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### Citation

Lindridge, Andrew; Henderson, Geraldine Rosa and Ekpo, Akon E. (2015). '(Virtual) ethnicity, the Internet, and well-being. *Marketing Theory*, 15(2) pp. 279–285.

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/44620/>

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**(Virtual) Ethnicity, the Internet and Well-Being**

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## **(Virtual) Ethnicity, the Internet and Well-Being**

### **Abstract**

Recent research studies allude to the wellbeing benefits of the Internet to the individual. Yet while these studies possess merit in their findings scant research has focused on the assertion of significant differences, the changing availability and thus role of technology within the daily lives of individuals when ethno-racial differences are considered. We argue for a broader understanding of how the Internet may be used by consumers to avoid, pursue, and/or resolve one's ethnic identity in their everyday lives and what the wider wellbeing implications are for the individual and society.

**Keywords:** Internet, Virtual Ethnicity, Well-being, Identity Project, Acculturation

### **Introduction**

The internet beyond any reasonable doubt represents the greatest technological change to our lives over the past thirty years. A change that has allowed individuals to form friendships, romances, reconnect with family members over great distances and communicate in ways previously unimaginable beyond the confines of science fiction. Within these changes has been a stream of research on whether the internet increases or otherwise our well-being. A report by the British Government in 2013 (Department of Culture, Media and Sport) declared that such was the increase of well-being offered by faster broadband internet that economic incentives should not only be offered to accelerate national coverage but also increasing internet download speeds. A perspective not unwarranted within previous literature. Indeed, researchers have indicated that the internet and the opportunities for online communication leads to increases in an individual's self-esteem and assertion and increases in adolescents intimacy and friendships (Schmitt, Dayamin and Matthias, 2008; Valkenberg, Peter and

Schouten, 2006). Yet considering the relevance of the internet to wellbeing a review of the literature reveals a paucity of research that consider how ethno-racial groups adapt and incorporate the Internet into their daily lives (Kim, Jung, and Ball-Rokeach (2007) and what the wider implications are for their well being. A finding that is more surprising considering research into wellbeing and ethnicity has been considered from differing perspectives, including empowerment (Molix and Bettencourt, 2010) and economic power (Nandi and Platt, 2010).

Understanding the role and relevance of the Internet with regards to ethnicity offers researchers an important understanding of how individuals and groups develop a virtual ethnicity and its consequences for wellbeing. In particular the Internet has offered consumers means of constructing, establishing and maintaining virtual ethnicities (Cohen and Prusak, 2001; Henderson et al 2013). Although the emergence of the Internet may have been perceived by Wilson (2002) as a classless, genderless, or an ethnicity-free space, we argue that the Internet is a space which not only fosters these factors, but also encourages adaption, construction, and negotiation of one's self-identity in multiple ways (Foster 2005).

The implications of the Internet for ethno-racial groups and their wellbeing warrants further research through three inter-related trajectories. First we discuss how discrimination encourages individuals to consume through the internet. This is then followed by a discussion on how the Internet encourages individuals to seek happiness. The final trajectory discusses how the Internet maybe used to construct positive ethnic identities.

### **Trajectory 1: Avoidance through the use of the Internet**

The Internet allows for those who may feel disenfranchised in their individual locales to develop a broader community of support due to economies of scale. For example, there have been numerous events in the media that has highlighted instances of discrimination that

occurs in the U.S. marketplace (Crockett, Grier, and Williams 2003; Harris, Henderson, and Williams 2005; Williams, Henderson, and Harris 2001). Given the historic and collective memory of discrimination in offline settings, many ethnic consumers flee to the Internet as a means of avoiding such issues (Ekpo 2012; Williams and Henderson 2011). Consider the research of Ayers and Siegelman (1995) in which they found that while negotiating a price for a new car, Black and female confederates fared far worse than their White male counterparts. In contrast, research conducted by Morton, Zettermeyer, and Silva-Risso (2005) found that if purchases were made via the Internet, rather than in person, this discriminatory effect diminished. When combined, such studies suggest that it is far less likely for those who conduct business via the Internet, to be discriminated against on the basis of their ethno-racial profile. Consumers may then use the Internet as a means of finding, building, and maintaining much needed community.

For those individuals who in their daily offline lives feel disempowered, escaping to the Internet may provide a means to feel equal or perhaps even greater power in a virtual community. We would therefore invite future research to explore this issue. In particular, what websites, and their characteristics, that offer greater levels of empowerment and wellbeing? Associated with this are what websites conform or otherwise with offline cultural norms and what are implications of this for retailers? If websites indeed offer a ethno-racial free space are these co-constructed websites, blogs or simply commercial websites and how do they contribute to the individual's well-being?

