

# **Examining the Relationship Between Ethnic Affinity and Brand**

By Martha G. Russell, Neal M. Burns, and Ted Barker

This paper deals with the relationship between two issues: 1) ethnicity and its impact on everyday life and 2) the relationship of brand affinity to perceived ethnic origins. The field work was conducted by means of an Internet survey and the results are examined in the context of studies on acculturation and brand loyalty.

## **Introduction**

This paper deals with the relationship between two issues. The first considers the possible influences of ethnicity on everyday life. This assessment was made through the use of a survey conducted over the Internet. Of special interest to the investigators were the ways in which perceptions of self were influenced by adopting and /or reporting multiple ethnic ties. The second issue involves the relationship of brand affinity to perceived ethnic origins. In this paper the relationship between these two issues is examined as well as the definition of ethnicity and the multiple affinities and allegiances revealed by the respondents. In a literature that often assumes singular ethnic identities and relatively monolithic brand preferences the observations reported here add a more molecular and meaningful interpretation to human behavior.

At the outset some operational definitions are in order. "Ethnic", as used here, will refer to a segment or sub-culture that can be distinguished from the dominant culture on the basis of cultural background, affinity or genetic heritage. The cultural legacy or baggage carried must also be examined particularly in terms of the remembered and/or adopted folklore. While this definition of ethnic provides a kind of operand or specific nomenclature, the definition also suggests a degree of mutual exclusivity which may or may not be present.

In this paper ethnicity is considered a parameter of self-description. Usually an ethnic "tag" is assigned based upon a simple list of demographic origins. The definition used here examines and accepts the individuals' self classification which in turn reflects the way the individual perceives and experiences him or herself and the way he or she wishes to be perceived and experienced by others. Given the opportunity, people may elect to describe themselves along several ethnic dimensions. In turn the perception and incorporation of several ethnic identities can affect attitudes and perceptions of self in powerful ways. The concept of brand, too, brings with it the user's interest in being perceived by others in a certain way. This preliminary study suggests the nature of this complex relationship and the ways in which they affect the affinity for brands.

## **The Internet Survey <sup>1</sup>**

A study, using an established panel on the Internet, was conducted by ClickinResearch.com as part of an ongoing research project that looked at racial identity, primary and secondary ethnic affiliation, lifestyle affiliation, and personal community. Members of the panel, known as Cyberleague™, were invited by e-mail to participate in a survey posted at a secure URL. Items included self-ratings and open-ended responses that were later coded. Items in the survey instrument reported in this paper are shown in Appendix 1. A total of 4310 respondents completed the survey and the results reported here are based on that sample.

## **Racial Affiliation**

Racial affiliation is one component of ethnic identity. Nineteen percent of this sample was non-Caucasian, a relatively close correspondence to the distribution along ethnic lines of those using the Internet at the time of the data collection (fall 1998).

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Hispanic descent was reported by 5.7% of the respondents. The racial affiliation of respondents reporting Hispanic descent is predominantly Caucasian and can be seen in Figure 2.

## **Ethnic Affiliation**

Respondents were asked to identify both primary and secondary ethnic affiliation, selecting from among 44 ethnic categories to identify one primary ethnic background and to identify as many secondary affiliations as applied. The number of secondary ethnic selections was counted for each respondent and used as an indication of multi-ethnicity. Across all respondents, forty three percent identified only a primary ethnic background, 36% identified one additional, 11% identified two additional, 7% identified 3 additional, and 3% identified 4 or more additional ethnic backgrounds.

Some differences in multi-ethnicity were observed across racial affiliations, as reported in Figure 3. The extent to which people of African American and Asian racial affiliation report a single ethnic background stands in contrast to the diversity of ethnic affiliations reported by people of Hispanic descent.

And in the same manner, as shown in Figure 4, respondents who reported a primary ethnic affiliation as African American identified a number of different racial affiliations.

Overall the impact of ethnic origins is perhaps best reflected in the respondents' estimate of the effect of their ethnicity on their everyday life, as shown in Figure 5. Hispanic, African American and Asian respondents reported greater influence of their background on their everyday life than did Caucasian and American Indian respondents.

