

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Patriotic advertising and the creation of the citizen-consumer**

**Wan-Hsiu Sunny Tsai**

School of Communication, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL, USA. E-mail: wanhsiu@miami.edu. Tel: 1-(305)284-2845 Fax: (305)284-3648.

Accepted 20 January, 2010

**As the United States confronts political and economic turmoil, corporate marketers and political leaders encourage citizen-consumers to shop to keep the economy growing. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between consumption and citizenship in American culture and to understand how consumers make sense of buy-domestic advocacy and advertising appeals to patriotism. The study used semi-structured in-depth interviews to investigate how consumers conceptualize patriotic consumption; the ethnic, age and professional profiles of the 18 participants represented diverse voices and experiences. The study participants viewed the free market as an essential site for consumers to reaffirm core American values and citizenship. Whereas they believed that consumption had a positive collective impact on the economic system, they regarded saving as a self-centered practice. Framed by issues of corporate outsourcing and trade deficit, patriotism, rather than nationalism, is the driving factor contributing to consumer ethnocentrism, and consumers regard the purchase of domestic products as an altruistic helping behavior.**

**Key words:** Patriotic advertising, consumer ethnocentrism, buy-domestic, citizenship.

## **INTRODUCTION**

During the 20th century, citizenship was increasingly redefined in relation to the consumer's right to participate in the marketplace (Glickman, 1999). Consumption was turned into a political practice, so that consumer choice and preference became equated with voting and freedom (McGovern, 1998). Abundant research based on historical and textual analyses has suggested that modern citizenship is closely intertwined with mass consumption in the United States and advertising has been widely cited as a key driving force behind this transformation. However, little empirical research has been devoted to the influence of patriotic advertising on the confluence of consumer and citizen identities. Little is known about consumers' understanding of the sociopolitical implications of consumption and how exactly individual consumers embrace, negotiate, or reject such notions of patriotism designed to fuel capitalism in their everyday economic activities. Therefore, one of the primary purposes of this

project is to advance our understanding of the construction of the "citizen-consumer" (Jubas, 2007) through exploring consumer response to patriotism-themed advertising.

Historian Lizabeth Cohen (1998) argued that right after World War II, American citizens were urged to fulfill their civic responsibility of reconstructing the nation's economy by participating in mass consumption. Policymakers, business and labor leaders and many ordinary Americans put mass consumption at the center of their plans for building a prosperous postwar nation. In the demand-driven capitalistic market system, the roles of good citizen and responsible consumer became closely intertwined. Beyond the specific historical context of postwar America, scholars have suggested that as nationalism grows in intensity when a country is threatened or attacked (Sharma et al., 1995), individuals' consumption behavior is notably influenced by ethnocentrism (Lee et al., 2003)

and that through this mechanism, the identities of consumer and citizen are likely to be conflated. The September 11 attacks stimulated a strong sense of patriotic fervor among many Americans that only contributed to enhance the prevailing conjuncture of the citizen and consumer roles. In the wake of September 11, the connection between consumption and citizenship was made clear and reinforced in public pronouncements of government officials including President George W. Bush, who asserted that resistance to terrorism and the enactment of citizenship depended on daily consumerist activities. In the years since 2001, the necessity of patriotic spending to support the war effort and keep the economy growing as the nation struggles against economic recession has been continuously advocated.

As we work with Congress [...] to chart a new course in Iraq [...] we must also work together to achieve important goals for the American people here at home. This work begins with keeping our economy growing [...] and I encourage you all to go shopping more (Bush, 2006).

The continuous emphasis on consumption instead of saving or long-term financial management, however, may involve serious ramifications. One potential consequence is the skyrocketing consumer debt that has accumulated over the last decades. According to the latest Federal Reserve study, around 43% of U.S. families spend more than they earn (Federal Reserve Bulletin, 2006). In February 2008 alone, consumer debt continued to grow as Americans tacked on nearly \$5 billion in net new debt (Business Wire, 2008). Have consumers incorporated political language to justify shopping and downplayed saving through the influence of public and advertising discourse on patriotic spending? This study thus is motivated to explore how consumption and saving are conceptualized by consumers in relation to what dominant ideologies in American culture and entail what implications on national economy.

### **Patriotic advertising**

In the aftermath of September 11, the relationship between consumption and citizenship was dramatically reinforced in patriotism-themed advertising. Patriotic ads using American symbols such as the statue of liberty, the American flag, patriotic colors and phrases such as "God bless America" and "United We Stand" began appearing in newspapers within a week after September 11 to showcase companies' commitment to and pride in the nation (Kinnick, 2003). Roughly 20% of the patriotic messages carried an explicit sales pitch to promote consumer patronage (McMellon and Long, 2006). In an ad titled "Keep America Rolling," General Motors explicit-

ly indicated that purchasing cars was crucial to a post-September 11 America.

