## How do French consumers perceive ethnic products? The case of Nike Hijab

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#### **Abstract**

This study attempts to understand the perception of French consumers toward the new Nike collection, Nike Hijab. This paper first reviews the concept of ethnic marketing in France. The consumers' reactions toward Nike Hijab are examined through a netnographic study. The results show that Nike Hijab is perceived negatively by French consumers and seems to have a negative impact on Nike's image. In light of the results obtained, managerial and theoretical implications are proposed.

**Keywords:** Ethnic marketing; Ethnic products; Netnograhy; French consumer behavior.

#### Introduction

The referee Bolqola whistled to signal the end of the final match between France and Brazil in 1998. France won the match 3–0 to claim the World Cup for the first time. For many researchers (Marks, 1998; Dauncey and Hare, 1999), this moment introduced the idea of a unity among a people who loved hitherto poorly mixing colors and styles, and triggered the ethnic marketing in France (Pires et al., 2005). But despite the democratization of distribution of ethnic products such as "Halal" and "Kosher" range in supermarkets(Robert-Demontrond, 2009), ethnic marketing confronts the French republican universalism (Treguer and Segati, 2003) and faces many cultural and political challenges (Barth and Boyer, 2008;Delannoy and Peretti, 2010).

In February 2017, Nike made waves when it announced it is launching a Hijab for Muslim women to wear while exercising early next year. The Nike Hijab is a piece of high-performance sportswear designed to dissolve the barriers that prevent Muslim women from keeping fit. Even if the collection will not hit the market before 2018, but it has received mixed reactions in France. Launching an ethnic product by an international company while far-right parties are achieving electoral successes in many European countries has served to receive a great deal of discussion on social media websites and in French blogs.

In this research, we will attempt to contribute to the ethnic marketing literature by studying the French consumer reactions to ethnic products and more specifically to Nike Hijab. Therefore, the

research question is: How French consumers perceive Nike Hijab? We begin this paper by reviewing theliterature on ethnic marketing. Next, we describe the methodology used in this research. Further, we present the main findings obtained. Finally, we consider limitations of our study, suggest some managerial implications, and propose promising avenues for further research.

#### Literature review

Ethnic marketing was developed in the United States in the early 1900s with CJ Walker, a black beautician. She said at that time that black women demanded to integrate into the American society, mainly white, and resorted to all sorts of amazing methods in order to straighten their hair using a flatiron and it resulted in many deceptions.

Sengès (2003, p.26) gives the following definition of ethnic marketing: « an approach that takes into account the existence of a parallel market to the general public: market communities. The company is seen as an aggregate of communities that are distinguished by their patterns of consumption, their lifestyles, their language, their way of dressing, their leisure ». Ethnic marketing has emerged as one of the effectivestrategies to keep and get more customers (Venkatesh, 2011). The concept has actually assumed relevance due to theincreasing number of immigrants and the shifting bases of skilled and managerial population in the various parts of the world (Venkatesh, 2011).

Ethnic marketing involves in-depth knowledge of population by demography, culture, and traditions(Pires et al., 2005; Hamlett et al., 2008). The implication of ethnic marketing is targeting a specific segment of consumers that can be defined through their ethnicity(Barth and Boyer, 2008). One of the most notable challenges associated with ethnic marketing relates to the potential ability to confront diverse cultural context (Béji-Bécheur et al., 2011). Majority of the marketers have been accustomed to address a variety of unique values as well as habits of different cultural groups (Bessen, 1993). Every target audience has distinct quirks along with idiosyncrasies that call for an adoption of varied strategies of marketing. Therefore, effective ethnic marketing will be successful only with sufficient mental flexibility (Wentz, 2004).

If the ethnic marketing is present in the United States since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was adopted in France more recently, more precisely after 1985. According to Rochefort (1995), French manufacturers were hesitant because the segmentation by ethnic segregation could have been interpreted as the exclusion of the population's majority. Ethnic statistics, although present in the United States, Great Britain, and many other countries are inexistent in France. Under French law, only the information about the nationality and place of birth is allowed. Therefore, the companies cannot assess the financial strength of different ethnicities and therefore they are not confident whether their investment will be profitable or not. Yet it is essential to carry out studies to assess the suitability of the product to the expectations and the needs of the identified ethnic groups. Segmentation tools are different from those of a public approach; the company must be able to decipher the cultural codes that target specific minorities (Barth and Boyer, 2008; Kipnis et al., 2014), and to assess the size of the ethnic markets. Although there are estimations for each major group, they are not very useful for marketing professionals, accustomed to studies indicating the purchasing power and consumption habits of their targets (Barth and Boyer, 2008). If even demographers who proposed to segment the statistics to better identify discrimination have been accused of playing from the extreme right, we imagine that marketers do not dare to assert their right to establish ethnic files.

