

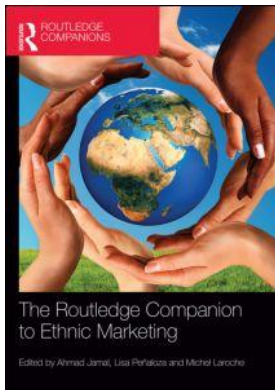
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## **The Routledge Companion to Ethnic Marketing**

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### **Ethnic consumer decision making**

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# Ethnic consumer decision making

*Yasmin K. Sekhon*

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## Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the influences and main characteristics of ethnic consumer decision making and what factors, whether directly or indirectly, influence the decisions made. Globally, we have witnessed a rapidly expanding multicultural landscape. With the growth in Hispanic, African American, Asian American, Black and ethnic minorities (BME), understanding ethnic decision making is vital for many. The rise in migrant numbers over the years is considerable, as is the change in the type of migration – from flows of people in particular eras to ‘more people are now moving from more places, through more places, to more places’ (Vertovec 2010, p. 86). The migration scene has changed with larger groups migrating in the mid-1950s to late-1970s from countries such as India, Pakistan and Africa to more recently smaller groups moving from one country to another. Understanding ethnic consumption and decision making is more challenging. The traditional distinct attributes of ethnic groups have become blurred; in addition, transnationalism blurs the boundaries further. Also Venkatesh draws attention to the role of ethnicity: ‘Ethnicity becomes a cultural condition with profound consequences to the nature of consumption experiences among different people’ (1995, p. 36).

The changing face of consumption and the challenges facing the consumption process have been discussed by many:

Consumption is evoked as a meta-concept, used to explain the most disparate phenomena. At once part of debate on industrial and commercial restructuring, over the language and meaning of contemporary politics and about the reordering of identity, space and place, consumption is glossed as a composite and synthetic term.

*(Mort 1996, p. 7)*

This evokes the depth and complexity of the concept of consumption and how it can affect different aspects of a person and the environment.

Central to consumption theory is motivation. Motivation is regarded as a basic concept in ‘human behaviour and also in consumer behaviour’ (Evans *et al.* 2009, p. 4). There are many different motivations that drive the consumer to buy. Belk and Xin (2003) argue that ‘want’ is the basic motivator in contemporary consumption. Others have argued that ultimately

consumption is used as a means of fulfilling one's satisfaction, as Marx (1867/1967) wrote, 'A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether for instance they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference' (p. 33).

This chapter focuses on ethnic consumer decision making; and in doing so, culture, identity, ethnicity, influence of reference groups, considering transnationalism and superdiversity.

## Ethnicity and ethnic identity

'Ethnicity is a dynamic concept related to changing social relations. Today, ethnicity is not so much the expression of existing roots but the provocative avowal and claim of a disturbed identity' (Bouchet 1995, p. 97). In addition, ethnicity is similarly described as 'pertaining to a social group within a cultural and social system that claims or is accorded special status on the basis of complex, often variable traits, including religion linguistics, ancestral or physical characteristics' (Engel *et al.* 1991).

Weber's (1961) work focused on ethnicity and ethnic identity. Ethnicity was regarded as a construct that included a sense of common custom, language, religion, values, morality and etiquette. Horowitz (1985, p. 41) regarded ethnicity as a concept of individual and group identity that 'embraces differences identified by colour, language, religion, or some other attribute of common origin'. Ethnicity is complex in nature; Webster (1994, p. 321) states that the term 'ethnicity has implied several dimensions, including a sense of common customs, language, religion, values, morality and etiquette and has subsequently been measured in a myriad of ways'. Horowitz's work (1985, p. 53) on the concept of ethnicity has referred to 'tribes', 'races', 'nationalities', and 'castes'. Parsons (1975, p. 53) related nationalism to group and ethnic identity, in which there is 'a coincidence of . . . common culture and territory of residence'. The many aspects of ethnicity accentuate its complexity. Notably when discussing ethnicity, the author refers to one's ethnicity as well as one's ethnic identity.