On September 11, the world as we knew it came to an end. We sat glued to our televisions, watching events unfold that shook us to our very core. And suddenly, the little things that had previously divided us seemed wholly insignificant. Now it is time to move forward. For years, the auto industry has played a crucial role in our economy. General Motors takes that responsibility seriously. We think it is important to keep workers working and for the economy to keep rolling along. (GM, 2001).

While companies like General Motors used patriotism as a sales pitch to stimulate consumer confidence and generate sales in the wake of September 11, other companies toned down the economic aspect and crafted advertising campaigns to express grief, foster national pride and identify the companies as good corporate citizens. One example is Miller's 2001 television commercial that depicts people from different parts of the country holding signs saying "America the Beautiful," "Go U.S.A.," and "We Are All New Yorkers." In this way, advertising not only served to generate consumer confidence but also instilled the idea that it is one's fundamental civic duty to continue engaging in consumerism and supporting American brands in particular. The confluence of patriotism-themed marketing campaigns, mounting nationalism and concerns about the nation's economic stability has transformed consumption into a patriotic and thus political practice.

With the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a slowing economy in the United States, patriotism, instead of being confined to a one-time appeal in issue advertising responding to crisis, has been incorporated into advertisers' long-term branding campaigns. In 2005, Anheuser-Busch produced another patriotic commercial for the Super Bowl. In the ad, set in a bustling airport, a passenger suddenly begins clapping for unseen reasons. The camera soon reveals the cause for the clapping as a young female soldier walks through the airport in a desert combat uniform. The applause is joined by many others and quickly turns into a standing ovation when more returning soldiers walk in. The spot then ends with a caption that reads "Thank You" to demonstrate the company's appreciation and support of the troops. Another well-known example is Chevy Silverado's 2006 "Our Country, Our Truck" campaign, which portrays the truck as the authentic, classic American vehicle through linking to an image montage of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Woodstock, Vietnam war soldiers and Hurricane Katrina, with American music legend John Mellencamp singing the "Our Country" anthem. While the prevalence of patriotic ads has relatively diminished in recent years, such appeal persists while the country is at war. For example, in the summer of 2009, the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf Company, the oldest and largest privately-held

chain of specialty coffee and tea stores in the United States, hosted its third annual "Coffee from Home" Various campaign that invited consumers to purchase bags of coffee to donate to troops posted overseas. Content and textual analyses have examined the patriotic appeals in post-9/11 American newspaper advertisements (example, Kinnick, 2003, 2004). In her analysis of September 11-related newspaper advertisements, Kinnick (2004) indicated that 45% presented commentary on unity or patriotism, while 27% called for readers to resume their daily lives and shopping habits. However, few studies have empirically probed consumer response to such appeals. McMellon and Long (2006) reported that such tactics can be counterproductive, as consumers may view the strategy as exploiting tragedy for financial gain. In general, most studies were concerned with the effectiveness of such a format in generating favorable reactions to the brands and did not look into how consumers make sense of patriotic commercial messages within the broader social and historical contexts.

### **Consumer ethnocentrism, patriotism and nationalism**

An important theoretical construct relating to patriotic consumption is consumer ethnocentrism. According to Shimp and Sharma (1987: 280), consumer ethnocentrism refers to "the beliefs held by the consumers about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign-made products" and often involves morality pertaining to pride and loyalty to one's country. From ethnocentric perspective, purchasing foreign products is viewed as detrimental to the economic health of the consumer's home country and thus are undesirable, unpatriotic and even immoral (Klein, 2002). Consumer ethnocentrism has been empirically investigated, especially in country-of-origin research in which ethnocentrism is found to be closely related to country-based bias (Balabanis et al., 2001). Various antecedents of consumer ethnocentrism have also been identified. Consumers who tend to be more ethnocentric are those who are female, older, less educated and in blue-collar occupations (Good and Huddleston, 1995). Se-Jin Lee and colleagues (2003) further suggested that the more nationalistic and less cosmopolitan consumers are in their preferences and attitudes, the more ethnocentric they tend to be. In particular, patriotism and nationalism have been theorized as distinct constructs and identified as key antecedents to consumer ethnocentrism. Druckman (1994) explained that "patriotism is commitment – a readiness to sacrifice for the nation – while nationalism is commitment plus exclusion of others, a readiness to sacrifice bolstered by hostility toward others." In other words, patriotism entails a citizen's feelings of attachment to one's nation, and nationalism explains one's belief in national superiority and dominance. Therefore, consumers' ethnocentric con-

