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A cultural perspective on young adults' scheduling constraints

Abstract

Cultural norms influence how individuals spend their time. Marketers strive to understand such differences when creating products and promotional messages helpful to diverse consumer groups. This work examines how culture influences time constraints faced by young adults, a consumer segment that businesses often target due to its huge marketing potential. The research explores how family responsibilities prevalent in traditional Latino and Asian subcultures influence their approach to planning and to subsequent task completion. Undergraduate students taking Marketing courses at a university in the United States were categorized as being from traditional Latino or Asian families if they grew up speaking their country-of-origin language (i.e., a Spanish or an Asian dialect) at home. All participants listed tasks that they planned to accomplish in four weeks; the researchers collected these materials. Twenty-eight days later the lists were returned to the participants, who noted which tasks they had completed. They also recalled which of all the listed items family members had asked them to do. Spanish and Asian language-skilled participants' initial to-do lists contained a high percentage of tasks requested by family members. Also, participants skilled in Spanish or Asian languages both (a) completed a higher proportion of family-related chores than did their classmates, and (b) made more mention of uncontrollable factors influencing task completion. Discussion focuses on targeting schedule-constrained consumers, understanding how family responsibilities influence student life, and building upon these findings with future research.

Keywords: cultural differences, scheduling constraints, family obligations.

Introduction

Consumer populations are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse (Kennedy, Lawton, and Walker, 2001). Marketers who want to successfully target disparate groups must keep abreast of demographic shifts and associated consumption norms. This research provides cultural insights into the behavior of young adults, a segment attractive to business professionals due to its huge marketing potential (Bush, Martin, and Bush, 2004).

It is proposed that ethnic customs differentially influence young adults' time management and schedule constraints. Specifically, there are disparate cultural norms regarding how much time they are expected to spend on family responsibilities. Such duties, which are especially prevalent in immigrant families (Sy and Romero, 2008; Tseng, 2004), include participation in family care-giving, household chores, involvement in family activities, and financial support. This study investigates culturally-based scheduling constraints faced by young adults in the United States, with a particular focus on those whose families have maintained country-of-origin customs. Below are the background, method, and findings for this research.

1. Background

Much research on family responsibilities has focused upon the Latino subculture. In one study, Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) found that Filipino and

Latin American high school students had a strong sense of familial duty, and were more likely than their counterparts to help their families financially. Other researchers have recognized Latinos' high levels of care-giving activities (Kuperminc, Jurkovic, and Casey, 2009). Many individuals within the culture take familial responsibilities seriously, even when there are no overt pressures to help (Sy and Romero, 2008).

The Asian subculture also traditionally places a high emphasis on family-related activities. For example, Tseng (2004) asked undergraduates to respond to a series of rating scales designed to measure how much assistance they provide at home (e.g., running errands that the family needs done). Asian participants placed more emphasis on family interdependence than their European counterparts. In the same vein, researchers found that individuals of Chinese descent had schedules that included numerous family obligations (Fuligni, Yip, and Tseng, 2002). Finally, individuals from both Latino and Asian subcultures report that family obligations are present both during high school and college (Fuligni, 2007).

Hence, research has established that Latinos and Asians from traditional backgrounds are inclined to be dedicated to family. This paper extends past work by investigating how young adults manage those responsibilities. In a given month, what proportion of their schedule is spent focusing on familial obligations as opposed to other chores characteristic of their age group? Although individuals from all ethnic backgrounds may have such family duties, based upon past work it is

anticipated that Latinos and Asians from backgrounds that emphasize country-of-origin cultures will have many such tasks on their to-do lists. In addition, when completing the tasks, it is expected that Latinos and Asians will spend proportionately more energy on items family members request that they do. Finally, when describing their ability to finish items on their to-do lists, Latinos and Asians immersed in their country-of-origin cultures might be more likely to comment on uncontrollable factors that affect their time management.

2. Method

2.1. Participants. A total of 89 undergraduates taking marketing classes at a large public university were asked to participate in a two-part study. Eighty-one (43% male) were present for both class sessions in which the surveys were administered. One participant who provided no responses was dropped from the analysis. This quasi experiment depends upon the natural ethnic breakdown in the participant group; while equal and large cell sizes would be ideal, this study is intended to provide a foundation upon which future research on cultural time constraints can be based.

