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## Measuring Cross-Cultural Differences of Ethnic Groups within Nations: Convergence or Divergence of Cultural Values? The Case of the United States

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the differences in cultural values of ethnic groups within one nation following Hofstede's methodology. The key finding points to the convergence of cultural values of ethnic groups in the United States—with different degrees of convergence *across* groups. The results of this study may be surprising to the US business practitioner community, which tends to view ethnic consumers in the United States as diverging from mainstream cultural values more than converging. A possible interpretation of the results supports Hofstede's long-held argument that his framework is not the optimal instrument to effectively measure *within*-nation value differences. Future researchers may take these results into account when studying differences and similarities in cultural values among ethnic groups within countries. Implications are significant for global corporations that are interested in understanding the link between cultural values and consumer behavior of members of ethnic groups as compared with mainstream consumers.

### KEYWORDS

Convergence–divergence; cultural values; dimensions; ethnic groups; Hofstede

### Introduction

Increased movement of populations around the world, causing growing within-country ethnic groups with varying consumption behaviors, leads to growing interest in the study of the cultural values of such groups. Are they diverging or converging with mainstream cultural values of the host populations? Nations vary with respect to variety and size of minority groups—with the United States leading as to the size of ethnic groups. In marketing, assumptions about convergence or divergence of groups vary, with some expecting ethnic groups to preserve or even reinforce their ethnic identity and others expecting convergence.

In the United States, the traditional notion of the melting pot for symbolizing the integration of the various immigrant groups in society has been replaced by the salad bowl metaphor, suggesting that the various groups retain the cultural values and habits from the country of origin. Previously so-called minority groups are also becoming majorities. In 2015, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans accounted for more than 120 million people, representing 38% of the total US population. These cultural groups are projected to increase by

2.3 million each year before becoming a majority of the population by 2044, according to the US Census (Beniflah 2015).

Observed differences in consumption and shopping behavior of members of ethnic groups are assumed to be driven by cultural values that are different from those of mainstream consumers, and leading corporations increasingly want to gain greater insight into the cultural differences of the US multicultural population. Because the ethnic groups are large, models of national culture that have proven to help understand cultural values that drive differences in consumer behavior across countries, are assumed to also help understand the underlying cultural values that drive differences in consumer behavior across US ethnic groups and in other large countries. The Hofstede dimensional model of national culture (Hofstede 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010a) was selected to measure the cultural differences (if any) across ethnic groups in the United States. This model is a worldwide, well-known framework for international management that also has been applied to measure differences in consumer behavior across nations. This is the first study that replicates Hofstede's methodology for

examining the differences in cultural values of ethnic groups in the United States: US Hispanics of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican origin; African-Americans; Chinese Americans; and non-Hispanic whites.

### The need to analyze cultural differences across ethnic groups

At the basis of multicultural marketing is segmentation across markets based on cultural differences. Personal values are linked with behavior and can predict behavior and choices. This also applies to cultural values (shared values of groups). In marketing practice, values can be linked with product attributes and benefits to help distinguish brands vis-à-vis the competitive brands in the category and build brand positions. Some products or brands appeal to specific values or motives that are not equally important in all cultures. Luxury goods, for example, appeal to the status motive. In some cultures, on average, more individuals are driven by the status motive than in other cultures, which can be a need for social status or more ego-related, self-enhancement. Also, appeals in advertising are expressions of values, and so are brand images. If in marketing communications appeals, behaviors or images do not conform to the values of a culture, the message is difficult to be interpreted and can be less effective (De Mooij 2014).

In international marketing, cultural values have helped understand behavioral differences of consumers across nations. As the ethnic groups in the United States are becoming larger than the populations of some nations, multicultural marketers in the United States wish to measure cultural values of these groups to help understand behavioral differences.

The US multicultural population has been found to drive at least 30% of sales, 40% of growth, and 50% of profits in over a dozen consumer packaged goods categories (Nielsen 2015a). Leading corporations are aware of the fact that ethnic groups are growing fast and want to adapt their strategies to cultural differences of ethnic groups. PepsiCo's former Head of Music and Cultural Marketing, Mr. Javier Farfan, states that PepsiCo's business growth is coming from these groups; from a business perspective, Cultural Marketing should get more attention and "deliver differentiated brand stories across various media platforms" (Farfan 2015). Other large companies assume that younger generations, in particular, the so-called

millennials (age group 18–34 years) are converging with the majority of the population, which would enable them to standardize their marketing strategies to reap the benefits of economy of scale.