cerns not only involve nationalistic pride and superiority of domestic products over foreign products, but also pertain to patriotic sentiments of responsibility and loyalty, which has been investigated in cross-cultural comparisons that examine how culture dimensions influence consumer ethnocentrism. In individualistic cultures (example, American and Czech), consumers' ethnocentric tendencies result from nationalistic perceptions of the country's supremacy and dominance (Lee et al., 2003). In contrast, in collectivistic societies (example, Turkish), patriotism that emphasizes loyalty, commitment and attachment to the country was the most important motive for consumer ethnocentrism (Balabanis et al., 2001). Granzin and Olsen (1998) suggest that economic patriotism works to induce pro-social purchase of domestic products and through such acts consumers consciously enact the role of altruistic "helpers" to fellow citizens whose employment is endangered by imported products. In their study of consumers in the USA and Portugal, Granzin and Painter (2000) reported that empathy toward the threatened workers influenced consumers' favoritism toward domestic products and patriotic consumption behavior.

Although prior studies have considered nationalism to be the prominent factor affecting American consumers' ethnocentric tendencies, the rising tension and conflicts in global politics and in the international marketplace, as well as the aggravated problems of trade deficit and corporate outsourcing, might result in American consumers' changed ethnocentric tendencies towards patriotism.

There is a need to revisit the theoretical concepts of consumer nationalism (based on nationalistic pride and superiority) and consumer patriotism (based on loyalty and attachment) in relation to American consumers' patriotic consumption. This study thus explores the subtle yet important variations within the consumer ethnocentrism phenomenon in the United States to shed insight into the influence of the broader social context on consumers' disposition to favor domestic products and prejudice against foreign brands.

This study serves two purposes. First, it explores the role of consumption and related capitalistic ideologies, such as "the American dream" and "consumer freedom," in defining American citizenship. Second, it seeks to provide insights into the dynamics and complexity of audience response to patriotism-themed advertising and the "buy-American" appeal. Questions regarding audiences' interpretations of messages promoting patriotic consumption are concerned less with the message effectiveness, such as whether they agree with such appeal, but rather with what are the cultural relevance and social contexts that frame their interpretations.

Such a study becomes especially relevant during times of political and economic turmoil, when many advertisers and political leaders have constituted consumption-oriented citizenship by purposely conflating the private sphere

of consumption and public discourse of the national economy.

## METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews were conducted in the southeastern United States during the summer months of 2008. Interview participants were recruited through ads posted on local online communities and forums. Participants with different ethnic, age and professional profiles were purposely recruited to represent diversity of voices and experiences within the boundaries of a defined population (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Participants were recruited and interviewed until a redundancy in descriptions and themes began to emerge. The final sample comprised 10 male and 8 female participants whose ages ranged from 22 to 52. Participants came from different economic backgrounds, including college student, stay-at-home mom, business professional, school teacher, real estate agent, waiter, airport manager and tour bus driver. Three of the 18 participants, were of mixed ethnicity, seven Caucasian, two African American and six Hispanic, reflecting the racially diverse population of the study setting. Limitations inherent in generalizing from such a small sample are recognized and the discovery-oriented nature of this inquiry is stressed (Zhao and Belk, 2008). Although this is an acceptable number to achieve saturation of themes in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 1995), transferability of the research findings to other contexts should be carefully evaluated by the receiver/researcher according to the degree of fittingness (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

The interviews began with the showing of a short video of President Bush's 2006 national speech, in which the president encouraged American citizens to go shopping more in order to keep the economy growing. Participants then discussed their awareness, perceptions and opinions of such requests and elaborated on the social implications of private consumption in relation to the nation's economic health. In the latter part of the interview, the participants were shown six patriotism-themed commercials that have been frequently discussed in marketing trade publications, including American Airlines' post-9/11 commercial, General Motor's 2001 "Keep America Rolling" spot, the 2006 Silverado "Our Country, Our Truck" commercial and the 2005 "Thank You" commercial from Anheuser-Busch.