Research shows that 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic identity' are often used interchangeably. Venkatesh (1995) also argued that identity is influenced by self-identification and belonging. He presented ethnicity as self-identification influenced by others, which raises the difficult area of identity also being impacted by how others see us. Identification is both an individual response and one affected by the groups we relate to. This notion is an important issue to consider. Rossiter and Chan (1998) support Venkatesh, defining ethnicity as a means of self-identification by individuals categorizing themselves and others into groups using ethnic labels.

The discussion of ethnicity also leads to work on multiculturalism. Historically, heterogeneous groups from different cultural and religious backgrounds with linguistic differences have been the focus of multicultural studies. The discourse on multiculturalism has meant that there are a number of different labels of multiculturalism: from difference multiculturalism (Turner 1993) and public space multiculturalism (Vertovec 1996) to Delanty (2003) detailing nine kinds of multiculturalism. However, it has been argued that the term 'multiculturalism' is outdated (Vertovec 2010), and with the need to consider 'superdiversity', which questions the neat categorization of ethnic groups based on ethnicity, marketers now need to consider the diversity of migrants as well as the delineation of migrant groups.

## Consumption: identity and ethnicity

A number of consumption studies focusing on one's ethnicity have been undertaken, including Hirschman's (1981) analysis of Jewish consumption patterns, Stayman and Deshpandé (1989), Zmud and Arce (1992), as well as Peñaloza's (1994) research on Hispanics and Venkatesh (1996).

These studies have all considered ethnicity and its role in the consumption process. Consumption is regarded as a personal and social process helping to express feelings of belonging and identity in private and public (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Belk 1988; Lunt and Livingstone 1992).

Tomlinson (1991) linked identity to marketing, suggesting that marketing has a role in creating identity. Zmud and Arce (1992) make a direct link between identity and consumption, suggesting that 'social and cultural identity are affected by the social surroundings and the type of product being purchased' (cited in Burton 2000, p. 859).

The interplay between consumption and identity was also discussed by Askegaard and Arnould's (1999, p. 335) study of consumer acculturation of Greenlandic people living in Denmark. Consumption was regarded as a 'domain through which immigrants seek to hold on to certain patterns of culture and identity perceived to link them to their culture of origin'. Askegaard and Arnould's research is in fact highlighting the dual identity held by ethnic groups. Through acculturation and the transition from one culture to another, consumption patterns help form and shape this identity and so play a fundamental role in the socialization process. The research found that 'border crossings produce persistent identity constructions that may nonetheless alternate in Danish and Greenlandic social contexts' (1999, p. 335).

Ger and Ostegaard's (1998) study also links consumption with acculturation and identity. Arguably, different forms of cultural transition impact ethnic consumption. The findings suggest that consumption helps to negotiate the cultural differences and becomes the basis of constructing a new and more modern identity. Identity for ethnic audiences is constantly evolving, developing and changing over time. Ger and Ostegaard (1998, p. 48) studied Turko-Danish students and found that their participants were 'negotiating their identity in their consumption of clothes, with cultural and sub-cultural forces being felt and reflected in their dress'. Findings from this study implied that global consumption patterns were influencing identity formation among immigrants on a day-to-day basis. Here, clothing served 'the construction and expression of identity for the second-generation Turkish immigrants in Denmark' (Ger and Ostegaard 1998, p. 45). Hence, consumers were seeking and developing their identity through consumption (Friedman 1994).

Appostolova-Blossom (1999, p. 333) found that particular forms of consumption allowed the groups to hold on to country-of-origin culture or to further assimilate with the new culture. Ethnic groups, whether recent or more established, hold dual and fluid identities. These identities were also discussed by Lindridge *et al.* (2004) in their study of South Asian women living in Britain, highlighting how consumption is used 'to negotiate different cultural settings in post-modern ethnic families and households' (2004, p. 212). However, Lindridge and colleagues argue that consumption is only one part of identity formation and that acculturation levels, with the influence of family/households and generations, are also important in the process. In addition Lindridge and Dhillon (2005) argue that while previous studies show immigrants using consumption to create 'multiple identities', certain groups 'actively disengaged from any consumption they felt had cultural association with British White society or their own communities' (p. 413). Consumption is a part of one's identity; the complexity of influences ranges from community, family and a desire to belong and be accepted.

