Honors Thesis Proposal
for
The Dark Side: Study of the Role of Skin Tone on Consumer Perception
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Introduction

There has been significant past research about culturally directed marketing and how it affects different racial groups in advertising. One of the primary focuses has been looking at how different racial groups can be marketed to or how the groups respond to advertisements. Little attention has been paid to implications such as skin color. An original study by Yuvay Meyers found that “the ethnic identity of an African-American consumer plays a significant role in how African American models are received in advertisements based upon their skin color” (Meyers 2008). This article was able to inspire my previous research in which I examined the effect of skin tone on perception of service provider quality. Extensive past research has been done on the imaging and portrayal of different ethnicities in advertising and services marketing research, with little attention paid to variance of skin tone (Bailey 2006). With the previous research I was able to investigate not only the skin tone of African American subjects, but Hispanic and Caucasian as well, and how consumers perceived their quality of service.

Little research has been conducted on the relationship between service provider quality and ethnicity. One study suggests that consumers prefer members of their own race across commercial contexts (Adams et al 2008). Also, though there has been a vast amount of research about the tipping behavior of consumers based on their ethnicity, there has been little research concerning tipping behaviors based on the skin tone or ethnicity of the said service provider. My previous research seeks to fill this gap in the literature and to investigate 1) if the skin tone of a service provider effects perceived service quality, 2) if the perception of service quality is based on the consumer’s ethnic identity strength in response to skin tone, 3) If the ethnicity of the service provider has any implications
on the service a consumer is expected to perceive; and 4) If tipping is influenced by the ethnicity and skin tone of the service provider.

African Americans have a current buying power of $1 trillion, and are expected to reach $1.3 trillion by 2017, while Hispanic females have a current buying power of $1.2 trillion. (Nielson 2013) It would be advantageous to marketers and those in service positions to study and understand the implications behind minority service providers and how they are perceived by consumers of same and different ethnic backgrounds.

Literature Review

In 2011, Yuvay Meyers conducted a groundbreaking study that extended skin tone and perception to the area of marketing and advertising. The findings of this study demonstrate that those with greater ethnic identity showed only a slight preference for the light skinned model over the dark skinned model. However, those that identified as ‘low’ in ethnic identity showed a clear difference in skin tone preference with the light skinned model being the more favorable. Overall, there was a distinct preference for the lighter skinned model, which the researcher attributes to ethnic identity. This research provides strong reasoning as to why marketers should be aware of the trend in the African American community, and how this community can be reached effectively. This article sheds light on how or why consumers would show a preference towards service providers of various skin tones, and if they have an effect on their perceived service.

A study conducted by Ayers et al. (2005) showed that explicit racial biases were demonstrated by consumers against white and black cab drivers. In the study, the researcher’s data showed that White cab drivers were tipped more than Black cab drivers based on 1,000 recorded tips. This explicit racial bias begins to inform my research question of whether or not ethnicity plays a factor in quality of
perceived service. Ayers continues to state "This explanation suggests that server race may not affect tipping in restaurants, where service effects are weak, and that any observed server race effects on tipping will disappear after controlling for service quality." Adams et al (2008) began to explain that the displayed white bias may be caused by aversive racism or implicit racial attitudes. Through my research I hope to do quite the opposite and employ a controlled scenario in which we are able to explore the effect of ethnicity or skin tone on tipping behavior. These findings would add to the current research on the subject matter and respectfully dispel the idea of ethnicity and "weak service effects"

Another study done by Paul Koku in (2005), showed that the reason people tip inside restaurants is different from the reasons people tip in other service encounters, largely due to the norm driven aspect of tipping inside restaurants. His data further concluded that there is no difference between the tipping behavior of whites and non whites in service encounters outside of the restaurant. The article continued to describe the largely interesting lack of literature on the tipping manners of Hispanic consumers. The article describes that this could be due to the fact that when minority tipping behavior is discussed, it usually groups together African Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans (Koku, 2005).

Although there is a lack of literature on the consumer behavior of the Hispanic minority group compared to others, there have been some studies that reveal their common actions. Hispanics have been shown to have stronger attitudes toward family and toward service interactions with fellow Hispanics; they are more dependent on personal social interaction than non-Hispanics (Parker 1999). Research has also shown that Hispanic consumers respond differently to various marketing efforts than non-Hispanic consumers, and that the Hispanic market as a whole are more likely to desire interpersonal contact in service transactions (A. Miyazaki, W. Lassar, K. Taylor, 2007). This lack of research on the Hispanic race has several implications as their buying power is at a current rate of $1.2 trillion (Nielsen, 2013), and will grow faster than that of African American buying power (54%) (AHAA, 2013).
My previous conducted research showed that skin tone was, in fact, not an identifier for perceived service provider quality. What was shown to be the largest identifier was the race and gender of the service provider. This outcome could have been based on many reasons, possibly related to stereotyping. As previously mentioned, a vast amount of stereotypes exist for those on the consumer side of market exchanges, but does the same exist for those in the service role? A classic study examined the difference between people who know what a stereotype is as opposed to those who let the stereotype affect their behavior. The study went on to say that those who identify as ‘non racist’ individuals engage in more inhibitions of stereotypes (Devine, 1989). This study has relevance to my research, as it is most useful in explaining how conscious/unconscious stereotypes can manifest themselves in everyday life. My research would seek to uncover any instances of racial stereotyping which would be evident in the explanation of perceived service quality. Although discrimination cannot be the sole reason for the studied actions, it is certainly a major factor.