Yet, research findings show that media and shopping behaviors vary across ethnic groups, which also applies to millennials. For example, for US Hispanics, as compared with general market shoppers, shopping is a family affair, including children and grandparents (Nielsen 2007); both Hispanics and African-Americans buy more beauty products (Nielsen 2011, 2015b); African-Americans spend more on basic food ingredients (Nielsen 2011), as do Asian-Americans who also buy more fresh foods (Nielsen 2015c). For both African-Americans and Hispanics, shopping trips are shorter (Nielsen 2011; Unilever 2006). This may be due not only to culture, but also to other factors—larger households, income, dependence on public transportation, and greater awareness of special deals (Unilever 2006).

Levels of acculturation also tend to account for differences (Chattaraman, Lennon, and Rudd 2010); these appear to influence self-confidence, physical vanity, and media usage (Mathur 2012); decision-making styles (Segev 2014); coupon usage and brand loyalty (Villareal and Blozis 2015); as well as preferences for brands from the country of origin (Li, Tsai, and Soruco 2013). The Hispanic Millennial Project (2014) has reported behavioral and attitude differences between several ethnic groups—in particular the millennials—with respect to various product domains and media. The report concludes that millennials cannot be generalized; that they differ from their older counterparts, but also between each other as ethnic groups, as well as between US born and foreign born. Yet, too little is known about cultural values that drive consumer behavior differences across the various ethnic groups.

### Multicultural marketing studies in the United States

There are many reports by commercial companies documenting behavioral differences across the various ethnic groups, but study on the underlying values is limited. Scholarly studies of ethnic groups and multicultural marketing are scarce, and the study of ethnic consumers does not have a long history.

Cui (2001) reviewed scholarly articles about ethnic consumers until 1997 and found that two-thirds were published after 1983. A large percentage investigated consumption patterns, responses to advertising, and media usage. Research topics vary by ethnic group. With respect to African-Americans, studies have focused on portrayal of blacks; for Hispanics, consumption behavior was the most important topic. A number of studies have proposed to segment various ethnic markets based on acculturation, media usage, and psychographic variables. None covered the values underlying behavioral differences. Carter (2009) reported that the volume of ethnic marketing literature has waned since 1980s and 1990s. He was one of the first to mention Hofstede's "cultural values framework" as a suitable method for understanding ethnic differences. Beniflah and Chatterjee (2015) found that between 1979 and 2015, only 42 academic papers were published on Hispanic marketing in top US marketing journals. Such articles tend to provide overviews of the value of the US Hispanic population, the influence of language, or differences with respect to brand loyalty. Various studies have found that US Hispanics differ from non-Hispanics in attitude and behavior, but others suggest that Hispanics may not be very different from non-Hispanic whites in behavior.

Leslie and Korzenny (2015) tried to find the underlying cultural values to explain differences in brand loyalty and found specific cultural differences between ethnic groups, but only with respect to individualism–collectivism, using a different measurement from Hofstede's. They concluded that this cultural dimension could not explain differences in brand loyalty. In order to find relationships between cultural values and ethnic behavior, first the varying ethnic groups have to be measured properly to find if there are differences between the groups with respect to cultural values. This has not been done before in the United States.

### **National culture versus regional cultures and cultural values of ethnic minorities**

Hofstede (Hofstede 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010a) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others." Following this definition of culture as collective programming, the term culture can be attributed to different collectives such as nations, regions within nations,

and ethnic or tribal groups. The question is if these differences can be measured the same way.

### **Dimensions of national culture**

Cultural differences have been measured *across* nations in several large-scale studies that have defined dimensions of national culture. These dimensions are scales on which countries have been given a score. The first one to do so was Geert Hofstede (Hofstede 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010a), who in a large survey among employees of the IBM Corporation defined four dimensions of national culture called Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity versus Femininity. Later, fifth and sixth dimensions were added: Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint.

