

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON AFRICAN AMERICAN, ASIAN AND HISPANIC CONSUMERS

THE AUTHORS EXAMINE THE CONTEXTUAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS BEHIND THE PANDEMIC'S EFFECTS ON THREE CONSUMER GROUPS TO HELP DEVELOP MORE SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH AND MARKETING IN THE VIRUS'S AFTERMATH.

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

COVID-19 has been a jarring wake-up call. While the idea of traditional research on ethnic consumers and their disparate COVID-19 experiences is certainly not a groundbreaking proposition, what clearly will be evident post-COVID-19 is that one size does not fit all. As infection numbers and death tolls from the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. are tallied, racial breakdowns show that the pandemic has had different impacts on communities of color.

Regardless of whether you do multicultural research, the advent of COVID-19 will have a tremendous impact on consumers across all ethnicities and their engagement with brands going forward. According to The Age of Dissonance, a recent Nielsen annual marketing report, the No. 1 goal of 41% of marketers surveyed was to reach new customers. In the quest for new customers, striking the right tone with brand messaging and communications to broaden your audience and reach consumers across all ethnic groups will become increasingly important. Companies that invest now in research to better understand the cultural and social dynamics of people of color will come out ahead because of the extensive influence they wield.

This article explores possible contextual and cultural factors behind the pandemic's impacts specifically on the African American, Asian and Hispanic communities to provide a better understanding and foundation, post-COVID-19, for more successful research studies and brand interactions with these audiences.

AFRICAN AMERICANS: DISTRUSTFUL OF GOVERNMENT AND FEARFUL OF BEING LEFT FURTHER DISADVANTAGED

According to recent Associated Press reports, African Americans account for more than one-third of the COVID-19 deaths even though they make up only 14% of the general population. And while medical and health care professionals point to income inequality, health care and access disparities that lead to disease susceptibility, one cannot help but wonder if there are other factors, other parts of the African American story that haven't been told.



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Culturally, most African Americans have been and continue to be mistrustful of messengers that wield large amounts of authority and power over them such as the government, law enforcement and big business. Compliance with messages about COVID-19 were not a top priority at the start of the crisis. In an Axios poll less than 60% reported that they trusted the local state health department, the National Institutes of Health and the World Health Organization, underindexing compared to other ethnic groups.

In the United States, wearing face coverings is neither traditional nor socially accepted. To be frank, they are stereotypically associated with criminality and attempting to hide one's identity. African Americans and others know all too well how quickly they, in particular, are associated with negative stereotypes. They avoid any actions like wearing a face mask that would expose them to further harassment from law enforcement or anybody else.

Contextually, and more importantly, because of urban housing conditions and a preponderance of employment in essential frontline, low-paying jobs – from grocery clerks to delivery people to public transportation and safety workers often in close quarters with others – African Americans don't have the luxury of working from their homes and are forced to interact with infected and asymptomatic members of the public. That inability to practice social distancing because of their livelihood leaves them more open and susceptible to becoming infected with the virus.

Lower penetration of laptops and Wi-Fi to continue work or schooling remotely places African Americans and their children at a unique disadvantage. The lack of access to earn income from non-frontline jobs and, especially when school does resume, time and learning lost, are setbacks that may not be overcome for some time. The COVID-19 experiences of African Americans are, without a question, quite different from other groups.

Implications

Interestingly, according to 2019 Pew Research, there were more 27-year-olds in America in 2018 than any other age. But the most common age among whites was 58, more than double that of minorities! It was 27 for African Americans, the most targeted age group of most marketers. Going forward, post-COVID-19, greater representation in research studies that reflects this and other demographic evolutions will be vitally important to get a better understanding of this community. The crisis also presents a new opportunity to continue building, albeit remotely, a more empathetic rapport with segments that were not as willing to connect in the past but because of social distancing want to connect more.

The lack of trust, common across all generations of African Americans, also extends to big business and brands that have not been/are not authentically engaged with them during this trying time. Researchers should not expect that this population will automatically go back to business as usual. In fact, researchers must become much more culturally aware and empathetic to solicit authentic stories and not meaningless platitudes when conducting studies. With overindexing mobile phone usage as well as outsized access of and influence on social media, African Americans are no longer just a minority population, they are influence dominators. They can digitally kill a brand's credibility on megaphones like Twitter, Instagram or Facebook if they feel it is not relatable and the message is tone-deaf. And they will do it quickly and indiscriminately. No brand is safe. Just ask Gucci, Prada, Dove and Papa John's.

