

Acculturation vs. Assimilation Among US Hispanics: E-mail Self-Reports

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The purpose of this article is to present the results of an e-mail survey conducted with US Hispanics. The goal of this research is to understand key issues in the process by which US Hispanics adapt to the culture of the United States.

US marketers currently struggle to understand the US Hispanic market. Many think that US Hispanics will assimilate as many prior waves of immigrants did. Others believe that Hispanics tend to preserve their culture to a larger degree than other immigrant groups. This research was designed to obtain insights from US Hispanics regarding their own acculturation or assimilation experience in the US.

Methods

Approximately 3,000 questionnaires were e-mailed to individuals with Hispanic surnames listed in the Four 11 Internet directory. Three hundred and ten responses were obtained. About 120 of them were not usable because they came from individuals living outside of the United States, were incomplete, or were from individuals who indicated they are not Hispanic. The questionnaire was open ended and asked the following questions:

1. To what extent, if at all, are you replacing your Hispanic culture with the general culture of the US? Why?
2. To what extent do you believe it is possible to keep one's Hispanic culture in the US? How does one do that?
3. If you maintain your Hispanic culture in the US, What are the specific aspects of the culture you are trying to keep?
4. If you speak Spanish, to what extent do you feel that the Spanish language helps you express ideas and emotions as compared with the English language?

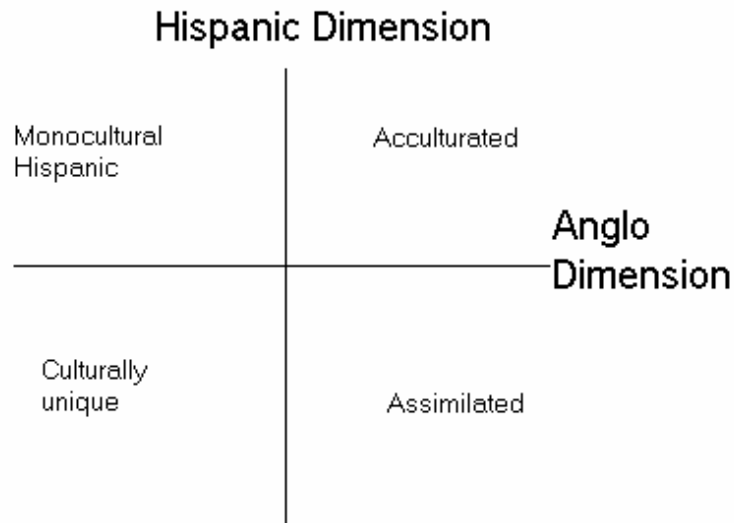
It was clear from the outset that by doing this study through e-mail the respondents would generally be more proficient in English than those not yet connected to the World Wide Web. That bias was not considered to be detrimental to this research because the central conceptual question of this research is: As immigrants spend more time in the US do they tend to acculturate or assimilate?

Acculturation is the process of acquiring a second culture. Assimilation is the process of replacing one's first culture with a second culture. Due to the growth of the US Hispanic market and the recognition of its importance by commercial and political forces, it was hypothesized that Hispanics are more likely to acculturate, or become bicultural, than they are to assimilate and thus abandon their original culture.

Results

By necessity the results of research like this need be qualitative due to the self selectivity of respondents, and due to the type of in-depth open ended questioning: Overall the responses obtained substantiated that Hispanics, at least those who chose to answer this survey, are more likely to find value in preserving their culture despite having been in the United States for a long time.

The following diagram illustrates that there are different types of adjustment to a new culture, in this case the "Anglo" culture. "Acculturated" individuals are those who acquire a second culture and are in contrast to those in the lower right hand quadrant, who assimilate and abandon their original culture.



There are clearly those who are monocultural in their original culture in the upper left hand quadrant. And in the lower left hand quadrant are those who are culturally unique, like for example those who identify as Chicanos.

The following are typical responses obtained from Hispanics through the United States via e-mail.:

The strength of weak links

"The only connection I have to my heritage is through my family. All we have together is language, musical taste, cuisine, and cultural attitudes about how a family works."

