# Learning to navigate the American retail servicescape: Online forums as consumer acculturation platforms and consumer gift systems

Hope Jensen Schau [a,*], Yan Mandy Dang [b], Yulei Gavin Zhang [b]

[a] Eller College of Management, The University of Arizona, United States
[b] W. A. Franke College of Business, Northern Arizona University, United States

### ABSTRACT

With consumer mobility on the rise, marketers need to understand how to best serve the increasing number of immigrants, expatriates, and foreign nationals. We examine an independent (non-corporate, brand agnostic) online forum that operates as a consumer acculturation platform and a consumer gift system, where Chinese-speaking consumers assist one another with navigating and even exploiting the American retail servicescape. Forum participants bestow the gift of experience on the collective to enhance the market-oriented communicative competence of forum participants necessary to master the American retail environment. Consumers on the platform systematically employ American English to reference brands and describe retail marketing promotions in a forum dominated by Chinese language. Specifically, we find that code switching, typically expected in early stages of language acquisition, becomes a robust norm to communicate specifically about American retail phenomena (metaphorical code switching) and bridge the gulf between home and host cultures. We offer firms four tactical strategies to attract and retain Chinese-language consumers.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc.

## 1. Introduction

More than half the countries in the world are multi-lingual (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), making it common to have services conducted in the service provider's or service consumer's second language. Complicating matters, the rules and norms that govern market exchanges are often not intuitive. Marketplaces in the United States are governed by a host of contradictory situational norms that can confuse even the savviest American consumers. In some retail circumstances consumers pay full asking price (i.e., grocers and department stores), haggle (i.e., automobiles, and bundled goods and services), bid (i.e., antiques and eBay), barter (i.e., co-operatives), and tip (i.e., restaurants and bars). Consumers may pay in advance, pay at the time of purchase, pay in installments, pay a third party over time, or even lease. A consumer is unlikely to have perfect market information, therefore, the most favorable price or "best deal" on a given product across stores is virtually unknown (Urbany, Dickson, & Sawyer, 2000).

Consumers less familiar with the rules and norms of the American retail servicescape (i.e., immigrants and visitors) are at a severe disadvantage. Things are exponentially complicated when the service provider and service consumer do not share a common language; confusion and disengagement or market abandonment result. Conversely, a common language increases understanding of service roles and enhances willingness to engage, and firms that use the consumer's native language increase positive word-of-mouth and efficacy in service recovery (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). Prior research shows how language impacts interactions between providers and consumers and shapes service outcomes (Holmqvist, 2011), yet relatively little is known about how language in consumer-to-consumer interactions shapes service encounters and outcomes. We aim to illuminate the use of language within peer-to-peer market-oriented interactions and the impact of these interactions on service encounters.

Immigrants account for 13.3% of the United States' total population, which is the largest share in 105 years (Camarota & Zeigler, 2015). The Department of Homeland Security indicates that there were 160 million nonimmigrant admissions to the United States in 2010 (Monger & Mathews, 2011). They consist of foreign nationals granted temporary legal entrance and usually refer to business travelers, tourists, students, and temporary workers. These staggering figures only reflect legal, documented entrants. It is estimated in 2010, despite Homeland Security's efforts, almost 11 million "unauthorized immigrants" reside in the US (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2011). Regardless of formal status, these immigrants, expatriates and foreign nationals must learn to navigate the intricacies of the American marketplaces and in many cases do not have fluency in English.

\* Corresponding author at: Eller College of Management, The University of Arizona, 1130 E. Helen Street, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States.
*E-mail addresses:* hschau@eller.arizona.edu (H.J. Schau), yan.dang@nau.edu (Y.M. Dang), Yulei.Zhang@nau.edu (Y.G. Zhang).

The US Census estimates that in 2013 2.9 million individuals residing in the US spoke Chinese as a primary language with 1.6 million of these indicating that they spoke English "less than very well" (American Community Survey, 2014). Since 2012, there has been a dramatic uptick in the number of Chinese, and specifically wealthy Chinese, coming to North America. In 2014, applicants for the U.S. immigrant investor program hit an all-time high, and 85% of the applicants were Chinese (ChinaFile, 2015). The sheer volume of Chinese-speaking consumers living in the US and their increasing financial resources makes these consumers an important market segment; understanding their needs is a competitive advantage.

We posit three research questions: 1) what do Chinese immigrants and visitors do in online forums to learn the rules and norms of the American retail servicescapes? 2) why are forum participants motivated to actively educate newer entrants to exploit American retail promotions? and 3) how is language strategically employed in the forums to facilitate consumer acculturation and market mastery?

Empirically, we show how the American retail-oriented board, "PennySaver," acts simultaneously as a consumer acculturation agent (Peñaloza, 1994) and a consumer gift system (Giesler, 2006). Leveraging netnography (Kozinets, 2009), we demonstrate the PennySaver forum's distinctive purpose: to share market knowledge and enhance the communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) of Chinese-speaking market actors. The forum plays a significant role in Chinese-speaking immigrants and visitors learning from one another about American retail promotion rules and norms, enhancing service outcomes.

We trace longitudinal discourse on PennySaver to explore the strategic use of language on the forum. We hone in on code switching phenomena, using an established computational linguistics method. The data reveal that code switching behavior occurs at the language-level and at a subcultural level (new Chinese-speaking entrants to the US) with a shared code developed among participants on the acculturation platform (forum) regarding American retail protocols and promotions. We show that code switching, while expected in early learning stages, becomes a robust norm to communicate about specific retail phenomenon (metaphorical code switching). We illustrate the manner in which metaphorical code switching is used to make sense of the retail rules and collaboratively strategize ways of extracting maximum value in retail transactions.

We begin with a review the extant literature on consumer acculturation, language in services, consumer gift systems, market mavens and code switching. Then, we discuss the field site and methodology. Our data reveal the practices, inspirations and outcomes of forum participation, as well as the strategic use of language, specifically code switching, on the forum. Lastly, we offer managerial implications for retailers interested in attracting and retaining Chinese-language consumers.

## 2. Conceptual development

### 2.1. Consumer acculturation

Luedicke (2011), describes consumer acculturation as "an intricate process of socio-cultural adaptation to unfamiliar economic (income, status), biological (food, health), physical (urbanization), social (family, friendships, discrimination) and cultural (clothing, religion and language) conditions" (223) that face migrants and visitors. Peñaloza (1994) derives a model of immigrant consumer acculturation, where the process requires agents who know both the culture of origin (home) and the culture of immigration (host). Acculturation agents within an immigrant's social network act as consumption mentors, navigating new immigrants through the complexities of their host country's marketplace.

Lerman, Maldonado, and Luna (2009) identify the markers necessary for enhanced consumer market outcomes. Language plays a prominent role in acculturation, accounting for 13 of 28 of the items on the Cultural Life Style Inventory (Lerman et al., 2009, 402). Interestingly,

they assert that "language proficiency is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for language preference (or vice versa)" (Lerman et al., 2009, 402).

Here, we investigate a consumer acculturation platform with extended reach beyond one's immediate social network and including multiple acculturation agents. We examine an online forum built to facilitate consumer acculturation of Chinese-language consumers to the American retail market, where more knowledgeable market actors explicitly aid novices in navigating markets. We investigate language use on the forum looking for patterns of language choice in the communication threads.

### 2.2. Consumer gift systems

Giesler (2006) defines a consumer gift system as "a system of social solidarity based on a structured set of gift exchange and social relationships among consumers" that is more than an aggregate of dyadic gift exchanges and which becomes a social fact that contributes to the development and continuity of a society (283). Giesler (2006) identifies three key components to consumer gift systems: 1) social distinctions, 2) reciprocity, and 3) rituals and symbolisms. Here, we demonstrate a forum where knowledgeable market actors gift their experience (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007) to the collective. This specific consumer gift system takes as its goal the education of new market actors in a fashion similar to market mavens.

### 2.3. Market mavens

Defined by Feick and Price (1987), market mavens are: "individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information" (85). The maven has characteristics that distinguish him/her from other individuals and other types of diffusion portals such as opinion leaders and early adopters. A market maven has awareness of a broad range of new products, brands, and markets; shares information with others about these things; seeks information from diverse sources; engages with enjoyment in the marketplace, pays attention to advertising and uses coupons/deals; and is known to (and is aware of) other mavens.

