing power to be over $686.3 billion while Asian Americans’ purchasing power was estimated at over $397 billion (Reyes, 2006). Furthermore, the purchasing power of these two groups shows steady growth. Purchasing power for the USA as a whole increased 49 percent from 2000 to 2009. In contrast, Asian American purchasing power during that same time period posted an 89 percent gain. Moreover, purchasing power for the Hispanic population recorded a 100 percent gain during the same 2000-2009 period (Humphreys, 2008). Understanding the unique buying behavior characteristics of each of these ethnic groups becomes critical for retailers due to their size and purchasing power.

Unique characteristics of Hispanics and Asian Americans populations provide a valuable contrast of different variables (i.e. appearance and interaction with salespeople) in study of the buyer-seller similarity. Whereas the Asian population is more readily recognizable by sight due to distinctive facial features and coloring, the Hispanic population is physically diverse, that appearance may not be an accurate indicator of ethnicity. Customers may expect varying ranges of interaction with their salesperson with regards to traits such as attentiveness, sympathy and friendliness.

**Theoretical perspectives and hypotheses development**

**Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is a classification based upon a person’s demographic and geographical origins which result in a shared culture and background. Ethnic identity is how people in the ethnic group relate themselves to their larger society and within their own group (Berry, 1980; Cleveland and Laroche, 2007). People who identify with a certain ethnic group share similar values, language, artifacts, rituals, and food. Immigrants to the USA bring with them their distinctive cultural heritage, belief system, and behaviors: the sum of which is reflected in their shopping behaviors (Fowler et al., 2006). Differences between ethnic groups have been found with regard to shopping values and mall activities (Michon and Chebat, 2004), shopping strategies (Shim and Gehert, 1996), purchases (Dyer et al., 2006), price reactions (Ackennan and Tellis, 2001), shopping time and number of cues considered (Ackennan and Tellis, 2001), brand loyalty (Saegert et al., 1985), brand extensions (Monga and John, 2007), and word-of-mouth advertising (Chung and Darke, 2006). Although Hispanics and Asians may share the similar experience of being strangers in a strange land and of being increasingly significant target markets for retailers, the uniqueness of each ethnic group suggests that each will have different preferences with regard to salespeople and the service they are provided.
Hispanic refers to people who identify themselves as Hispanic/Latino and come from Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Central America (US Census Bureau, 2004). People of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Degree of ethnic identification has been found to influence purchase behavior and family decision making. Donthu and Cherian (1992) found that individuals with strong Hispanic identity had less response to marketing tactics than those with weaker Hispanic identity. Webster (1994) found that husbands with a strong Hispanic identity had a more significant impact on family decisions than those husbands with less Hispanic identity.

Asians – people who identify themselves as Asian and who have originated from Asia including the Far East and South East – have been found to exhibit unique purchase behavior (Jiang, 2005; Li and Su, 2007). In their study of Asian-Americans’ purchase decisions, Kim and Kang-Park (1995) found that Asians are more brand and store loyal and that they value high-quality goods. In addition, Asians are more likely shop with friends or family members than are their Caucasian counterparts. Extant research has begun to delineate differences between the two ethnic groups; however, specific research into salesperson preferences and ethnicity is still lacking.

**Salesperson appearance**

Buyers may feel welcomed when they see salespeople who look like them. The sales literature has long held the importance of salesperson similarity in establishing sales relationships. As early as Evans (1963), researchers have investigated how similarity between buyers and sellers influences their interaction. Studies in the sales literature have investigated a number of dimensions including attitudinal similarity (Fine and Gardial, 1990), personality traits (Dion et al., 1995), and appearance reflecting age (Kang and Hillery, 1998), race, and nationality (Campbell et al., 2006; Churchill et al., 1975; Jones et al., 1998). Perceived buyer-seller similarities have been found to increase the level of trust in the salesperson and improve sales performance (Dion et al., 1995). According to Lichtenthal and Tellefsen’s (2001) buyer-seller similarity theory, customer perceptions of salespeople may result from observable characteristics such as height, age, interaction, speech and other cues. In transactional sales, such as a retail setting, customers may quickly form judgments to assess the trustworthiness of the salesperson. Hence, in retail, customers may be forced to rely on observable characteristics to ascertain salesperson preferences (Figure 1).