These commercials were used as a stimulus device, a technique called "auto-driving" which requires that participants be provided with photographs, text, or video as prompts for their interpretations (McCracken, 1988: 24). Through this prompting procedure, participants were able to provide vivid interpretations of the media narratives and the represented meanings. After watching each commercial, participants described immediate feelings and their interpretations of the ad messages, especially the meanings of "freedom" and "the American dream" that were employed and emphasized in the commercials. Respondents were encouraged to expound their own notions of what was important for the researcher to know and to talk about any issues that they felt were relevant to the topic. The researcher raised some probing questions regarding globalization and outsourcing, the definition of shopping and support for domestically manufactured products and the long-term effects of consumer spending versus saving.

The digitally-recorded interviews lasted 60 to 90 min each and were transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically through a manual procedure. Participants' interpretive narratives were reviewed several times to identify reoccurring issues. Responses were compared, matched and assigned to a few broad categories and further analyzed for discovering patterns, themes and key issues. The member check method, considered to be the most crucial

means of establishing credibility in qualitative studies (Lindlof, 1995), was used. Transcriptions of interview conversations were emailed back to participants approximately 2 weeks after the interview for further confirmation, verification and clarification.

## RESULTS

This study had findings in five areas: (1) consuming an American identity, (2) shopping and the strength of the nation, (3) patriotic advertising and buy-American, (4) the inclusion of corporate America as part of an in-group and (5) perceptions about the impact of saving money on the collective good. Each of these findings will be reviewed in turn.

All of the interview participants were aware of the widely publicized encouragement from political leaders to resume daily activities, including consumer spending, after the September 11 attacks. The participants' belief that mass consumption was almost universally regarded as a key route to recovery and economic stability for post-9/11 America was pervasive. This held true regardless of whether the participants themselves viewed such a stance as realistic or appropriate in times of economic and political disturbance.

### Consuming an American identity

McGovern (1998) indicated that advertising metaphors transform consumption into a ritualistic means of affirming one's nationality as an American. In the present study, participants' interpretations of patriotic commercials that used words with strong patriotic connotations (such as "freedom," "independence" and the "American Dream") similarly reflected the cultural meanings of consumption as an important element in the configuration of an American identity. For example, the importance of consumer freedom in American culture was elaborated in participants' interpretations of a post-9/11 American Airlines commercial that stated, "We are an airline but it's become clear we are more. We are a way of life, the freedom to come and go anywhere." Consider the following exchange between the interviewer and Ingrid, a corporate event planner:

Interviewer: You mentioned that this commercial was pro-American and it used the power word "freedom." Can you explain a little more about why freedom is a powerful word for Americans?

Ingrid: The word freedom is huge. It's precious with us. I think that's what we feel gives us a higher edge to other places, that we have freedom that other countries may not have. [...] People want to be able to buy whatever they want and travel to wherever they want basically.  
Interviewer: Does that mean you can really buy whatever you want to buy?

Ingrid: No. But we have choices. Personally, knowing that I have 10 choices as opposed to two makes me feel better. I think it's our culture to need to have those choices- the more choices the better.

In Ingrid's interpretations, freedom was at least partly defined in terms of consumption, and she further explained that consumer freedom is an important extended concept of the conventional forms of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Moreover, although many participants recognized or feared problems of wasteful overconsumption and rising consumer debts, many also asserted that consumer freedom and the associated financial superiority, abundance of commodities and conspicuous consumer spending were culturally significant phenomena and distinct to the United States:

Javier: I like variety and the freedom to choose. [...] For example when we have family members from Cuba [...] they're like, "We don't have this over there. This is great, all of this variety." I don't know if other countries have the cash flow because consumer freedom actually depends on the consumer capability to have that money to spend. It is part of the American pride that we are strong and then we all are equal to attain to the American goal, to have the American dream, to have whatever we want.

Magie: You have this freedom to choose from a lot of different things [...] that's what we stand for. China? They still have [rules] like you only can have one baby. [...] We don't have that. I'm free to buy whatever I want. We stand for the free trade, free commerce that you can get whatever you want.

Distinct from previous findings that indicate it is the less cosmopolitan consumers who are more likely to exhibit high ethnocentric tendencies (Lee et al., 2003), participants constantly referred to their direct observations from traveling overseas or experiences with family members from foreign countries when discussing the perceived superior market dynamics and quality of life in the United States. In addition, the emphasis on consumption-oriented American citizenship was found to be particularly prominent among first- or second-generation Hispanic participants, who defined the American Dream largely in the language of consumption and commodity ownership in their interpretive narratives of patriotic commercials, as a first-generation Honduran participant explained:

Sergio: My father grew up very poor in Honduras, we were dirt poor [...] I still remember to this day, when I was little and we went to visit, there was a big Coca-Cola sign on the mountain [...] my dad sees it as "That's my dream" and he would tell my sister and I to have these things. [...] That's part of the American dream and I'm adding my stuff to it. I want that beach house. I want that BMW. [...] We're no longer in a third-world country, we are now in a

first-world country and we have a standard of living that we couldn't enjoy back there.