Paradoxically, the Internet may also exacerbate a resistance to multicultural exposure and interaction. Acculturation literature helps us to understand some of the processes, ideologies, and struggles, individuals may face when confronted with a different culture (for example: Askegaard et al., 2005; Berry, 1980; Luna, Ringberg and Peracchio, 2008). Criticisms of acculturation studies lament on the assumed uni-dimensionality of the acculturation process

by relegating it to assimilation. However, the Internet provides a space where consumers can progressively develop and reinforce beliefs and values that may be reverberated online (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). For example, consumers in their quest to retain their chosen ethnic identity may use the Internet to resist an ethnic identity they find themselves immersed in offline. Thus escaping to the Internet every time one feels marginalized in the marketplace does not provide feedback to the marketplace allowing for self-correction. Taken to an extreme conclusion, the Internet could potentially become an even more divisive device for making individuals siloed into their own worlds with little face-to-face interaction. If individuals opt to use these technology-based options instead of local options, it could lead to even greater societal and wellbeing problems.

These problems and the related social and mental health opportunity costs arising from avoiding discrimination through using the Internet remain unclear. What are the social implications of minority ethno-racial groups undertaking Internet purchases? Do such actions encourage their withdrawal from society whilst perpetuating and inadvertent supporting a discriminatory market place? What are the wellbeing implications of these actions both for the dominant and minority ethno-racial groups?

The ability of individuals to escape their ethno-racial identities through the Internet is however increasingly challenged by Big Data. For example, Sweeney (2013) found that online searches for perceived African-American associated names disproportionately produced advertisements promoting criminal background searches and accompanying text suggesting the individual had a criminal record (regardless of whether they had or not). In other instances Big Data is being used to associate individuals consumption patterns with other individuals who share, to varying extents, similar lifestyles. For example, credit card agencies now increasingly associate demographic data derived from Big Data with ethno-racial profiling. An individual, through a computer algorithm, automatically becomes

associated with perceived similar groups often to their detriment (Rabess, 2014).

We therefore call for research to investigate the wellbeing implications of Big Data on ethno-racial profiling and consumers. For example, to what extent does Big Data restrict an individual's life opportunities through stereotyping, access to resources such as credit. Alternatively does Big Data and the Internet offer social marketers greater opportunities to overcome discriminatory experiences encountered by individuals?

### **Trajectory 2. Pursuit of Happiness (Hedonic Motivations for Virtual Ethnicity)**

Individuals may also use the Internet for pleasurable pursuits such as finding similar others with similar interests via virtual communities (Muniz and Schau, 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). This relatively hedonic purpose for using the Internet may be subdivided into motivations for, as well as mode and manner of access, which we discuss, in turn, below.

We posit that different ethnic groups may have different motivations for why they may use the Internet, how they use the Internet once there, and face different fallouts of their Internet usage. In some cases, individuals chose to abandon their socially ascribed ethnicity.

Brumbaugh and Grier (2013) suggest that ethnicity may be either enduring or transitory and as such we find that those whose real-life identity projects may be of one ethnicity may choose to have a virtual ethnicity which reflects a completely different identity project. Here, individuals may seek out virtual rather than real ethnicity for situations in which they believe that the former will make them happier or more self-actualized than the latter. Further, this could also be a way in which these individuals embody their own self-concept, in which they enact consumption practices that reflect a prototypical rather than an ethno-racial role of who they think they are (Gecas 1982; Triandis 1989).

Individuals or communities adopting these ethnically-masked and/or virtual ethnicities may exist for two reasons. First, the individual may truly want to be with fictive kin who

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share common interests that are not necessarily tied to the person's actual ethnicity (Ibsen and Klobus 1972). In their research of fictive kin phenomenon in the global hip-hop music diaspora Motley and Henderson (2008) found that stigmatized individuals from various societies around the world coalesced via connective marginalities, many times using the Internet as a means of sharing music and/or lyrics, as well as other aspects of hip-hop culture (e.g., fashion, graffiti).

An individual's need to construct an alternative ethno-racial identity or fictive kin through the internet suggests a number of future research areas. Most importantly, what are the wellbeing implications for individuals who actively construct a new identity online and seek solace in a fictive kin? Related to this, what are the individuals on/offline characteristics that encourage this practice and what is the rationale for choosing particular websites? Within these fictive kins' how do individuals communicate with each other? Is it purely online or does it extend to face-to-face meetings as the British Government (2014) suggests? Within these research calls the need to explore and understand wellbeing remains paramount.

