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Subjective social inclusion: A conceptual critique for socially inclusive marketing[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical background to define the new construct of subjective social inclusion and initiate a new theoretical framework of inclusive marketing. We define subjective social inclusion as a multi-dimensional construct comprising of acceptance, belongingness, empowerment, equality and respect. The proposed framework of inclusive marketing explains the potential effect of multi-ethnic embedded marketing communications on self-feelings of social inclusion by ethnic consumers, as well as the intervening effects of ethnic self-referencing, ethnic self-awareness, ethnic self-identification and self-congruity. The analysis shows that multi-ethnic embedded marketing communications may represent an effective means to more inclusive communication with ethnic individuals for the benefits of consumer wellbeing and marketing effectiveness. This paper initiates a new research agenda of marketing to disadvantaged individuals, with implications for future research, practice, and public policy.

1. Introduction

In recent years some marketers have been active in providing differentiated appeals to different ethnic consumer segments, with global brands such as Coca Cola, AirBnb and L'Oreal entering the local political and social debates and giving voice to their multicultural customers. This “deliberate effort by marketers to reach a group of consumers presumably due to their unique ethnic characteristics” is known as ethnic marketing (Cui, 2001, p.23), and it is motivated by the increased ethnic diversity across the world. In the US, the Census Bureau forecasts that by 2044 the ethnic minority population will become the numerical majority (Colby & Ortman, 2014). The buying power of US multicultural consumers reached \$3.4 trillion in 2014, with a percentage increase twice higher than in the total population (Nielsen, 2015). In 2010, 13% of the total UK population was foreign-born (Office for National Statistics, 2012), while the purchasing power of the Black and Minority Ethnic population was estimated at £300 billion (IPA, 2012). It is hence pertinent to understand how marketers can adapt their communication strategies in order to effectively appeal to ethnic consumers.

Although positive effects of mono-ethnic marketing have been noted particularly in the area of congruence between endorser and target audience (e.g. Appiah & Liu, 2009; Karande, 2005; Khan,

Lee, & Lockshin, 2015), negative consequences have been pointed out in the literature. Burton (2002) critiques ethnic marketing communications targeted at pre-defined ethnic groups for their use of broad racial and ethnic categories that ignore the variety within each ethnic segment and the myriad of ethnic identities that one may have. This, in turn, may engender underrepresentation of certain consumer segments, misunderstanding of cultural nuances, stereotyping and consumer prejudice (Davidson, 2009), or even exoticization and exclusion (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005). These issues represent a threat to ethnic consumers' integration in the host society and the effectiveness of ethnic marketing communications.

Thus, an important research question and indeed a gap in the extant literature, is how ethnic cues can be best depicted in marketing communications in order to effectively reach the diverse audiences, ensure fair representation of ethnic consumers and trigger their positive feelings of being part of the society. Advancing research in this respect is beneficial for both ethnic consumers' psychological wellbeing and marketing effectiveness. To fill in this gap, the purpose of the current paper is twofold. First, we aim to provide an in-depth conceptualization of the construct of subjective social inclusion and justification for its importance to the marketing literature. Second, we join recent research streams that question the performance of ethnic marketing (Jafari & Visconti, 2014; Kipnis et al., 2012; Schroeder & Borgerson,

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2005), and propose new theoretical underpinnings of marketing communications aimed at enhancing ethnic consumers' inclusion in the host society and corresponding effectiveness of marketing efforts in ethnic consumer markets.

A review of the extant literature shows that there is a notable lack of consensus as to what “social inclusion” means at the individual, subjective level despite its widespread use at the economic, political and societal levels. This hinders the efforts for a more inclusive society and calls into question the effectiveness of “inclusive” policies in accurately reflecting the needs of their targeted groups. In the current paper, we propose to focus on subjective social inclusion as a multi-dimensional construct and define it as the individual's feelings of belongingness to a host society in which he/she feels accepted, empowered, respected and fully recognized as an equal member. Our theoretical positioning departs from past research that focused on ethnic marketing as a persuasion tool to explore the psychological and social mechanisms that underlie consumers' responses. We focus on ethnic consumers' subjective social inclusion as an important outcome of multi-ethnic embedded marketing communications and a constructive factor for effective marketing efforts.