The construct achieved importance globally as a tool for marketers and managers to examine and promote market diffusion. Market mavens and their impact have been examined theoretically and empirically for retail markets (Abratt, Nel & Nezer, 1995), for couponing (Price, Feick & Guskey-Federouch, 1988), and in industry (Nataraajan & Angur, 1997). Mavenhood has been tested across product categories (Slama & Williams, 1990) and across media to include internet mavens (Belch, Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005) and WOM "what goes viral" studies (Ho & Dempsey, 2010; Yang, 2013). The "meta maven" (Barnes & Pressey, 2012) was introduced to theorize mavens across physical and virtual spaces, where an individual also serves as a portal through which knowledge is collected and disseminated. The main contribution of the meta maven construct is showing that the original maven construct holds in real and virtual spaces. Yang, Liu and Zhou (2012) examine the market maven online for Chinese consumers, and show that cultural differences further complicate the online variation.

We posit that the role of maven in Web 2.0 is played not by an individual person per se, but by a socio-technological assemblage of many individuals and technology. Through examination of the Chinese-language consumer acculturation platform and gift system, we find promise in the idea of the collective maven.

### 2.4. Language in services

Service encounters are generally described as interactions between a consumer and a provider. Language is a critical component of all

services (Holmqvist, 2011), impacting the three phases of service encounters: before, during and after (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). While considerable research has focused on scripting of the service encounter to enhance the "during" service phase (c.f., Grove & Fisk, 1983; Leidner, 1993; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985), far less research has been devoted to the "before" and "after" phases. Recent notable exceptions exist and provide fruitful avenues for future research.

Holmqvist (2011) addresses the importance of language congruence, formerly taken for granted in service research. Holmqvist (2011) uncovers the trade-off some consumers make between price and language congruence during the "before" service stage, where consumers may be willing to engage in services in their second language if the price of the service was heavily discounted.

Holmqvist, Vaerenbergh, and Grönroos (2014) show willingness to communicate in a second language in the "before" service stage can impact service engagement such that native language preference "before" service encounters is impacted by the manner in which language is politicized. Likewise, Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) demonstrate that consumers are more willing to tip (immediate "after" service phase) if served in their native language ("during" service phase). Interestingly, the preference for the native language ("before" service stage) is not related to language skill but again to the politicization of language in the culture (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013).

Blending the "before," "during" and "after" service phases, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) find native language preference ("before" phase) is highest when perceived control is low and consumers fear comprehension issues ("during" service phase) will negatively impact the service outcome ("after" service phase).

Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) examine the impact of service language incongruence ("during" service phase) and word-of-mouth behavior ("after" service phase), where consumers served in their second language are overall less likely to recommend the service to others. This lack of positive word-of-mouth can be detrimental to market share.

Absent in the above extant literature is the interactions among peers that influence service encounters. Here, we will show that online forums can serve as acculturation platforms where acculturation agents prepare ("before" phase) new market entrants for service encounters ("during" phase) for optimal outcomes ("after" phase), explicitly teaching new entrants how to navigate American retail promotions.

### 2.5. Code switching

To explicitly examine the role of language in peer-to-peer interactions related to services, we draw on theories from sociolinguistics, specifically the construct, code, and the intracultural practice of code switching. Codes are defined in sociolinguistics literature as community-level communication systems (Gumperz, 1982). A code is a neutral term denoting a linguistic variety (language, dialect, vernacular) (Crystal, 1987) that reflects the social norms of the practicing collective (Heller, 1988; Smitherman, 1977).

Code switching is a communication strategy where a communicator toggles from one code to another (Eastman, 1992; Heller, 1988) during discourse. Communicators may switch codes in part, as in mixing or blending codes within a single speech exchange (Gumperz, 1982); or in total, as in an entire shift from one code to another (Poplack, 1988). Code switching is a communicator's systematic and deliberate shifting between codes during a single communicative episode (Coulmas, 2005; Eastman, 1992; Heller, 1988). Speakers wield codes to serve their communicative purposes (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986, 61).

Code switching is a social process (Heller, 1988, 2) where identity is marked and relationships are signaled through use of specific communication codes that reveal operating social realities and a set of referential meanings (Gumperz, 1982; McClure, 1981; Valdes, 1981). Through use of a given code in a given context, a communicator acknowledges their membership in a social group, a particular perspective, or interpretive frame (Myers-Scotton, 1988). As part of a discourse strategy, code switching is both a "boundary leveling" and a "boundary-maintaining" linguistic strategy (Heller, 1988, 1) meaning that code switching indicates relational ties and the social boundaries that exist because of the ties. The most common community-level communication system is a language and the most prevalent form of code switching occurs between languages. For example, Chinese immigrants to the US may switch between speaking their language of origin (Chinese) and speaking the host language (English) in a single communication event such as a face-to-face conversation in a grocery store, a telephone conversation, an email exchange, or an online forum.

Code switching occurs for different reasons. Blom and Gumperz (1972) identify situational code switching as when factors external to the participants dictate a code and the same speaker switches codes as they cycle through their various social obligations. In role dependent code switching, an individual who plays different roles uses codes to mark each role (Goffman, 1981). Blom and Gumperz (1972) distinguish situational code switching from metaphorical code switching where a particular topical domain can trigger a code switch as in discussing a governmental regime (Hechter, 1975), a specific ideology (Gal, 1988; Myers-Scotton, 1990; Poplack, 1980), a macro-social power (Heller, 1992), or even the market (Gardener-Chloros, 1985). This differs from frame switching (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000) where bilingual-biculturals have "distinct cognitive frameworks associated with their cultures and languages," where "mental frames may consist of different repertoires of values and behaviors as well as separate world views and identities" (Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008, 279). People who engage in metaphorical code switching are not necessarily bicultural, or even truly bilingual, and the metaphorical code switch is nested in a specific topical domain importing only those aspects of the social system that are embedded in that language for that given topic.

Sociolinguistic scholars debate whether a single word or phrase can qualify as a code switch (Gringas, 1974; Reyes, 1976), or whether word borrowing is a distinct phenomenon. Word borrowing is when a word or phrase from one code is imported to another code as in technical or scientific terms in one language appearing in another, like the American English term "jump drive" used globally to refer to a portable external digital storage device. Lance (1975) insists that code switching includes the introduction of a single unassimilated word or phrase specifically including personal names, place names and brand names, as long as the word or phrase does not undergo a structural adaptation. Myers-Scotton (1993, 15) agrees that the length of a code switch is not important, but rather the intention of the switch and the understanding of the greater cultural content of the code from which the word or phrase emanates. For example, the term "jump drive" appearing in an otherwise German code communication would not constitute a code switch because it simply refers to the storage device not a wider language-based interpretive frame, like technology. "Jump drive" enriches the German code with a borrowed resource; however, the remainder of a discussion on technology is conducted in German. In our present study, we treat brand names, as well as American English words and phrases describing American retail protocols and marketing promotions, as metaphorical code switches within the forum subculture because the code switches occur predictably within a delineated social group (Chinese immigrants to the US and visiting Chinese foreign nationals) based on topic and the English terms are inextricably part of the American free market interpretive frame (Blom & Gumperz, 1972).

Linguists recognize that code switching can be examined at the individual (how do individuals use code switching) and at the collective level (what are the trends in given communicative communities)

(Heller, 1992). Our analysis focuses on the latter, the sociolinguistic examination of collective code switching.

## 3. Field site

The Internet is a medium for community-based social interaction, where people share information, exchange opinions, and discuss ideas about various topics (Kozinets, deValck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). As a widespread Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) social vehicle (Abbasi & Chen, 2008), this study focuses on a Web forum, where different people can initialize or join discussions to learn from, or teach others about, the American retail environment. Using longitudinal archived data, we demonstrate that an independent (non-corporate, brand agnostic) online forum, MITBBS (http://www.mitbbs.com/), serves as an acculturation platform and consumer gift system.

Our research examines web forums, different from blogs. Web forums tend toward more balanced discussions among participants, than blogs, where the blog owner typically leads the discussion. When compared to social network sites, another advantage of forums is that conversations in social network sites occur between friends and acquaintances, while there is no such restriction in forums. This means that a wider scope of participants with differing skills and knowledge bases may interact on forums.