Another aspect of consumption is discussed by Joy and Dholakia (1991). In their study of home and possessions of Indian professionals in Canada, they found that a more individualistic ethic is being adopted by ethnic groups as they acculturate to the host country.

Acculturation, it is argued, has ushered in a reconsideration of identity based on the supremacy and the sovereignty of the individual over community, such a concept allows for the recognition of the individualistic ethic within which property and possessions have begun to dominate.

(Joy and Dholakia 1991, p. 385)

However, as Berry (1980) and Wallendorf and Reilly (1983) have argued, such individualism does not necessarily result in cultural loss and displacement, but rather is a process of growth in the new country. The study by Joy and Dholakia indicates that the second generation's identity and values are learned more from their Canadian peers and so are eroding their Indian identity. 'The second generation are in part tempered by the demands made by the milieu in which they live – Canada, they learn to value individual material gains over community with greater ease than their parents' (1991, p. 397). The study reveals that identity formation is therefore closely linked to consumption, and consumption is being influenced by acculturation and the desire to assimilate with the host country to help create belonging. This desire to conform appears to be without pressure. There is arguably a need to possess a hybrid style of culture and values that take into account the host country with a strong country-of-origin foundation. Home- and host-country integration and consideration of values is also discussed later in the chapter.

Understanding identity through consumption is problematic and challenging, as it is an ever-changing and developing phenomenon. As Gould's (1994, p. 306) work on Asian post-modern consumer culture shows, the 'consumer in post-modern culture is engulfed in a tidal wave of disorienting dilemmas which challenge his/her identity'. Firat (1995, p. 116) has attempted to explain this idea of post-modern consumer culture by classifying identity and ethnicity as a commodity. 'In post-modern consumer culture, ethnicity has been commodified, alienated from history, reified, and reduced to a set of symbols circulating on the global market and available to everyone'. This so-called 'fragmentation of the self' theoretically allows the possibility of building and ordering one's identity through the market (Firat 1995, p. 115).

This idea of building one's own identity piece by piece was also put forward by Bouchet (1995, p. 84), arguing that consumers' ethnicity in 'post-modern Europe is more bricolage than ever. It is not the continuation or the importation of an already existing cultural system, but rather the creation of a lifestyle. Ethnicity in today's Europe is, like religiosity, *à la carte*'. He argues that consumption is being used to form and express identities. However, these identities are more than just the home and host country's influences but are rather the 'building of a new and often individual identities on the basis of elements from a diversity of cultural representations and practices' (Bouchet 1995, p. 84).

Oswald (1999) develops the subtlety of ethnic identity formation by stating that 'immigrants negotiate differences between home and here by choosing when and where to wear their ethnicity' (p. 315). Oswald provides empirical evidence to support the co-existence of consumers' mixed emotions arguing that 'in consumer culture, ethnicity can be bought, sold, and worn like a loose garment' (p. 304).

Ethnicity and identity have been discussed here in the context of consumption. Consumption, it is argued, helps to construct one's ethnicity and identity. In essence it is not only ethnicity influencing consumption, but consumption impacting one's affiliation and ethnic identity. Consumption decisions may be made to express one's loyalty to the home country or to demonstrate one's assimilation; however, this may be a moveable and changing process. The meaning of consumption in identity terms is multi-faceted. It includes the need to possess certain goods as well as symbolize one's cultural affiliation in different contexts. Moreover, it is the formation of a hybrid identity that takes into account one's personal, public and cultural needs, and so as Oswald (1999) states, we are in fact 'theorizing about the movement of ethnic identity between several worlds at once' (p. 303). We see how ethnic consumer decision making is influenced by one's acculturation, identity and feelings of ethnicity. In addition the transnational consumer (discussed later in the chapter) needs to be considered, the influences are varied and diverse and so challenge traditional consumption thinking.

## Bi-cultural self and culture

The study undertaken by Sekhon and Szmigin (2005; 2009) found their participants – second-generation Asian-Indian Punjabis—when making consumption decisions did not require subordination of their own needs to those of the group as traditional collectivistic theory has indicated (Hofstede 1984; Triandis 1989; Triandis *et al.* 1988); however, the findings did demonstrate how their ‘bicultural self’ has to take into account the Punjabi culture in their decision making. They use the term the “‘bicultural self’ to refer to a mixture of home- and host-country influences along with the integration of individualistic and collectivistic thinking. These factors, they found, impacted the intensity of the acculturation of this ethnic group, which oscillates between strong and weak depending on the ongoing cultural context – whether it be more Western or more Eastern. Additionally, Brewer and Chen (2007) explore the cultural discourse of individualism and collectivism, calling for a need to further investigate these distinctions as well as understand the relational networks that exist in different cultures.