2.2. Procedure. In an initial session, participants were asked to list all the tasks they planned to complete within a four-week period. Since this research focuses on factors that constrain young adults' time (instead of on how much time they spend at school), they were asked to create a to-do list of responsibilities *unrelated* to classes and to studying. Sample tasks that were noted include car maintenance, apartment cleaning, providing transportation, and grocery shopping. Four weeks later, the lists were returned to the participants to measure successful task completion.

2.3. Dependent and independent variables. After giving back the to-do lists, participants were asked to put a plus sign (+) next to each task they had completed. In addition, they noted throughout their initial lists which tasks family members had asked them to do.

Participants were then asked to describe why they did or did not complete their scheduled tasks. The open-ended responses were categorized by two independent coders blind to the experimental hypotheses and conditions. They placed all comments into one of two categories, those reflecting "uncontrollable" factors affecting completion (e.g., "There was a date by which tasks needed to be completed"), and those referring to "controllable" factors (e.g., "I completed most of my tasks because it makes me feel accomplished to cross things off my to-do

list"). Coding agreement was 99%, with the rare discrepancy resolved by a third coder.

At the end of the survey measures were taken to ascertain participant ethnicity. Since this research is based on cultural influences that stem from country-of-origin norms (Sy and Romero, 2008; Tseng, 2004), it was important to identify participants who were from families that continued to emphasize customs prevalent in the nations from which they emigrated. Therefore, participants were asked if they spoke a language other than English, and if that language was spoken in their household. A total of 32 participants (40% of the sample) learned Spanish or an Asian language at home. (This study was conducted at an ethnically diverse public university wherein 70% of the student body is bilingual.) The survey responses from these participants were compared to their classmates – the non-Spanish/Asian language group – during the data analysis.

It was worthwhile to obtain further evidence that participants bilingual in Spanish or Asian languages came from families that maintained country-of-origin values. All students were asked to state how long ago their families immigrated to the United States. Those in the Spanish/Asian language group came from families that arrived in America on average 34 years ago ($SD = 14.23$). Hence, one or both of those participants' parents likely immigrated and maintained to some degree the cultural norms of the country from which they emigrated. These participants' families immigrated more recently than did their classmates' families ($M = 74$, $SD = 37.67$), $t(55) = 6.08$, $p < .001$.

One additional measure was taken to account for an uncontrollable factor that had the potential to bias the study results. Namely, fundamental differences between those in and out of the Spanish/Asian language group in the number of hours they spent at work had the potential to make data interpretation difficult. Therefore, all participants were asked how many hours a week they spent at their jobs. Fortunately, as to this variable the Spanish/Asian language participants did not differ significantly from the rest of the sample, ($M = 18.00$, $SD = 11.83$, and $M = 16.76$, $SD = 12.19$, respectively), $t(75) = 0.44$, *ns*. Work schedules, therefore, appear not to be a confounding factor in this study.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analysis. Two participants (a male within, and a female outside of the Spanish/Asian language group) provided responses that were three standard deviations above the mean; these outliers were removed from the analysis. To check if all participants followed the survey instructions

correctly, a preliminary analysis was conducted to see if the total number of listed tasks was similar across the two groups. (Note that no differences were hypothesized for this analysis since there is a limit to the number of daily tasks that can realistically be completed.) Indeed, the mean number of total tasks Spanish and Asian speaking participants anticipated completing within one month did not differ significantly from their classmates ($M = 9.81$, $SD = 4.93$, and $M = 9.15$, $SD = 3.46$, respectively), $t(76) = 0.69$, *ns*.

Preliminary analyses of the main dependent variables reveal that the variances of the two experimental groups are unequal (Levene's Test for equality of Variances, $ps < .05$). For full disclosure of the results, the data are examined and presented in two ways. First, the means are compared using *t*-tests that accommodate unequal variances. Then, to further address concerns posed by the dissimilar group variances, conservative nonparametric analyses are described.