Our study site is MITBBS forum, the largest, most popular and most active web forum among the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students and professionals scattered throughout the U.S. and living elsewhere abroad. The forum is not accessible within China. The forum started in 1997 as bbs.mit.edu at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, hence "MIT" in its name. The forum grew in popularity among Chinese students studying abroad. After 2002, due to the forum's popularity and bandwidth limitations, it was moved from the mit.edu domain to its own permanent domain at mitbbs.com (Li, 2004). It is estimated that 300,000 users visit the site every month and 85% of their Internet traffic is generated from within the US. The forum records the number of people simultaneously logged on; usually over 20,000.

The forum has around 400 different sub-boards across many topics ranging from legal residency to child care and education. We focus on the sub-board PennySaver, where people are discussing the US retail environment. Two of the authors are registered users of the forum for several years and one of them is an active participant on PennySaver. There are three reasons that all discussions on the sub-board are closely related. First, the sub-board master can delete any off-topic discussions. Second, as incentives, the forum participants can earn points for posting highly relevant messages. Conversely, the master may ban user accounts. Third, participants of this board tend to have a strong social norm, which helps regulate users' behaviors. If someone does not obey the social norms, he/she will be criticized by regular users and reported to the master for punishment.

## 4. Methodology

The focus of our inquiry is an online forum with offline behavioral manifestations (service encounters) in retail stores. We engaged in naturalistic and participant observation on the forum, naturalistic observation in the physical retail stores, online and offline interviews, as well as discourse analysis of forum content. The observation of online and offline behavior allow us to understand *what* is going on. We catalogue behaviors and practices surrounding the forum. Interviews provide us access to *why* members engage in the practices, or the behavioral rationales. Forum thread content, discourse analysis and computational linguistics give us a longitudinal view of *how* the forum operates, specifically the manner in which language is systematically deployed. Taken together, the data represent a robust examination of the PennySaver as a consumer acculturation platform.

### 4.1. Data

#### 4.1.1. Observation
To understand what is happening on the forum and offline in the retail environments, we employ two types of observation: naturalistic and participant. Each form of observations provides us with unique nuances. For naturalistic observation, we unobtrusively culled and analyzed the forum content. Next, one of the authors made contact with six forum members obtaining permission to follow through their perusal of the forum, preparation for shopping (gathering coupons and promotions and creation of shopping lists) and rode along on eleven of their shopping adventures (each member once and five members two shopping sessions). In these instances, the author did not engage in the forum, but observed the six members going about their forum-related behaviors. For participant observation, one of the authors is a member of the PennySaver forum, with six years of experience. The last two years, the author identified herself as a researcher examining the forum as market behavior. This author maintains field notes of the experience on the forum and interactions with members.

#### 4.1.2. Interviews
Interviews online and in-person were conducted to determine why members engage on the PennySaver forum. We developed an interview protocol regarding inspirations for participating. The online interviews were initiated by an open forum invitation, resulting in 57 members expressing initial interest in being interviewed for the research project. Questions were sent to these individuals. We received a total of 26 completed responses: 17 in English and nine in Chinese. Next, to delve deeper into members' inspirations for participating on the forum and rationales for engaging in practices on the forum and as a result of the forum, one author conducted in-person interviews with six informants and followed them on shopping sessions.

#### 4.1.3. Netnography
Researchers captured the PennySaver threads and analyzed the longitudinal textual conversations for themes and member roles.

#### 4.1.4. Computational linguistics
Automatic data collecting and parsing programs were developed to collect the forum messages (HTML format) from the board and then parse the text bodies into a relational database. Our data collection started on May 06, 2010 until we achieved around 1000 threads. The data set contains a representative sample drawn from a timeframe not known for high marketing promotions 1029 threads with 9173 messages posted by 581 different forum participants from May 06, 2010 to May 20, 2010 and theoretical sample from June 2011.

### 4.2. Data analysis

Netnographic data were captured and analyzed using an iterative approach (Schwandt, 1997), triangulating three methods (observation, interviews and thread analysis). Data analysis was guided by grounded theory as advocated in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and elaborated by Strauss and Corbin, (1998). Observations were captured by field notes. Interviews transcripts were archived. We coded the data and distilled thematic patterns using the constant comparative method of analysis (Spiggle, 1994). The initial data were analyzed separately and then reinterpreted comparatively. Subsequent data were analyzed in light of previous data and performed in an iterative style, or hermeneutic circle of understanding (Schwandt, 1997). We sought researcher agreement when coding discrepancies emerged.

Following the netnographic analysis, computational linguistics were used. An automatic, language-level code switching detection program was developed, containing two steps. First, the program classified all messages in our data set into three categories: pure English messages, pure Chinese messages, and the mixed-language messages

(i.e., message containing both English and Chinese words). As a result, among all 9173 messages, 749 are pure English messages, 3947 pure Chinese messages, and 4477 mixed-language messages. Second, the program checked the messages within each thread for language level code switches and subcultural code switching. Only the threads with more than one message were considered: 853 out of all 1029 threads.

Within mixed-language posts and threads, we developed an automatic word count program to count how many times a brand or a marketing promotion-related word appeared in English. Each unique English word in the mixed-language message collection and the frequency it appeared were extracted by the program. We then manually checked all the words that appeared equal to or greater than 10 times, and identified a list of brand names and marketing promotion-related words as shown in Table 1.

For Chinese words, it is difficult to conduct an accurate word count using a similar strategy since the Chinese words are not separated by spaces. Instead, Chinese brand names and promotion-related keywords often consist of several Chinese characters. This is referred to the "Chinese word segmentation" problem in information retrieval (Ong, Chen, Sung, & Zhu, 2005). Due to the limited occurrences of these Chinese brand names and keywords no existing computer-based word segmentation algorithm can achieve accuracy. Therefore, we used a manual approach to read through selected relevant messages to identify specific Chinese brand names and marketing related keywords. Table 1 shows the lists of marketing promotion-related identified and their Chinese translation as well as their frequency in English and Chinese respectively.

## 5. Findings

The findings are organized around our research questions and divided into three broad categories: 1) forum purpose (what), 2) forum participation (why), and 3) forum language (how).

### 5.1. Forum purpose: Learning the protocols of the American marketplace

We document forum behaviors and the retail service encounters they scaffold. Behaviors revolve around American retailscapes and extracting the maximum value from promotions. Forum purpose is best evidenced by the presence, and administrator support, of exams on PennySaver. Participants are encouraged to explicitly test their familiarity with the US marketplace in these exam rituals. Two exams are available related to CVS, an entry-level exam with relatively easy questions and an advanced-level with harder questions. They were originally created on July 16th and 17th, 2007 by user "tjphoton." The exams were marked by the board master as very important posts, placed in a special

**Table 1**
The list of marketing promotion-related words.

| Marketing promotion words in English | Marketing promotion words in Chinese | Number of times appeared in English | Number of times appeared in Chinese |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bogo | 买一送一 | 219 | 0 |
| Clearance | 清仓 | 23 | 104 |
| Coupon | 优惠券 | 660 | 0 |
| Deal | 优惠 | 517 | 0 |
| Discount | 折扣 | 31 | 0 |
| ECB | 购物点券 | 239 | 0 |
| Free | 免费 | 235 | 151 |
| Limit | 限量供应 | 75 | 0 |
| Off | 打折 | 1169 | 38 |
| Rebate | 回扣 | 335 | 0 |
| Refill | 续杯 | 53 | 0 |
| Sale | 减价 | 77 | 0 |
| Save | 省钱 | 41 | 0 |
| *Total* | | *3674* | *293* |

section of the forum, and cannot be deleted. An example question in the entry-level exam is:

| | |
|---|---|
| 我如何知道 CVS 每周有哪些促销活动?<br>A. 听广播, 电视的广告<br>B. CVS 会通过 USPS 寄每周的广告到家里<br>C. 去店里拿 flyer<br>D. cvs.com 查询 Weekly Store Ads<br>E. 去 fatwallet [fatwallet.com] / SD [http://slickdeals.net/] / families.com / afullcup.com 看看他们的讨论区, 或者到本版看更新的 google group | How can I know CVS's sales promotions for each week?<br>A. Listen to broadcast or watch TV commercials<br>B. CVS will mail the sales promotions to your house/apartment every week.<br>C. Go to the local store to pick the flyer<br>D. Go to cvs.com to check Weekly Store Ads<br>E. Go to fatwallet [fatwallet.com] / SD [http://slickdeals.net/] / families.com / afullcup.com to look at their discussion boards, or go to this board ["PennySaver"] to check the updated google group |

The correct answer to the above question is C D E with a summary note, "来本版参加讨论是最好的熟悉方法," which means that "the best way to get familiar [with CVS's weekly sales promotions] is to come to this board to join the discussions." The answer highlights the explicit nature of the board to act as an acculturation platform, teaching Chinese entrants how to shop within the American marketplace.

