

# AMBICULTURALS IN THE NEW MAINSTREAM: THE EVOLVING AMERICAN MARKETPLACE AND THE RESEARCH CHALLENGES OF CULTURAL POLYMORPHY

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Contemporary America is in the midst of an unprecedented wave of social, economic and cultural change. At the forefront of this transformation are Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and other multicultural groups who are mixing, merging and evolving in ways that affect how all Americans live, work, shop and see each other and themselves.

The collective impact of these groups—along with non-Hispanic whites who share their interests, values and desires—is the engine behind an ascendant new mainstream in American consumer markets. Thanks to their growing numbers and some \$5 trillion in spending power, new multicultural mainstream consumers are demanding more choices, more involvement and more recognition of their individual needs, tastes and aspirations.

Hispanics, due to their status as the nation's largest ethnic group and their proclivity to mix and merge with others, are at the forefront of a trend toward a more complex and inclusive definition of American identity. EthniFacts research shows that both the most- and least-aculturated Hispanics are engaged in an aspirational shift toward an “ambicultural” center where traditional cultural values and identity coexist alongside mainstream “American” ones. Whereas “bi-cultural” implies a cultural division or split, ambicultural Hispanics are completely comfortable being fully “Latino” and fully “American,” pivoting between them with effortless duality, without sacrificing or questioning their attachment to either.

Modern Americans live and function in an environment that is characterized by high levels of cultural fluidity, driven, we believe, by a high frequency of intercultural interactions. The explosion in cultural flexibility is the inevitable result of increased diversity in all environments. We call this cultural fluidity, or polymorphous cultural identity, ambicultural behavior. Latinos literally choose what cultural identity and preferences they display in various ecological cultural niches, such as the workplace, at home, schools, etc. Further the explosion of technology and social media have rendered traditional segmentation approaches outmoded and suspect. We describe below how we have observed this phenomenon, measured it, and where instances of its direct effects on consumer behavior have been found.

Ambiculturalism, as both a process and a destination, presents a challenge to the market research community. It seems that Latinos are *not* progressing steadily in the direction of assimilation, but rather appear to change direction (retro-acculturation), or stop after partial assimilation, and in some cases, refuse to assimilate altogether. Ambiculturalism undermines a commonly used strategy of having a general market strategy and “waiting” for the Latinos to assimilate into the majority culture. They are taking different routes through the culture, arriving at unexpected destinations in their

cultural development, e.g. de-acculturating. Latinos are also creating personal culture mixes not unlike personal playlists for occasions. Further, it appears that the ambiculturalism is spreading by cultural and social sharing and interaction to other new mainstream ethnic groups.

This ambicultural phenomenon is creating both challenges and opportunities for the market research community. For example, old assumptions like “say it in Spanish” turn out to be inept, because language use is exquisitely sensitive to the interpersonal context of communications, e.g. talking with whom? Talking about what? When? In practice, this might involve a young person listening to Spanish and responding in English to parents and in Spanish to grandparents. A perfect example of effective use of context-driven language use appears in the Wells Fargo “first paycheck” commercial, showing eight separate changes of language in thirty seconds. This is a vivid example of two things: First, the contextual nature of language use among Latinos, including inter-generational communication. And second, the unconscious nature of the ambicultural memplex. A “memplex” is a group of memes that replicate together and reinforce each other’s survival, often invisibly to the host culture and persons. A “meme” is a basic culture unit that spreads by interpersonal contagion, and may be words, melodies, images, ideas, movements, etc. Ambiculturalism is a memplex that gains resonance as individuals from different ethnicities recognize and appreciate ambicultural behaviors in themselves and others, reinforcing a growing awareness that when cultural differences are celebrated and strengthened – as opposed to denigrated and shunned—everyone wins.

For researchers, it is critical that the conceptual approach to this trend towards ambiculturalism distinguishes between the process of change, or shift towards becoming ambicultural, versus the destination or final status of being ambicultural. The array of change processes and how they can be measured and tracked include, but are not limited to, unique behavioral signposts or marker variables such as the fluidity of contextual language usage, the intensity of ethnic identity, and the respondent’s expressly desired future ethnic identity.

