

**How International Marketing Trends Impact Segmentation and Targeting:
A Cultural Revision***

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Abstract

By adopting a cultural and interpretive perspective, this paper questions two highly institutionalized tenets in marketing: segmentation and targeting. We argue that contemporary markets under the challenges induced by international forces and trends are jeopardizing the way we may look at segmentation and targeting. Our work achieves two main results. First, through an extensive literature review we identify six key traditional provisions to market segmentation and targeting, which we revise in the light of the cultural tradition. Second, we expand the logics for segmentation criteria by adding to direct versus indirect criteria two additional typologies, which we call objective versus co-constructed criteria. We think this revision can foster academic discussion and marketing practice as well.

Key words: segmentation; targeting; interpretivism; cultural approach; objective criteria; co-constructed criteria.

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Will Segmentation and Targeting Celebrate Their Golden Wedding?

The provisions and the benefits of market segmentation, and the related process of targeting, have so far been almost untended. Actually, no product differentiation would ever exist beyond the idea, and the chance, of splitting markets into heterogeneous groups of customers (Peter and Donnelly 2008) according to their agglomerated preferences (Kerin *et al.*2006), loyalty, geographical accessibility to the product, purchasing power, and the like (Kotler and Armstrong 2006). When a market is internally different for these or other reasons, segmentation and the consequent detection of one or more key segments to target carry advantages both for companies and their customers (Lambin 1998). With reference to competitors, companies outperform when they are better off in meeting peculiar needs of given market groups. On their own, customers benefit from the opportunity of receiving a customized, almost unique offer, which they often contribute to create and for which they are willing to pay a premium price (Cova and Dalli 2009).

If segmentation and targeting are all this, why then questioning these two tenets? Why raising shadows in a perfectly happy marriage? Maybe the marriage is not as happy as it looks. Maybe it asks for fresh lymph to survive some more decades.

As ethnographic researchers, this is the impression we have out of our decennial fieldwork with customers and companies. However, we are not alone since the same impression is supported by the increasing criticism tied to the interpretive (Hirschman 1989; Sherry 1991) and the cultural (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Peñaloza, Toulouse and

Visconti 2011) streams in consumer research. What harms traditional provisions of segmentation and targeting – we argue – is, at the same time, the transformation of the market context occurred over the last years (Brown 1995; Deighton *et al.* 2010) and the unquestioned (and unquestionable!) underlying hypotheses of segmentation and targeting, which do not match such renewed context so well.

Therefore, our interest in revising researchers' and marketers' understanding of similar conceptual milestones in the marketing practice is not intended to threaten the established equilibrium. Instead, field evidence shows that avoiding a revision would lead to a future, inevitable collapse of two necessary frames that have oriented our discipline so far. Said differently, we wish long life to segmentation and targeting but admit that this can be arguably achieved by rethinking some of their grounded, and frequently implicit, foundations.

In this paper we move from the largely shared remark that the established, cognitive approach to marketing – and to segmentation and targeting, in particular – does not capture the international evolution of markets as well as the trends in consumers' consumption and companies' strategic decisions. As such, the paper aims at critically revising the pre-conditions, conceptualization and practice of market segmentation, and thus at providing fresh understanding of the informative basis for managers' targeting decisions. By comparing the cognitive and the cultural perspectives together, we preliminary present segmentation and targeting within the established tradition of marketing – i.e., à la Kotler – and subsequently show that many provisions hold by such approach fail to meet the emergent trends in consumption and market dynamics. Eventually, we draw implications for future research and managerial praxis.

Our work is here mostly conceptual, being supported by a comprehensive review of the international literature on market segmentation and targeting. Nonetheless, some confirmatory empirical examples are drawn from our decennial investigation of consumers'

identity projects and their connection to consumption choices, experiences, and socialization (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Holt 1995; McCracken 1986). More precisely, we deploy empirical data from research conducted with immigrants and second generations to highlight and sustain our contributions. Our geographical scope of analysis is multinational, especially including the USA, Italy, France, Denmark, and Turkey.

