ATTRIBUTE VS ACTIVITY ORIENTATION AS RELATED TO SUB-CULTURE PURCHASE BEHAVIOR DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

In this study an attempt was made to contrast clothing purchase behavior of a group of employed black females and a group of employed white females. It was hypothesized that the blacks are more likely to be attribute oriented and whites activity oriented. The hypothesis was accepted. This implies that there some sub-cultural differences in clothing purchases. If understood and further verified, these differences can be used to satisfy consumer needs more readily.

Introduction

Most societies, but particularly the American society, are composed of many cohesive groups named sub-cultures. These sub-cultures are a subset of a larger culture with some different values, norms and symbols that are not common to all members of the larger culture (Gudykunst and Kim 1984). The presence of sub-cultures implies the applicability of some or all of the efforts that are made to dichotomize or classify cultures. This paper is based on the premise that Hall's (1976) high-context versus low-context culture dichotomy is applicable to American sub-cultures as well. It is further posited that American Blacks display behavior patterns and values which are closer to high-context culture whereas American whites are more likely to be classified as being close to low-context culture. According to Hall (1976), high context societies are less formal, people in these societies rely more on interpersonal communication rather than written communication. There are fewer attorneys, fewer contractual agreements than those that may be identified as low-context societies. Agreements are made more on the basis of individual handshakes than official negotiations. Thus, high context societies appear to be less formal, people in these societies are more inclined to put emphasis on unwritten communication; personal interaction and other contextual factors such as appearance, aesthetic appeal, and verbal guidance from certain individuals play a key role in consumer behavior.

If this dichotomy is accepted, i.e. blacks display a behavior pattern closer to high context culture whereas whites behavior can be classified as low-contextual, then the Monroe and Guiltinan (1975) model can be utilized to distinguish black and white purchase behaviors.

Monroe and Guiltinan (1975) make a strong case about the existence of a dichotomy in retail purchase behavior or retail store selection. They introduced and explore the concepts "attribute orientation" and "activity orientation".

Attribute orientation implies paying attention to specific store attributes and merchandise attributes. Among other factors, attribute orientation can be pinpointed to the attention paid to store layouts, windows, sales people's personality, interaction with store personnel, special sales, some aspects of advertising and other impulse buying factors. Activity orientation, on the other hand revolves around the individual. The individual consumer is more inclined to be self-reliant, information seeking and making decisions as the process of shopping progresses. In addition to trying to be free to make individual comparative analysis of merchandise, they use the sales people or store advertising to receive information which would aid their decision making process.

The relationship between cultural background and purchase behavior is based on Wallace's (1964) theory of culture and personality. This theory is presented, in a simplified form, in Figure 1. The figure illustrates that personality is the force behind behavior which is conditioned by culture. Thus, it is maintained in this paper that hi-context versus low-context dichotomy influences the personality which then is inclined to use attribute or activity orientation.

Monroe and Guiltinan (1975) posited that an all white sample of females follow basically activity orientation in their shopping behavior rather than attribute orientation. Samli et al., (1980) however, dealing exclusively with a sample of black females found, on the whole, that the respondents were having a tendency towards attribute orientation. The present article explores this issue more closely. It attempts to answer the question: If similar samples of black and white females were to be utilized, will there be significant differences in their purchase behavior which may be related to attribute or activity orientation.

**FIGURE 1**

**WALLACE’S THEORY**

| Cultural Background | Personality | Behavior |

Methodology

Most store selection and purchase behavior studies particularly pertaining to clothing dealt with female samples (see e.g. Sirgy and Samli, 1985; Samli and Sirgy, 1981; Samli et. al., 1980; Samli et. al., 1978). Most of the studies dealing
with black purchase behavior have been exclusively based on black female samples (see e.g. Samli et. al., 1980; Samli et. al., 1978; Smith, 1974; Portis, 1966). The present study is based on black and white female respondents. This paper is based on a portion of a larger data base dealing with the clothing purchase behavior of black and white working women.

The Sample

The information for this study was obtained from 239 black working women and 239 white working women. This data base was only partially utilized as the basis for analysis in this paper. The subjects were all members of professional women's organizations. In order to get access to both black and white respondents a purposive sample was taken. An attempt was made to collect data from both blacks and whites in similar professional groups. All respondents were employed and appeared to be middle-class in terms of their socio-economic background. A deliberate attempt was made to keep the two samples in equal sizes. In terms of age, education, occupation and income, the two groups were almost identical. Thus, the possible impact of socio-economic and demographic factors on the study outcome was neutralized. It was therefore assumed that if there are certain differences between these two groups they are bound to be due to racial or sub-cultural factors since there are no other clear-cut differences between the two. It must be reiterated that racial differences, if any, are not related to the color of skin as much as the existence of certain sub-cultural differences.

The Hypothesis

The hypothesis for this study was:

H1: Working black women are more attribute oriented whereas working white women are activity oriented.

The four sub-hypotheses were:

H1a: Blacks are more impulsive in their apparel purchases
H1b: Blacks prefer boutiques
H1c: Blacks have stronger inclination to pay to store features
H1d: Whites are more careful about the product features

Variables

In the context of research pursued in this study, it was assumed that certain impulsive approaches are more readily related to attribute orientation. Additionally, the type of store specific features of the store, and certain product features were utilized as indications of being activity or attribute orientation (see Exhibit 2).

In order to approximate impulsive purchase behavior two specific approaches were utilized. First, direct approach and second, indirect approach. The direct approach was implemented by using a scale with the wording of "I stop to look at clothes even when I am not planning to buy anything," and second, the response to the attitudinal statement of "If I see a garment I like in a store window, I just may go in and buy it."

**EXHIBIT 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive behavior</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store features</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product features</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The store, where the purchase was made, is also an indicator of activity or attribute orientation. If the store is a department store the individual is left alone to explore and make decisions. Furthermore, there is much greater choice and therefore a greater basis for individual exploration and information gathering. A boutique, on the other hand, provides more opportunity for interpersonal interaction and possibility of being impressed by the appearance the merchandise and by atmospherics (Kotler 1973-74). In this case, department store versus boutique choice by the respondents was utilized as the indicator for attribute versus activity orientation.

More specifically than the type of store itself, store features may invoke attribute or activity orientation. Unfortunately there are not too many bits of information relating to this factor. Store features are articulated in terms of the type of advertising that the store has been undertaking and in terms of sales clerks' attitudes. These two and numerous other store features are likely to create attribute or activity orientation. Finally, exploring product features may indicate activity or activity orientation. Only one bit of information was utilized in this area, the fiber content. The response to the attitudinal statement of "I read fiber content labels on clothes before buying them", was used as a factor which may trigger an attribute or activity orientation.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 presents survey results relating to this particular issue. In all three indicators of impulse, black respondents appeared to be significantly ahead of white respondents. Thus, they appeared to be more impulsive which is one aspect of being attribute oriented. As they see the product or the display, black respondents appeared to be more impressed and therefore, more influenced. This information is supportive of hypothesis 1a.