In addition, according to social psychology matching theory (Berschied and Walster, 1978), the similarity of two people increases their degree of attraction. Judgments are made on the basis of cues such as appearance (Campbell et al., 2006). Cultural similarities have been found to positively influence attitudes of the target population (Aaker, 2000). The impact of first impressions is especially worth noting in a retail sales setting where sales may be transactional in nature and the salesperson-customer interaction may be a brief encounter; interpersonal trust between the customer and salesperson has yet to be established.

**The impact of salesperson appearance on customer preferences**

Race – which can be established by appearance – has been found to be a visual cue used by buyers to insinuate seller credibility (Jones et al., 1998). Matching salesperson appearance with customer ethnicity is likely to be valued differently among Asian and Hispanic populations due to physical and cultural differences. Salesperson appearance
may play a less significant role in retail sales for the Hispanic population. Hispanic appearance is physically diverse ranging from dark skinned, swarthy native Spaniards to blue-eyed blonds. For Hispanics, appearance may not be an accurate indicator of ethnicity. Ethnic identification on the basis of appearance poses a challenge for the Hispanic population. In contrast, appearances, in general, play a significant role in Asian culture (Ngai et al., 2007; Zhou and Hui, 2003; Zhou and Belk, 2004). The Asian population is more readily recognizable by sight due to distinctive facial features, dark hair, brown eyes, and skin color, which allow members of the Asian population to quickly recognize each other. This natural insider trust and quick ability to identify insiders by sight suggests that Asians will express a preference for a salesperson similar to them in appearance.

Hence, the following hypothesis was tested:

H1. The level of preference for similarity in ethnic appearance between a salesperson and a customer will be higher for Asian immigrants than Hispanic immigrants.

Interaction between salespeople and customers
Because of cultural differences in shopping experience, it is reasonable to expect that Hispanic and Asian immigrants differ in their preferences for service in retail settings. Studies of Asian mall shoppers in the USA found that, especially for older Korean Americans, the shopping experience serves a utilitarian function; they shop to purchase what they need (Kang et al., 1996). In their study, motivation to shop as a social
experience was overall weaker for Korean shoppers than for other groups (Caucasians, Hispanics, and African-Americans).

In contrast, Hispanic cultures are more relationship and socially oriented (Arnold and Bianchi, 2001; Shim and Gehert, 1996). For Hispanics, the language and the ability to communicate are as important as the product being purchased (Eckman et al., 1997; Fowler et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, research has shown that Hispanics experience a greater enjoyment of shopping and report more recreational/social shopping experiences than other ethnic groups (Eastlick and Shim, 1995; Herche and Balasubramanian, 1994; Kim and Kang-Park, 1995). To make the shopping experience a pleasant one, Hispanic shoppers likely prefer personal interaction and service. Based on these ethnic differences, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2. Preference for more interaction between the salesperson and customer will be higher for Hispanic immigrants than Asian immigrants.

Method
Data collection and respondent characteristics
Survey data for this study were collected in Cook County (the Chicago area) Illinois because of the high Hispanic and Asian immigrant populations residing in the area. Two retail sites were selected: one site with a high number of Hispanic shoppers and another site with a high number of Asian shoppers. Store owners agreed to allow their customers to participate in the survey; all survey data were collected at retail stores. At each location, the store manager provided a table and chair in their stores for three days. Store consumers were asked if they wanted to participate in the survey. Participants received a $2 gift card as an incentive. Completing the questionnaire took about ten minutes. Questions asked respondents about their shopping experiences in general; responses were not limited to the particular store where data was collected. In order to control for variances in income and gender, only female customers whose income was under $45,000 were analyzed. Previous studies confirmed that females are more prone to shopping and spend more time in a retail store. Survey collection resulted in a total of 324 (Hispanics = 173 and Asians = 151) useable questionnaires for the purpose of the study. Length of US residency varied with over half the sample residing in the USA 15 years or less. Demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table I.