Segmentation and Targeting at the Mirror: Faces of an Old Couple

As mentioned above, the existence of agglomerated preferences (Kerin *et al.*2006) constitutes the prerequisite to market segmentation. As such, consumers should present differences in their preferences to justify companies' economic investment in product differentiation. At the same time, they have to gather around some shared preferences in order to make each market segment an economically appealing target (McDonald and Dunbar 2004). To tell the truth, today markets usually show situations in between the two extremes of homogeneous versus totally scattered consumer preferences. Therefore, segmentation and targeting are always empirically applicable (Kotler and Armstrong 2006).

Segmentation can then be performed at various stages. Macro-segmentation is meant to separate the major market segments, which are usually addressed by an adaptation of Abell's industry model (1980). According to this reference, macro-segments stem from the different combinations in terms of *needs*, *technologies* and *consumer groups* a company may envision. For example, with reference to the out-door food market, each competitor selects its combination of consumer needs (e.g., taste, healthiness, value for money, etc.), technologies (e.g., fast versus slow food formula, self versus assisted service, etc.) and groups (e.g., kids, families, immigrants, working professionals, etc.). Since 1967 Taco Bueno, a Tex-Mex USA chain (<http://tacobueno.com/>), operates more than 150 restaurants in the States, and mostly

targets consumers looking for tasty Mexican food served with a fast service formula that particularly appeals to Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans. It is not by chance that its core business resides in the state of Texas.

----- Table 1 about here -----

When the dimension of each macro-segment are relevant, segmentation can be carried further by means of detecting micro-segments. A list of traditional micro-segment is offered in table 1, where the main distinction is between indirect and direct segmentation criteria. While *indirect criteria* divide the market by means of some consumer traits that are not specifically related to their preference for or consumption of the company's product (e.g., their geographical location or the level of formal education), *direct criteria* are based upon the judgment, preference, loyalty, or use expressed by prospect and/or actual customers of the company. As such, Taco Bueno may differentiate further its markets by separating frequent and occasional customers, or by adapting its offer to geographical tastes. Actually, the company deploys age to identify a distinct micro-segment constituted by kids.

While the logics of macro- and micro-segmentation tend to hold also within the cultural perspective, where traditional and interpretive approaches dramatically differ is with reference to the main provisions grounding segmentation. Through our extensive literature review, we detecte six, key provisions of segmentation as meant in the mainstream marketing literature. The first four are usually addressed in many marketing textbooks (Kerin *et al.* 2006; Kotler and Armstrong 2006; Lambin 1998). In fact, managers and researchers are quite aware that segmentation and targeting are made possible whenever segments differ one from the other (*differentiability*); when they are quantifiable in terms of dimensions and expected revenues (*measurability*); when they are economically appealing (*relevance*) and at reach for the company (*accessibility*). Differently, the two last preconditions are very often implicit (Peter and Donnelly 2008), and complement the list by stating that segmentation and

targeting ultimately require the attribution of each customer to a single cluster (*exhaustiveness*) and the durability of the traits characterizing each segment (*stability*). Unfortunately, the turbulence and complexity of contemporary market trends shape a completely different scenario, in which even the strongest believer in traditional marketing would have hard times to couple real markets with the abovementioned theoretical provisions.

Cultural Spur for Keeping Young

The fragility, anachronism and dangerousness of most of the assumptions listed above are enlightened by the cultural perspective. A close examination of what is meant by cultural approach goes much beyond the objectives of this paper. However, we briefly recall its definition within the field of marketing and consumer research. Moving from the foundational work of the MIT's outstanding scholar Grant McCracken (1986), the cultural view denies that the role of marketing researchers and companies is to establish the objective features of market behaviors. Instead, attention has to be addressed towards the intimate, subjective as well as social activity of meaning attribution and meaning negotiation that consumers and companies daily carry on with reference to their consumptions and – to speak the language of Douglas and Isherwood (1979) – “the world of goods”. A comparative summary of the two approaches is provided in table 2. As such, elaborating upon the postmodern critics (Brown 2005; Firat and Dholakia 1998; Firat and Schultz 1997), the cultural school has been actively demonstrating the overarching role of the symbolic, relational, and experiential over the functional in consumption.