With respect to mode of access, we also find differences. For instance, Kim, Jung, and Ball-Rokeach (2007) noted how White users tend to use the Internet for business and financial related reasons, compared to Asians and African-Americans using the Internet for entertainment, and Latinos Internet usage related to accessing information and other resources that were not available in their typically socio-economic deprived areas. Complimenting this African-Americans have virtually leap-frogged their White-American counterparts with respect to mobile usage, particularly as a means of conducting mobile commerce (m-commerce) (Rideout and Wartella, 2011). What all of these have in common is that the digital divide equates to having broadband at home. It does not account for other ways of access, which should be researched. For instance, anecdotal evidence suggests African-Americans extensively use Twitter. What, how and when are these web-based

technologies used and what are their wellbeing implications? Is their usage purely for social reasons or does it offer social marketing an effective way to offer wellbeing communication to often unreachable groups?

### **Trajectory 3. Extensions of Real Life (Ethnicity in the Convergence Culture)**

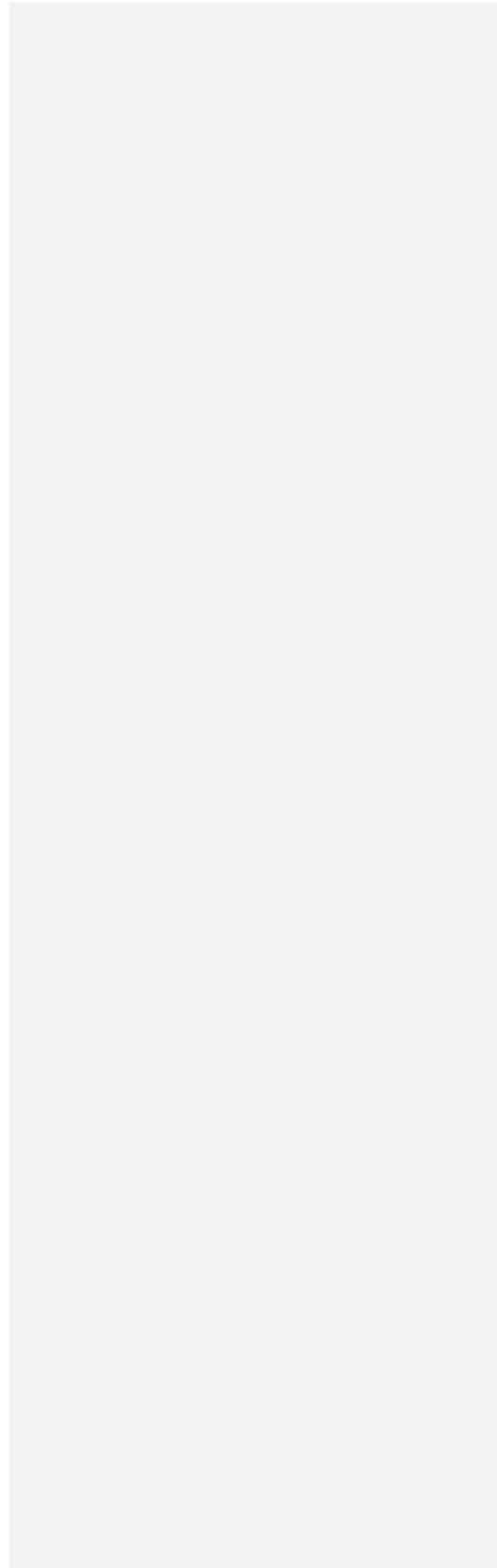
As on/offline environments draw closer together ethnic minorities may encounter a convergence of their cultures. For example, Parker and Song (2006) in a study into second-generation, British-born Chinese noted how this group established websites to affirm a positive self-identity, addressing a wider perception of a latent collective identity amongst a geographically dispersed group. Another motivation was to affirm a positive British Chinese identity through the Internet to the wider British society. It is thus important to understand how the nature of the technological culture in which we live shapes and is shaped by our lived experience of ethnicity.

What then are the transformative benefits the Internet offers these groups? Does the Internet with its requisite technical knowledge exclude as many members of different ethno-racial communities as it includes? Research is required to explore who is and isn't accessing these communities, their respective motivations and the implications for their well being.

### **Conclusion**

Despite recognition of the wellbeing benefits offered by the Internet relatively little research exists regarding what, how and why ethno-racial groups usage of this phenomenon. By recognizing how individuals may seek solace and wellbeing through the Internet through three research trajectories mentioned here offers fruitful perspectives for future research. Yet the Internet should not only be recognized as a space where people escape from the realities of the world but, as we indicated, is increasingly become a place where discrimination is

increasingly becoming apparent.



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