



Exploring Diversity within the Hispanic Market:  
An Investigation of Shopping Experiences among Puerto Rican Consumers

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Hispanics are currently the largest minority group in the United States, accounting for 16% of the total population of the country, with Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans comprising the largest subgroups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although there has been some progress in terms of defining consumption behaviors of Hispanics in general, the existing research tends to consider Hispanic consumers as a homogeneous market and therefore does not address the potential cultural differences that may exist (e.g., Chattaraman & Lennon, 2007; Seok & Sauls, 2007). Thus, there is a need for studies that investigate consumption behaviors among the different subgroups comprising the Hispanic market. To that end, the purpose of this study was to examine the consumption behaviors of Puerto Rican consumers, specifically their experiences with shopping for apparel.

Puerto Ricans represent the second largest Hispanic subgroup in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) with more Puerto Ricans living in the mainland U.S. (4.7 million) than on the Island itself (3.6 million). Puerto Rico became part of the United States in 1898 as a result of the Spanish-American war. Under the Jones Act of 1917, its residents were granted U.S. citizenship, allowing them to travel freely and settle anywhere in the U.S. At 14.4%, Puerto Rico is presently experiencing the highest unemployment rate in the nation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012) and its household median income is slightly over one third that of the mainland (\$18,860 versus \$50,502, respectively) (US Census Bureau, 2012). Yet, the average sales per square foot in Puerto Rican shopping malls is 23% higher than that of the U.S. mainland (International Council of Shopping Centers, 2006). Many U.S. apparel retailers, including JC Penney and Macy's, operate their most profitable stores in one of Puerto Rico's nearly 200 shopping malls located across the small Island. In addition, the first luxury shopping mall is preparing to open its doors and will include the only Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue stores in this market (Díaz, 2012). The obvious dichotomy between low income levels and high consumer spending points to the need to better understand the Puerto Rican consumer.

A qualitative approach to data collection and interpretation was used as the methodological basis for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted in Puerto Rico with a total of 22 participants including 15 females and 7 males between the ages of 24 and 64. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were audio-taped with participants' consent. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and responses were analyzed thematically. Following the interpretive process proposed by Spiggle (1994), each interview was analyzed separately and then merged into a consistent whole. Three themes emerged from the analysis: *The Good and the Bad*, *Channel Preferences and Limitations*, and *Spending versus Earning*. Issues important to

understanding participants' apparel shopping practices and preferences were used to structure the themes.

Participants had mixed feelings about shopping. On the negative side are the large crowds and long lines that they regularly experience at the stores because shopping is a popular pastime among Puerto Ricans. Good things about the shopping experience were primarily expressed through the ways that shopping helps meet participants' social and recreational needs. However, most participants indicated that they prefer to shop alone, particularly when they need to relax or when the purchase is planned. Few of the participants buy clothing online; the majority prefers to see the actual garment before purchase. Moreover, participants described high shipping costs and extended delivery times (even via the U.S. postal service), risks as to the accuracy of the order, and the return process as reasons why they do not shop online. Finally, participants have developed various strategies to buy what they want despite financial constraints, ranging from comparison shopping to buying an item and then returning it at a later date. All participants shop out of the need to purchase specific apparel products as well as more hedonic motivations related to recreation and relaxation.

Results of this study offer insight into the shopping experiences of Puerto Rican apparel consumers as an overlooked group within the overall Hispanic consumer market. Such insight addresses a gap in the literature and permits retailers to develop strategies that can better target the particular needs of this active segment of consumers. Future research should examine the differences in consumption practices between mainland Puerto Ricans and those living in Puerto Rico. More research on consumption behaviors of Puerto Ricans relative to other groups within the Hispanic community (e.g., Mexicans, Cubans, and Dominicans) is also needed.

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