Across all respondents, roughly 62% report some influence of their ethnic origin on their everyday life. Interestingly, 18% report that their ethnic origin exerts "quite a bit" or "really a lot" of influence on their daily life, and our findings (Figure

6) show this is higher for people who report a single ethnic background. Those who reported that their ethnicity had impact on their daily activities were likely to report multi-ethnic backgrounds.

### **Lifestyle Affiliation**

Ethnic background and racial affiliation represent two sources of identity and group affiliation that can be used to identify and address consumers in the marketplace. Lifestyle and “community” identity represent two additional sources. Lifestyle affiliation was measured by respondents’ selection of lifestyle terms to describe themselves.

The extent to which respondents identified with multiple lifestyle segments was not significantly influenced by their racial affiliation or ethnic background. Across all segments and over the entire sample, no significant relationships were noted between the number of ethnic affiliations and the number of lifestyle affiliations – with two exceptions. Individuals with 8 or more lifestyles more frequently reported more than 3 ethnic affiliations. And, younger people with Hispanic descent were more likely to report multiple ethnic affiliations than other age groups.

As shown in Table 1, people of Hispanic descent who reported 3 or more ethnic affiliations more frequently reported lifestyle affiliations with Workaholics, Generation X, and Students. People of Hispanic descent reporting 1 or 2 ethnic affiliations more frequently reported Empty Nesters and High Society lifestyle affiliations.

The lifestyle affiliations of people with African American and Caucasian racial affiliation also differed by the diversity of their ethnic affiliations, as measured by the number of ethnic affiliations selected. These effects are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

### **Community Affiliation**

Respondents were also asked to describe their personal sense of community – groups of people like themselves – using three terms. These open-ended responses were analyzed then coded. Across all respondents the most frequently mentioned personal affiliations were personality or character and friend-family related. Some differences in frequency of mention of community affiliation can be seen across racial affiliation, as shown in Table 4.

## **Discussion**

The focus and complexity of personal identity are reflected in results of this study. Racial, ethnic, lifestyle and community identities come together in a mix of affiliations for each person. Each presents an opportunity for addressability in

the marketplace and suggests that in a diverse ethnic milieu messages that fail to address that complexity will have diminished effectiveness.

Across varying ethnic affiliations, the degree of influence and acculturation - or over-acculturation – varies. Across respondents the number of ethnic affiliations also varies. The size and prominence of the ethnic group, its composition and diversity in terms of economic stature, the language spoken at home and the length of time viable enclaves have been established all come together to determine both the ethnic and the cultural dimensions of significance. Gentry, et al (1955) reported over-acculturation among Mexican Americans who typically consumed more high sugar cereals, packaged cookies and white bread than did Anglos.

With the high intrusiveness of carefully crafted messages and the availability of low cost media – in the United States in particular – each culture or ethnic group has the capacity and at times the motivation to appropriate from the other. Such adoption is encouraged by two opposing dimensions; one suggests the "melting pot" – blending in and losing the group identity – and the other suggests that there is an aspirational value to certain brands and contexts – standing out and being counted as a member of a group. This context of mutual appropriation impacts style, food preference and the adoption of icons and role models.

In the US these forces are clear when the place and power of Hispanic or Latino cultural influences are examined. The dominance of salsa as a condiment and the popularity of Hispanic entertainers are but two clear examples of this phenomenon. Similarly, the appropriation of major general market brands by ethnic members signifies in some ways the aspirational value these brands have for this segment. The large scale "adoption" of the Tommy Hilfiger branded clothing by the African American community is a good representation of the aspirational trend.

The nature of the relationship a person has to a brand is based on several factors. Clearly the fundamental equities and meaning the brand has in the general market serves as a baseline – but for comparison purposes, not necessarily as the benchmark for a particular ethnic segment. Secondly, the age of the brand – the length of time it has "been around" – is a variable in understanding the meaning it possesses for ethnic users (as it is for the general market). Over a long period of time (e.g., 150 years or so for Ivory brand soap) predecessors of the current target market may have used the brand in the US as well as early adoption and use in their country of origin. In that context the brand may have acquired a syntax and societal value that impacts its importance within the ethnic community. The history of the brand within the ethnic culture will, in turn, affect the importance and relevance of the brand to the ethnic cohort and may increase its value or substantially reduce the importance of the brand.