The most obvious outward expression of culture, cultural change and ambiculturalism is language use and how it changes over time, under different circumstances. We measure fluidity of contextual language use by asking specific

behavioral questions about when, where, with whom and how often they use native vs. adoptive language. In particular, we look for changes in generational language shift, that is, what language is used with what generation of close relatives and friends, and how those choices influence other individuals within the family and/or community.

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*Ambicultural Hispanics and other “new mainstream” social viewers (consumers who don’t just use watch or listen to media, but interact with it) are unique. They have an ability to merge and morph different cultural inputs and language choices in a fluid, contextual way, making them even more likely to appreciate the interactive meshing of social and traditional media as a natural platform for cross-cultural communication and self-expression.*

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We also find the ecological niches (neighborhoods, schools, clubs, etc.) that Latinos inhabit are crucial to our understanding of where and with whom they behave, which is closely related to the ambicultural phenomenon. Key specific variables of this type are the ethnic density of the various environments in which the respondents spend most of their time, and more nuanced characteristics of the culture of origin, such as urban/rural, and others.

One of the many benefits of this approach is the ability to engage in predictive analysis and forecasting. The intensity of Latino’s cultural affiliation and identification is an important factor that determines both the direction and the amount of acculturation that a particular person will experience. These cultural identity-related behavioral tendencies and attitudes are key predictors of ambiculturalism. Finally, temporal distance from the culture of origin is another key grouping of variables that trigger ambiculturalism.

The effects of cultural affiliation and identification are not always intuitive and in expected directions. The chart shows

an interesting example of the marketing ramifications of direction and extent of acculturation among a test population of representative Hispanics. Brand A simply increases preference with assimilation and movement into the “melting pot.” The opposite of this phenomenon also very often exists where preference decreases with assimilation. What is of particular interest to marketers is the behavior of Brand B and Brand C. These two brands exhibit an increased preference among ambicultural consumers as opposed to preferences exhibited by consumers on either end of the acculturation spectrum. This is actionable information for a brand and category manager and demonstrates the marketing potential of the ambicultural phenomenon.

If the above example represents the convergence of the pathways taken by individuals, the critical question that must be answered is what are their individual journeys and destinations and how can they be identified and measured? Our findings suggest that ethnic identity does not seem to have a terminal state – it is in a relatively constant state of flux. The same individual can appear to be fully “acculturated” and at other times, appear to be more traditionally Latino. In simple terms, an ambicultural state can be reached from both ends of the acculturation spectrum and key drivers can be identified in different situations.