As illustrated by participants' interpretations, the American free market was viewed as an essential site for citizen-consumers to reaffirm core American values such as democracy (expressed by the participants in terms of an open market free from government intervention), independence (financial independence and consumer sovereignty), freedom (the exercise of consumer freedom in consumer choice) and equality (everyone has the same chance to pursue the American Dream). American consumerism, with its dominant values of consumer freedom, consumer choice, made possible by mass production of commodities, thus constitutes an accessible and dominant vehicle for realizing and affirming national citizenship.

### Shopping for a stronger nation

All participants were able to intuitively and with a noticeable ease, articulate and rationalize the significant role of consumer spending in contributing to the nation's economic health. Framed by publicized discourses promoting patriotic spending, instead of conceptualizing consumption as a form of self-indulgence, participants unanimously believed that consumption has collective and cumulative impacts on the demand-driven economic system, whereas contractions in consumer spending were viewed as having a direct effect on the current economic slowdown. Consider the following passages explaining the domino effect of individual consumer activity in American society:

Trevor: I've always felt that shopping contributes [to the economy]. If we stopped traveling [with] the airlines, it would affect the airlines and then it would affect the people that put the food on the planes and it would just trickle down. [...] Everyone gets affected. So if you spend less money, it affects more people than just you not buying a pizza. Consenting to the public discourse that translates political objectives into private economic choices, mass consumption becomes a form of mass mobilization in which individual consumers join their fellow citizens in mass consumption in the name of the country and the collective good. By recognizing the far-reaching consequential impacts of their economic activities, individuals conflate their social roles of citizens with those of consumers to construct an identity as citizen-consumers in their responses to patriotic consumption appeals. Furthermore, when asked about exactly what types of shopping have simulative effects on the economy, participants' responses suggest that it was excessive or conspicuous spending on luxurious indulgence—such as a flat-screen television or an extravagant cruise vacation—that was believed to effectively

invigorate the economy, not expenditure on necessities and essential goods like basic food, gas, rent, or even tuition. Participants cited the ubiquitous advertising messages that predominantly promote consumer spending on lifestyle and image-oriented commodities to rationalize superfluous spending as the key economic activity buttressing the American capitalist market economy.

However, participants who approved the plan of advocating mass consumption for boosting economic growth did not necessarily feel obliged to be further engaged in consumer spending or splurging. Most participants pointed out that, although ideal and justifiable, the plan could be unattainable for many Americans, given the rising unemployment rate and the ailing economy:

Judy: I'd shop more, yes, if I had a salary like his [President Bush's]. But unfortunately, most of us can't. People who were unaffected, who haven't remained making the same amount of money while everything has been going up, can do this.

Julie: It's so cavalier, just go shopping more. I almost find it hypocritical for him to tell me to go shopping because he's at a much higher income level than I am. And I feel like it removes him from the average American by saying everything's going to be okay, keep shopping.

Even the more critical respondents who pointed out the problems of class bias and widening class gap in relation to mass consumption ratified the significance of consumer spending in building a prosperous post-September 11 America. Some further indicated that they would have happily obliged President Bush's invocation and contributed economically if they belonged to a privileged social class. However, the underlying assumption is that the more benefited members of society should help the less benefited members; thus purchase decisions were equated with civic responsibility on the basis of patriotism and caring for fellow Americans. Predisposed by the public discourse on the aggregated effect of consumption, the participants often discussed shopping as a means of "spreading" and "sharing" of wealth rather than as a self-centered pleasure. Accordingly, shopping was seen as a helping behavior in keeping with the reciprocity of a dynamic market system and its collective, interconnected effects:

Wade: If we continue shopping and paying out the credit card payment, we are continuing [...] having the whole circle of people helping each other out economically. The more stores that are open, the more people have jobs. And when people have jobs, the more money that they can spend. So everything is attached to something else. [...] I guess everyone feels like through shopping, it is the better way of having our money to be spread across

economically through other facets of the community or our country.

Sergio: Recently, we had the Economic Stimulus Package to be given to all the Americans. And they feel it was with the intention of spreading that growth, to have Americans to pay for their credit card bills, through shopping and through other various ways. And by having that, we are to continue to spend and we could be stronger as a nation.

