

CROSS-BORDER SHOPPING: MEXICAN SHOPPERS IN THE US AND AMERICAN SHOPPERS IN MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

In modern society markets play an important, if not the most important, role. Markets became criteria for economic success, and consumption became a way of demonstrating status; that is, the level of consumption achieved became the measure of the quality of life (Slater and Tonkiss 2001). Firat and Dholakia (1998) observed what they termed “consumption ethic” to denote how consumers judge “their own and other’s degree of success on the basis of their ability to consume” (p. 46). Markets became inescapable, and today we can hardly imagine life without markets and consumption. Market ideology and consumer culture have diffused throughout and dominate the world thanks to (capitalist) globalization (Sklair, 2005).

In the modern world, economic power encompasses the power to influence and to decide what is right or wrong. Consequently, modernity causes the rise of nation-states that divide nations based on political decisions of the elite. Invisible lines, called borders, were drawn and differences among countries were specified based on their economic power. The economically strongest countries became “developed” countries and the rest of the world was divided into “developing” and “third world” or “underdeveloped” countries. In border regions, specifically between developed and less developed countries, cross border activities became very important in every day life. The “better life” in developed countries persuaded many in less developed countries to cross the border and experience “the other” side. On the other hand, developed countries and their multinational corporations were attracted to less developed countries due to several economical reasons such as cheap labor force, less environmental restrictions.

This study sheds light on the deep-seated reasons underlying cross-border shopping around the U.S.-Mexico border, specifically in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). The South Texas border is overwhelmed with paradoxes. It represents the soil of the most powerful country in the world, and at the same time, it qualifies as the second poorest region in that country. Moreover, the region borders with Mexico, which, according to economical standards, is a “developing” country. Nevertheless, La Plaza Mall, the largest shopping center in the region, has much higher sales per square foot than the US average (Guo et al., 2006).

Previous studies in this area (Wilson, 1995; Wang, 2004; Dmitrijevic and Vida, 2004; Ghaddar and Brown, 2005; Guo et al 2006) have not tried to unravel deeper meanings of cross-border shopping, and they have mostly used quantitative methods to examine this phenomenon. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study explores the deeper and richer meanings of cross-border shopping present on the borderline. In-depth interviews were conducted with RGV residents. They were recruited through undergraduate student connections and fliers.

We find Mexican shoppers to be well acculturated with the American consumption culture and to know when and how to shop. They are well aware of specific promotional days such as Black Friday or the post-Christmas sale. At first glance, one is tempted to assume both American and Mexican nationals engage in cross-border shopping for utilitarian purposes. However, our results show that people, especially older generations, love to cross-border shop because it connects them with their roots and their relatives. The findings do corroborate the utilitarian and hedonic shopping values discussed in previous research. Shoppers from developing countries are motivated and influenced by the messages they receive from the mass media of developed countries. They trust retailers and feel safer on the other side. They feel that they have to “adjust” their manners and behaviors upon crossing in order to be compatible with the new “order.” An analysis of shoppers from developed countries, however, suggests that they are not driven by the force of consumption culture. Rather, they practice cross border shopping because it makes their survival easier and because they want to reconnect with their roots. To them, crossing is experiencing a new culture and escaping from their own “materialistic” culture.

References Available on Request.