3.2. Main dependent variables: Emphases on family-related tasks. As anticipated, the type of tasks enumerated on participants' to-do lists reveals an ethnic "familial responsibilities" norm. It was predicted that those with Spanish or Asian language skills would list more tasks that were requests from family members. Indeed, they provided a statistically significant higher percentage of family-related tasks on their to-do lists than did the non-Spanish/Asian language group ($M = 23.79$, $SD = 23.39$, and $M = 12.73$, $SD = 14.86$, respectively), $t(46) = 2.34$, $p < .03$. In addition, Spanish and Asian language participants focused proportionately more of their task completion on family-related duties. Of the tasks that were finished, they had a higher percentage of family items than did the remaining participants ($M = 25.37$, $SD = 29.60$, and $M = 10.09$, $SD = 14.87$, respectively), $t(40) = 2.66$, $p < .02$.

To conduct nonparametric analyses, the data were re-coded into nominal scales. First, an "any family task mentioned on the to-do list" variable was created. Participants who wrote at least one family-related item on their task lists were given the value "1", while the remaining participants were assigned "0". Similarly, a "completed a family-related task" variable signaled which participants finished a task requested by a family member, wherein "1" denotes "yes", and "0" signals "no".

Although the nonparametric analyses are mixed vis-à-vis the *t*-test findings, the results generally support the notion that the Spanish/Asian language skilled participants expended more effort on family-related tasks. While more of those participants listed at least one family-related task (71%) than those not in the Spanish/Asian language group (51%), the

difference does not reach statistical significance, $\chi^2(1) = 2.29$, *ns*. Yet, the difference between the groups is significant when examining who completed a family-related task. In the Spanish/Asian language group, 65% finished at least one such task, compared to 36% of their classmates, $\chi^2(1) = 4.94$, $p < .03$. Hence, although a majority of participants in both groups have at least one family request, those with Spanish or Asian language skills have fuller follow through with successful task completion.

3.3. Supporting measures: Describing task completion. When describing their ability to finish their scheduled tasks, it was proposed that participants skilled in Spanish or Asian languages would comment more upon uncontrollable variables than upon those factors within their volition. Sample participant statements include, "Many times if my parents ask me to do something, it becomes a higher priority" and, "I was lazy." For each participant, the number of controllable statements was subtracted from the number of uncontrollable comments. As anticipated, those in the Spanish/Asian language group emphasized more heavily factors not within their control, ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.60$, and $M = 0.98$, $SD = 1.74$, respectively), $t(78) = 2.17$, $p < .04$.

4. Discussion

This research underscores the expectation that Latinos and Asians from families who have maintained country-of-origin values (as reflected in bilingual abilities learned at home) partake in a relatively high level of familial responsibilities. It also outlines the extent to which such tasks add to their "to-do" lists. According to the findings, such family requests comprise a large proportion of Latinos' and Asians' schedules. Next, when they pursue task completion, much of their focus is on familial activities. Finally, when describing their approach to tackling scheduled to-do items, they are more likely to emphasize uncontrollable factors (e.g., requests placed on them from others) over controllable rationales.

Marketers wanting to target young adults might do well to recognize the scheduling constraints they face. In purchase settings their decision making may include a strong "family" component. For example, familial considerations may influence the number of seats they need in a car, the neighborhoods in which they want to live, and the type of employment they seek (e.g., in terms of time flexibility). Historically, these attributes have been used to target consumers with children; this research suggests that family-conscious product characteristics may be relevant even to some younger adults who do not yet have offspring.

What products and services might help Latino and Asian young adults organize their days? Time management workshops often stress the importance of leaving room for work disruptions. In today's world of smart phones, applications that help phone users manage their time – including the pressures of family expectations – might be developed and marketed. Then, those young adults with high levels of family responsibilities might learn to allocate additional “interruption” time, and to develop tactics that help them refocus upon returning to professional and campus responsibilities. (For example, before errand-running one scheduling expert takes a moment to list three to-do items that help to ease the transition back to the office.) Even more, they might strive to organize family responsibilities; assigning such tasks to specific days of the week might protect them from being “on call” for so much of their time. Note that although norms within the Latino and Asian cultures might prompt higher levels of family duties, a majority of participants from both research groups in this study provided such responsibilities on their to-do lists. Therefore, efforts to help young adult consumers successfully schedule their time might be especially relevant to Latinos and Asians, and are more generally applicable to individuals from all backgrounds.