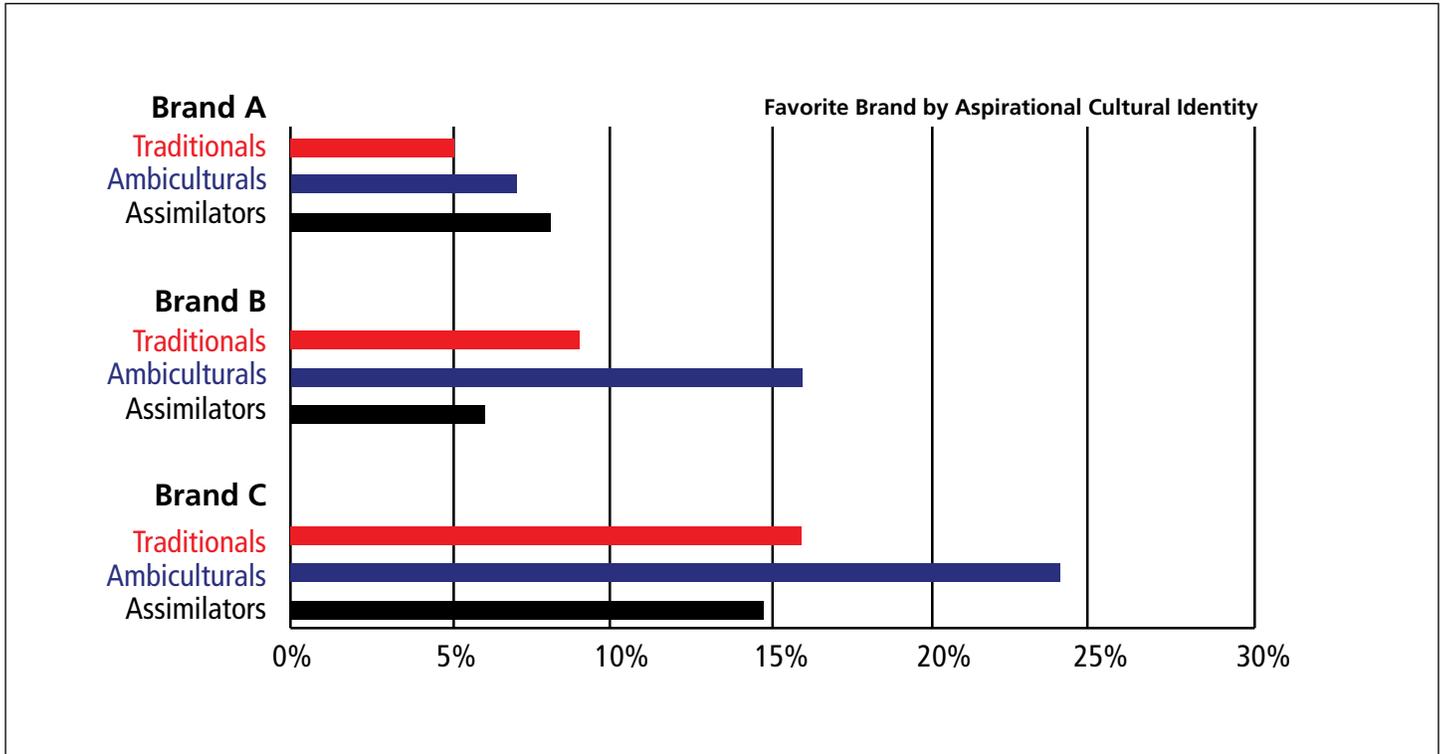
This new model of culture change and culture interaction and exchange essentially replaces the outdated and inaccurate melting pot model of unidirectional and inexorable assimilation and much of the acculturation-based marketing models currently applied to Hispanics and other ethnic/immigrant groups. We are seeing a remarkable effect where highly tech-savvy, English-fluent Latinos choose to maintain a strong connection to their cultural roots. This is a new feature in the cultural landscape, and it is different from the experience of previous immigrant cultures. Several key factors are simultaneously driving the shift from assimilation to culture change and exchange. The most important are:

**Social media**, which is used by immigrants to maintain close contact with relatives and friends in their home countries, a phenomenon unimaginable even ten years ago. The expected distancing and dimming of cultural roots is significantly slowed by this facility. This is illustrated by the table, which is from a recent Pew Internet and American Life Project.

**Technology and telecommunication** that allows conversations with video, facilitated by Skype, Google Chat, and other providers. In qualitative research, we found

Who uses social networking sites

% of internet users within each group who use social networking sites	%	Index % of all users
All internet users (n=1895)	72%	
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White, Non-Hispanic (n=1,331)	70%	-3%
Black, Non-Hispanic (n=207)	75%	4%
Hispanic (n=196)	80%	11%



numerous instances of regular video chats with older relatives in the home country, preserving the connection to elders and extended family. One case in particular struck home, with “desayuno con el abuelo en Skype” (breakfast with grandpa on Skype) – a daily event for one family.

**Proximity to culture of origin** combined with ease and affordability of travel allows Mexicans and Central Americans (who make up the vast majority of Latino immigrants in the U.S.) who are geographically proximate to their ancestral homes to travel nearly at will, thus “watering” their cultural roots. The ease of contact provided by geographic proximity is accentuated by the affordability of modern air travel.