African Americans are no longer the monolith they were once perceived to be. Instead they are a very diverse group with Caribbean, European, African, Latin and South American, Middle Eastern, Asian and many other heritages from around the globe. Collecting and understanding their diverse stories using today's online methodologies with mobile applications is pivotal to generating insights that could grow audiences and prevent costly communications disasters. Marketers looking to enhance outcomes that do not acknowledge this audience's COVID experiences will decrease brand engagement and motivation and, ultimately, erode brand currency, not only among them but the millions of consumers influenced by the culture.

ASIAN AMERICANS: CONCERNED ABOUT DISCRIMINATION AND SAFETY ON TOP OF HEALTH AND FINANCES

Depending on data available and the region where the data is pulled, the infection and death rates among Asian Americans are on par with or slightly lower than the general population.

The majority of Asian Americans are foreign-born and have close ties to home countries in Asia. Since the pandemic first broke out in Asia at the end of January, they have closely watched what was happening. They were better informed of the danger and of effective measures for self-protection and preventing the virus spread. When the outbreak first happened in Asia, Asian governments encouraged wearing face masks early on, whereas Western countries were late in encouraging citizens to do so. While wearing a mask is perceived to be associated with criminality in the West, it's common in East Asia. People who live in metropolitan areas with air pollution frequently wear face masks to keep their faces clean and also filter the air they breathe. Wearing face masks became an essential component in virus containment during the SARS outbreak in the region in 2002-2003 and has been further integrated into daily life afterwards. For example, since the outbreak, the Taiwanese government has made sure that face masks are available to all residents.

Culturally, Asian Americans tend to be group-oriented and more willing to sacrifice individual rights for the greater good of the community. Conversely, non-compliance to virus containment measures is seen as a threat to public health. According to Judy Yuen-man Siu, a medical anthropologist at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, wearing a mask in Hong Kong during an epidemic is considered a civil responsibility and people not wearing a mask will be stigmatized and discriminated against. In China, a Chinese Australian female who went out jogging without wearing a mask in Beijing was reported by Netizen and the incident report quickly went viral on social media in China, drawing ire of the entire country. She was fired from her job. Group orientation, by and large, has tended to increase compliance and influence the pandemic's impact on Asian Americans.

COVID-19 has also inflicted a psychological and emotional toll on Asian Americans. Since the pandemic first broke out in central China, overseas Chinese and East Asians in general (mistaken to be Chinese) have experienced a huge rise in xenophobia and discrimination. While cultural traditions and experiences played a tremendous role in influencing the level of compliance, they did not prepare this segment for the sudden onset of discrimination.

There were spikes in mentions of "discrimination against Chinese" on WeChat, the most popular social media app in China, and among Chinese overseas. Within the first week since Stop AAPI Hate's launch on March 19, 2020, the reporting platform received over 650 reports of discrimination incidence related to COVID-19.

Implications

With shrinking market research budgets and the need to quickly pivot and adapt to a new normal, the need for agile and cost-effective market research is greater than ever. Higher internet penetration and adoption of technology among Asian Americans means that it will be easier for researchers to engage with them and capture their experiences via online research methodologies such as online bulletin boards, video chats, video diaries and live online text discussions. In-language research among Asian Americans is key to increasing participation and platforms such as 20|20 and HatchTank that also offer machine translation with higher accuracy rates make in-language online qualitative research more user-friendly than it used to be. For marketers who are considering doing research among Asian Americans, it's highly advisable to adopt online methodologies to ensure more robust engagement.

Asian Americans traditionally have been both underrepresented and misrepresented in mainstream media, especially during this pandemic. Researchers increasing their awareness of the issue of discrimination and showing support for Asian Americans help build a more meaningful connection for better insights. Deeper cultural awareness translates beyond building a connection with them in the U.S. It can also help brands build rapport with a much broader consumer base in Asia, given the reach of social media and the internet. Messaging that conveys a united stand on important issues, such as fighting the rising discrimination during times of crisis or highlighting Asian American health care workers on the frontlines, as well as adhering to accepted cultural traditions is more apt to be looked on favorably and get traction in the community.