Ethnic marketing in France is considered as the expression of communalism, it seeksto single out a consumer for his difference in appearance or culture which is to be contrary to the foundation of the Republic. In effect, asking the question of ethnic marketing in France is still politically incorrect to the extent that true yoke fell on the shoulders of marketing people (Delannoy and Peretti, 2010). The first article of the fifth French Republic constitution which specifies that: «France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It ensures the equality before the law of all citizens, without distinction of origin, race or religion» is the first obstacle to ethnic marketing in France. Thus, ethnic marketing goes against the republican principles ((Treguer and Segati, 2003; Delannoy and Peretti, 2010). Diversity is another issue among these groups that equally pose significant challenges to ethnic marketing. The marketers are exposed to some mental trap with regard to oversimplification of the minority groups in France (Milton, 2000). Members of these French groups have specific characteristics as well as norms and values that they share in common which makes them qualify as aunified whole (Naomi, 2000). An extensive grouping of ethnicity, however, is associated with extraordinary disparities with regard to their culture, values, language as well as education (Treguer and Segati, 2003). This makes it relatively simple to deal with this particular category of thepopulation in contrast to a single ethnic grouping. In France, everyone either French or part of an ethnic minority has the same rights - at least officially. Addressing the theme of ethnicity appears to be contrary to the very foundation of the republic. This would amount some to "deny" the fundamentals of France which is a real cultural problem. For example, Quick, one of France's most popular fast food chains has taken pork off the menu at eight of its restaurants, turning them into Halal-only outlets in 2010. However, it has sparked angry reactions from Catholic groups and politicians.

Another challenge that is of great importance in ethnic marketing in France is dealing with dynamic populations. Ethnic populations undergo transformations on account of assimilation, immigration as well as cultural adoption which usually occur at an accelerated rate as compared to the case of the general public (Zachary, 2000; Askegaard and Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2011). The rates of immigration are inherently unpredictable and they are usually under the effect of international, cultural, economic as well as political factors (Paulette, 1998). This situation is further resultant to development of a capricious mix in as far as nationalities and cultures are concerned (Treguer and Segati, 2005). According to the international definition of the United Nations, France welcomes more than 7.2 million immigrants, 11.1% of the population.

In France, consumption of ethnic consideration is paradoxical: on the one hand, it is the limit of political correctness. But on the other, it meets an expectation of individuals seeking multiculturalism in their consumerist practices. The process of adaptation seems to be amulticultural alternative that gives brands a real boost in expanding targets (Harrisson et al., 2015). Findings of a previous study show the importance of ethnic products for Muslims and Jews who would like to remain attached to their cultural roots, a religious duty and a sense of belonging to their communities(Robert-Demontrond, 2009). Also, the major ethnic groups in France are interested in their ethnic products and don't have aproblem to pay marginally more for it (Robert-Demontrond, 2009).

#### **Research Method**

In order to examine the French consumers' perceptions toward "Nike Hijab", we have conducted a netnographic study. So, the potential sources of information for this study include the online comments and interactions on the subject of "Nike Hijab".

The first stage of thenetnography is to make an "entry" (Kozinets, 2002). First of all, we have selectedseveral virtual communities with a concordance with our research question. The next stage was to filter the forums and the most relevant compared to the problematic. Then, we have uploaded all of the messages through "copy-paste" in a Word file. However, great care was needed in the use of this approach because most of the information is derived cannot be ascertained. Lack of sufficient accuracy may hinder the achievement of answering the research question and objectives. Finally, we have coded these messages using Nvivo in order to generate and manage the coding. Concerning the verification by the internet users, we have adopted the posture of Langer and Beckman (2005) which suggests that the researcher does not come into contact with the members of the online communities. The netnographic study was conducted in March 2017 and out of the 136 answers were available in the French online communities in this month, 98 were considered valid (38 off-topic answers were eliminated).

### **Findings**

76% of the online messages were negative, containing bad perceptions of new Nike products. The negative perception of Nike Hijab may lead the consumers to reject the brand "lamentable, 8 centuries back with religious obscurantism, the discrimination and the submission of women just for financial interests. We quickly understand why Nike has taken pro-migrants positions lately... Good to have never given a penny to this company" (Christophe), and even more to boycott it, "Let's boycott Nike, Viva Adidas" (Anne), "I will never buy anything Nike again!" (Carla). Other online users have criticized Nike, claiming the veil normalizes the oppression of women, "the veil is a symbol of the oppression of women" (Tony), "The veil and burqa are not equal rights, they are oppression of women until I see Muslim men adopting similarly restrictive standards of modesty. And I do not want that to become culturally normal in this country (Bernard)".

