



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres

Artrepreneurship and learning in ethnic markets

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Cultural diversity
Ethnic entrepreneurs
Experiential learning

ABSTRACT

Many scholarly studies point to the growing cultural diversity in the marketplace and subsequent cultural learning mechanisms adapted by marketers and consumers. This research advances the theoretical and instrumental understanding of cultural learning mechanisms adopted by a specific form of entrepreneurs called ethnic artrepreneurs. Using interview data with 16 ethnic artrepreneurs, the study finds that ethnic artrepreneurs' learning is cyclical in nature consisting of interconnecting stages. Following, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, the study labels and discusses emerging themes as per four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The study represents an attempt to identify artrepreneurship as a strategic resource for marketing in ethnic markets.

1. Introduction

Consumer and marketer acculturation are important issues for marketers who have to deal with a growing marketplace cultural diversity (Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999). Acculturation requires the interaction of at least two cultures and is a process by which a person learns and adopts the norms and values of a different culture (Rudmin, 2003). Consumer acculturation studies focus on progressive learning of a new culture, making sense and adjusting to the culture changes that occur subsequent to cultural contact (Laroche & Jamal, 2015). A related stream of research focuses on ethnic entrepreneurship revealing the extent to which ethnic entrepreneurs take an active interest in identity based relations facilitating consumer acculturation processes (Jamal, 2003, 2005) including culture swapping (Oswald, 1999) and frame switching (Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008). Ethnic entrepreneurs actively engage in progressive learning, translating cultural customs and developing adaptation strategies while coping with multiple acculturation agents (Jamal, 2005; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999).

This study aims to investigate the learning mechanisms adopted by ethnic minority artists, henceforth, referred to as ethnic artrepreneurs. Like consumers, ethnic artrepreneurs also face a clash of cultures with the need to navigate in between heritage and host cultures. They may act as 'bicultural mediators' (Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999) promoting marketplace diversity and transcultural consumption (Elliot, 2016; Elliot, Cherian, & Casakin, 2015) by utilizing contrasting elements from diverse cultural representations (Jamal, 2005). However, ethnic marketing literature largely ignores the extent to which ethnic

artrepreneurs' engagement in art facilitates diversity in the marketplace. The production of a work of art relies crucially on a hidden collaborative network of artisans, suppliers and distributors (Besich & Kittredge, 2008) facilitating interaction among cultural diversity, creativity and innovation enhancing competitiveness of local economies (Smallbone, Bertotti, & Ekanem, 2005).

In this context, this study investigates how and in what sense ethnic artrepreneurs progressively learn and translate cultural customs via artistic engagement (Besich & Kittredge, 2008). How do they exploit cultural consumption markets, appropriate and commodify their own cultural talent, creativity and originality while working in a low capital, low knowledge but highly competitive and multicultural environment? Our motivation is to contribute towards a better understanding of ethnic entrepreneurship in specific contexts such as art and to discuss implications for acculturation and ethnic marketing. The present study differs from earlier efforts by its consideration of specific learning processes that ethnic artrepreneurs undergo as they acculturate into and propagate marketplace diversity.

We organize our work as follows: We begin our discussion of artrepreneurship in ethnic markets by situating it in relation to the ethnic marketing tradition in marketing and consumer research and identify the research need. Next, we outline literature characterizing learning mechanism within artrepreneurship in ethnic markets. We then move on to present our data collection and data analyses procedures in our methodology section and offer an integrative perspective of artrepreneurship in ethnic markets in our findings section. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the contributions and limitations of our

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Received 1 April 2015; Accepted 1 January 2017

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work and directions for promising future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Artrepreneurship

Artrepreneurs, being a subcategory, share similar traits with the category of entrepreneurs — creativity, proactiveness, alertness, and opportunistic behavior. With a specific focus on culture and art, artrepreneurship brings together individuals from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and unites them by a common goal (Benjamin, Cerere, Granier, & Tang, 2006). Artrepreneurs represent a creative class that makes good use of market information for refining ideas, identifying problems, and finding relevant solutions (Ayse, Dees, & Anderson, 2002; Bird, 1989). Their use of imagination is crucial for developing social consciousness and new forms of civic association and collaboration (Greene, 1995). They learn and educate themselves and others in ways that imaginatively empower and promote respect for diversity, build communities and engage other artists in a participatory democratic manner (Garber, 2001). Their motivational disposition acts as a motor for developing personal visions (Ayse et al., 2002). Most of them have a personal agenda of achieving progress and of changing socio-economic realities, and specific cultural contexts impact this agenda (Mair & Marti, 2006). Artrepreneurs survive and grow despite lack of finance, formal business training and education and, therefore, their learning and creativity become central to success. Because their learning is not formal, it is interesting and useful to understand exactly how they learn their craft and subsequently impact acculturation experiences in the marketplace through artistic engagement.