----- Table 2 about here -----

Segmentation and targeting make no exception. When consumers become active, agentic, and multi-dimensional subjects who deploy consumption much beyond its functional sphere, we argue that the provisions grounding segmentation and targeting need to be revised. While the two last preconditions (i.e., exhaustiveness and stability) have to be removed, the other four (i.e., differentiability, measurability, relevance, and accessibility) require partial revision. In detail, we hereafter comment each of the established provisions in the light of the cultural critique, and we start from the two weakest of them:

1. *Exhaustiveness rejected.* Nowadays consumers are fragmented subjects who thus shift from different identity positions at different moments in time (Firat and Shultz 1997). Their multiple self is attributable to rival roles (e.g., parent, son/daughter, friend, worker, member of a club, etc.), different consumption situations (e.g., home vs outdoor, individual vs group, etc.), belonging to various subcultures (e.g., gender, generational, religious, ethnic subcultures), suspension between real and virtual lives, and different levels of structuring the self (I-self, me-self, looking glass self, etc.). The main implication for segmentation is that customers cannot be expected to maintain a stable position in the market since they may swap among different identity positions. In doing so, consumers enter and leave more segments at a time, and thus jeopardize the theoretical requisite of exhaustiveness.
2. *Stability rejected.* Similarly, the tenet of stability wobbles. On the one hand, self-fragmentation accounts for the constant transformation and reconfiguration of the customers' features. On the other hand, however, an even more radical modification has taken place. If customers become interpretive subjects, operating in culturally constructed markets where products, services, brands, and experiences are dense carriers of meanings, their behaviors cannot be explained solely (or mainly) in terms of personality traits, genetic imprinting (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard 1999) or

rationality. Their functioning is more likely to conform to cultural categories and principles (McCracken 1986), which are learned by experience and constantly revised through practice. In other words, what characterizes a customer is not written at the outset but steadily updated, thus introducing an element of structural unsteadiness when segmenting the market.

3. *Differentiability revised.* The conviction that each segment has to be internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous grounds the construct of segmentation and is therefore unquestionable. At the same time, the traditional meaning of differentiability asks for revision when informed by our former discussion. Traditional segmentation postulates that consumers are homogeneous inside each market segment because (i) each client is part of a single segment and (ii) behaves consistently with the other parts of the same market group. Cultural segmentation acknowledges the migration of customers across different segments but confirms that their behavior, when part of a given segment, has to be internally consistent. Hence, the composition of each segment is in a state of transformation while its behavioral features are more steadily maintained.
4. *Measurability and relevance reloaded.* Analogously, the composition of each segment being unstable, it is impossible to grant univocal measurement. Instead of having delineated estimates of the dimensions of each market segment, it is more likely to provide ranges of estimates. Therefore, the economic relevance of each segment is subject to the oscillation embedded in the measurement procedures, which implies some kind of inaccuracy and lack of clarity.
5. *Accessibility reloaded.* The transition from traditional to cultural marketing has so far increased the unpredictability and complexity of market phenomena, and of segmentation in particular, due to customers' multiple belongingness and high rates of

variation and the wobbly measurement and economic calculation. Unexpectedly, this transition actually simplifies the way companies interact with their targets with reference to accessibility in that it unlocks some of the gates that usually impede the possibility of reaching an aimed segment. First, the need to identify and utilize large amounts of exclusive media and retailing settings to filter the targeted customers is now attenuated because customers can flow across various segments. This migration of customers across segments, and thus across multiple retailing and communicational formats, expands companies' opportunities to reach the aimed group as well as the locations or mediascapes (Appadurai 1996) that are less consistent with their intended positioning. Second and more relevantly, cultural marketing fully acknowledges the active role played by customers, because the customers participate in the co-creation of the product or service and, thus, in the generation of value (Borghini and Carù 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Consequently, the resources necessary to engender value in a given market segment come to be possessed jointly by the company and its customers. Through the bi-directional participation of managers and customers in the activities of design, production, and consumption, companies can eventually gain access to segments where the requested resources are partially brought in by their customers or are constructed with them. This condition is largely confirmed by empirical evidence, both for the consumer and industrial contexts, and has been shown to reduce the numerous resources that firms must have in order to enter appealing market niches.