Bhatia’s (2002) work discussed the complex nature of identity, labelling it ‘hyphenated’ identity. In particular, he suggests that ‘immigrant parents and their native-born children are constantly negotiating their multiple, and often conflicting, dialogical voices, histories and I positions’ (2002, p. 57), once again supporting the ever-evolving and changing notion of identity. In a bi-cultural world, ethnic consumer decision making is influenced by a number of factors that are embedded into an individual’s being, both at a personal and at a social level.

Consequently, consumption, culture and identity are interrelated. Consumption is shaped by culture, which then influences one’s identity and levels of ethnicity. This, however, varies in both the private and the public context. Joy and Dholakia’s (1991) work examined the close relationship between culture and consumption and how it then influences identity formation, particularly among the second generation, succinctly highlighting the ever-changing and developing nature of identity across generations. Similarly, Jamal and Chapman (2000, p. 377) identify consumption as indicative of the ‘multiple identities held within and across groups’. Zmud and Arce (1992), in researching the relationship between ethnicity and consumption, argued that social and cultural identity is affected by the ‘social surroundings and the type of product being purchased’ (cited in Burton 2000, p. 859). This view has been supported by Lindridge *et al.* (2004), whose research indicates that culture is part of and influenced by ethnicity, identity and consumption. Bhatia (2002) argues that those living as a part of two cultures are constantly negotiating their cultural identities, defying categorization such that the individual may experience multiple identities at any one time.

A more recent study by Sekhon and Szmigin (2011) found that ethnic consumer decision making, particularly those from the first- and second-generation Indian Punjabi background, was influenced by a number of factors. Indeed, these were well managed; the influence of two cultures, *izzat* (family honour), parents, family, community, friends and peers was accepted in a consumption context but was found to be more challenging in developing one’s identity. The participants are explicit in stating that Punjabi cultural norms and expectations influence their decision making, which stems from their collectivistic thinking of the role of *izzat* in their lives. The participants deal with the pressures of both cultures with greater ease in the context of consumption than they do in the context of defining their own identity. In addition, consumer decision making is also inextricably linked to the need to gain approval from others. Sekhon (2007) in her work looking into the consumption patterns of first- and second-generation Asian Indian Punjabis found that the identity for these participants was to seek belonging. Being accepted, one’s image in the public and private domain, is linked to history (parents’



migration), to the present (feelings of belonging with different groups) and the future (one's level of achievement and success and affiliation in a bi-cultural context).

As the previous sections have highlighted, consumer acculturation is also a fundamental part of identity and consumption. Acculturation can impact ethnic groups as they grapple with two distinct cultures, both home and host. Acculturation is strongly linked to consumption. There has been significant consumer acculturation research, including Deshpandé *et al.* (1986); Venkatesh (1994); Peñaloza (1989; 1994); Askegaard *et al.* (2005); and Luedicke (2011). The cultural interactions influence ethnic consumer decision making. The 'cultural viewpoint', the mix of cultures impact consumption; as Sekhon and Szmigin stated, ethnic groups are influenced by a number of factors, 'the between two cultures generation' who do not just juggle situations between East and West (home and host country) but rather juggle life continuously, sometimes integrating and acculturating and other times deliberately alienating and identifying with one's ethnicity for a sense of belonging and identity (2005, p. 13).