The following is a question from the advanced-level exam:

| | |
|---|---|
| CVS 有 buy 1 X get 1 X free 的 promotion, 你还有 buy 1 X get 1 X free mfr. coupon, 请问你最终能?<br>A. 2 个 free 的 X<br>B. 3 个 free 的 X<br>C. 4 个 free 的 X<br>D. 花 1 个 X 的钱, 拿到 3 个 X<br>E. 花 1 个 X 的钱, 拿到 4 个 X | CVS offers a promotion about buy 1 X get 1 X free, and you also have a buy 1 X get 1 X manufacturer coupon. What can you finally get?<br>A. 2 free Xs<br>B. 3 free Xs<br>C. 4 free Xs<br>D. Pay for 1 X and get a total of 3 Xs<br>E. Pay for 1 X and get a total of 4 Xs |

The correct answer provided by the exam creator is A. In the advanced exam, specific tips for using American retail protocols are revealed. Exploiting the market is an activity that is culturally unfamiliar to the new entrants and using the promotions is a form of consumer acculturation. Experienced members collectively act as acculturation agents explaining the new retailscape to new entrants toggling back and forth between Chinese and English to make the American retail promotions understandable.

In addition to the exams that display mastery, we identify three status positions. Among the twenty six informants, seven identified as educators (teaching others about the US market promotions and coupon uses), eleven labeled themselves learners (learning from other participants), and eight informants self-described as senior learners (learning from as well as teaching participants). Importantly, the roles change through continued forum participation, where novice learners become more advanced learners and ultimately educators.

We follow one participant from through six weeks of forum engagement, earning social distinctions from learner to educator. Initially, this member asks a question about expired coupons. She specifically identifies as a newbie, seeking assistance.

Within four weeks, she is more knowledgeable and contributes content instead of just asking questions. Her role had changed from the learner to senior learner:

| | |
|---|---|
| 我如何知道 CVS 每周有哪些促销活动?<br>A. 听广播, 电视的广告<br>B. CVS 会通过 USPS 寄每周的广告到家里<br>C. 去店里拿 flyer<br>D. cvs.com 查询 Weekly Store Ads<br>E. 去 fatwallet [fatwallet.com] / SD [http://slickdeals.net/] / families.com / afullcup.com 看看他们的讨论区, 或者到本版看更新的 google group | How can I know CVS's sales promotions for each week?<br>A. Listen to broadcast or watch TV commercials<br>B. CVS will mail the sales promotions to your house/apartment every week.<br>C. Go to the local store to pick the flyer<br>D. Go to cvs.com to check Weekly Store Ads<br>E. Go to fatwallet [fatwallet.com] / SD [http://slickdeals.net/] / families.com / afullcup.com to look at their discussion boards, or go to this board ["PennySaver"] to check the updated google group |

Person A: 请教一下 cvs 的 coupon 能叠加吗？一个 10 off 50，一个 5 off 两个奶粉，都是 cvs 自己家的。我如果买两个奶粉，正好 50 的话，两张 coupon 能叠加使用吗？哪位有经验的请指点一下，谢谢！

**P\*\*\*e: <u>可以的。我用过，没有任何问题。</u>**

Person A: 谢谢谢谢

Person A: Can I use CVS coupons in a combined way? I have one 10 off 50 [coupon] and one 5 off coupon for the purchase of two bags of powder formula, both CVS coupons. If I buy two bags of powder formula with the original price being exactly $50, can I then use both coupons? Can any experienced member give me some instructions? Thanks!

**P\*\*\*e: <u>You can use both coupons. I used coupons like that before. There is no problem at all.</u>**

Person A: Thank you very much!

Finally, she becomes an educator. When someone asks about the feasibility of applying a complex coupon usage strategy, she gives a firm answer, saying "sure, you can."

Person A: 手上有 5OFF15 以及 5off25 两个 off 胖. 买 huggies diaper 9.49 一包的，买 5 包 47.45 有前几天打印的 CVS 3off huggies 胖以及 manufacturer 的 2.5off any huggies diaper 用 5 个 3off 和 5 个 2.5off，一共 oop=47.45-10-5.5\*5=9.95+tax 能过不 谢谢

**P\*\*\*e: <u>可以的</u>**

Person A: I have one 5 off 15 coupon and one 5 off 25 coupon. I plan to buy 5 bags of Huggies diapers, $9.49 per bag, and the total will be $47.45. I also have some CVS 3 off Huggies [products] coupons and some 2.5 off any Huggies diaper coupons that I got a couple of days ago. If I use five of the 3 off coupons and five of the 2.5 off coupons [plus the 5 off 15 coupon and the 5 off 25 coupon], the total I need to pay will be oop [out of pocket] = 47.45-10-5.5\*5= 9.95+tax Can I do it like this? Thanks!

**P\*\*\*e: <u>Sure, you can.</u>**

In six weeks she evolved from newbie to educator. She exemplifies the purpose of the forum: to learn and master US retail promotional protocols.

Observation of members' forum and in-store behaviors corroborates the forum's educational intent. The advice given on the forum is enacted offline. We witnessed forum members perusing forum content, gathering retail promotional tools, creating a strategy to exploit value as directed on the forum, and ultimately executing retail promotions in-store. The forum is not merely a theoretical discussion of what retail promotions exist in American retail or how they work, but serves as a guide to performing these value maximizing activities.

### 5.2. Forum participation: Consumer gift system and collective market maven

In the prior section we saw evidence of social distinctions (learner and educator) and of rituals (exams and praise). When asked why people join PennySaver, all interview informants reference mastering American retail strategies and sharing deals and coupon information to help members save money. Informants mention that sharing promotion information is a "delight":

"省钱买到便宜东西其实际了节约开支外,主要是心情很愉快。而且大家能相互分享这个愉快的心情,是件很美好的事情。"

*Translation: By buying things with less money, I can not only save money, but more importantly, I can enjoy the process. In addition, being able to share such a delightful process with others [on the board] would be a wonderful thing.*

Here, we see that the informant is motivated by saving money and by sharing educational tips.

Many discuss the board as a community and reveal expectations of reciprocity:

"*Sure, I am more than happy to help others. I have gotten many help [sic] and gained knowledge from this board, therefore I also want to do something to give back to this community.*"

We see there is a willingness to give the gift of experience (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007) to other participants in a manner consistent with consumer gift systems containing social distinctions, rituals and generalized reciprocity (Giesler, 2006). The threads are replete with explicit references to imparting knowledge to new

entrants about the idiosyncrasies of the American marketplace. Like the creator of the exams, "tjphoton," participants heavily invest time and energy on PennySaver for the benefit of others. The forum is a consumer gift system in the form of a repository of market-oriented advice.

Participation includes the obligation to share and emanates from previous instances when they received helpful information. Members feel duty bound to reciprocate to the general membership not to specific posters, supporting a collective enterprise as opposed to individual acculturation agents helping specific members within their social network:

"是,我似乎把做这件事当成一个兴趣爱好了。我分享是希望大家都这样,我也能分享到别人的信息,这个平台才能互利互惠。我希望这个平台有了我会更好。我愿意付出我也希望收到回报。"

*Translation: Sure [I am willing to share information with others]. I seem to treat this as one of my hobbies. I share information on the board because I also hope others can do the same thing and I can get information from others too. By doing this, the platform [board] can bring us mutual benefit. I hope this platform [board] will be even better by having me. I am willing to give and also hope for return.*

The informant feels compelled to enhance the forum, paying forward benefits to novices with the expectation that more advanced knowledge will be revealed through general reciprocity.