Contrast those brands with long histories to the significance and meaning newer brands – like Tommy Hilfiger – have acquired with ethnic target markets. In these latter instances precedent cohorts of the current target (e.g., 15 to 25 year olds) have either no history with the brand directly or through mediated images. Consequently, newer brands do not have the "ethnic cultural legacy" of long established brands.

Equally likely is the possibility that a major US brand may not have been fully accessible in the country of origin although the brand was known and had a significant connotation to the ethnic target. Small towns in Latin America or Africa, for example, may have lacked the presence of a McDonalds although aspirational impressions of the product may have developed from brief glimpses in a movie or anecdotal reports.

A corollary of this definition is that the value or descriptiveness of an ethnic label – like Hispanic or African-American – may lose its effectiveness for those individuals that have left the cultural core of their origin, have affiliation with multiple ethnic groups, and have affiliation with several lifestyle segments. and have other well-defined roles in society (i.e., the general market). Consider, for example, the hypothetical case of "Ana Rodriguez". Ana is a single mother who kept her maiden name after divorcing her WASP physician husband. She has her child attending a Jewish day-care center (at the suggestion of her live-in female companion/lover) while she works long hours as a well paid computer programmer at an up and coming ".dot com".

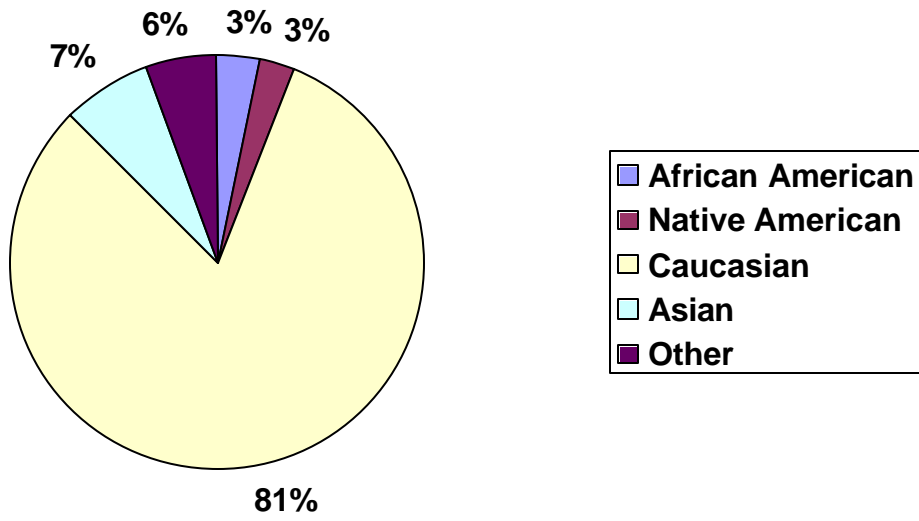
Should Ana, a well-established second-generation American citizen with a Spanish surname, be considered Hispanic and have marketing messages targeted towards her from Latino media? Or, looking at the progress of assimilation and the complexity of Anna's life, can marketers leave the current emphasis on uni-dimensional categorization and consider Anna more holistically and – in the process – more realistically and effectively? The authors favor the latter approach and believe the data presented here support that view.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