HISPANICS: DEALING WITH MORE THAN JUST THE FEAR OF THE VIRUS ITSELF

Similar to many African American consumers, Hispanics tend to be hourly employees who do not reap the same benefits and extended pay of salaried workers and for many, their employment came to a halt after shelter-in-place orders took effect.

According to a recent Pew Research poll, more Hispanics than the general population reported someone in their household had lost a job or had to take a pay cut due to COVID-19.

For those who are still working, the coronavirus outbreak has made their situation even more precarious, forcing them to risk their lives to save their livelihood.

While many employers have stepped up and provided safety gear such as masks and gloves, those who work in construction or as gardeners/landscapers, for example, are relying on their own means to stay safe.

As part of their story, one of the greatest challenges Hispanics face is adapting their behavior to comply with social distancing guidelines. Culturally, family and social gatherings are vital to this community. How is it, they wonder, that adult children can't visit their parents, grandparents can't celebrate a grandchild's birthday and all planned festivities and celebrations now have to be cancelled or postponed? Their biggest challenge is understanding that even immediate family is a risk to health and welfare.

Furthermore, Hispanics are culturally programmed to shop for groceries on a daily basis in their countries of origin. In the United States, it has become a weekly or biweekly activity that tends to coincide with payday and usually makes for a family experience. Shopping to cover large periods of time, i.e., shelter in place, is not possible because their budgets are still designed to cover shorter periods of time. Therefore, it's business as usual even with warnings/restrictions of going into grocery stores.

Supermarkets that cater to this segment have done a great job of adjusting to the new regulations in order to keep their stores open and stocked for these consumers. For example, Northgate, a Mexican-owned, California-based chain of supermarkets, was the first to implement plexiglass barriers for its cashiers and first to designate special shopping hours for seniors. It is doing everything it can to keep its customers safe, given that not all are complying with new regulations. Nonetheless, there are still entire families shopping at the store, not everyone wears masks and some still struggle with the six-foot social distancing guidelines, even with markers on the floor.

Change is difficult for everyone but especially for a segment like this one that thrives on family time and family interaction.

Perhaps it's part of the fatalistic mentality that Hispanics are known for and is an important part of the overall culture – “It's all in God's hands/God will protect us from evil.” Or simply the fact that they must continue to risk what needs to be risked in order to provide for their families and for their mental/social well-being.

Implications

While government directives around COVID-19 are still evolving at the time of this writing, one key element that will help address stay-at-home ordinances is to continue providing the Hispanic community with factual information in terms and situations they can understand and relate to. This is critical to overcoming both cultural and language barriers and ensuring greater compliance. Univision and Telemundo have done a great job of having their talent featured on PSAs and local news personalities provide PSA segments throughout their daily programming – stay home; don't visit family and friends; wash your hands; wear a mask; beware of cross-contamination when wearing gloves, etc. – to connect with and motivate the community. For most Hispanics, like other ethnicities, their lingering concern is being left in an even more tenuous situation after COVID-19, thanks to unpredictable and uncertain economic effects.

NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL

Because of their diverse experiences, it will not be business as usual across the ethnic groups presented here after the virus is under control. While no one has the answers today, marketers and researchers now have a unique opportunity to rethink the rules of engagement for conducting both quantitative and qualitative research. Along with redefining engagement, to get a more accurate post-COVID-19 consumer picture, consider recruiting for a better representation of culture and ethnicities. Employing remote qualitative research methodologies to express interest in and connect with these consumers while they are in need will not only be enlightening but also potentially rewarding thanks to revenue-driving insights.

Consider this crisis an opportunity to also course-correct the way we interact with study participants. Savvy researchers who understand that one size really does not fit all will ask participants the right questions in the right context and in culturally appropriate ways to uncover more of their inner motivations and yield fresher, more nuanced answers. Finally, companies that are focused on acuity and agility, in spite of budget restraints, understand that increasing cultural research right now will drive more engagement and help them win with these valuable consumers in the months and years ahead.