Informants gain pride and recognition as more knowledgeable board members when receiving positive feedback on their posts:

"*personally I enjoy writing and write about topics that I am interested in. I love to share coupon info with others, as well as helping newbies. On the other hand, people also help me back tremendously. Sometimes I write blogs [forum postings] as a way to express my feelings and share knowledge or expertise to others. People read my blogs [forum postings] as a source of information because I think they find my writing is interesting, and give me a lot of very positive feedback, which makes me fell [feel] very proud of myself. I read PennySaver board everyday and pretty much know everything what [that] is going on.*"

This behavior is consistent with consumer gift systems with a very particular purpose: market education. Forum participants master complex tasks and share their acquired skills with novices, resembling market mavens (Feick & Price, 1987), and perhaps more aptly the "meta maven" construct (Barnes & Pressey, 2012), where an individual serves as a portal through which knowledge is collected and disseminated. On PennySaver, the maven behaviors are across real and virtual spaces with a diffuse virtual social network, akin to Yang, Liu and Zhou (2012) studies. Our forum mavens translate information about an unfamiliar market with a specific vernacular in a manner consistent with the construct sociolinguists call code switching.

### 5.3. Forum language: code switching

Code switching (cf. Gumperz, 1982), or moving between one set of words and symbols full of cultural meaning to another set of words and symbols, is found when forum mavens communicate with market novices to transfer market knowledge. We find evidence that participants strategically deploy language on the forum. Novices communicate on the forum mostly in Chinese. Senior learners acquire and utilize more English in their posts than novices. Educators explicitly use English terms for American retail promotions (metaphorical code switching discussed later) and provide glossaries of these terms and exams for the learners to improve their skills. Specifically, the data show that two forms of code switching are prevalent: language-level code switching and metaphorical code switching within the subculture.

### 5.3.1. Language-level code switching

Informants cite the multilingual nature of the board as attractive and helpful:

> "PennySaver [is] a great [place] for [a] Chinese audience, especially for people who just come to [the] US, [and] does [do] not read much in English. It's a very useful blogging [forum] board to start learning how to save money in US."

Above, the informant reveals that the board is explicitly for new Chinese entrants to learn how to navigate the American marketplace. It also reveals that participants are not truly bicultural but vary along a continuum of novice positions learning from one another on the forum.

A language-level code switching occurs if a participant replies to a message in the same thread in a different language, indicating a total of six types of language-level code switching scenarios: replying with a pure Chinese (English) message to a pure English (Chinese) message, replying with a pure English (mixed-language) message to a mixed-language (pure English) message, and replying with a pure Chinese (mixed-language) message to a mixed-language (pure Chinese) message. In total, language-level code switching occurred in 464 threads (i.e., 54.40%). Among all six scenarios, the code switching between pure Chinese messages and the mixed-language messages happened much more frequently than the other four.

Each mixed message itself is an instance of code switching, as the poster switches between codes purposefully within a communicative episode (a single post, or the larger thread). The following shows a language-level code switch between pure English and pure Chinese:

Person A [in C]: 昨天去买了牙膏 2.49 返 2.47, 回来把信息登到网站上了. 是否还需要把收据邮寄到哪里? 谢谢
Person B [in E]: No, just wait for the end of the rebate period, and claim your rebates online.
Person C [in C]: 不需要
Person D [in E]: You can claim any time you want, but note that you can only claim once per "rebate month."

Person A [in C]: I bought toothpaste yesterday, 2.49 dollars with 2.47 dollars return. I registered the information in my online account. Do I still need to mail my receipt to any place? Thanks
Person B [in E]: No, just wait for the end of the rebate period, and claim your rebates online.
Person C [in C]: You do not need to.
Person D [in E]: You can claim any time you want, but note that you can only claim once per "rebate month."

Person A starts the discussion by asking about how to get the $2.47 return after buying toothpaste. Then, three posters act as acculturation agents by answering his/her question. Person A asks in Chinese and two of the acculturation agents respond in English (demonstrating their familiarity and authority on the matter) and a third responds in Chinese to clarify the advice. In essence, Person A is given both the Chinese explanation, so they can fully understand the concept, and the American English label, so they can recognize the promotion across all marketing communications in the host country. Again, the purpose of the exchange is entirely to teach the nuances of the American marketplace. Language is used as an acculturation tool to instruct the entrant via the acculturation platform (the forum).

The following is a complicated language-level code switch between pure English and mixed-language messages. Person A asks about a liquid soap using both English and Chinese, and then Persons B and C who are the acculturation agents answer the question also in mixed-languages. Then another Person D switches to pure English asking how to do the rebate. One of the acculturation agents, Person C, answers his/her question in the mixed-languages. The same Person D asks a follow-up question in English. Then the agent switches to pure English to answer:

Person A [in M]: Softsoap 带 pump 的洗手液如何买? 原价要 8 刀, 加上胖胖后也要 6 刀啊.
Person B [in M]: 买一个 pump, 买一个 base, 用两张胖胖, 出 8 刀, 得 4 ecb, 再 rebate 4 刀, 就是 free 啦.
Person C [in M]: pump + base, 可以返 4 ecb, 7.99+3.99-2*2=8 块, 返 4, 再加上 rebate 就算合适了. 或者两 base, 3.99*2-2*2=3.98 加税返 4ecb, free.
Person D [in E]: How to do the rebate?
Person C [in M]: 你得找到 rebate form, 现在不知还能不能找到. 我们这边的 Safeway 店里有, 你可以去试试.
Person D [in E]: Where in the Safeway store can we get the rebate form? Thanks.
Person C: [in E]: near this item
Person D [in E]: I see. Thanks!!!!

Person A [in M]: How do you buy the liquid soap of Softsoap, the ones with a pump? The original price is 8 dollars; it still needs 6 dollars if using coupon.
Person B [in M]: Buy a pump and a base, then use two coupons. You pay 8 dollars and get 4 dollar ecb. Then use 4 dollar rebate and it's free now. [CVS offers the registered users free membership cards, named "ExtraCare card." ECB means the ExtraCare Bucks that are printed rewards which can be used to purchase any item in CVS (excluding alcohol, tobacco, lottery, gift cards, money orders, postage stamps, pre-paid cards, prescriptions, and special order Home Health Care items, including footwear).]
Person C [in M]: pump + base can return 4 ecb, 7.99+3.99-2*2=8dollars, return 4 dollars. It is quite good considering the rebate. Or buy two bases, 3.99*2-2*2=3.98, adding tax and then you can get 4ecb; then it's free.
Person D [in E]: [sic] How to do the rebate?
Person C [in M]: You need to find the rebate form; not sure whether it can still be found now. Here, I can find it in Safeway. You may try.
Person D [in E]: Where in the Safeway store can we get the rebate form? Thanks.
Person C: [in E]: near this item
Person D [in E]: I see. Thanks!!!!

It is evident in the above exchange that the code switching is occurring at the language-level through consumer acculturation, while participants are learning the American marketplace protocols. This may be an example of a situational code switch (Blom & Gumperz, 1972) where the motivation to switch languages comes from external sources: the forum. Interestingly, the participants consistently use English for the brand name (Softsoap and Safeway), product attributes (pump and base), and marketing promotions (ecb, rebate and free). All three are examples of metaphorical code switching where communicators opt to discuss part or all of a given topic in a particular code. Here, the code is a language (English) used to refer to features of the American marketplace (brands and retail promotions).

### 5.3.2. Metaphorical code switching

In addition to the complete language-level code switching where communicators switch together from one language to the next in a communicative episode, a mixed-language message is a form of language-level code switching, where a single communicator changes codes in a communicative episode (i.e., a message). The latter is quite prevalent in our data set; 4477 out of all 9173 messages are the mixed-language messages. Further investigation, reveals an interesting pattern of metaphorical code switching. That is, in most of the mixed-language messages, the brand names and the marketing promotion-related words are written in English while other parts of the messages are in Chinese. The brand names and promotional terms are not adapted to the Chinese grammar but tucked into the otherwise Chinese messages just as they would appear in English.

Our analyses show that almost all brand names and promotion words were more often used in English than in Chinese (excepting the term clearance). Overall the promotion words appeared 3674 times in English and 293 times in Chinese. In all 4477 mixed-language messages, 669 messages (14.94%) contained brand names in English, 1489 ones (33.26%) contained marketing promotion-related words in English, and 310 ones (6.92%) contained both. However, only 65 messages had brand names in Chinese and 187 messages had promotion-related words in Chinese. This indicates that people overwhelmingly preferred to use English instead of Chinese when talking about brands and marketing promotions.