----- Figure 1 about here -----

----- Figure 2 about here -----

The modification of the traditional segmentation and targeting strategies can be exemplified by the case of the worldwide bank HSBC. This financial giant, founded in Hong Kong but headquartered in London, has long been leveraging upon cultural heterogeneity beyond the boundaries of ethnicity. Starting from the idea of a multi-ethnic customer base (cfr. figure 1, in which the ad states “*In New York, the whole world is your neighbor*”), it has rapidly expanded its identity strategy to include a plurality of customers – both ethnic and local – and their different cultural viewpoints (cfr. figure 2, in which the ad claims “*The more you look at the world, the more you recognize how people value things differently*”). Today, HSBC presents itself as “*The world’s local bank*” (<http://www.hsbc.com>), and so reconciles the global and the local, the exotic and the familiar as part of the same whole. In doing so, HSBC overcomes the established segmentation criteria rooted in national or ethnic differences to acknowledge the complexity, creolization, and unpredictability of contemporary market boundaries.

----- Figure 3 about here -----

Mattel faced analogous problems to use clear-cut segmentation criteria when launching, and later developing, its models of the “black” Barbie. In detail, the company went through various stages. First, in 1967 Mattel launched the first model named “*Colored Francie*”, a doll with dark skin but the same head traits of the traditional Barbie. The following stages see the advent of “*Christie*” (1968), “*Black Barbie*” (1980), and “*So in Style*” (2009), which only eventually incorporate the main features of African-American women (curly hair, peculiar eye and nose features, etc.). While having in mind the intention to extend its customer base to the Afro-American young consumers, Mattel avoided and still avoid to segment the market according to ethnic criteria. Instead, the company recognizes that the prospect customers of these models may be white as well as black American girls.

Growing the Family: Including Consumers in Segmentation and Targeting

We have commented that contemporary consumers are not only cognitive but also interpretive subjects. As such, they not only alternate their belongingness to multiple segments within the same industry. Moreover, they become active players in the market, manipulating, negotiating, and altering meanings of products and brands, and thus taking relevant stance in the shaping of market segments.

Moving from this evidence, we propose both to academicians and marketers not only to rethink the preconditions to segmentation and targeting, but also to extend the traditional segmentation criteria in order to take into account the transformations occurred in the role played by consumers. We think that segmentation criteria can be differentiated not only in terms of *direct* versus *indirect* criteria. In fact, we suggest a twofold articulation of their taxonomy by adding a second dimension, which leads to the distinction between *objective* versus *co-constructed* criteria. While objective criteria comply with the traditional understanding of markets (i.e., cognitive and realistic), co-constructive criteria celebrate the cultural and interpretive view. More precisely, the latter deploy market cultures and the way different customers interpret and assimilate these cultural features. From this perspective, what matters is the way each customer elaborates the external market culture (i.e., the extra-somatic culture) at an individual or group level (i.e., the intra-somatic culture. In other words, co-constructed criteria consist in the different patterns that customers deploy to process and utilize the meanings embedded in a given brand, product, or service for their identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In these ways, managers are not widely looking at the overall cultural landscape but more precisely at the patterns of appropriation carried out by customers. Table 3 offers a detailed articulation of the two-dimensional space for segmentation criteria.

----- Table 3 about here -----

Overall, we think this paper provides two main contributions.

First, we increase researchers' and marketers' salience about the usual underlying assumptions rooting market segmentation and targeting, and document that all of them are inadequate, if not misleading, to meet the trends and transformations of contemporary markets. In so doing, we provide revised theoretical and economic assumptions to plan segmentation and targeting.

Second, we extend the set of criteria for segmentation. We complement the usual distinction between indirect (e.g., demographics, psychographics, etc.) and direct criteria (e.g., awareness, attitudes, frequency of purchase, etc.) by means of an additional categorization of segmentation criteria in terms of objective versus co-constructed ones. While objective criteria are imposed by the company onto its market, co-constructed criteria acknowledge the active role that many customers play, and thus suggest to involve customers in the making of market segments. Consequently, segmentation ceases being a linear, step-by-step process, and becomes a circular, discursive, iterative process along which companies and customers learn from each other.

Since this revised approach to market segmentation and targeting is time-consuming and costly, companies should attentively value the returns and customers' availability before getting started. At the same time, when co-constructed criteria are applicable and properly implemented, companies gain involvement and credence in the minds of their targeted customers. We contend that each company drives and controls its positioning by selecting a consistent set of elements. Cultural marketing additionally suggests that segmentation and positioning can be carried out by leveraging the emotional, social and expressive valences of the company's brand/supply.