We call this the strength of weak links because while the family is the only link to the culture it is a very strong one. This individual could be classified as being close to the Anglo Dimension and low in acculturation but not really assimilated.

Assimilation regrets

"I have replaced some of my Hispanic culture by mainly speaking English, at home and at work. Unfortunately, I have not taught my children the Spanish language. (I have regretted not teaching my children to speak Spanish. Although they are both taking it in school. But they are certainly not fluent in the language, and it has hurt them more than not.)"

Why make such a strong effort?

"I don't believe keeping one's Hispanic culture is an easy task (especially 2nd and 3rd generations). I have found that by making an effort to learn more about our history and continuing to attend and interact with activities that have to do with our culture (i.e. Cinco de Mayo, 16 de September, Hispanic Month, watching the Hispanic channels on TV, i.e. news, variety shows, etc.) helps to keep one more or less in touch."

Adding a new culture

"I keep my Hispanic culture. I accept and follow the U.S. culture but it will not replace my maternal Hispanic culture." "I don't think I am replacing my culture, but just learning a new culture."

The meaning of Hispanic culture

"Family values are very important. Social values as to keep the same friends for ever. "Respeto" respect for older people. Religion, sharing and not being so individualistic as many Euro-Americans are."

"Some things that have remained in my family are the language(Spanish) and some of the values (such as no children out of wedlock, everyone must either get married or become a priest or nun, and that everyone must be hardworking... anyone who doesn't follow these is looked down upon... at least in my family)."

"The language, music, sports and the general Hispanic hospitality that is shared among most Hispanics. Although I was born here I've maintained my Spanish pretty well since I was young. I get EXCITED when Hispanic athletes from foreign countries' teams win. I also feel I go about most things

with an intense passion that I know comes from my Latino upbringing, and that is something that I'll never lose."

Is it possible to preserve Hispanic culture?

"It is possible to keep one's Hispanic culture as long as you are strong to be proud of it and show people around you your culture is better. I specially will show my culture in terms of family, friendship, eating habits and values. Celebrating our holidays, like Mexican Independence and Cinco de Mayo. Learning about our history, from back when it was all Native Americans to the turmoil of Mexico's beginnings to Aztlan to the Spanish-American War to the participation of Hispanics in the World Wars to the Chicano Movement of the 60's and 70's to now. Keeping in touch with each other, both in families and in communities, to help and support one another. Keeping our language, being strong and demonstrative of our identity."

On the importance of the Spanish language

"Spanish is my mother tongue, and it is the tongue of my mother. Spanish is still the tongue which I feel most clearly speaks from my heart. It calls out from my childhood. What I mean is that it encompasses my sense of identity by its sound and rhythm, and the fact that it is the language which I speak to my family with. It speaks not of the identity which I project in public now, but rather of my personality and sense of self since birth. When I speak in Spanish, I feel I speak from my soul."

"I feel it is much more beautiful and expressive than English. Words are savored and carry many nuances in Spanish. English is clunky and inelegant, and hard to work with. And there is more soul in Spanish expressions - for example, how can a "Yee-haw" stand up to the outstanding, vibrant Grito?"

Language is an inherent component of culture. These statements clearly testify to the emotional value of expression in the Spanish language for Hispanics. The individuals who wrote the above statements are obviously fluent and proficient in the English language, still they recognize the expressive and emotional value of Spanish for themselves.

Marketing implications

Given these responses it can be qualitatively concluded that acculturation seems to be a more predominant mode of adaptation to the US culture than assimilation. It also seems that US Hispanics are finding that they can preserve their Hispanic culture while at the same time learning the dominant culture, including language, of the United States.

From a marketing standpoint it can be argued that marketers who are likely to succeed in luring the 33 million Hispanics now in the US will need to recognize the dual cultural identity of the market.

Further it would seem that segmentation studies among US Hispanics will need to take into consideration the location of these consumers in the acculturation scheme detailed above.

Future research will benefit from recognizing the duality of the cultural experience of US Hispanics. The questions may not be how "Americanized" are US Hispanics, but how "bicultural" are they?