The different dimensions appear to reflect basic human value differences. A frequently heard objection against dimensional models of national culture is that they do not uncover *within*-country differences. This is because these studies are based on survey data collected from individuals, and the responses are aggregated at national level. As a result, the dimension scores cannot identify individual or regional differences within countries. A few large-scale value studies such as the World Values Survey (WVS) do delineate regions within nations, and analysis of these data has proven that differences across nations are larger than regional, within-nation differences (Minkov and Hofstede 2012).

For international marketing, the Hofstede model has proved to be useful as it allows comparing and explaining consumer behavior differences across countries by using the country scores as independent variables for secondary analysis of national-level market and consumer behavior data. Thus, dimensional models of culture can help explain behavioral differences across nations that are driven by cultural values (De Mooij 2014). A key question is if observed behavioral differences between ethnic groups within countries can also be explained by cultural value differences as measured by Hofstede.

### **Value research on regions within large nations**

Only a few research efforts have been conducted to find dimension scores for regions using the Hofstede methodology, most with poor results. Anjum,

Muhammad, and Raza (2014) found scores for provinces of Pakistan. With some exceptions, these were variations of the national scores. However, the scores of a few provinces deviated strongly for some dimensions. The authors apply Hofstede's questionnaire (VSM2013) and mention a sample of 632 respondents, but do not explain if and how they constructed properly matched samples.

Dheer et al. (2014) analyzed differences between the regions of the United States and Canada, based on a number of items of the WVS and three of Minkov's dimensions, for which the scales were created based on WVS items. These dimensions were Exclusionism–Universalism that is similar to Hofstede's individualism–collectivism, monumentalism–flexhumility that is the same as Hofstede's long-term orientation, and indulgence–restraint. Their conclusion was that regional subcultural diversity is present within the United States and Canada, but they appeared to be mostly based on geographic and climatic patterns, immigration and migration patterns, concentration of ethnic and foreign communities, differences in economic and technological development, and institutional policies.

Hofstede et al. (2010b) analyzed three different research projects that had used Hofstede's Values Survey Module (VSM) in Brazil. This showed that the different states of Brazil were much more similar to each other than to other Latin-American countries. Only differences between individualism and collectivism could be recognized, which can also be understood from the large differences in wealth between southern and northern Brazilian states. An important conclusion from this study was that the application of Hofstede's cross-national dimension framework to regional cultures did lead to interpretable results, but the researchers do not recommend it as the ultimate research strategy for *within*-country regional comparisons. Their argument is that the framework is appropriate for comparing different nations that basically do not share common institutions, but not for comparing regions that share a national context of institutions, regulations, festivities, sports heroes, and the like.

### **Previous research on cultural values of ethnic groups within the United States**

The same reservation can be made when applying Hofstede's model to *within*-nation ethnic groups. Yet, interest in applying the Hofstede model to within-country groups is increasing. Some researchers have

tried to measure cultural values of US ethnic groups according to various other criteria.

Several cross-cultural psychologists have measured differences in individualism–collectivism of ethnic groups, with varying results. The assumptions made in these studies were often that African, Asian, and Hispanic Americans would be more collectivistic than European Americans. Some studies supported these assumptions, whereas others did not, in particular with respect to African-Americans. The latter were found to be as individualistic as European Americans, or even more so (Coon and Kimmelmeier 2001). Some (Oyserman, Gant, and Ager 1995), concluded that African-Americans were collectivistic because of familialism and connectedness to the black community. Vargas and Kimmelmeier (2013) collected documented results from all studies that used the individualism–collectivism scale developed by Triandis (1995). This analysis casted doubt on the assumption that American ethnic minorities are less individualistic than European Americans. The researchers also concluded that the cultural values of young Americans are becoming more similar. Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997) applied an individualism–collectivism scale developed by Oyserman to a student sample. The Asian-American students in the sample were higher in individualism than expected.

### **Research questions**

The main question in our study was whether dimension scores reflect cross-cultural value differences or point to convergence of values of the different ethnic groups. In other words, does the research find different dimension scores for European Americans, Mexican Americans, Hispanics of Cuban origin, Hispanics of Puerto Rican origin, African-Americans, and Chinese Americans that reflect values of the countries of origin, or are they similar, suggesting that there are acculturation effects that drive cultural convergence?