Several users believe that Nike Hijab makes clear political statements directed against the Trump administrationand supporting Muslims, "Nike is supporting now the political arm of Islam who is successfully using young,trendy, attractive, upwardly mobile young female Muslims to present a softer side of Islam" (Sarah), "Nike is just supporting Muslims, placing our national security at risk by doing more to help them take over country" (Alain). Even more, someonline users think that Nike is trying to Islamize Europe and that these new products are just a tool achieve this objective, "these products are an aggression against the Republic and Europe", "we should protest against Nike and against the veil in France" (Dani), "this promoting a religion, not a product" (William). It should be mentioned by the way that the term "Islam" was used 48 times in the communities' messages.

Also, new Nike products were associated with discrimination and fragmentation of the society, "Nike tried to isolate people instead of uniting them, shame on Nike" (Melanie). In effect, Nike was not able to construct a positive relationship with the different ethnic groups in France and to create solutions for the anxiety of French people about their identity. According to the online members, racism in France is on rise now and Nike products will contribute to "more discrimination in the society" (Bernard).

Many individuals expressed negative feelings toward Nike and its new products, "I am really frustrated" (Maria), "I am angry and upset, when I will see someone wearing this, I will rebuke her harshly" (Simon). Some of these users are also upset because "Nike is trying to capitalize on

the religious and the political atmosphere to profit off of the Hijab even while governments continue to impose laws against it" (Maria).

On the other hand, 24 % of the online messages were supporting Nike Hijab. This new collection is seen as a tool to reflect on the multiculturalism and social integration in France. Also, Muslims who have been subjected to discrimination are likely to appreciate business organizations that offer opportunities to members of their community. Several comments and interactions show the happiness and satisfaction with new Nike products, "I am extremely happy because I want to walk into a shop store and find sports clothes for Hijabis in front of me" (Mohamad).

### **Discussion**

In this research, we aimed to contribute to enriching the ethnic marketing literature by exploring the consumers' reactions toward ethnic products. More specifically, we conducted a netnographic study analyzing consumers' perceptions of Nike Hijab, anew collection launched by Nike. The findings show that the majority of the online communities' users (76%) did not like Nike's new products. This supports the conclusions of (Delannoy and Peretti, 2010) that indicate the negative reactions of French population toward ethnic marketing. Previous research also show that French people are likely to take ethnic marketing offensive (Barth and Boyer, 2008).

On the other hand, results reveal thepositive perception of Nike Hijab by some online users. Actually, in spite of many constraints that hold back the development of ethnic marketing in France, many positive factors appeared recently. In effect, Marketing is becoming increasingly complex and needs to be more sophisticated tools of cultural analysis. To bear in the competitive marketplace, French marketers need to target many "fruitful" subcultures with effective crosscultural or culture-specific advertising campaigns. Therefore, ethnic marketing in France has been associated with afabulous increase in the interests of ethnic buying behavior with the ability of effectiveness of promotion to ethnic groups gaining importance (Robert-Demontrond, 2009). The efforts of several brands have been directed towards the attraction of a share of ethnic markets in a bid to accommodate the needs and the wants of this important consumer population. The application of traditional approaches is reaching diverse populations have proved to be less effective (Turrow, 1997). Also, the growth of agencies and ethnic media in France, show that ethnic minorities are beginning to make their voices heard. In addition, the ethnic advertising campaigns are emerging as consumers who want people to look like them in the commercials, and advertisers are finally beginning to understand (Robert-Demontrond, 2009).

#### Conclusion

Results of this research show that the ethnic groups in France are associated with high echelons of ethnic identification and pride. Any potential investment that a brand decides to make in an ethnic community with an indication respect and knowledge to the traditions, as well as the culture of the community, plays a significant role in the establishment of apositive image of the company (Pires et al., 2003). The context of communication for the brand is also enhanced and this makes ethnic marketing for an organization to be very successful. Therefore, marketers should carefully review their options before making a decision on the brand ethnic image. Also, themajority of the ethnic groups in France bear a history that is associated with discrimination as well as prejudice that makes them be extremely sensitive to images that are presented by the

media that bear similarities to stereotyping (Garcia and Calantone, 2002). Unawareness to taboos together with idiosyncrasies as far as other cultures are concerned is a potential contributor to unintentional insult

Our results should nonetheless be considered with some caution in view of certain methodological limitations. The first limitation is linked to the fact that we have just used netnography to understand the consumer behavior and attitudes toward ethnic products. Actually, netnography focuses only on online groups, and in the case of our study, this method is not sufficient to generalize the results obtained from a particular online group to other groups (Kozinets, 2002). Another limitation is the study of one type of ethnic products, Nike Hijab and therefore the results of our study are not generalizable to all the ethnic products.

This paper provides a guide for academic researchers who would like to study the French consumer behavior towards ethnic products. Future research should also take into account the limitations indicated above. It would be enlightening to conduct a quantitative study to examine the perceptions of a representative sample of consumers toward ethnic products. Moreover, future investigations can be cross-cultural in order to analyze different perceptions toward ethnic products and not only the French one.

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