Measurements
Salesperson-customer interaction variable was measured via an instrument developed by the researchers. This measure was created based on the review of the relevant literature in sales studies (Cronin et al., 2000; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Saegert et al., 1985). Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement. The statements were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree). The six items of salesperson-customer interaction measurement and their factor loadings are presented in Table II. A principal component factor analysis among these items resulted in one factor. Factor loadings ranged from 0.60 to 0.68 and Cronbach’s α was 0.71. Preference for salespeople with a similar ethnic appearance was assessed via the statement “I like salespeople who have a similar appearance as my ethnic background.”
Results

Significant mean differences between Hispanics and Asians for each variable (i.e. ethnic appearance and interaction with salespeople) were examined via $F$-tests. Based on the result of an $F$-test for salesperson ethnic appearance, Asians significantly preferred a salesperson similar in appearance to their own ethnic background ($M = 3.54$) compared to Hispanics ($M = 3.30$). In terms of salesperson-customer interaction, Hispanics had a significantly higher mean score ($M = 4.34$) than Asians ($M = 4.15$). The results of each Levene’s test were not significant for the two outcome measurements, which indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met for these analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Hispanics ($n = 173$)</th>
<th>Asians ($n = 151$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residency in USA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 3 years</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-10 years</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20 years</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 20 years</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 years or less</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 56</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below $15,000</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,001-25,000</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,001-35,000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,001-45,000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate and beyond</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Demographic characteristics of participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items: I like salespeople who</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
<th>Cronbach’s $\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are kind and friendly to me</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>greet me when I enter and exit the store</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allow me to shop without pressure</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are available when I need assistance</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are sympathetic</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give personal attention instead of just checking on me</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalues</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of variance</td>
<td>41.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Question items and factor loadings for salesperson-customer interaction
Then, a series of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted to control the possible effects of demographic characteristics (i.e. age, education, income level, and length of residency) on each test of the dependant variable. The levels of demographic characteristics were coded 1-5 and were used as covariates. The ANCOVA test statistically removes the variance caused by extraneous factors from the dependent variable, which are not the primary focus of the study (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). The ANCOVA test was applied for each hypothesis to better assess the effects of ethnicity.

For H1 (the level of preference for similarity in ethnic appearance between a salesperson and a customer will be higher for Asian immigrants than Hispanic immigrants), ANCOVA results indicated that the four demographic influences were not significant covariates for salesperson ethnic appearance but the F-statistic for ethnicity was significant ($F = 6.85, p < 0.05$). Therefore, H1 was supported. For H2 (preference for more interaction between the salesperson and customer will be higher for Hispanic immigrants than Asian immigrants), the four demographic influences were also not significant but the F-statistic for ethnicity was significant ($F = 7.58, p < 0.05$). Thus, H2 was supported. Table III presents the means, standard deviations of the outcome variables, and the F-values from the ANCOVA.

**Discussion and implications**

The results of our study support and concur with work by other researchers who have found ethnicity to be an important segmentation variable for targeting consumers (Emslie *et al.*, 2007; Herche and Balasubramanian, 1994). The results of this study show that significant differences between Hispanic and Asian immigrant customers in terms of preferences in appearance of and interaction with salespeople when demographic characteristics (age, education, income, and length of residency) were controlled. Asian consumers prefer a salesperson that looks like them and Hispanics respond more positively to attention from the salesperson than Asians. These results hold implications for both retailing practitioners and academics studying Hispanic and Asian immigrant consumers. Retailers will benefit by understanding and capitalizing on these differences will encourage customer loyalty to their retail stores.