Our second question was whether our research findings correspond to expectations based on the observed behavior. A popular belief among business practitioners in the United States is that the non-white groups (also called multicultural consumers) are *all* more collectivistic than non-Hispanic whites and that their values, to a certain degree, reflect the values of their country of origin.

Our third question centers on generational effects on cultural values: are there cultural differences between US-born and foreign-born ethnic consumers?

The fourth question was whether millennials are similar or different from the general averages of ethnic groups; are they converging, thus becoming more similar to each other, or do differences remain?

## Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine if a proper replication of Hofstede's VSM method applied to large *within*-country ethnic groups will deliver dimensions with scores for the various groups that reflect significant differences in cultural values.

In order to replicate Hofstede's comparison of national cultures, the VSM2013 was used. Experience has shown that if this instrument is applied to well-matched samples across a number of countries, the dimension scores computed with the formula ([www.geerthofstede.eu](http://www.geerthofstede.eu)) correlate significantly with the original scores of countries. The dimensions are based on *ecological correlations*, that is correlations of aggregate data (i.e., mean scores on questionnaire items for matched samples of respondents from each country).

Matched samples were produced for Mexican Americans, Hispanics of Cuban origin, Hispanics of Puerto Rican origin, African-Americans, Chinese Americans, and non-Hispanic whites. Geometry Global, a global shopper-marketing agency, sponsored data collection and recruitment of a sample of 1,400 respondents in the United States: 200 US Hispanic (Cuban); 200 US Hispanic (Mexican); 200 US Hispanic (Puerto Rican); 200 US Asian (Chinese); 300 African-American, and 300 non-Hispanic whites. For each of these cultural groups, the following variables were measured: age (18–34, 35–49), nativity (US born, foreign born), gender (male, female), income (\$25,000–\$50,000 and \$50,000–\$75,000), education (high school graduate/some college), and employment (part-time/full-time).

The survey consists of four value questions for each of the six dimensions. The formula for calculating

each dimension consists of two pairs of questions and multiplication factors. For each dimension, a different number is calculated (C) to develop the final scales. For reasons of comparison, the scores were computed by taking the known US score (originally of mostly Caucasian Americans) as a benchmark for the C in the formula. This has to be done because culture is relative. When researchers do replications of Hofstede's work or try to research new countries, the prescription is that for comparison purposes, nations of which scores are known are included in the study. As a result, the scores of non-Hispanic whites are Hofstede's original scores on the dimension scales for mostly European Americans.

## Results

The dimension scores for the different groups, resulting from the calculations following the VSM instructions are presented in Table 1. The most interesting result of this study is that the values of the various ethnic groups of the United States—except the Chinese Americans—are not much different from mainstream (European-American) values. This is demonstrated by the relatively small differences between dimension scores as compared to differences found at national levels of nations of countries of origin.

As found in other studies, African-Americans score as individualistic as white Americans. In fact, all groups score individualistic and low on power distance. Only Chinese Americans score significantly lower on individualism. All groups score relatively high on the Masculinity–Femininity dimension, which conforms to the scores of the countries of origin. African-Americans score lowest on uncertainty avoidance, and Cuban-Americans score highest. Generally, scores for this dimension can be influenced by a stressful environment, which may have influenced the score for Cuban-Americans. All groups score low on long- vs.

**Table 1.** The dimension scores resulting from Hofstede's VSM 2013 formulas.

	Power distance index (PDI)	Individualism–collectivism (IDV)	Masculinity–femininity (MAS)	Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI)	Long- vs. short-term orientation (LTO)	Indulgence vs. restraint (IVR)
Non-Hispanic whites	40	91	62	46	26	68
African-Americans	34	89	65	34	37	80
Hispanics of Cuban origin	42	82	70	51	22	58
Mexican Americans	35	85	69	45	35	83
Hispanics of Puerto Rican origin	35	85	73	45	24	63
Chinese Americans	31	74	66	39	22	57

short-term orientation (LTO), which is only surprising for the Chinese Americans (see table 2). Yet, these do score lowest on indulgence vs. restraint (IVR), which points at thrift, an original Chinese value. Mexican Americans score highest on IVR, which does reflect the values of the country of origin. However, generally speaking, the scores show little reflection of the values of the countries of origin.