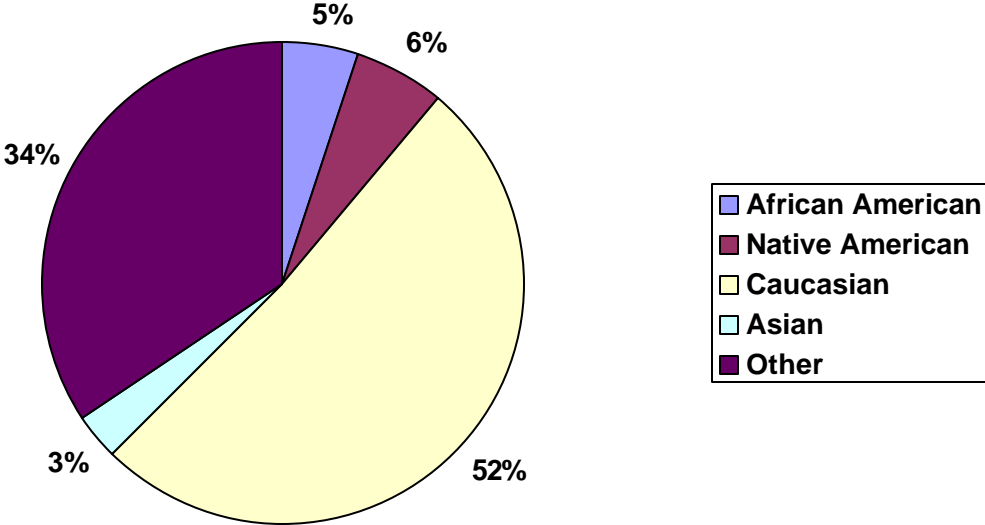
This paper has presented data from Internet survey research that may add more realistic definition to the ethnic categorization that accompanies a diverse audience.

The authors examined cohort identity and brand relationships and demonstrated that ethnic cultural influence interacts with brand relevancy to produce complex preferences. The conventional use of descriptive tags and ethnic identifiers was questioned in terms of their suitability for message development and media selection.