Above, we show metaphorical code switching occurring when forum participants systematically use English rather than Chinese translations to refer to American market protocols. This metaphorical code switch occurs because the American market phenomena and the language that addresses them are unfamiliar to the consumers from China. The Chinese speaking consumers import the American English language and ideology embedded in the retail practices (e.g., coupon, rebate) to make sense of, and utilize, American retail protocols. Recall from the prior section that the exams within PennySaver reference the American marketing promotions in English: "buy 1, get 1," "free," and "mfr [manufacturer's] coupon." These terms are not merely borrowed,

but rather highlight the American market interpretive lens that enables these consumer promotions. Further the forum uses simplified Chinese characters as the default language code, which were introduced in 1954 by the government in mainland China to promote literacy. Thus, the specific Chinese code used in PennySaver is one that emanates from a region which does not have American marketplace protocols. The systematic switch to English to reference brands and marketing promotions is more than an occasional word borrowing (Callahan, 2004), but rather an invocation of the American marketplace interpretive frame (Gardener-Chloros, 1985), or a metaphorical code switch (Blom & Gumperz, 1972).

Coca Cola first introduced the coupon as a method of sales promotion to the United States markets in 1887. Nielsen reported that 3.3 billion coupons were redeemed in the US in 2010 (Nielsen Marketing Charts, 2011). In February 2011, more than 2/3 of American adults indicate that their household uses print coupons (Fetto, 2011). The development and adoption of coupons in China is not as popular as in the US, although there is an increasing trend. Some global chain stores (e.g., KFC and McDonald's) are actively using coupons in their stores in China. Some local Chinese stores and companies provide coupons. Interestingly, even when Chinese firms implement coupons, the coupon practice is considered to be imported American retail practices. Likewise, very few stores in China provide weekly circulars with coupon and discount information like CVS and Walgreens do in the US. Simpson (2002) compared different retail sales promotion methods in Chinese marketplaces and found that point-of-purchase promotions, price offers, and free gifts or premiums were much more popular compared with coupons and rebates. Prendergast and Thompson (2008) found that lucky draws were more popular than coupon or discount sales promotions in China. They explained such results based on the popular belief of personal luck in Eastern cultures.

Our data show continued use of metaphorical code switching within PennySaver, beyond the initial consumer acculturation phase. Forum participants continue to switch to English when talking about American brands as well as American retail protocols and marketing promotions while using Chinese for other words in a same message, long past their acculturation phase. This phenomenon is evident in the advanced exam posted on the forum where participants with considerable experience in the American marketplace continue the metaphorical code switching.

The following is an example of metaphorical code switching:

Person A: Maybelline 部分指甲油 75% **OFF**, 价格是$1.03, 不参加 **BOGO**, 但是买 3 个, 用上 3 个 1 刀的胖子, 基本免费, 倒赚 5 刀 **rebate**. 有的指甲油上并没有 **clearance** 的标志, 要扫了价格才知道, 有兴趣的可以试试.
Person B: 赞. 刚好要去看看.
Person C: 我昨天也看到了, 但是那个 5 **rebate** 的 tag 上小字写着 except **clearance** item, 有人 claim 成功了吗?
Person B: 看来[Person A]已经 claim 成功了, 赞.

Person A: Some nail polish products of Maybelline are 75% **OFF**, for $1.03, without **BOGO**. If you buy 3 and then use 3 one-dollar coupons, you can get them almost free. In addition, you can also get 5 dollar **rebate**. Some nail polish may not have the **clearance** labels, and you can only know the prices after scanning. Try it if you have interest.
Person B: Great. I just want to check it.
Person C: I saw this yesterday. But the tag says that the 5 dollar **rebate** except **clearance** items. Any one has claimed it successfully?
Person B: It seems that [Person A] has already successfully claimed it, great.

Above, people are discussing the promotions of Maybelline nail polish products. The words related to retail protocols and marketing promotions are in English including "off," "bogo," "rebate," and "clearance," while most other words are in Chinese. The understanding is advanced, demonstrating the persistence of metaphorical code switching. Posters are not asking the nature of coupons but the existence of specific brand coupons which they know will maximize their realized value. Posters routinely switch to English for American retail related topics, showing that beyond word borrowing (Myers-Scotton & Jake, 1997) and early stages of consumer acculturation (Peñaloza, 1994), the topic of American market protocols consistently triggers a metaphoric code switch (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gardener-Chloros, 1985). This patterned and predictable use of English to refer to retail-oriented phenomena exemplifies metaphorical code switching (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986).

## 6. Discussion

Our data evidence the importance of language in service encounters. Building on Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012), we demonstrate that language is critical to learning service protocols and extracting value from the retailscape. Interestingly, we find that native language is used for explanation and exposition and second language is used as an end game for certain retail promotion mastery. This departs from Holmqvist (2011) where first language is preferred within the service transactions. Here, we find that second language use is a badge of mastery. We diverge from Holmqvist et al. (2014) because we did not uncover the political considerations because they are deeply embedded in consumer acculturation; the impetus to acculturate to a host market is itself political and implies a willingness to forego first language use. Likewise, we did not see insistence to use first language in services (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013) because the very purpose of engaging in consumer acculturation privileges the second language. Alternatively, our findings may be inconsistent with the extant literature because prior work examined language in provider-consumer dyads, where we study the forum as a generalized gift system (Giesler, 2006) among peers. The forum behavior is aggregate, collective and transcends individual social networks akin to consumer gift systems. Advice is given publicly for general forum access and reciprocity is to the forum in general not individual members.

Further, positive word-of-mouth in this context was also not related to first language use (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). We believe this divergence from the extant literature is an artifact of the specific type of forum and its consumer acculturation purpose. That said, we do echo Lerman et al. (2009) that consumer acculturation is not linear toward assimilation as implied in Peñaloza (1994). Metaphorical code switching is evidence of a chronic state of liminality between first and second language where topics are referenced and understood in the language in which they are most embedded.

Interestingly, PennySaver serves as an online consumer acculturation platform where acculturation agents collectively teach new market entrants the American retail protocols within generalized reciprocity norms. This is most obviously revealed through the use of quizzes regarding the importance and proper use of PennySaver. This study contributes to current work on consumer acculturation. Where Peñaloza (1994) demonstrates the process of consumer acculturation, she does not reveal the specific role of language. Through netnography and computational linguistics, we reveal the manner in which language is used within the consumer acculturation process. In our data, the acculturation agents typically provide an explanation to new entrants in Chinese but retain the English for the label of the practice or brand name, making it easier for the new entrants to recognize the market-oriented phenomenon in the host country communications. Here, where D'Haenens, Koeman, and Saeys (2007) find language has a bridging function between cultures, our study contributes by revealing the specific strategic use of code switching in consumer acculturation.

This discovery of code switching within subcultural market-oriented discussions, echoes a recent article that found language, dialect and brand level code switching operating in quick service restaurants and beverage bars (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007). Our data show that the participants overwhelmingly use a specific type of code switching, metaphorical code switching (Blom & Gumperz, 1972), where a speech community uses code switching to discuss specific topics in order to import the underlying cultural meanings associated with the language code for that specific topic. Chinese-speaking consumers on the platform systematically employ American English to refer to brands and marketing promotions, in an otherwise Chinese-dominant forum.

Our findings align with Luna et al. (2008) who examine a related construct, frame switching, or the ability of a bicultural bilingual person to systematically shift between languages (code switch) to signal a fundamental switch in the entire cultural frame of their discourse, or to highlight culture-specific meanings embedded in a given language.

There are two important differences between this study and Luna et al. (2008): 1) they examined consumers who are both bicultural and bilingual, where we examined immigrants and visitors many of whom are in the early stages of acculturation and not necessarily bilingual and 2) frame switching goes beyond metaphorical code switching to encompass very sophisticated meanings of specific words (masculine, feminine, self-sufficient) within the language code (Luna et al., 2008) rather than broad ideological constructs associated with or embedded in a language for a given topic (American retail protocols). According to Peñaloza (1994), PennySaver, is a consumer acculturation agent under the media category, specifically an online acculturation platform, where many if not most of the participants are new to American marketplaces seeking remedial cultural insights, thus are not yet bicultural.

## 7. Managerial implications

Peñaloza and Gilly (1999) formalize this theory of simultaneous change, insisting that much like consumer acculturation, marketer acculturation takes place through intercultural contact prompting the marketer to be both "changer" and "changed." This means that while consumers learn the market protocols, retailers can learn how to create more value and efficiency for new entrant consumers, potentially changing the way they do business generally.