Ethnic similarity in appearances was found to be an important factor for Asian buyers. It would behoove retailers targeting Asian immigrant consumers to encourage their salespeople to capitalize on commonalities shared with the Asian culture including physical appearance. Similarly, retailers targeting Hispanic immigrant consumers should match Hispanic salespeople knowledgeable about Hispanic shopping preferences to effectively target Hispanic immigrant consumers. Owing to growing globalization, retailers interact with more consumers from various ethnic backgrounds than ever before (Cleveland and Laroche, 2007). When people travel and visit tourist places they may have a tendency to make quick decisions with a single or limited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>Hispanics M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Asians M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$t$ (n = 324)</th>
<th>$F$ (df)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salesperson appearance</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>$-2.11^*$</td>
<td>6.85$^*$ (df = 1, 314)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesperson interaction</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>$3.37^*$</td>
<td>7.58$^*$ (df = 1, 316)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $^*$ $p < 0.05, ^{**} p < 0.001
interaction with the seller. Today’s fast moving retail business does not allow buyers enough time to invest in building relationships with retail salespeople. Furthermore, when the goods are not expensive and are associated with low risks, sales tend to be transactional and buyers tend to make prompt purchase decisions. Hence, appearance in similarity and shopping interactions, both of which are observable cues, can be initial factors that attract buyers to sellers. In addition, retailers cannot make the assumption that all immigrant populations use identical cues to evaluate salespeople. In fact, Asian immigrants appear to value salesperson appearance more heavily while Hispanic immigrants prefer to evaluate salespersons interactions within the store. Retailers need to assess the ethnicity of the immigrant population they are targeting and hire the appropriate sales force.

Our research examined the theory of buyer-seller similarity in regard to ethnic customers’ salesperson preference. Lichtenthal and Tellefson (2001) portrayed buyer-seller similarity assessment as consisting of two components: observable and unobservable characteristics. Extending the observable characteristics facet of the Lichtenthal and Tellefson (2001) model, our research results suggest that buyers from different ethnic groups will assess salesperson characteristics differently. In addition, while the Lichtenthal and Tellefson (2001) model was designed for industrial sales interactions, our results suggest the model holds applicability for retail sales as well. Our findings support that immigrant buyers’ processing of salespeople’s observable characteristics leads to inferred similarity and a positive preference for the salesperson which translates to increased sales for the retailer.

Limitations and future research
Future research is needed to extend the generalizability of this work. The scope of our research was limited to female immigrants with incomes under $45,000. Survey data for this study were collected in the Mideast region (the Chicago area) and future research may collect data from other regions of the USA in order to enhance representation of immigrants. Future research might also include American shoppers in the sample as a basis for comparison. It is possible that with the increased exposure of global media to young shoppers, cultural differences may decrease. It is recommended that a larger sample size would include both genders as well as multiple income levels.

In addition, future research should consider strength of ethnic identification and assimilation. Length of stay in the USA has been associated with immigrant consumers’ differential skills and their ability to adapt to the American way of life. However, adaptability needs to be considered in the context of age. Is age (rather than ethnic group) a more dominating factor in the adaptation of US habits? Future research could begin by contrasting Hispanic and Asians consumers with similar ages and years in the USA. Within both the Hispanic and Asian populations, diverse variations in country of origin exist. Additional research is needed to investigate differences within each ethnic group and identify variations in country of origin for both customers and salespersons.

With the globalization of retailing and the increase of the Hispanic and Asian immigrant populations in the USA, it behooves retailers to identify the different preferences of buyer-seller similarity among these important ethnic groups. Our research assists in the understanding of US immigrants based upon their cultural experience and background. Understanding preferences with regard to salespeople is one step in increasing our understanding of immigrant shopping behavior. The results
of this and future studies may help researchers and managers understand and overcome some of the cultural and individual differences contributing to conflicts that arise when diverse peoples interact. As immigrant issues remain in the forefront of American public policy, increasing our understanding of the immigrant population becomes increasingly imperative.

References


**Further reading**


**About the authors**

Dr Lynn Eunjung Kwak (PhD – Florida State University) is an Assistant Professor at The Patton College of Education and Human Services, Ohio University. She teaches Retail Merchandising, Product Development, and Strategic Retail Policy. Her research interests include retail consumer buying behavior and product development in retail industry. Dr Lynn Eunjung Kwak is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: kwak@ohio.edu

Dr Jane Z. Sojka (PhD – Washington State University) is a visiting Associate Professor at the University of Cincinnati. She teaches Marketing Principles, Professional Selling, and Consumer Behavior, among other courses. She worked as a Marketing Consultant prior to being employed as Materials Manager for the Coleman Company. Her research interests include affect and decision processing, professional selling, and visual/verbal communication.