2. Subjective social inclusion: conceptualization and definition

2.1. Subjective vs. objective dimensions of social inclusion

With a few exceptions, extant literature appears to encapsulate social inclusion mainly in terms of objective measures such as not at risk of poverty and deprivation (Engsted, 2013), proper living standards, access to education, work opportunities, housing, services for good quality health and marketplace, and being involved in the society (Eurofound, 2015; Hamilton, 2009; Williams & Windebank, 2002; World Bank, 2007). We argue that while objective dimensions of social inclusion represent important conditions for individual's feeling of being included, these conditions do not constitute the consequential subjective feeling of social inclusion. As Porter (2000) argues, the concept of social inclusion in the extant literature risks to omit the lived reality of marginalized individuals and focus more on the allocation and access to power and resources in a society. Indeed, the prevailing notion of social inclusion is “a policy which has its heart in the right place, but one that needs further examination” (Clegg, Murphy, Almack, & Harvey, 2008, p.91). Hence, we propose “subjective social inclusion” as an important concept in the wider domain of social inclusion, and provide a definition of subjective social inclusion that is exclusively focused on individuals' feelings of being included in the society.

2.2. Defining subjective social inclusion

The first step of the conceptualization process consists in the collection of representative definitions of the focal construct (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016). For this we used the following data sources: the extant literature on social inclusion; relevant dictionaries; and previous operationalization and measurement scales for the concept of social inclusion. We adopted a social-psychological rather than an organizational perspective and expanded our search into mental health, disability, sociology, poverty, feminist and education literature. A collection of relevant definitions and descriptions from the extant literature can be found in Appendix A. These definitions/descriptions encompass objective and subjective aspects of social inclusion, but few seem to explicitly focus on feelings of social inclusion experienced by individuals. Following the recommended approaches in the literature

(Gerring, 2012; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Podsakoff et al., 2016), we scrutinized selected definitions/descriptions to extract meaningful attributes for our conceptualization of subjective social inclusion, resumed searching for new definitions once they became redundant, and extracted useful attributes based on the desired conceptual domain of subjective social inclusion (see Appendix A).

Most of the definitions identified in the extant literature include belongingness and social acceptance (e.g. Bailey, 2005; Baumgartner & Burns, 2014; Cobigo, Ouellette-Kuntz, Lysaght, & Martin, 2012; Hall, 2009; Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2015; Wilson & Secker, 2015 - see Appendix A for details). Fredericks (2010) argues that belongingness experienced at an individual level brings about feelings on which inclusive societies are based. The feeling of belongingness is often associated with social inclusion and closely related to the notion of connectedness to others and wellbeing (Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans, & Soulsby, 2007). Social acceptance, or feeling welcome (Marino-Francis & Worrall-Davies, 2010), means that “other people signal that they wish to include you in their groups and relationships” (Leary, 2010, as cited in DeWall & Bushman, 2011, p.256). Social acceptance reflects society's willingness to embrace the individual, and the feeling of being accepted comes from the signals received from the reference group. Thus, the two attributes – belongingness and social acceptance – have direct relevance to the individual (the desire to belong to the mainstream society) and the society (the society's willingness to accept the individual), and represent two core dimensions of subjective social inclusion.

Another important attribute of social inclusion is empowerment that refers to a “process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power, which allows people to take action to improve their life situations” (Gutierrez, 1995, p. 229). Empowered individuals are expected to have control over their lives, their decisions and the socio-political environment (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006; Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998). This concept is of particular relevance to ethnic individuals who experience vulnerability. Empowerment can be used as a means towards reducing stigma and powerlessness and increasing wellbeing (Molix & Bettencourt, 2010), hence, it is regarded as an indicator of social inclusion (Cherayi & Jose, 2016). Empowerment can be viewed from an individual perspective, depending on each individual's power to be in control, and an institutional perspective, depending on the sociopolitical environment of every country. In this research we are mainly interested in psychological empowerment resulting from the individual's interaction with the society, and not the sociopolitical system of achieving it.

Equality has been a prevalent indicator of social inclusion in the public policy and law discourse (Collins, 2003), referring to fairness, justice, balance and sameness (Lunga, 2002). Similar to empowerment, equality can manifest at different levels of the society, from being equal before the law and having equal opportunities to having equal social relationships with a non-vulnerable individual (Chan, Evans, Ng, Chiu, & Huxley, 2014; Davys & Tickle, 2008; Zelenev, 2009). In the present research, we focus on the general feeling of being an equal member of the society as an integral feature of subjective social inclusion.

Some scholars regard respect and social recognition of the disadvantaged individuals as dimensions of social inclusion (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Ponc & Frisby, 2010). Hill (2000, p.59) defines respect as “something to which we should presume every human being has a claim, namely fully recognition as a person, with same basic moral worth as any other”. According to Hill (2000), social recognition can fall under the broader conceptual domain of respect. Both constructs are extensively used in procedural justice research, communicating symbolic messages and acknowledgement of

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