In their elaborations of spending and buying as a helping and sharing behavior, participants mentioned other fellow Americans, such as waiters, restaurant owners, sanitary workers and truckers in the circle of economic exchange, who were perceived as fellow citizens connected with themselves. Participants' internalized responsibility to help through economic activity was even more prominent in their discussions of buy-American.

### **Patriotic advertising and buy-American**

Implicit in participants' recognition of mass consumption as a sharing and helping behavior is the premise of a benevolent national community, in which Americans, including corporate citizens, join together to overcome hardship and adversity. Participants noted repeatedly that their preference for domestically manufactured products was motivated mostly by wanting to help save fellow Americans' jobs. The social context of global trade and corporate outsourcing was a crucial factor in participants' framing of purchasing domestic products as a way of assisting vulnerable American workers. Consider the following passages from two participants who had witnessed their acquaintances lose jobs as a result of corporate outsourcing:

Eva: I was reading in the paper about buying Converse and it was like, "Converse makes all of their sneakers in America so you're supporting American jobs when you buy Converse in America." [...] I know personally, my cousin just got laid off because her whole company is going to India. Therefore, you have lots of people unemployed.

Judy: It's more appealing to me if I know that it's an American-made product versus foreign product. [...] I don't think it's because I'm patriotic or American products are better. I do it because I want to stimulate the economy, to keep jobs in America.

Participants who were more vicarious and sympathetic with American workers were likely to be outspoken advocates of buy-American. In particular, participants belonging to the lower income class expressed more vicarious concerns, as they showed a stronger identifica-

tion with the victims of outsourcing. They argued that the theory of relying on consumer spending to stimulate the American economy only applies to domestically manufactured products. In this way, social concerns regarding the trade deficit and outsourcing of jobs have created a sense of sharing a common fate with the threatened American workers. Participants' responses reflected a perception of sameness and closeness to the workers, as they felt similarly vulnerable to losing their jobs and many indicated that they too had experienced the aftermath of outsourcing.

As illustrated by their reasoning regarding their support for domestic products, the participants based economic decisions on social concerns for fellow Americans (and themselves) that faced outsourcing threats. This finding is different from those of previous studies concerning American consumers (Lee et al., 2003), which found nationalistic pride to be the dominant factor contributing to consumers' prejudice against foreign products. Instead, there appeared to be changes in nationalism; when participants expressed patriotic support for domestic products, they did so out of nationwide altruism to assist their fellow citizens, the threatened American workers. The implicit feeling was that the more privileged members of a society should help compensate those who are disadvantaged—in this case, the distressed workers. This sentiment was also observed when some participants argued that they were doing their part by purchasing domestically manufactured products and advocated that others follow suit.

Although American culture is conventionally considered to be highly individualistic, when the country is threatened by outsiders, what was formerly viewed as an individualistic and private matter is likely to be regarded as a collectivism-oriented practice. Individual consumption has been transformed into a collectivistic way of sharing and helping others partly through the influence of political discourse and partly through consumers' social concern for laid-off workers and disappearing American jobs has transformed.

### **Corporate America as “one of us”**

Some participants were clearly moved by the patriotic story and imagery in advertisements such as Miller's “America the Beautiful” and the Anheuser-Busch “Thank You” commercial dedicated to American soldiers. In the process of identifying with the ad message and imagery, participants embraced advertisers as “one of us”; they argued that September 11 had a deep impact on everyone, including corporate America. Consider the following interview passages collected, which demonstrate participants' perception of sameness or resemblance and a shared experience of collective trauma with the advertised companies:

Kim: Those types of companies, the ones that I believe are to be long-standing, ingrained; I believe they feel like they also have an obligation to not just push their product, but to reiterate the fact that they're still part of everyday society.

Wade: It is saying that we don't really need you to be a person that's going to be purchasing our product. We just want to let you know that we're here for you. [...] We're supporting our country and by the means of supporting of our country, we're also supporting you. And it has to be a big company to put a message out there. [Budweiser is] more or less like a symbol, an American symbol. [...] And we're not just a company for beer, but we're part of the role of helping everyone economically.

The interviews were conducted before the giant Belgian brewer InBev took over Anheuser-Busch. Therefore, in participants' rationalization of their positive response to the patriotism-themed commercials, they clearly identified the company with the United States (example, “speaking as a voice of the American people”) and felt vicariously as they spoke from the company's perspective. Many participants specifically asserted that they would respond less favorably if the patriotic ads were produced by foreign companies who were viewed as outsiders and whose messages therefore would not be perceived as genuine:

Julie: Perhaps it would have been a different feeling if the ad [GM's Keep America Rolling] were from Honda or a Mitsubishi. [...] I do feel like because it was General Motors and that's known to be the legacy of American goods.