Historically Peñaloza (1989) also discusses consumer acculturation, describing it as a 'two-level phenomenon' (1989, p. 114), a phenomenon that can occur at an individual and group level, and at a psychological and social-psychological level. At a psychological level, cognitive development theory is used to explain age and generational differences in immigrant consumer acculturation. For example, the first-generation immigrant typically demonstrates lower levels of cultural assimilation than proceeding generations (Padilla 1980). Social-psychological theories place emphasis on the importance of 'interpersonal relationships and exchanges of information which then affect individual consumer theory' (Peñaloza 1989, p. 117). Peñaloza (1989) suggests that consumer acculturation may also result in accelerated adoption and display behaviours related to conspicuous consumption because of products associated with the new culture. Hence, ethnic groups, whether recent settlers or more established communities, are influenced by different levels of acculturation and assimilation. This in turn impacts their decision making, in terms of who and what influences their choices. In addition, Berry discusses acculturation strategies (1980), consisting of two components, attitudes and behaviours; however, the author states that often individuals do not always have complete freedom because of dominant cultural constraints – for example, language and other structural factors, that is attitudes of dominant culture members, all of which influence consumption patterns and behaviour.

Gronhaug *et al.* (1993) report that 'through observation, imitation and interactions with socialising agents, individuals learn the culture brought up in and they become socialised as consumers' (1993, p. 279). Consumers are socialized and their resultant consumption patterns are directly linked to this socialization process, such that 'consumer acculturation refers to the subset of acculturation related to consumption activities' (1993, p. 280).

Sandıkçı and Ger (2002) suggest, because of culture, the creation of a hybrid post-modern tone to consumption. On the one hand, this hybridity is regarded as a result of globalization, but on the other, it is regarded as a state that is a result of forced acculturation or forced adoption of behavioural patterns due to structural mandates and conditions. Jun *et al.* (1993) also argued that individuals might choose a particular brand simply because of its availability over another; however, this does not necessarily imply acculturation assimilation of the host country, but rather consumption based on the choices available to the individuals. This is similar to other previous studies, for example Wallendorf and Reilly's (1983) work on assimilation, suggesting that an individual may be forced to participate with the host country's culture because of 'structural constraints that force compliance' (p. 293). These studies distinguish between consumption choices that are made freely with no restriction and those that are forced, arguing that those based on structural constraints do not accurately measure

acculturation in a consumption context. The neat categorization of ethnic groups as either integrated or marginalised as proposed by the dominant Berry model (Berry 1997) is questioned. If we are to question the neat categorization of ethnic groups, it would be timely to consider transnationalism, 'the cross-border and homeland links maintained by migrants' (Vertovec 2010, p. 89).

Traditionally, acculturation theory has suggested that ethnic groups acculturate with the host country, adapting to new traditions' values and experiences, or decide, due to a number of circumstances, to remain closely associated to their home country with little integration with the host country. This has made marketing to these groups very distinct because of a number of factors, from the more obvious language differences, clothing for some groups, health and beauty (because of skin and hair differences) and even the consumption of public services, especially in relation to health, fitness and well-being. However, in more recent arrivals, smaller groups are consumers of multiple retailers, from both their host and their home country. Decision making is not so neatly categorized and there is a clear blurring of boundaries.

Additionally, transnational practices of these groups encourage increased mobilization, whether it be for personal, business or professional services. Locality is not necessarily the anchor or the key factor that influences decision making. Community is not just those in their locale, but through the development of technology and communication they remain rather connected and integrated to their homeland. Furthermore, in-groups, as well as social networks, may vary (Brewer and Chen 2007). Transnationalism does not necessarily alienate individuals or discourage them to integrate; rather, there is a greater level of multiple identity formation. As Vertovec (2010, p. 93) neatly summarized, 'While migrants continue to feel powerfully bound to homelands and communities elsewhere, they are now more able to maintain and enhance these feeling, while at the same time being quite capable of developing a new life, livelihood and social ties'. Vertovec (2010) labelled this as 'superdiversity', a more sophisticated and a less demarcated way of thinking, moving beyond multiculturalism; in essence, regarding ethnic decision making as a complex, diverse and nonlinear process. The social capital of individuals and ethnic groups is enlarged, and so decision making is more complex than ever before (Jones *et al.* 2010). There is thus a need to consider both traditional cultural studies along with the findings of transnationalism and 'superdiversity' if we are to better comprehend ethnic consumption at the present and in the future.

