



What Are the Consumer Preferences of Chinese Immigrants in Toronto?

What is this research about?

The ethnic neighbourhoods in major cities like Toronto are quickly growing. So, too, are so-called 'ethnic markets' – shops that cater to members of a specific ethnicity. These shops are often frequented by newly arrived immigrants who want to continue the way of life they experienced back home. Other immigrants, however, embrace 'acculturation.' These newcomers try to integrate themselves into the culture of their new country by shopping in 'non-ethnic' stores. Still others try to find a middle ground.

What did the researcher do?

Professor Lucia Lo, Department of Geography at York University, set out to explore the shopping preferences of Chinese immigrants in Toronto. Her goal was to study the impact of a person's likes and dislikes on both the Chinese market and the larger Toronto market. She also wanted to find out if these two markets are considered similar. She used surveys and focus groups to look at four areas of consumption:

What you need to know:

Chinese immigrants in Toronto prefer to shop in Chinese stores.

1. Groceries
2. Electronics
3. Travel services
4. Medical services

People who took part in the study had the choice to shop in either market: the Chinese market or the Toronto market.

What did the researcher find?

Chinese immigrants in Toronto, newly arrived or relatively established, have a strong preference for the Chinese ethnic market. What drives this preference? For the most part, ethnic identity. Ethnic markets help immigrants to continue to experience their home culture – after they have arrived in their new country. They also ensure a smooth integration into Canadian society.

Immigrants who have not been in the country long tend to gravitate more to these stores. So, too, do immigrants who have lower household incomes. Overall, Chinese immigrants shop in both the Chinese and the Toronto market, particularly for culture-related goods in the former and general goods in the latter.

How can you use this research?

This research can help marketers and entrepreneurs to learn about the needs and wants of ethnic consumers. It can help them to learn about how ethnic markets in cities shape the shopping choices of newcomers. This research can also help ethnic and non-ethnic businesses to develop strategies for growth. Businesses will benefit if they improve their services to ethnicities and diversify their customer base.

On an academic level, this work aims to bridge research in different areas: ethnic economies, consumption, consumer behaviour, and marketing. However, more work is needed to understand the consumer behaviour of immigrants and how those from diverse backgrounds adapt to their new country in different ways. Researchers need to study the consequences of immigrant integration, ethnic retail expansion, and community growth planning. And they need to look at immigrants of other ethnicities.

About the Researcher

Lucia Lo is a Full Professor in the Department of Geography, York University. This Research Snapshot is from her SSHRC-supported study “Close market, Open Market and Ethnic Consumer Preferences: An Empirical Exploration among Chinese Consumers in Toronto”.

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