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

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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. 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.

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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 non-immigrant 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.
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 servicescape? 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 (Péhaloza, 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. Péhaloza (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 symbolism. Here, we demonstrate a forum where knowledgeable market actors gift their experience (Lampel & Bhalia, 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 (Natarajan & 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, 1983). This differs from frame switching (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000) where bilingual-bicultural 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).
4. Methodology

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. Data

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

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 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:

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marketing promotion words in English</th>
<th>Marketing promotion words in Chinese</th>
<th>Number of times appeared in English</th>
<th>Number of times appeared in Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bogo</td>
<td>买一送一</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearance</td>
<td>清仓</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>104</td>
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<td>Coupon</td>
<td>优惠券</td>
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<tr>
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<td>活动</td>
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<td>Discount</td>
<td>折扣</td>
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<td>Free</td>
<td>免费</td>
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entraments 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 acculturants helping specific members within their social network:

“是，我似乎把这件事当成一个兴趣爱好了。我分享是希望大家都能这样，我也能分享到别人的信息，这个平台才能互利互惠，我希望能这个平台有了会更好。我愿意付出我也有希望收到回报。”

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 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 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 market subculture. (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 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 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 Chinese (English) 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 EN]: Yesterday bought toothpaste for 2.49 each. Repel. I wonder what’s the difference...?

Person B [in EN]: No, just wait for the end of the rebate period, and claim your rebates online.

Person C [in C]: 你不要等了，现在就可以。

Person D [in EN]: You can claim any time you want, but note that you can only claim once per rebate month.

Person A [in EN]: 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 receipts to any place? Thanks.

Person B [in EN]: No, just wait for the end of the rebate period, and claim your rebates online.

Person C [in C]: 你不要等了，现在就可以。

Person D [in EN]: You can claim any time you want, but note that you can only claim once per rebate month.

Person A [in EN]: 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 (using coupon). Person B [in EN]: Buy a pump and a base, then use two coupons. You pay 8 dollars and get 4 dollars back. Then use 4 dollars rebate and it’s free now. CVV offers the registered users free membership cards, named “ExtraCare card.” ECB means the ExtraCare Bucks that are plotted rewards which can be used to purchase any item in CVS (excluding alcohol, tobacco, lottery, gift cards, money orders, postage stamps, prescription, and special order Home Health Care items, including textbooks).

Person C [in EN]: 5 inches to pump, base return 4 each, 7.99+3.99=22 in. 54, 3. Follow-up question in English. Then the agent switches to pure English and answers the question also in mixed-languages. Then another Person D switches to pure English asking 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 EN]: Softsoap bar pump gives you 8 1/2 points, plus you have 6 1/2 points.

Person B [in EN]: Buy a pump, buy a base, use two coupons, you need 4 each, 7.99+3.99=22 in. 54. Follow-up question in English. Then another Person D switches to pure English and 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 EN]: 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 (using coupon). Person B [in EN]: Buy a pump and a base, then use two coupons. You pay 8 dollars and get 4 dollars back. Then use 4 dollars rebate and it’s free now. CVV offers the registered users free membership cards, named “ExtraCare card.” ECB means the ExtraCare Bucks that are plotted rewards which can be used to purchase any item in CVS (excluding alcohol, tobacco, lottery, gift cards, money orders, postage stamps, prescription, and special order Home Health Care items, including textbooks).

Person C [in EN]: 5 inches to pump, base return 4 each, 7.99+3.99=22 in. 54, 3 dollars rebate, add tax and then you can get 4; then it’s free. Person D [in EN]: [sic] How do you do the rebate? Person C [in EN]: You need to find the rebate form, not sure whether it can still be found now. Times, I can find it in the Safeway. You may try.

Person D [in EN]: Where in the Safeway store can we get the rebate form? Thanks.

Person C [in EN]: 5 inches to pump, base return 4 each, 7.99+3.99=22 in. 54, 3 dollars rebate, add tax and then you can get 4; then it’s free. Person D [in EN]: [sic] How do you do the rebate? Person C [in EN]: You need to find the rebate form, not sure whether it can still be found now. Times, I can find it in the Safeway. You may try.

Person D [in EN]: Where in the Safeway store can we get the rebate form? Thanks.

Person C [in EN]: You don’t need to.

Person D [in EN]: You can claim any time you want, but note that you can only claim once per rebate month.

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 (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 regular 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粉饼目前有57% OFF: 卫生纸$1/包, 餐巾$2/包, 化妆水$7/500ml, 面霜$15/50ml, 洗面乳$20/50ml, 牙刷$4/支, 立口$20/支, 补骨脂膏$30/100ml. 有折扣的商品后面有 clearance 说明, 希望您去了解(Chinese text).

Person B: 嗯, 好的, 去看看!

Person C: 我今天去查了, 57% OFF 所有的东西都不能除了 clearance 说明, 有人成功吗?

Person B: 嗯, 好的, 去看看!

Person A: 有些指甲油产品是Maybelline的, 有OFF 75%的优惠, 这个$8.03, 但是没有Bogo. 如果你买3个, 并且是1美元的优惠券, 你就可以实际免费。这可以用第二个$5优惠券, 你可以只花$2获5美元优惠。所以Maybelline指甲油可能不提供 clearance 说明, 你能只能看商品的价格后填写。试试如果有效。

Person B: 嗯, 我去查查。

Person C: 我昨天查了一下这个, 但是只说5美元, 但是除clearance, 有任何人成功吗?

Person B: 嗯, 有人已经成功了, 真的。

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 phenomena in the host country communications. Here, where D’Haenens, Koeman, and Saeyt (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 linguistic 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 bicultural 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 such measures counteract 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 retailer promotions. These consumers are eager to discuss market-oriented topics and are highly susceptible to the advice of others, 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 means are simultaneously modified through embedding them in the community, making them more resonating and emically 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. Brand strength is an attribute we did not measure or manipulate since we are analyzing in situ data.

### 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.

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