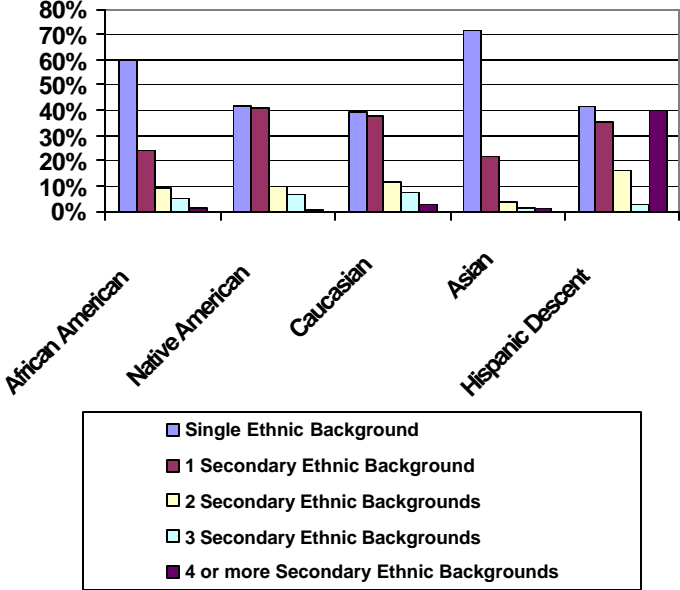
**Figure 1: Racial Affiliation**



**Figure 2: Racial Affiliation of Respondents Reporting Hispanic Descent**



**Figure 3: Multi-ethnicity by Racial Affiliation**



**Figure 4: Racial Affiliation of Respondents Reporting Primary Ethnic Affiliation as African American**

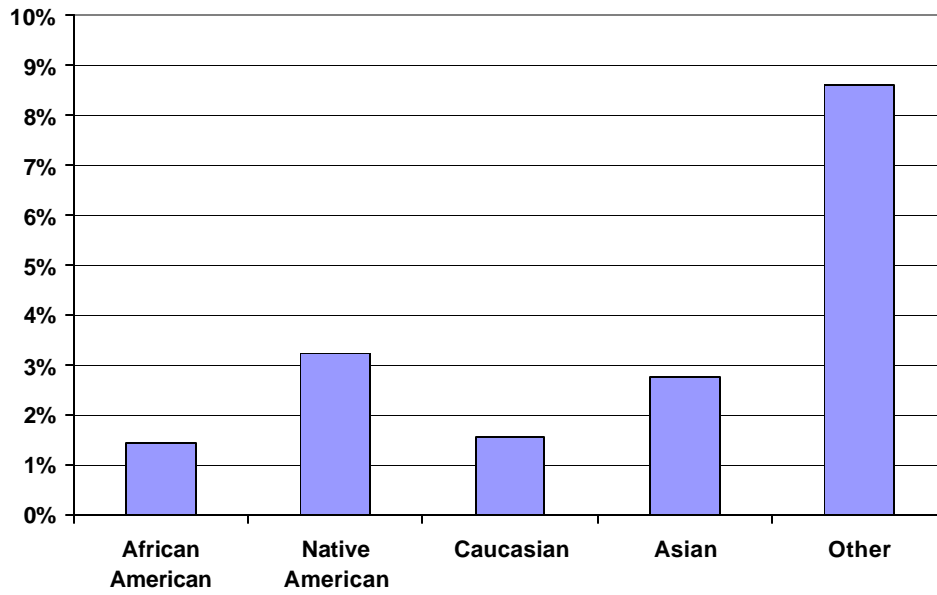


Figure 5: Influence of Ethnic Origin on Everyday Life  
By Racial Affiliation

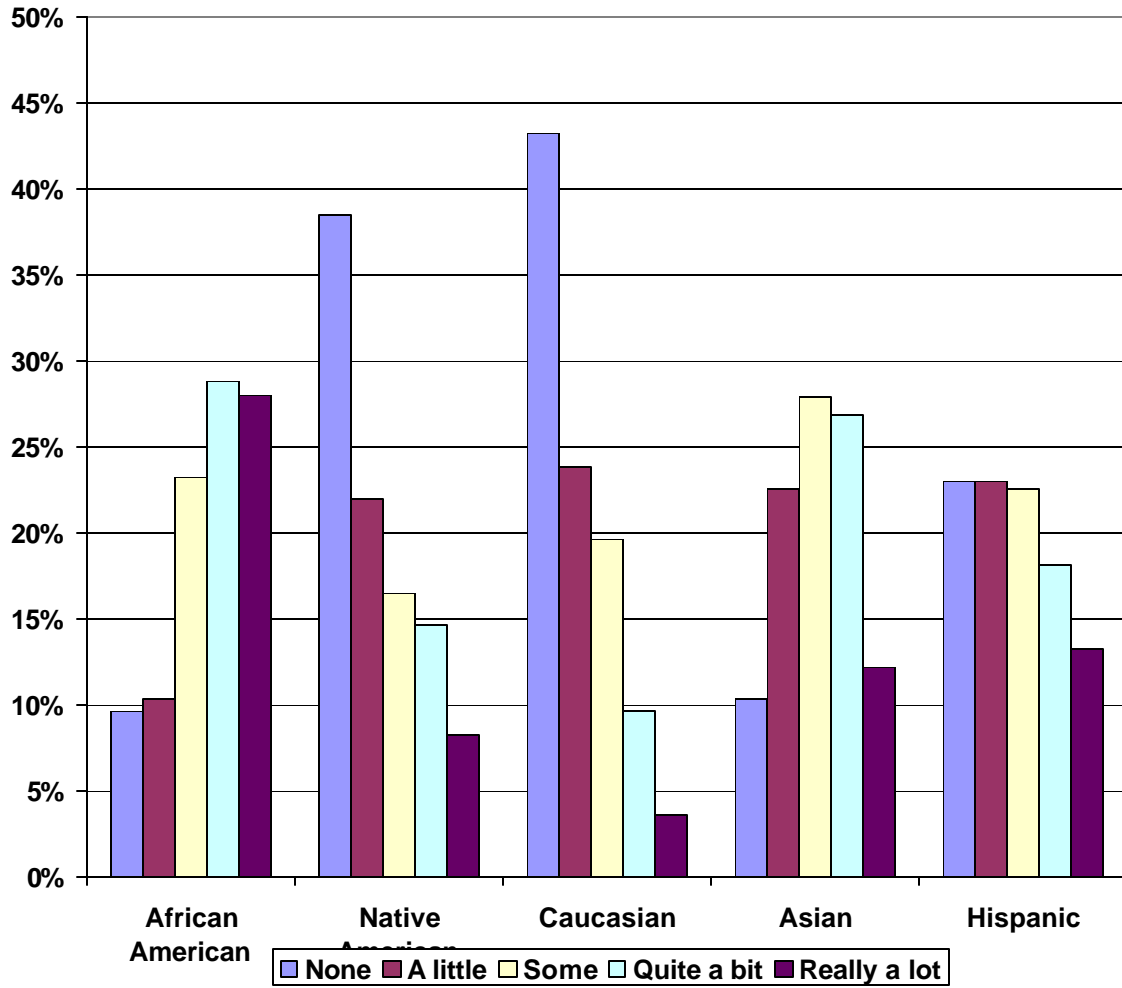
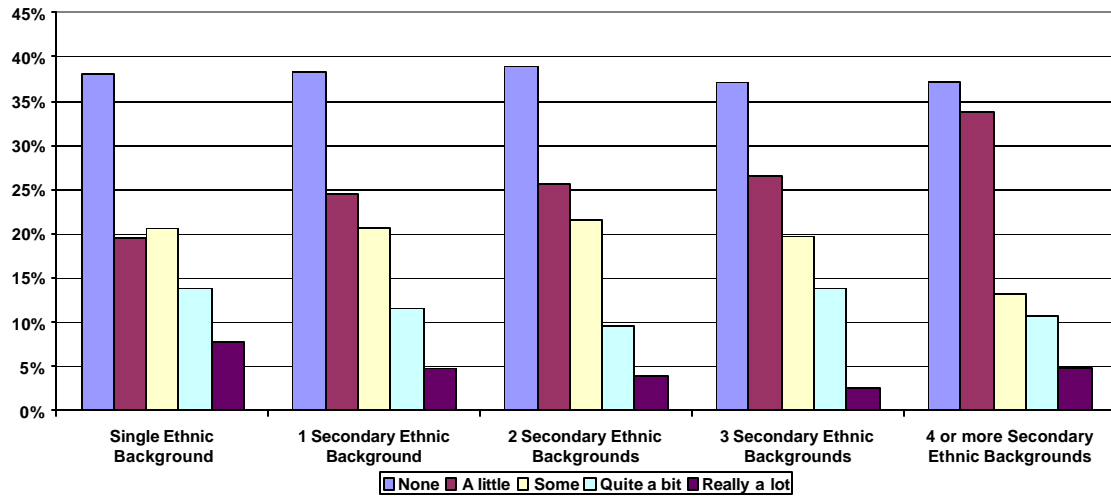