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TABLE 1

Traditional criteria for market micro-segmentation

| | Sampling criteria | Definition |
|---|----------------------------|--|
|  <p>Indirect criteria</p> | Geographical criteria | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supranational markets (North-America and Canada; Far East and Asia; European Union, etc.) - National markets (USA, Canada, France, etc.) - Regional and superregional areas (Rocky Mountains, West coast, etc.) - Cities - Density of the population (rural, suburban, urban) <p><i>Usefulness:</i> any time the location of consumers impacts their culture, consumption practices, and logistical issues</p> |
| | Socio-demographic criteria | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age - Sex - Number of family members - Life stage of the family - Education - Income - Profession - Religion - Ethnicity - Nationality <p><i>Usefulness:</i> easily applicable and often available in official statistics, they identify influential variables impacting consumers' functional and symbolic needs</p> |
| | Psychographic criteria | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social class - Personality - Lifestyle <p><i>Usefulness:</i> they trace lifestyle profiles combining different geographical and socio-demographic criteria, and thus tracing values of different groups of clients. There are different examples of psychographic models: VALS II (SRI International) in North America; Europanel (GfK) in Europe; Sinottica (Eurisko) in Italy, etc.</p> |
| | Behavioral criteria | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attitudes toward the product/service/brand - Level of awareness (uninformed, informed, interested) - Situations of use - Benefits requested - Stage of use (non user, user, former user) - Intensity of use (light, intermediate or heavy user) - Loyalty <p><i>Usefulness:</i> they directly connect market segments to different profiles of customers of the product/service/brand of the company</p> |
| <p>Direct criteria</p> | | |

Source: Visconti, Luca M. and Mine Üçok Hughes (2011), “Segmentation and Targeting Reloaded,” in *Marketing Management: A Cultural Perspective*, Lisa Peñaloza, Nil Toulouse and Luca M. Visconti (ed.), London: Routledge, 295-314.

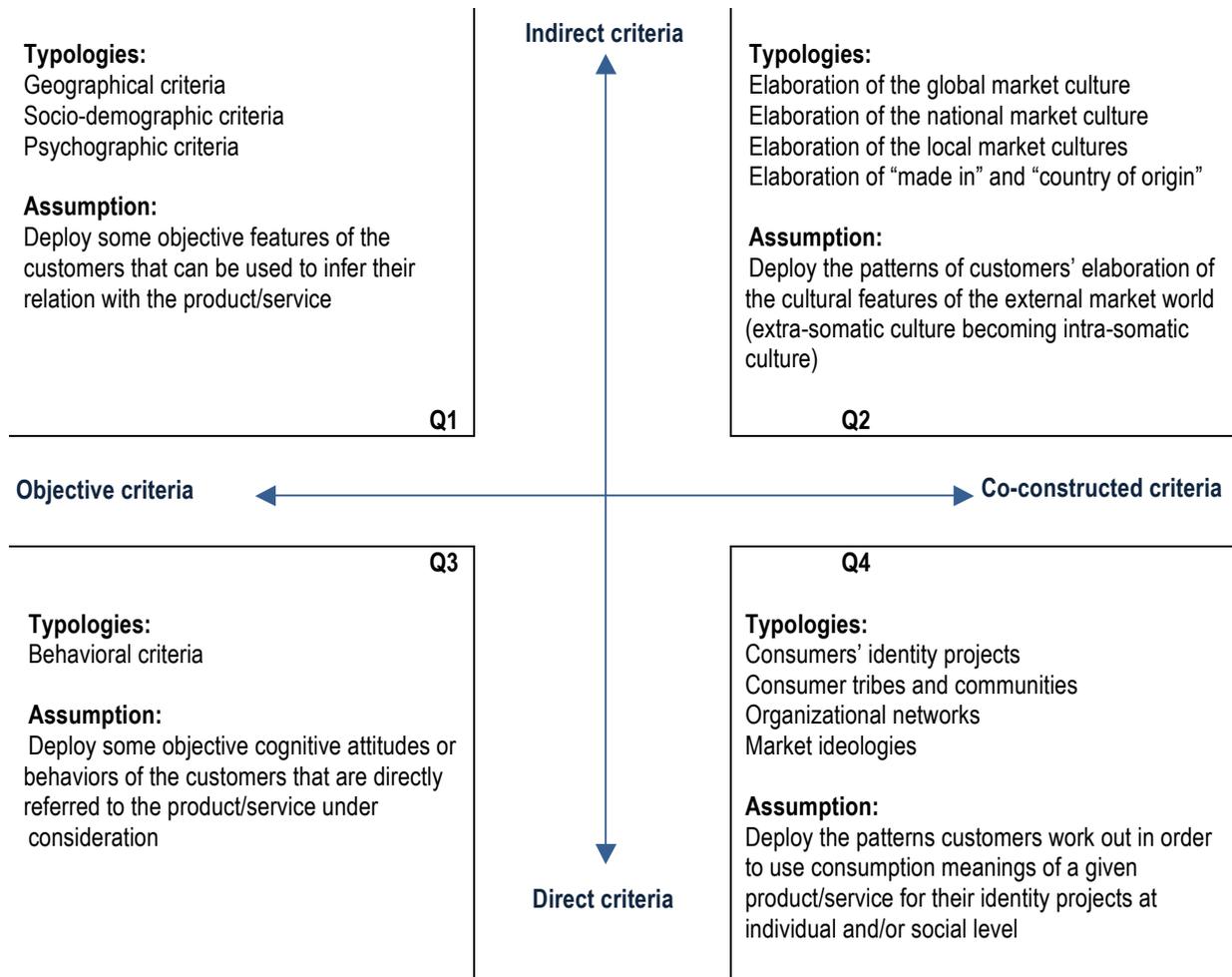
TABLE 2**Segmentation and targeting from the traditional and cultural perspectives**