2.1.1. Ethnic artrepreneurship

The literature on ethnic entrepreneurship, the marketing/entrepreneurship interface and consumer acculturation provides a conceptual basis to understand the cultural underpinnings of ethnic artrepreneurship. Ethnic entrepreneurship refers to “a set of connections and regular patterns of interaction among people sharing common national background or migration experiences” (Waldinger et al., 1990: p. 3). Networks of ethnic minority enterprises act as distinct marketing systems within the mainstream economy (Iyer & Shapiro, 1999; Jamal, 2005). Specific ethnic entrepreneurs take active interest in identity based relations facilitating consumer acculturation processes (Jamal, 2005). Accordingly, ethnic artrepreneurs compete with other artrepreneurs very much in the same way as ethnic entrepreneurs compete with mainstream businesses with a special interest in ethnic and cultural identity projections via their artistic work. This is mainly because ethnic identity pervades much of the social and business fabric of the ethnic minority communities in the US (Iyer & Shapiro, 1999).

As a collective entity, ethnic artrepreneurs act as culturally adaptive communities that either embrace diversity to capitalize on cultural assets or utilize arts and culture as an economic development tool with the ultimate goal of achieving improvements for the community and its inhabitants (Benjamin et al., 2006; Smallbone et al., 2005). At the very heart of this competency is the notion of experiential learning that involves experience and knowledge of doing business (Carson & Gilmore, 2000) and of creating and recreating art in a culturally authentic manner, as well as communicating this to all stakeholders of different cultural backgrounds. Despite the potential role of ethnic artrepreneurship, little research has investigated their experiential learning occasioned by their acculturation experiences. Such a perspective is useful as it helps in understanding how various elements of culture generate and impact creativity within a business domain (Peterson & Anand, 2004).

2.2. Experiential learning and acculturation

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) is a theory of how

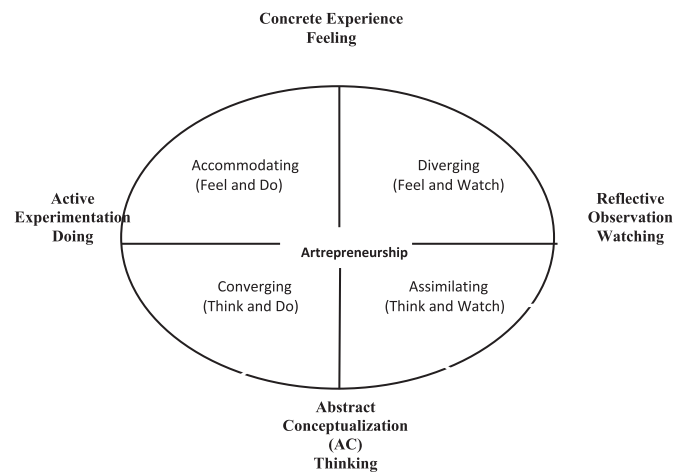


Fig. 1. Model of artrepreneurs' experiential learning cycle. (Adapted from Kolb's experiential learning cycle).

individuals learn from experience (see Fig. 1). Kolb argued that experiential learning encompasses the entirety of the human learning process, where experience forms the foundation for four modes of learning: feeling, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Experiential Learning is a continuous process whereby learning emerges from the interplay between expectation and experience. The process begins with concrete experience (CE), where one is involved in a new experience. CE serves as the basis for observation and reflection (RO), a process of objective analysis, in which the experience is subsequently assimilated into abstract conceptualization (AC), which involves reviewing conceptual understanding. From AC, the experience is then formed into active experimentation (AE) within the milieu. AE both completes the cycle of learning and ensures that it begins afresh by assisting the creation of new experiences. CE emphasizes the ability to employ feeling, intuitive understanding in the present reality, and sensitivity towards other people's emotions and values. AC involves the use of logic, ideas, and concepts. RO capabilities require understanding the meaning of thoughts and situations by carefully watching and listening. RO emphasizes using reflective understanding to uncover how and why things happen and imagining the meaning of situations and ideas, seeing things from different perspectives, and appreciating different opinions. The AE process focuses on practical applications, experimenting to find solutions and a pragmatic focus on what works.

Kolb defines several characteristics of the experiential learning theory: learning is best conceived of as a process with ideas formed and reformed through experience; learning involves transactions between the person and the world (transaction being distinct from the limited concept of interaction). Finally, learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed models of adaptation to the world. The acculturation process can be categorized as a learning process with similar characteristics of experiential learning. As a process likely to occur outside any formal educational system, cross-cultural learning within ethnic artrepreneurship fits naturally under the general category of experiential learning (see Kolb, 1984; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). An extensive review of acculturation (Laroche & Jamal, 2015) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2001) literature suggests that both acculturation and experiential learning interlink with each other and yet we find no research investigating the dynamics involved when ethnic artrepreneurs learn and acculturate. This research aims to fill this gap in the literature. In this study, we integrate experiential learning theory with research on acculturation by explicating findings from our study that illustrates this interplay.

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