Based on our findings, we believe firms interested in Chinese-speaking consumers should monitor online forums to understand consumer perceptions of manufacturer and retail promotions. These consumers are eager to discuss market-oriented topics and are highly susceptible to the advice of other, more experienced consumers who act as market mavens (Feick & Price, 1987). Word-of-mouth is especially potent in acculturation platforms. This research jibes with recent inquiries examining the power of word-of-mouth in contexts such as movie reviews, where box office revenue can be directly impacted by online word-of-mouth review sites like Yahoo Movies (Liu, 2006). Liu (2006) finds that the Yahoo Movies impact is strongest in the early days of a movie release, as consumers eagerly learn about new movie offerings. Similarly, Kozinets et al. (2010) demonstrate the power of word-of-mouth within online communities is not simply amplifying marketing messages, but the meanings are simultaneously modified through embedding them in the community, making them more resonating and emicly valid. Monitoring consumer acculturation platforms can give firms early warning about trends that impact their profit margins and opportunities to enhance consumer-perceived value as well as revealing the emic language of the consumers.

Since forum participants overwhelmingly use the English brand names instead of corporate-derived Chinese translations, we suggest that corporate strategies to create a Chinese brand name translation in marketing promotions within the United States may be ill-advised. Our findings echo recent studies that recommend retaining the original [English] brand name when the existing brand is strong (Hong, Pecotich, & Schultz, 2002). Perhaps the brands discussed in our data are sufficiently "strong." Alternatively, the preference for American brand names may be due to the Chinese immigrants' and foreign nationals' commitment to consumer acculturation to the American retail environment.

Since our data reveal that forum participants systematically refer to marketing promotions in English, we suggest that firms communicate retail promotions (coupons, quantity discounts, bundles) primarily in English foregoing translations. While this finding may appear to support a standardization of international marketing strategy (Jain, 1989), we are not advocating that position. Our field site is an acculturation platform where consumers seek advice and information regarding the American retail environment. We are examining consumers' entrance into a local national market with the desire to acculturate through performing authoritative acts (Arnould & Price, 2001) that reveal competence, not a marketing strategy firms would use in multiple national local markets. Our findings suggest that firms in the American marketplace courting Chinese-speaking consumers should not use translations

of marketing communications because consumers in our study actively seek consumer acculturation and utilize English to refer to retail promotions.

Lastly, we urge firms to construct engaging and complicated price promotions that facilitate and are dependent upon collaborative consumer strategizing and allow for explicit signaling of mastery. Most market research related to coupons is either geared toward firms maximizing their coupon redemption rates effectively among profitable consumers (cf., Anderson & Song, 2004), or conversely on motivations behind coupon use such as deal proneness or value consciousness (cf., Lichtenstein, Netemeyer, & Burton, 1990). Here, we propose that for consumers engaged in acculturation, the impetus to redeem promotional discounts is more about demonstrating marketplace acumen in their host country. Firms that devise complicated engaging promotions will add value to these acculturating consumers by giving them challenges that provide collective, collaborative, opportunities to exploit the marketplace and earn social capital and ultimately to master the market.

In summary our data-driven recommendations for retailing practice are: 1) monitor online acculturation platforms, 2) encourage use of uniform brand names in national promotional communications, 3) devising marketing communications in English, and 4) utilize complicated retail promotions that depend on collaborative efforts to exploit and allow consumers to display their mastery of American retail promotions.

## 8. Limitations and future research

The present study examined one, albeit large, forum focused solely on Chinese-speaking consumers learning US retail protocols. Future research may examine other language community forums to see if similar patterns appear with respect to the what, why and how of forum operation. The present study also does not draw from or contribute to the literature on international market strategy: what works for this specific language community in the US may not hold in international marketing contexts where mastery of American retail environment is not a desired status marker.

Lastly, the brands discussed in our data are sufficiently "strong," to echo Hong et al. (2002) recommending retention of the original (English) brand name when the existing brand is strong. Brand strength is an attribute we did not measure or manipulate since we are analyzing in situ data.

## 9. Conclusion

With consumer mobility at an all-time high, the issue of best serving immigrant and foreign nationals is timely. We examined consumers' use of a peer-to-peer forum identifying: 1) forum purpose (what), 2) forum participation (why), and 3) forum language (how).This article contributes to our understanding of consumer acculturation theory and specifically focuses on the how acculturation agents in online acculturation platforms utilize language. We introduce code switching as an integral component of consumer acculturation, where acculturation agents move back and forth between language codes to effectively teach retail-oriented protocols and promotions to new market entrants. We demonstrate that systematic code switching based on topic areas, or metaphorical code switching, allows acculturating consumers to import broad ideological constructs into the discussion signaled by language choice. The acculturation platform in the present study is a consumer gift system, a collective with generalized reciprocity norms supporting the notion of collective acculturation agents and the existence of a collective market maven.

## References

Abbasi, A., & Chen, H. (2008). CyberGrate: A design framework and system for text analysis of computer-mediated communication. *Management Information Systems Quarterly, 32*(4), 811–837.

Abratt, R., Nel, D., & Nezer, C. (1995). Role of the market maven in retailing: A general marketplace influencer. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 10.1*, 31–55.

American Community Survey (2014). *Detailed languages spoken at home and ability to speak English for the population 5 years and over: 2009–2013*. United States Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html).

Anderson, E. T., & Song, I. (2004). Coordinating price reductions and coupon events. *Journal of Marketing Research, 41*(4), 411–422.

Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. L. (2001). Authenticating acts and authoritative performances: Questing for self and community, in S. *Ratneshwar, David Mick and Cynthia Huffman edited the why of consumption: Contemporary perspectives on consumer motives.* Goals and Desires, London and New York: Routledge Press.

Barnes, S. J., & Pressey, A. D. (2012). In Search of the "Meta-Maven": An Examination of Market Maven Behavior across Real-Life, Web, and Virtual World Marketing Channels. *Psychology & Marketing, 29.3*, 167–185.

Belch, M. A., Krentler, K. A., & Willis-Flurry, L. A. (2005). Teen internet mavens: influence in family decision making. *Journal of Business Research, 58.5*, 569–575.

Blom, J. -P., & Gumperz, J. J. (1972). Social meaning in linguistic structures: Code switching in Norway. In J. Gumperz, & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communications* (pp. 407–434). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Callahan, L. (2004). *Spanish English code switching in a written corpus.* Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Camarota, S. A., & Zeigler, K. (2015). Immigrant population hits record 42.1 million in second quarter of 2015. *Center for Immigration Studies (August)* (pp. 1–10).

ChinaFile (2015). Wealthy Chinese are fleeing the country like mad: A ChinaFile infographic translation. https://www.chinafile.com/multimedia/infographics/wealthy-chinese-are-fleeing-country-mad

Coulmas, F. (2005). *Sociolinguistics: The study of speaker choices.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

D'Haenens, L., Koeman, J., & Saeys, F. (2007). Digital citizenship among ethnic minority youths in the Netherlands and Flanders. *New Media & Society, 9*(2), 278–299.

Eastman, C. M. (1992). *Code switching.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Feick, L. F., & Price, L. L. (1987). The market maven: A diffuser of marketplace information. *Journal of Marketing Research, 51*, 83–97 (January).

Fetto, J. (2011). *Print coupon use strong despite increase in digital coupons.* Consumer Insight, Featured, Marketing Channels (http://www.experian.com/blogs/marketing-forward/2011/03/31/print-coupon-use-strong-despite-increase-in-digital-coupons/ accessed December 25, 2011).

Gal, S. (1988). The political economy of code choices. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Codeswitching: Anthropological and sociolinguistic perspectives.* Berlin Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

Gardener-Chloros, P. (1985). Language selection and switching among Strasbourg shoppers. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 54*, 117–135.

Giesler, M. (2006). Consumer gift systems. *Journal of Consumer Research, 33.2*, 283–290.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. 81*(86) London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson.

Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gringas, R. (1974). Problems in the description of Spanish English Intrasentential codeswitching. In G. Bills (Ed.), *Southwest areal linguistics* (pp. 167–174). San Diego, California: University of California Institute for Cultural Pluralism.

Grove, S. J., & Fisk, R. P. (1983). The dramaturgy of services exchange: An analytical framework for services marketing. *Emerging Perspectives on Services Marketing*, 45–49.