And we're not a foreign corporation trying to feed off of what you're feeling right now. The participants' responses revealed the extent to which consumers are inclined to explicitly recognize a select group of American advertisers as worthy in-group members whose history has made them an American legacy and whose products have been an integral part of the American social fabric. The patriotism-themed messages functioned to depict the advertisers as benevolent corporate citizens, induced the participants to regard not only their fellow Americans as part of an in-group broadly defined in terms of patriotism and American citizenship, but to also include the advertisers in that group.

Consequently, participants were inclined to view a company's generous financing plan as well as their own purchases from the advertisers as behavior that helped each other. Some even felt supportive of the ad's explicit profit motive, as the health of the advertised company was viewed as part of the health of the nation:

Julie: They were an American company and they were making it clear. I know at the end of the day [GM's “Keep America Rolling”] is still about selling their product. [...] I

feel compassion for the company [...] and good for them [to] increase their bottom line. [...] Obviously they're an important part of the American auto makers. It would be pretty sad if we lose them.

### **Saving money seen as a self-centered matter**

In contrast to participants' ease in elaborating the value of consumer spending, there was a clear sense of difficulty, hesitance and uncertainty in formulating arguments when they were asked how saving contributed to the national economy. In fact, it was suggested that increased rates of saving and the resultant weakness in consumer spending led to the current stagnant economy:

Sergio: [By] squirreling away money into savings, you're hurting other people [...] because then there won't be jobs created.

Influenced partly by the patriotic discourse promoting mass consumption as civic engagement, participants viewed saving as a relatively self-centered practice devoid of the positive, collective and aggregated effects on the nation's economy, unless the purpose was to save for more, bigger spending in the near future:

Julie: I think saving is individual. [...] I'm saving for something that we can buy later, or a big ticket item. What am I using those funds for? It's to pay for something. If you keep that money in the bank while things are falling apart, it's not going to do any good for the economy.

Trevor: We're in a recession [...] and they're giving this money to stimulate, to feed the profits, to make people go out and spend money. [...] But if you save that money, the economy is just going to be flat. [...] Saving does not stimulate the economy. It's just helping you personally, like a safety net.

In contrast to the widely-publicized concept of consumer spending, participants' responses indicate that saving was downplayed in contemporary American culture. However, this does not suggest that participants disregarded the significance of saving; rather, saving is conceptualized in the language of individualistic personal security.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study presents an exploratory investigation of the relationship between patriotic advertising, consumption and citizenship in American society. Participants' responses to the political invocation of patriotic spending and buy-American advertising messages revealed that consumption was viewed as having positive

collective and cumulative impacts on the demand-driven economic system. Consequently, consumerism and related consumption ideologies were viewed as culturally significant to the definition of American culture and as an essential means of realizing and affirming one's American citizenship. Mass consumption has become a socially sanctioned way for American citizen-consumers to express collective sentiments and to address social concerns such as the trade deficit and corporate outsourcing. Influenced by their perceived shared fate and similarity to vulnerable American workers, the participants equated consumer purchases of domestically manufactured products with helping others. In contrast, saving was relatively underplayed in public media and consumers' collective consciousness, according to participants' responses. Furthermore, saving often connoted negative meanings in terms of its effects on the nation's economic health and was considered to be relatively inconsistent with the contemporary American way of life.

In contrast to previous research, this study found patriotism, rather than nationalism, to be the driving factor contributing to consumers' prejudice against foreign products. In other words, participants framed the purchase of domestic products as altruistic helping behavior and based their economic decisions on patriotic concern for fellow American workers. The core cultural values of American individualism may remain unchanged; however, the social context of economic challenges from foreign countries, in conjunction with patriotic advertising appeals promoting buy-American as helping behavior, may induce a higher level of collectivistic consciousness and stimulate consumers' internalized sense of patriotic responsibility to aid worthy in-group members, including not only American workers but also long-standing American companies. The extent to which such sociopolitical context and patriotic advertising appeals frame audiences' response to buy-American messages warrants more careful examination. An ongoing examination of changes in nationalism, patriotism and internationalism in response to constantly changing economic, social and political climates is thus imperative.