**Ubiquity or pervasiveness** of numerous clusters of Latinos in many areas of the U.S. Unlike past waves of immigrants, where significant clusters only occurred in large gateway metropolises, Latinos have substantial communities across urban, suburban, and rural geographies.

We surmise that there is a critical size that allows communities to acculturate in completely different paths than past immigrant streams.

**Diversity, or ethnic and cultural mixing** is also influencing the nature, extent and direction of acculturation. Immigrants tend to cluster in more affordable communities where work is plentiful, which leads to intercultural coexistence and interaction with other newly immigrated ethnic groups. This diverse cultural environment likewise modifies acculturation, in part, by “normalizing” otherness and similar behavioral factors that might drive immigrants into more traditional acculturation pathways.

**Blurring of ethnic and racial segments** as defined by the U.S. Census. It is important to be aware that ethnicity and race are a choice on the U.S. Census and that the evolving new mainstream will necessitate a change in our traditional definitions. EthniFacts has found powerful

evidence of culture sustainability in Census data regarding how inter-married parents (a Hispanic and non-Hispanic), chose to classify their children by ethnicity. In 1991, 35 percent of inter-married parents classified their children as Hispanic. That number more than doubled (72 percent) in 2011.

This new culture dynamic is producing compelling challenges and opportunities for the market research community. Among these are methods relating to population definition, sampling designs, instrument development, and analytic strategy. Specific research method recommendations follow.

1. **Population definition** – needs much more sophisticated delineation and movement away from just language use. The strong differences among common language users with regard to cultural capital are impactful – language is at best an entry point, but is only a very rough front door. There is not “Spanish Language” segmentation any more than “English Language” segmentation. The challenge is to apply

the same micro-delineation that has long characterized English users to the Hispanic or ethnic population. Also critically important is the aspired to and taken cultural trajectory. Aspiration is only important if consumers place themselves in the ecology to allow these aspirations.

2. **Sampling designs** – do not look strictly at language use and country of origin. Urban-rural distinctions are impactful, as is cultural ecology. The goal is to take into account not only where respondents are from but what opportunities they have in their cultural trajectory.
3. **Instrument development** – the necessity to take into account cultural differences in how respondents answer questions in surveys is critical. One cannot utilize the same instrument development/validation approaches as with the majority population. Ethnic surveys need much more focus on the response veracity and tendency to “over-answer” survey questions.
4. **Analytic strategies** – must focus on dynamics rather than static snapshots. The goal is to focus on trajectories and acculturation process rather than just assuming statics. Analysis needs to be

focused on non-recursive modeling over time.

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and language choices in a fluid, contextual way, making them even more likely to appreciate the interactive meshing of social and traditional media as a natural platform for cross-cultural communication and self-expression. As ambicultural viewers continue their steep adoption of digital and social media networks, they will continue to use them to devise new cultural amalgams and ways of connecting with people of all

racess and ethnicities. Multicultural social viewers aren’t just interacting with media in new ways, they are transforming the context of that exchange by adding their values and expectations of community and technology into a fresh and open-ended adventure in social and cultural connection. By using technology to amplify and mirror their abilities, aspiration and desires, they are creating a dynamic digital reflection of themselves.

Understanding and activating the confluence of these many contributing factors are the keys to survival and growth for purveyors of goods and services in the new America. As a result, the ability to provide reliable and actionable insights allowing marketers to best serve this evolving new mainstream is the key to long term credibility in the market research industry. ▽

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The authors (**Dr. Carlos Arce**, chief methodologist; **Dr. Glenn Cordua**, chief assets officer; and **Guy Garcia**, author/futurist) are partners in **EthniFacts**, LLC, a custom research provider examining the New Mainstream in the consumer markets and civic culture of America. EthniFacts is dedicated to building synthetic data models with behavior forecasting capabilities.

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