Table 6: Influence of Ethnic Background on Everyday Life by Multi-ethnicity



**Table 1: Lifestyle Affiliation by Number of Ethnic Affiliations of People of Hispanic Descent**

Classification Function Coefficients <b>People of Hispanic Descent</b>	Number of ethnic affiliations				
	P=Primary; S=Secondary				
	1 P Only	1 P and 1 S	1 P and 2 S	1 P and 3 S	1 P and 4 S
Activist	1.24503	0.441095	0.379674	-0.32349	-1.34626
Alternative	0.162188	0.472503	-0.17098	<b>2.536368</b>	0.969967
Avant Guard	1.108651	3.085608	<b>3.765861</b>	1.217221	2.010097
Bon Vivant	3.632564	1.616784	<b>4.025548</b>	0.980755	2.348826
Empty Nester	0.887251	0.795883	<b>4.287598</b>	-0.43772	2.871984
Generation X	0.922581	1.073523	0.381036	<b>3.442506</b>	-0.55716
Global Citizen	-0.62282	0.387493	-0.44971	<b>5.228324</b>	0.20555
High Society	-0.26761	-0.70388	<b>2.960444</b>	-0.57536	-1.31912
Mover/Shaker	1.305726	1.130412	0.591643	-2.51214	<b>2.572125</b>
Parent	1.988761	<b>2.894462</b>	2.624062	1.678891	2.883431
Private	1.326469	1.078559	1.011778	-0.51972	2.250157
Retiree	4.075711	2.467944	<b>12.02379</b>	-4.43233	3.696937
Student	2.657804	2.293815	<b>3.921404</b>	1.466788	<b>5.116818</b>
Workaholic	1.094846	0.024659	1.29181	<b>4.852105</b>	-1.35326

Fisher's linear discriminant functions  
Significance at the .05 level indicated in bold.