Table 2 includes dimension scores of a few relevant nations to show that some of the countries of origin of the ethnic groups show stronger or even different variations.

Although the heritage of African-Americans is in the far past, readers of this paper may want to compare to that of West Africa, the long-time country of origin of many African-Americans. Hofstede offers data for West Africa for his first four dimensions, and for LTO and IVR for Ghana. The table shows that when comparing Hispanics there are large differences between Latin American nations.

The answer to question one is that the dimension scores of the countries of origin of the ethnic groups are not or are only marginally reflected in the dimension scores for the ethnic groups found in this study. The differences between groups are smaller than those between nations, which points at convergence. As to question two, our findings do not conform to expectations of Hispanics or other nonwhite groups being collectivistic. A particular example is the expectation that Hispanic Americans would be collectivistic because they tend to shop in groups. If this is a manifestation of culture at all, this is not necessarily a manifestation of collectivism. It might be explained by another dimension that does distinguish between groups, which is indulgence (shopping as entertainment), on which dimension Mexican Americans score relatively high.

Our next questions were about differences between foreign born and US born, and between age groups. Table 3 shows the different scores

**Table 2.** Comparing scores with those of nations in the area.

	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO	IVR
United States	40	91	62	46	26	68
Mexico	81	30	69	82	24	97
Costa Rica	38	15	21	86	n.a.	n.a.
Trinidad	47	16	58	56	13	80
Surinam	85	47	37	92	n.a.	n.a.
China	80	20	66	30	87	23
West Africa/Ghana	77	20	46	54	4	72
Puerto Rico	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0	90

**Table 3.** Dimension scores for US born versus foreign born.

Dimension scores for foreign or US born	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO	IVR
Hispanics Cuban origin total	42	82	70	51	22	58
Cubans US born	50	80	73	50	25	63
Cubans foreign born	26	85	62	54	17	49
Hispanics Mexican origin total	35	85	69	45	35	83
Mexicans US born	33	85	66	46	35	81
Mexicans foreign born	40	86	73	41	36	86
Hispanics Puerto Rican total	35	85	73	45	24	63
Puerto Ricans US born	33	84	71	41	24	65
Puerto Ricans foreign born	44	90	83	63	24	51
Chinese Americans total	31	74	66	39	22	57
Chinese US born	36	75	64	37	13	57
Chinese foreign born	18	68	75	44	48	58

between US-born and foreign-born Hispanics and Chinese Americans and table 4 outlines the different age groups. Table 3 shows that foreign-born ethnic groups score differently than US-born groups. In several cases, a relationship with the country of origin can be found for the elder groups, which may signal the effects of acculturation within groups.

Results of analysis of the two age groups show that millennials of the different ethnic groups are not more similar to each other than the elder groups. There is no clear pattern, but there are a few particulars, such as young African-Americans score higher than their elders on all dimensions, whereas young Chinese Americans score lower than their elders. For the three Hispanic groups, the results are more diffuse. This answers questions three and four.

The cultural dimension scores between groups in the United States (i.e., Asians, Hispanics, African-American, and non-Hispanic whites) suggest that

**Table 4.** Dimension scores for age groups 18–34 and 35–49.

Dimension scores age groups	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO	IVR
Non-Hispanic whites total	40	91	62	46	26	68
Non-Hispanic whites 18–34	42	89	67	49	29	65
Non-Hispanic whites 35–49	39	93	57	44	23	71
African-Americans total	34	89	65	34	37	80
African-Americans 18–34	35	95	69	41	47	75
African-Americans 35–49	33	83	61	26	25	68
Cuban Americans total	42	82	70	51	22	58
Cuban Americans 18–34	41	82	68	54	20	61
Cuban Americans 35–49	42	81	72	47	26	54
Mexican Americans total	35	85	69	45	35	83
Mexican Americans 18–34	30	81	69	44	30	88
Mexican Americans 35–49	42	90	68	45	41	77
Hispanics Puerto Rican total	35	85	73	45	24	63
Puerto Ricans 18–34	43	89	75	36	35	61
Puerto Ricans 35–49	26	80	71	55	13	65
Chinese Americans total	31	74	66	39	22	57
Chinese Americans 18–34	29	75	63	39	12	56
Chinese Americans 35–49	34	72	71	38	33	59