## **Conclusion**

According to the recent report published by the U.S. Department of Commerce, saving rates having risen since the beginning of the current recession (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2009). Yet, as evidenced by the overwhelming rush to exchange clunker cars for new ones when given a government subsidy (Clark, 2009), American enthusiasm for consuming has not changed, even if diminished access to credits has crimped consumers' ability to spend. A possible explanation for this is that consumption ideologies may be more likely to be dominant in the short-term and low-uncertainty-

avoidance-oriented American culture, where there is a strong emphasis on immediate rewards best exemplified through the prevalence of credit cards and the “buy now, pay later” marketing appeal. In contrast, long-term and high-uncertainty-avoidance oriented cultures are inclined to value thrift, perseverance and saving (de Mooij, 2004). Cross-cultural studies comparing consumers’ attitudes toward consumption and saving and the implicated social consequences are needed to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding consumer consumption and saving as sociological phenomena.

## REFERENCES

- Balabanis G, Diamantopoulos A, Mueller RD, Melewar TC (2001). The impact of nationalism, patriotism and internationalism on consumer ethnocentric tendencies. *J. Int. Bus. Stud.* 32: 157-175.
- Bush GW (2006). Press conference by the president. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/12/20061220-1.html>.
- Business Wire (2008). FNBO Direct maximizes YouTube to kick off Pay Yourself First challenge. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0EIN/is\\_6/ai\\_n25383116](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_6/ai_n25383116).
- Clark A (2009). US ‘cash for clunkers’ subsidy sees car sales rise. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/aug/03/us-subsidy-car-sales-rise>.
- Cohen L (1998). A consumer’s republic: The politics of mass consumption in postwar America, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, pp.18-61.
- De Mooij M (2004). *Global marketing and advertising: Understanding cultural paradoxes*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 59-79.
- Druckman D (1994). Nationalism, patriotism, and group loyalty: A social-psychological perspective. *Mershon Int. Stud. Rev.* 38(1): 43-68.
- Federal Reserve Bulletin (2006). Recent changes in U.S. family finances: Evidence from the 2001 and 2004 survey of consumer finances. <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/2004/bull0206.pdf>
- Glickman LB (1999). *Consumer society in American history: A reader*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY. pp.1-16.
- GM (2001). [Advertisement]. *New York Times*, September 23, p A47.
- Good LK, Huddleston P (1995). Ethnocentrism of Polish and Russian consumers: Are feelings and intentions related? *Int. Mark. Rev.* 12: 35-48.
- Granzin KL, Olsen JE (1998). Americans’ choice of domestic over foreign products: A matter of helping behavior? *J. Bus. Res.* 43: 39-54.
- Granzin KL, Painter J (2000). Non-demographic vs. demographic determinants of buy domestic activities in two nations. *J. Global Mark.* 13: 73-92.
- Guba E, Lincoln Y (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA, pp.236-243.
- Jubas K (2007). Conceptual con/fusion in democratic societies: Understandings and limitations of consumer-citizenship. *J. Consumer Cult.* 7: 231-254.
- Kinnick KN (2003). How corporate America grieves: Responses to September 11 in public relations advertising. *Publ. Relations Rev.* 29: 443-459.
- Kinnick KN (2004). Advertising responses to crisis. *Society* 42(1): 32-36.
- Klein JG (2002). Us versus them or us versus everyone? Delineating consumer aversion to foreign goods. *J. Int. Bus. Stud.* 33: 345-363.
- Lee WN, Hong JY, Lee SJ (2003). Communicating with American consumers in the post 9/11 climate: An empirical investigation of consumer ethnocentrism in the United States. *Int. J. Advert.* 22: 487-510.
- Lindlof TR (1995). *Qualitative communication research methods*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- McCracken GD (1988). *The long interview*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- McGovern C (1998). Consumption and citizenship in the United States, 1900-1940. In S. Strasser et al. (eds), *Getting and spending: European and American consumer societies in the twentieth century*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, pp. 37-58.
- McMellon CA, Long M (2006). Sympathy, patriotism and cynicism: Post-9/11 New York City newspaper advertising content and consumer reactions. *J. Curr. Iss. Res. Advert.* 28: 1-18.
- Ritchie J, Lewis J (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 77-108.
- Sandelowski M (1995). Sample size in qualitative research. *Res. Nurs. Health* 18: 179-183.
- Sharma S, Shimp TA, Shin J (1995). Consumer ethnocentrism: A test of antecedents and moderators. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* 23: 26-37.
- Shimp TA, Sharma S (1987). Consumer ethnocentrism: Construction and validation of the CETSCALE. *J. Marketing Res.* 24: 280-289.
- U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2009). Personal saving rate. <http://www.bea.gov/briefrm/saving.htm>
- Zhao X, Belk RW (2008). Politicizing consumer culture: Advertising’s appropriation of political ideology in China’s social transition. *J. Consumer Res.* 35: 231-244