**Problem**

Through my previous study, I was able to show that skin tone was not the acting variable to service provider quality. The study showed that skin tone did not affect the perceived service quality from the participants. What seemed to be the largest indicators were the race and gender of the service providers, as the data showed that the females (African American, White and Hispanic) were rated higher than the males, with the Hispanic female rated the highest of all. Even more interesting, the males (African-American, White and Hispanic) as a gender were rated drastically lower than the females, but the Hispanic males were rated the lowest of all. With such a lack of research on Hispanic service providers, this phenomenon is difficult to pinpoint but is most likely related to some discriminatory issues. The previous findings present a large issue with real world implications due to the rapid growth of the Hispanic race in the United States. As it is expected for them to grow to the majority race by
2050, surely more of them will assume more roles in the service industry (Census.gov). My previous findings present the possibility of future issues as the data showed the outsized disparity between the perceptions of Hispanic males and females in the service sector.

For my current research I hope to test the following: if the skin tone of a service provider affects perceived service quality, if the perception of service quality is based on the consumer’s ethnic identity strength in response to skin tone, if the ethnicity of the service provider has any implications on the service a consumer is expected to perceive, and if tipping is influenced by the ethnicity and skin tone of the service provider. Figure 1.1 shows the intended variables and research measures. If there is indeed a disparity between ethnicity, gender and perceived service quality, my research will be of great benefit to those in the service industry. Studying consumer tipping behavior would also lend to the service industry due to its vital yet norm driven nature. Tipping is widely practiced when receiving a service from someone, but my research would explore any underlying factors based on ethnicity or gender. Also, by studying the effects of ethnicity and skin tone, marketers as well as service managers can utilize this information to create future service encounters that are efficient and beneficial to both the consumer and the provider.

![Figure 1.1](image-url)
Methodology

The execution of the study will be in the form of an online survey style questionnaire. Each participant in the study will see the same scenario about their experience in a service setting and will be partaking in one of three different experimental measures. For the first measure of skin tone and service quality, each participant will have a scenario in a service setting to read about. This measure will only have a description of their service experience to serve as the controlled variable. For the second measure, participants will still only be able to read about their service encounter and will be told of the gender of their server (male or female) without a picture. In the third measure, participants will read a description of their service encounter as well as have a picture of what their service provider looks like. Figure 1.2 shows what each measure contains and the possible combinations that participants may see in the study. Those that see a picture of Hispanic and African American service providers will view a version of a digitally altered stock photo that was created with a light and dark version of itself to represent difference in skin tone. In each measure the participant will then be able to decide and rate the service they received based on the scenario description, as well as leave a tip if they choose. To incorporate the measure of consumer ethnic identity strength, I plan to incorporate a MEIM (Multigroup Ethnicity Identity Measure) scale that addresses the general aspects of ethnic identity such as self identification, belongingness, and pride. This will allow the testing of possible relationships between ethnic identity strength of the consumer and skin tone of the service provider, and whether or not it influences perceived service.
Measure 1  (Description Only)
- Picture None
- Gender None

Measure 2  (Description with Gender Included)
- Picture None
  - Gender
    - Female
    - Male

Measure 3 (Description with Picture Included)
  - Male (Light or Dark)
    - Hispanic
      - Female (Light or Dark)
    - Picture
      - Black
        - Female (Light or Dark)
    - White
      - Male
        - Female

Figure 1.2
Research Questions

Through my research, I hope to examine the possible effects of skin tone and ethnicity and their relation to the perceived service quality of consumers. If ethnicity does play a role, I also intend to show whether or not the consumer ethnic identity strength influences service quality perception. My research will also shed light on the norm driven behavior of tipping, and investigate whether this is influenced by the ethnicity of the service provider. Through research, I hope to fill the gap on studies relating to ethnicity on service providers and consumer tipping behavior. I hope to also add new literature to the field, as little research has been done on Hispanics and their behavior as a service provider and how their ethnicity is perceived by consumers. This is increasingly important because Hispanics are the largest minority in the United States, and will make up almost one-third of the population by 2050 (Census.gov, 2012).

Based on previous research and completed studies, I hypothesize that skin tone will be shown to not have an effect on service provider quality because race may be a more indicator variable for participants. I do foresee a data trend between consumer ethnic identity strength and their perceived service quality, especially in scenarios with providers that are most similar to themselves. Also based on outside research, I believe my study will show a relationship between the tipping behaviors of consumers and the ethnicity of the service provider. Lastly, based on the previous study, I believe that the data will show a clear relationship between the ethnicity and the perception of service provider quality, which will best be explained by stereotypes that we all form and unknowingly carry.
Conclusion

In past years, there have been very few studies conducted that seek to explore the possible relationship between service provider ethnicity or skin tone and the perceived service quality they provide. Most of the literature looks at the stereotypes of consumers and how their ethnicity generally predicts their behavior in a service setting. My study seeks to reverse the roles and examine the possibility that the perception of service quality from a consumer standpoint may be based on skin tone, ethnicity, and consumer ethnic identity strength. The data from the study will be of use to many professionals in the service industry as well as those engaging in ethnically targeting marketing. With such a diverse country that we are living in today, more studies such as this should be conducted to examine the perception of minorities in the workplace. This will help us gain a better understanding of the public’s perception of ethnicities that may be unlike themselves, as well as quantify the fact that discrimination may or may not be rampant in our societies.
Bibliography


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