**Table 2: Lifestyle Affiliation by Number of Ethnic Affiliations of People with African American Racial Affiliation**

Classification Function Coefficients <b>People of African American Racial Affiliation</b>	Number of ethnic affiliations				
	P=Primary; S=Secondary				
	0	1	2	3	4
Activist	0.409664	-1.0069	0.514269	2.273465	<b>3.495359</b>
Alternative	-1.16665	0.223345	2.228235	<b>2.778485</b>	-4.97399
Avant Guard	1.576487	<b>2.705491</b>	<b>3.203753</b>	0.482724	<b>7.015757</b>
Bon Vivant	1.529257	-1.23722	<b>3.077835</b>	<b>5.790437</b>	1.838147
Empty Nester	1.1625	-0.42895	<b>3.249108</b>	<b>4.048542</b>	-0.59622
Generation X	1.047939	0.300989	1.598151	<b>2.626162</b>	<b>2.664376</b>
Global Citizen	-0.84754	0.346254	-0.86643	0.692835	-6.84954
Jet Set	1.37448	-1.93928	-3.16899	0.915224	<b>2.87276</b>
Liberal	0.838157	0.760487	0.830756	0.914223	<b>6.300833</b>
Mover/Shaker	0.272713	2.094418	0.151255	1.260587	<b>3.083158</b>
Online/Internet	0.786427	<b>2.240555</b>	1.642558	1.729308	0.669389
Private	0.867428	0.409647	-0.22016	<b>2.130576</b>	1.18595
Retiree	-5.50584	-3.53971	-11.5566	<b>-20.5363</b>	<b>-19.2546</b>
Student	1.621524	1.816204	3.517858	2.336066	<b>4.880498</b>
Upwardly Mobile	0.269645	0.576239	-0.11894	-2.10609	<b>3.149094</b>
Volunteer	-0.36411	0.209531	0.067771	1.692973	-3.22704
Workaholic	0.862542	1.599355	1.417769	2.081657	<b>6.827459</b>

Fisher's linear discriminant functions  
Significance at the .05 level indicated in bold.

**Table 3: Lifestyle Affiliation by Number of Ethnic Affiliations of People with Caucasian Racial Affiliation**

Classification Function Coefficients <b>People of Caucasian Racial Affiliation</b>	Number of ethnic affiliations P=Primary; S=Secondary				
	0	1	2	3	4
Alternative	0.443044	0.495008	0.679758	0.59608	<b>1.124265</b>
Avant Guard	0.254492	0.484427	-0.13492	0.995538	-0.21377
Bon Vivant	0.110807	0.552099	-0.11613	0.391899	-0.86059
Conservative	<b>1.129862</b>	<b>1.284066</b>	<b>1.342614</b>	<b>1.806607</b>	<b>1.649283</b>
Generation X	0.877927	0.919188	<b>1.260521</b>	<b>1.308047</b>	<b>1.374704</b>
Global Citizen	0.165872	-0.1237	0.380163	0.3555	0.114951
Liberal	0.897454	<b>1.16089</b>	<b>1.253408</b>	<b>1.101855</b>	<b>1.038511</b>
Old-Fashioned	0.857884	0.826818	<b>1.062678</b>	<b>1.18017</b>	0.922094
Online/Internet	<b>1.146578</b>	<b>1.223843</b>	<b>1.247665</b>	<b>1.567898</b>	<b>1.1631</b>
Student	<b>1.17385</b>	<b>1.198292</b>	<b>1.47756</b>	<b>1.950912</b>	<b>1.768952</b>
Techie	0.159313	0.157812	0.028719	<b>0.501995</b>	<b>0.53324</b>
Traditional	0.448651	<b>0.716161</b>	<b>0.605409</b>	<b>0.770521</b>	<b>0.949128</b>
Upwardly Mobile	0.204219	0.076007	0.316296	-0.29823	0.383381
Volunteer	0.309946	0.514544	0.68977	0.616921	<b>1.057351</b>
Workaholic	0.567589	0.567234	0.376833	0.214233	0.440709

Fisher's linear discriminant functions

Significance at the .05 level indicated in bold.