| | Cognitive approach | Cultural approach |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Ontology | Objective reality and markets | Culturally constructed reality and markets |
| Epistemology | Objective observation of laws ruling reality | Interpretation of meanings |
| Consumption | Functional consumption | Symbolic, communicative, identity-making consumption |
| Segmentation conditions | Differentiability; measurability; relevance; accessibility; exhaustiveness; and, stability | Differentiability; measurability; relevance; and, accessibility reloaded |
| Segmentation criteria | Indirect objective criteria Direct objective criteria | Indirect co-constructed criteria Direct co-constructed criteria |
| Segmentation process | Stage-process: from macro to micro segmentation | Dialogical, circular process |
| Targeting | Defined by the company and close | Partially defined by the company and open |
| Positioning | Through brand elements | By means of co-constructed brand narratives |

Source: Visconti, Luca M. and Mine Üçok Hughes (2011), “Segmentation and Targeting Reloaded,” in *Marketing Management: A Cultural Perspective*, Lisa Peñaloza, Nil Toulouse and Luca M. Visconti (ed.), London: Routledge, 295-314.

TABLE 3

Traditional and cultural criteria for market micro-segmentation



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FIGURE 1

Advertising campaign of HSBC: the use of ethnic criteria for targeting



The image shows a fire alarm pull station with two columns of buttons. Each button has a name taped to it, representing various ethnicities. The names are as follows:

| Left Column | Right Column |
|---------------------|----------------|
| B1: Evangelista | 4B: Li Kozorio |
| B2: XAVIER | 5B: JASCHINSKI |
| B3: Lee | 6B: GARRETT |
| 1A: M. Stoopack | 1C: VARGAS |
| 2A: CASTO | 2C: HART |
| 3A: Cohen | 3C: IMAM |
| 4A: [illegible] | 4C: TAN JAN |
| 5A: [illegible] | 5C: FUKUI |
| 6A: Kossing/Gooding | 6C: REILLY |
| 1B: James | 1D: McLaughlin |
| 2B: FAKAUT | 2D: D. KIM 김경자 |
| 3B: TYRKIN | 3D: McDeRods |

in new york, the whole **world** is your neighbor.

At least 173 nationalities dwell in the apartments of the five boroughs. A fact we at HSBC embrace on a daily basis. We've built our business using the insights gained from doing business in 77 countries and territories worldwide to better serve our customers, wherever they're from. So why not give us a buzz? You're sure to get a warm welcome.

us.hsbc.com

HSBC 
The world's local bank

FIGURE 2

Advertising campaign of HSBC: the use of cultura criteria for targeting



FIGURE 3

Mattel's Black Barbie models: 1967; 1968; 1980; 2009