Gumperz, J. J. (1982). Conversational code switching. In J. J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Discourse strategies* (pp. 59–99). Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Gumperz, J. J., & Hymes, D. H. (1986). *Directions in sociolinguistics.* New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Hechter, M. (1975). *Internal colonialism.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Heller, M. (1988). Introduction. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Codeswitching: Anthropological and sociolinguistic perspectives.* Berlin Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

Heller, M. (1992). The politics of code-switching and language choice. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 13*, 123–142.

Ho, J. YC, & Dempsey, M. (2010). Viral marketing: Motivations to forward online content. *Journal of Business Research, 63.9*, 1000–1006.

Hoefer, M., Rytina, N., & Baker, B. B. (2011). *Estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population residing in the United States: January 2010, population estimates.* U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics.

Holmqvist, J. (2011). Consumer language preferences in service encounters: A cross-cultural perspective. *Managing Service Quality, 21*(2), 178–191.

Holmqvist, J., & Grönroos, C. (2012). How does language matter for services? Challenges and propositions for service research. *Journal of Service Research, 15*(4), 430–442.

Holmqvist, J., Vaerenbergh, V., & Grönroos (2014). Consumer willingness to communicate in a second language: Communication in service settings. *Management Decision, 52*(5), 950–966.

Hong, F. C.(. F.), Pecotich, A., & Schultz, C. J., II (2002). Brand name translation: Language constraints product attributes, and consumer perceptions in east and Southeast Asia. *Journal of International Marketing, 10*(2), 29–45.

Hong, Y. -Y., Morris, M. W., Chiu, C. -Y., & Benet-Martinez, V. (2000). Multicultural minds: A dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition. *American Psychologist, 55*(7), 709–720.

Hymes, D. (1972). *On communicative competence, sociolingustics, 269–293.*

Jain, S. C. (1989). Standardization of international marketing strategy: Some research hypotheses. *Journal of Marketing, 53*, 70–79 (January).

Kozinets, R. V. (2009). *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V., deValck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. S. (2010). Networked narratives: Understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. *Journal of Marketing, 74*(2), 71–89.

Lampel, J., & Bhalla, A. (2007). The role of status seeking in online communities: Giving the gift of experience. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12*(2), 434–455.

Lance, D. M. (1975). Spanish-English codeswitching. In E. Hernandez-Chavez (Ed.), *En Lengua de los Chicanos* (pp. 138–153). Arlington, VA: Cohen and Beltrano.

Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food, fast talk: Service work and the routinization of everyday life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lerman, D., Maldonado, R., & Luna, D. (2009). A theory-based measure of acculturation: The shortened cultural life-style inventory. *Journal of Business Research, 62*, 399–406.

Li, Y. (2004). Web site helps Chinese in U.S. navigate life. *Wall Street Journal (eastern edition), New York (Oct 26, 2004), B.1.*

Lichtenstein, D. R., Netemeyer, R. G., & Burton, S. (1990). Distinguishing coupon proneness from value consciousness: An acquisition-transaction utility theory perspective. *Journal of Marketing, 54*, 54–67 (July).

Liu, Y. (2006). Word of mouth for movies: Its dynamics and impact on box office revenue. *Journal of Marketing, 7*(3), 74–89.

Luedicke, M. K. (2011). *Consumer acculturation theory: (crossing) conceptual boundaries, consumption, markets and culture14*(3). (pp. 223–244), 223–244.

Luna, D., Ringberg, T., & Peracchio, L. A. (2008). One individual, two identities: Frame switching among biculturals. *Journal of Consumer Research, 35*, 279–293 (August).

McClure, E. (1981). Formal and functional aspects of the codeswitched discourse of bilingual children. In R. P. Duran (Ed.), *Latino language and communicative behavior* (pp. 69–94). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Monger, R., & Mathews, M. (2011). *Nonimmigrant admissions to the United States: 2010. Annual flow report.* U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics.

Myers-Scotton, C. (1988). Code switching as indexical of social negotiations. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Codeswitching: Anthropological and sociolinguistic perspectives* (pp. 151–186). Berlin Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

Myers-Scotton, C. (1990). Elite closure as boundary maintenance: The case of Africa. In B. Weinstein (Ed.), *Language policy and political development* (pp. 25–32). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). *Dueling languages: Grammatical structures in code-switching.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Myers-Scotton, C., & Jake, J. L. (1997). Codeswitching and compromise strategies: Implications for lexical structure. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 1*(1), 3–24.

Nataraajan, R., & Angur, M. G. (1997). A quest for the "industrial maven". *Industrial Marketing Management, 26.4*, 353–362.

Nielsen Marketing Charts (2011). Coupon redemption grew 27%. http://www.marketingcharts.com/print/coupon-redemptions-grow-27-12586/nielsen-coupon-redemption-method-apr-2010jpg/ (accessed December 25, 2011)

Ong, T. -H., Chen, H., Sung, W. -K., & Zhu, B. (2005). Newsmap: A knowledge map for online news. *Decision Support Systems, 39*(4), 583–597.

O'Reilly, T. (2005). What is web 2.0? Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software. ((accessed March 03, 2010), available at) http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html

Peñaloza, L. (1994). Atravesandos Fronteras/border crossings: A critical ethnographic exploration of the consumer acculturation of Mexican immigrants. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21*(1), 32–54.

Peñaloza, L., & Gilly, M. C. (1999). Marketer acculturation: The changer and the changed. *Journal of Marketing, 63*, 84–104 (July).

Poplack, S. (1980). Sometimes I'll start a sentence in English y Termino en Español: Toward a typology of code-switching. *Linguistics, 18*, 581–618.

Poplack, S. (1988). Contrasting patterns of code switching in two communities. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Codeswitching: Anthropological and sociolinguistic perspectives.* Berlin Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

Prendergast, G. P., & Thompson, E. R. (2008). Sales promotion strategies and belief in luck. *Psychology and Marketing, 25*(11), 1043–1062.

Price, L. L., Feick, L. F., & Guskey-Federouch, A. (1988). Couponing behaviors of the market maven: profile of a super couponer. *NA-Advances in Consumer Research, 15.*

Reyes, R. (1976). Language mixing in Chicano bilingual speech. In J. D. Bowen, & J. Ornstein (Eds.), *Studies in southwest Spanish* (pp. 167–174). Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House.

Schau, H. J., Dellande, S., & Gilly, M. C. (2007). Script subversion: The impact of code switching on service encounters. *Journal of Retailing, 83*(1), 65–78.

Schwandt, T. A. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry: A dictionary of terms.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Press.

Simpson, L. (2002). *The influence of culture on retail sales promotion use in Chinese supermarkets, ANZMAC 2002, Melbourne, Australia.*

Slama, M. E., & Williams, T. G. (1990). Generalization of the market maven's information provision tendency across product categories. *NA-Advances in Consumer Research, 17.*

Smitherman, G. (1977). *How I got Ovah: The African world view and Afro-American oral tradition, talking and testifying: The language of black America.* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Solomon, M. R., Surprenant, C., Czepiel, J. A., & Gutman, E. G. (1985, Winter). A role theory perspective on dyadic interactions: The service encounter. *Journal of Marketing, 49*(1), 99–111.

Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of consumer research, 21.3*, 491–503.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* Inc: Sage Publications.

Urbany, J. E., Dickson, P. R., & Sawyer, A. G. (2000). Insights into cross-and-within-store price search: Retailer estimates vs. consumer self-reports. *Journal of Retailing, 76*(2), 243–258.

Valdes, G. (1981). Code switching as a deliberate verbal strategy: A microanalysis of direct and indirect requests among bilingual Chicano speakers. In R. P. Duran (Ed.), *Latino language and communicative behavior* (pp. 95–108). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Van Vaerenbergh, Y., & Holmqvist, J. (2013). Speak my language if you want my money: Service language's influence on consumer tipping behavior. *European Journal of Marketing*, *47*(8), 1276–1292.

Van Vaerenbergh, Y., & Holmqvist, J. (2014). Examining the relationship between language divergence and word-of-mouth intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, *67*(8), 1601–1608.

Yang, H. (2013). Market mavens in social media: Examining young Chinese consumers' viral marketing attitude, eWOM motive, and behavior. *Journal of Asia-Pacific Business*, *14.2*, 154–178.

Yang, H. "Chris", Liu, H., & Zhou, L. (2012). Predicting young Chinese consumers' mobile viral attitudes, intents and behavior. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, *24.1*, 59–77.