**Table 4: Community Affiliation by Racial Affiliation**

	African American	Native American	Caucasian	Asian	Other	Hispanic Descent
Personality/Characteristic	<b>27.54</b>	17.89	<b>20.03</b>	19.10	15.45	16.40
Friends/Family	7.97	<b>11.38</b>	8.14	5.90	3.88	6.60
Students/Educators	1.46	3.25	3.00	3.13	3.43	<b>5.30</b>
Professional/Co-workers	5.84	<b>8.94</b>	4.78	3.47	3.02	5.30
Religious	<b>5.80</b>	3.25	<b>4.87</b>	2.43	3.00	<b>4.10</b>
Diversity	2.92	3.25	1.69	2.43	3.86	<b>4.00</b>
Interest	2.19	0.81	<b>3.91</b>	2.08	4.74	<b>3.50</b>
Age	2.92	0.00	2.77	2.08	1.72	1.80
Values/Morals	1.46	1.64	1.22	0.35	0.00	1.80
Sports/Fitness	1.46	1.63	1.60	0.35	0.43	1.80
Music	0.00	3.25	1.05	0.69	1.72	1.30
Service/Volunteer/Charity Oriented	0.73	0.00	1.20	0.35	1.29	1.30
Socio-Economic Position	<b>2.17</b>	1.63	1.49	0.69	0.86	1.00
Lifestyle	1.46	0.00	2.04	<b>2.78</b>	0.86	1.00
Racial/Cultural	<b>5.80</b>	1.64	0.96	<b>2.08</b>	0.43	0.80
Has Child/Children	0.73	0.81	<b>1.40</b>	0.35	0.86	0.80
Internet/Computers	0.73	<b>4.88</b>	2.10	2.08	1.29	0.50
Health/Physical related	1.46	0.81	0.67	0.69	0.43	0.30
Ethnicity	0.00	0.00	0.41	<b>3.47</b>	0.43	0.30
Marital Status	1.46	0.81	0.70	0.35	0.00	0.3
Politics/Activism	1.46	1.63	1.02	0.69	0.43	0.30
Location/Residential Area	<b>2.92</b>	0.00	1.57	1.39	1.29	0.30
College Educated	<b>2.19</b>	1.64	1.60	0.69	0.00	0.00
Average/Normal	1.46	0.81	0.41	0.35	0.00	0.00
Military	0.00	0.81	0.44	0.00	0.00	0.00

Significance at the .05 level indicated in bold

## Appendix 1: Items in Questionnaire

**Some people define the term community as describing people like themselves. Describe your personal community(ies) with three words that refer to groups of people that are significant to you.**

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**Which of the following best describes your primary ethnic background? Which others, if any, also describe your ethnic background? (Select all that apply)**

African American  
Alaska Native  
Angle-Canadian  
Arab  
Argentine  
Australian  
Belgian  
Brazilian  
British  
Cajun  
Caribbean  
Chilean  
Chinese  
Cuban  
Danish  
Dutch  
Finnish  
French  
French-Canadian  
German  
Greek  
Hawaiian Native  
Hindu  
Hispanic  
Hungarian  
Irish  
Italian  
Japanese  
Jewish  
Korean  
Malayan  
Native American

Norwegian  
Pacific Islander  
Philippine  
Polish  
Portuguese  
Russian  
Spanish  
Swedish  
Swiss  
Thai  
Ukraine  
Vietnamese  
Other

**Which one of the following best describes your race?**

African American  
Native American  
Caucasian  
Asian  
Other

**Are you of Hispanic descent?**

Yes  
No

**How much influence does your ethnic cultural background have in your everyday life?**

None  
A little  
Some  
Quite a bit  
Really a lot

**Compared to when you were growing up, how much influence does your ethnic cultural background have in your everyday life now?**

Much less  
Somewhat less  
No difference  
Somewhat more  
Much more

**Which of the following currently describe your lifestyle? (Select all that apply)**

Activist  
Alternative  
Avant Guard

Baby Boomer  
Bon Vivant  
Conservative  
Cosmopolitan  
Empty Nester  
Gay/Lesbian  
Generation X  
Global Citizen  
High Society  
Jet Set  
Liberal  
Mover/Shaker  
Old-Fashioned  
Online/Internet  
Parent  
Private  
Retiree  
Spiritual  
Student  
Techie  
Traditional  
Upwardly Mobile  
Volunteer  
Workaholic  
Other

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Anupama Pakala, Market Analyst, ClickinResearch, Inc. in the analysis of these data.

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