**Consumer Responses to Ethnic-Inspired Apparel:**

**The Role of Ethnic-Embeddedness and Regulatory Focus**

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Within the mainstream U.S. marketplace, consumers often come across apparel products embedded with ethnic-inspired elements (e.g., colors, patterns, prints). The prevalence of such ethnic-inspired apparel (EIA) is not a recent trend as evidenced by fashion designers that have been utilizing ethnic inspirations in their designs since as early as the 1960s (Pozzo, 2020). In line with the sustained popularity, studies have been attempting to understand why mainstream consumers approach EIAs, and have generated important findings (e.g., Cho et al., 2019). However, a remaining gap in research is that no study considered the ethnic-embeddedness (EE) of an EIA – the degree to which an EIA is associated with an ethnic culture. That is, it is yet unclear 1) whether consumer responses vary depending on whether an EIA only has minimal ethnic cues perhaps as a small detail, or multiple ethnic cues throughout the entire apparel and 2) whether different consumers prefer different degrees of ethnic association in an EIA. This study attempts to address the gap via a conceptual framework that draws together the concept of EE, perceived aesthetics, and regulatory focus.

**Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

When mainstream consumers purchase any type of product that is associated with an ethnic culture, it is usually due to the product’s hedonic value rather than its utility (Hyun & Fairhurst, 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that studies of EIA commonly found perceived aesthetics as the most significant indicator of behavioral intentions (e.g., Lee et al., 2009; Cho et al., 2019). But what aspects of EIA would lead a consumer to perceive the product as aesthetically pleasing? Within the general apparel field, it has been suggested that perceived aesthetics is formed based on the evaluation of the design elements of the apparel (e.g., Lamb and Kallal, 1992). Further applying the above to an EIA context, it may be assumed that perceived aesthetics of an EIA is determined based on whether its design elements are ethnically-embedded. Grier et al. (2006) mentioned that products are considered to have high EE if it possesses multiple ethnic cues that signal the product’s ethnic association. Accordingly, this study proposes that EIAs with multiple ethnic cues (high EE), compared to those with minimal ethnic cues (low EE) may be perceived as more aesthetically pleasing, further leading to a higher behavioral intention. Thus, the following mediation hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The impact of EE on behavioral intention will be mediated by the perceived aesthetics of the EIA.

There may be personal characteristics that could alter the impact of EE. Specifically, this study explores the potential moderating role of chronic regulatory focus. Initially proposed by Higgins (1997) based on the basic principle that people approach pleasure and avoid pain, the regulatory focus theory has been utilized to better understand consumer motivation and behavior in a variety of settings. A particular aspect of regulatory focus that is relevant to this study is that prevention-focused individuals seek conservation and are reluctant to change, whereas promotion-focused individuals seek stimulation and are open to change (Liberman et al., 1999; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). Building on the above, Westjohn et al. (2016) showed that promotion-focus is positively related global consumption orientation and prevention-focus is negatively related to local consumption orientation. Using a similar logic, this study proposes that an EIA with high EE is more likely to be perceived as aesthetically pleasing among promotion-focused consumers, rather than prevention-focused. Thus, the following moderation hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The effect of EE on perceived aesthetics described in H1 will be amplified (attenuated) when consumers are promotion-focused (prevention-focused).

**Method and Results**

Survey was completed by 203 MTurk participants vetted via CloudResearch. These participants were randomly assigned to one of two stimuli (ethnic inspired t-shirt with high EE or low EE). Then, they completed a purchase intention scale (α=.918) followed by a six-item scale that measured perceived aesthetics (α=.951), a five-item scale that measured chronic prevention orientation (α=.866), and a five-item scale that measured chronic promotion orientation (α=.844). CFA of the measurement model showed a good fit χ2(113)=172.58, p<.001 (RMSEA=.051, CFI=.976, NFI=.935). Also, all AVE values were greater than .50 and the squared correlations between any two scales, thus lending support for the convergent and discriminant validity of the scales. To test H1, Hayes’ PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017) was used where EE was the predictor variable and purchase intention was the outcome variable, with perceived aesthetics as the mediator. Results supported the significance of a full mediation model as zero was not within the confidence interval (effect=.52, 95% CI=.17 / .87) and the direct effect of EE on purchase intention was insignificant (t=-.60, p=.55). Thus, H1 was accepted.

For H2, instead of testing the moderating effect separately, an overall moderated mediation model was tested using PROCESS model 7. Results suggested that prevention-focus moderates the impact of EE on perceived aesthetics (β=-.46, p<.01), such that participants’ tendency to perceive high EE product as more aesthetically pleasing was attenuated when their chronic prevention-focus was higher than 5.10 (scale of 1 thru 7). Promotion-focus was also shown to have a moderating effect (β=.39, p<.05), such that participants tendency to perceive high EE product as more aesthetically pleasing was amplified when their chronic promotion-focus was higher than 4.56 (scale of 1 thru 7). Aside from the above, the overall moderated mediation model was supported in both cases when prevention-focus was used as the moderator (index=-.44, 95% CI = -.77 / -.09) and when promotion-focus was used as the moderator (index=.37, 95% CI = .05 / .74). Thus, H2 was accepted.

**Discussion**

While previous studies of EIA provide valuable insights on why consumers may purchase EIAs, this study provides distinct findings by demonstrating the significant impact of EE. Specifically, it was shown that EIA with a higher level of EE is likely to be perceived as more aesthetically pleasing, further leading to positive behavioral intentions. This finding suggests EIA retailers to focus on enhancing their products’ level of EE. However, such strategy should be utilized with care as this study also showed that the positive impact of EE maybe moderated by the consumers’ chronic regulatory focus. Specifically, this study showed that EIA with high EE may appeal well to promotion-focused individuals but not as well to those that are prevention-focused. Accordingly, retailers may utilize consumer data (e.g., CRM database) to segment their consumers and promote low EE EIA to prevention-focused consumers and high EE EIA to promotion-focused consumers. Alternatively, based on previous findings that regulatory focus can also be situationally induced (e.g., Aaker and Lee, 2001), EIA retailers may utilize various regulatory-focus priming methods (e.g., advertising message) to prime their consumers into a regulatory orientation that better aligns with their EIA’s level of EE.

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