## Cultural consumption

Luna and Gupta (2001) proposed an individual's behaviour as directly linked to their cultural value system. These value systems develop over time through the socialization process. The individual's cultural value system is formed of societal culture, regional subculture and family values. This cultural value system then influences an individual's consumer behaviour. Luna and Gupta also suggest that an individual's consumption patterns may influence their cultural value system. They further suggest that an individual's consumption behaviour may be 'viewed and imitated or rejected by others. It can then become the group's norm of behaviour and be identified as part of the culture of a given population' (Luna and Gupta 2001, p. 46).

Ethnic groups are thus influenced by norms and values that are not only accepted but also respected by their peers and reference groups. A strong reference group for ethnic groups is family; a number of studies have investigated Hispanic consumers being influenced by family and peers (Hoyer and Deshpandé 1982; O'Guinn and Meyer 1983; Deshpandé *et al.* 1986). Others have also looked at Indian family influences (Lindridge *et al.* 2004; Sekhon and Szmigin 2005; 2011). These studies demonstrate how a mixture of ethnic identity and social belonging as



well as peer and reference group influence impacts ethnic consumer decision making. Culture-specific consumption behaviour has also been observed in a number of product categories, from food to clothing to entertainment.

This cultural significance of consumer goods was also discussed by Pyssler (1992), focusing on the study of the Indian two-wheeler (scooter). This study revealed how the same physical object can materially take on a very different cultural meaning, 'operating within different political economic structures, seen by different people, at different times, from differing perspectives, the scooter has generated diverse meanings, pleasures, and identities' (1992, p. 440). Pyssler, although in agreement with McCracken's (1986) statement that 'consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian value' (p. 71), also states that it is not only culture that differentiates a product and its meaning but also the country's infrastructure, availability of resources, and labour. Consumption and culture are thus interlinked.

## Summary and conclusion

Ethnic identity construction is impacted by the individual's social environment. This context consists of one's social and personal world. One's identity is formed both at an individual and wider social level; it has a number of influences from family, community, peer groups, mass media and the extended family, all of whom influence the forging of a new identity (Oswald 1999, p. 314). In particular, for many ethnic groups, identity is 'bicultural' in nature; additionally, acculturation in its many forms impacts consumer decision making as well as the significance of possessions to individuals as well as their communities.

Consumer acculturation studies highlight the various ways in which migrant identity is constructed as well as the interactions with cultures impacting consumer decision making. Social experiences together with these interactions influence identity construction. Peñaloza (1994) and Berry (1980; 1989; 2001) as well as Luedicke (2011) continue to dominate acculturation discussions.

In summary, consumption decisions are closely linked to and an expression of one's identity. Individuals wish to consume products that enhance their image and help to facilitate belonging within both one's ethnic group and the wider population. The chapter outlines how consumption, identity and acculturation are interrelated, impacting ethnic consumer decision making. The complexities of acculturation demonstrate how consumption helps to facilitate belonging and affiliation with other members. Consumption from an ethnic perspective is ever evolving as an individual's identity develops over time and with different interactions. Socialization theory and levels of ethnic affiliation as well as the influence of transnationalism and 'superdiversity' impact consumption decisions of ethnic groups. It is clear that these factors impact culture-specific consumption and, in understanding the interplay of all these factors, we can better appreciate ethnic consumption.

These discussions also highlight practical implications for marketing to ethnic groups. Marketers need to consider 'superdiversity' and ensure that they too question the neat categorization of ethnic groups, considering the diversity of ethnic groups (both smaller and larger groups). Targeting to these groups requires an in-depth understanding of the relationship networks that exist in these communities and the influence of these relationships as well as individual's transnational identities.

The constant negotiation of oneself is also a fundamental consideration for marketers; identity is negotiated in different contexts and situations. Decision making for different product categories may vary considerably and cannot be assumed to be consistent across all industries, products and categories. The negotiation of one's identity is ever present but differs across sectors.

## Future research directions

As we question and continually develop the different aspects of consumption, identity and culture, it would be appropriate to examine further these concepts across different generations. Consideration needs to be given to the constant negotiation experienced by different generations as consumption patterns vary considerably, from the first generation to subsequent generations influenced by a mix of cultural values. A greater level of understanding is required of the network of relationships that exist within these groups: questioning where the strength of ties lie and how these ties impact opinion leaders, as well as developing a meaningful understanding of and identifying in-group influences, will help to understand the complexities of ethnic consumer decision making.

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