Another application of the research findings pertains to promotion efforts. When creating “slice of life” advertisements that include young adults from traditional Latino and Asian backgrounds, it might be worthwhile to depict the family responsibilities they face. Executed with appropriate empathy or humor, such messages would signal an understanding of cultural pressures and, therefore, might result in more successful targeting.

As this research was conducted at a university, the findings have relevance to campus settings. The results may help to explain why some students take so long to graduate. Over a decade ago, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the typical undergraduate spent five and a half years getting a degree, and that the time frame was growing (Kronholz, 1998). The increase in campus ethnic diversity (Kennedy, Lawton, and Walker, 2001), and the cultural scheduling pressures associated with it, may play a part in the trend toward more student years. Support for this notion comes from a student in the Spanish/Asian language group who volunteered that her immigrant mother asked her to support the family with a 40-hour a week job. When the student's academic performance suffered, she explained to her mother that college required study time. They both agreed that she reduce her weekly hours to 20.

The daughter-mother example suggests that colleges might benefit by proactively helping incoming students whose family members expect the continued performance of numerous obligations. During student recruiting and orientation, it would be worthwhile to educate parents about the college process. This would especially apply to immigrants to the United States who are not familiar with the American college system, and to fathers and mothers from cultures that have high expectations for their children's accomplishments (Dandy and Nettelbeck, 2002; Mau, 1997; Perna and Titus, 2005; Spera, Wentzel and Matto, 2009). Freshman orientation could include special attempts to describe to parents the hours per week students are expected to spend both in lecture and studying. There might then be a better understanding of the degree to which family responsibilities constrain undergraduates' schedules.

Efforts to reduce students' obligations could be beneficial beyond reducing their number of years in school. Additional time to enhance classroom success or to become involved in campus activities may encourage a richer undergraduate experience. In short, addressing cultural time constraints may achieve customer (students and families) satisfaction through enabling higher student performance.

It is important to note limitations of this work, and to encourage directed future research. Forthcoming investigations can incorporate variables beyond what was explored in this study. For example, in some cultures daughters are raised to take a large role in family support and caretaking (Sy and Romero, 2008). This suggests that gender is an important factor when studying scheduling constraints. Although analyses based upon this variable are not statistically significant in this study ($ps > .10$), the null findings may be due to variable cell sizes, which range from a high of 28 females in the non-Spanish/Asian language group, to a low of 14 for males in that target language-skilled group. (The gender breakdown is similar – 40% to 47% male – in both study groups, but the Spanish/Asian language group is smaller.) As experimental assignment to gender conditions is of course not possible, a larger scale study would provide more insights into this issue.

Future research can compare young adults' affective responses to family duties across the two subcultures of interest in this work. That is, although students of Latino and Asian descent may have more family obligations than their counterparts, there is a risk in generalizing further similarities. Research findings suggest that Latino and Asian students react differently to emotional

support from parents (e.g., encouragement for college students' accomplishments; Suizzo and Soon, 2008). Perhaps there are also cross-ethnicity differences in how they cope with scheduling family responsibilities. This can be explored via survey questions designed more specifically to measure reactions to family pressure and support.

In addition, there are limitations to generalizing within subcultures (Blair and Qian, 1998). For example, because 23% of the Asian population in the United States is Chinese (Yang and Zhou, 2008), many studies about Asians may especially be relevant to individuals within that nationality. As student populations become more diverse, it will be possible to do more focused research within ethnic subcultures. Indeed, the breakdown of nationalities in this study suggests that more targeted investigations are potentially forthcoming. That is, the Asian sample contains five students of

Vietnamese background, three students each of Chinese, Filipino, and Thai descent, and one from Japanese and Korean families. Most of the Latino participants were of Mexican descent, yet there was one whose family is from El Salvador. Again, the increasing diversity in future participant samples will allow for a more thorough investigation within ethnic subcultures.

Despite careful warnings not to stereotype across and within groups, much can be learned from initial investigations – such as this one – that focus on general ethnic norms of consequence to young adults. It is hoped that this research stimulates more investigations into cultural differences that influence time constraints.

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