there is no uniform cultural pattern for the US “multi-cultural consumer” and that country of origin and ethnic differences and similarities do exist. No single pattern describes any one group across all the dimensions of culture, and no accurate cultural generalizations can be made.

## Conclusions

The key finding of this study points to the convergence of cultural values of ethnic groups in the United States—with different degrees of convergence *across* groups.

With respect to the values included in the Hofstede dimensions, the differences between US ethnic groups are small. The only group that shows significant differences consists of Chinese Americans, in particular with respect to individualism–collectivism. These findings are in line with findings from the Millennial Project Wave 5A (2015), which asked for a few value preferences and concluded that “American themes about rugged individualism tend not to resonate accordingly for Asian-American Millennials.” Generally, differences found in our study mostly apply to elder generations and those born outside the United States. For all groups, including non-Hispanic whites and African-Americans, there are differences between age groups.

The groups aged 18–34 years, the so-called millennials, are not more similar to each other than the other groups. The results show in particular that young Hispanics are not the same. Age and nativity make a difference.

We began this study with the general expectation that ethnic groups in the United States would differ across *all* cultural dimensions. Ethnic consumers in the United States, after all, self-ascribe differences of race and ethnicity. So naturally, we expected differences to emerge between groups. This was not the case exactly. The fact that the data were inconclusive—with some ethnic groups converging on some cultural dimensions while other groups diverging on others—suggest that ethnic consumers in the United States are not as “different” as they have been made out to be (e.g., Hispanics show significant variation, while Chinese in the United States show more consistency in their original cultural dimension scores). The results of this study suggest that culture is not necessarily a zero-sum game: some ethnic groups in the United States can diverge on some cultural dimensions, but do not diverge on other ones. The findings of our

research also affirm a long-held principle that Hofstede research has made for decades: there is generally less cultural diversity *within* a nation than *across* nations. Why this is the case in the United States, why some cultural dimensions in the United States change while others do not, and why they change for some ethnic groups and not for others remain the important questions for future empirical research. We suspect that acculturation or assimilation may play a role but do not rule out other phenomena.

An alternative conclusion can be the same as the Brazil researchers made: that the Hofstede framework is appropriate for comparing different nations that basically do not share common institutions, but not for comparing regions or ethnic groups that share a national context of institutions, regulations, festivities, sports heroes, and the like. The results of our study may help researchers of other countries with diverse populations who also tend to express the wish to apply the Hofstede framework to measuring within-nation differences. Our results may help these to progress with caution and/or spend the effort to develop other more appropriate methodologies to study the cultural values of within-country ethnic populations. We recognize that new research streams tend to create great interest in the research community, but this pioneering study unexpectedly generated more questions than answers, at this point. We are hopeful that future research in the United States and abroad will begin to answer some of the questions that we have posed with greater theoretical understanding.

## Implications for business and marketing

Our findings may disappoint those business and marketing managers who have applied the Hofstede model successfully for international purposes and now find that the strong value differences found between nations do not exist across ethnic groups in the United States, however large they are. Except for a few dimensions, the differences found are not significant enough to take into account when developing brand positions or advertising appeals.

Findings from studies like the Hispanic Millennial Project and research by large companies show that ethnic identities of members of some groups and, in particular, identities of Latino millennials seem tied to their original culture, which defines their self-image and aspirations (Baar 2016). Therefore, on the one hand, members of most ethnic groups seem to have adapted to the values of



mainstream society; on the other hand, some groups want to be approached according to their separate, self-ascribed identities. If members of such groups genuinely view themselves as different, marketers are wise to address them according to their preferences.

However, cultural values that distinguish nations will not provide guidance the way they can for international marketing. Segmentation studies based on more specific consumption-related values may be more effective.

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