



# Evolving the Framework for Exploring **Culture** in Research



**Written by**

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# Changing Population, Evolving Mindset

Over **20 years ago**, when the **2000** Census data was released, a seismic shift happened in the marketplace. Marketers and researchers, many for the first time, **began to take notice of the growing multicultural population in the US, especially Hispanics**, who were, **and continue to be, the largest multicultural audience in the US.**

When multicultural marketing and research were in their infancy, simply getting people to listen to and market to **“diverse audiences”** was a success in and of itself. **Marketers and researchers often lumped entire ethnicities together into a single monolith** – “Hispanics are brand loyal” “African Americans place a high value on faith.”

But as the emphasis placed on multicultural audiences has grown,

**so too has the need for a richer and more sophisticated understanding of culture.**

**The recently released results of the 2020 Census showed continued momentum in multicultural growth**, including the fact that all population growth over **the next 40 years will come from multicultural audiences** [including a whopping **276%** increase in those who identify as multi-racial].

That growth, along with movements like

**#BlackLivesMatter**  
**#StopAsianHate**

and others, which have increased the spotlight on racial inequality, have instilled new urgency into the need to better **understand multicultural audiences** and the role that culture plays in who we are and **how we operate in the world.**

# An Evolving Framework for *Exploring Culture*

**At Ahzul, multicultural is in our DNA – literally.** We're **100%** minority owned, and we have spent nearly **15 years helping brands understand and empathize with multicultural audiences.** We believe a cultural lens is critical to understanding how consumers view the world, themselves, and the brands they interact with every day.

**But we also know that culture is not the only lens we need to employ – nor does this lens always play the same role.**

**We have three core beliefs about culture that drive how we approach research and how we gain an authentic understanding of multicultural audiences:**

## Culture is fluid

Culture, and the way it manifests, is not linear or static. It evolves over time and life stages *[i.e. some teens might distance themselves from their culture of origin, while new parents might feel more closely connected to their culture as they aim to pass along values and traditions to their child]*. It flexes according to level of acculturation and how close people feel to both their country of origin and to **US culture at any given time.**

The role and influence of culture also changes depending on the behavior or category in question. It might play a foundational role in **beliefs and behaviors around food, or cleaning, for example.**

But in other categories, the role of culture might be less of a primary driver of behavior and **more of a contextual element that marketers can tap into via more subtle “cues and clues”** as we like to call them.

**At Ahzul**, we refer to the way culture flexes from the background to the forefront in different situations, life stages, and categories as **“cultural fluidity.”** This cultural fluidity is sometimes a choice, and sometimes imposed, and it responds to both internal and external pressures and norms. The workplace is a perfect example of a situation of this imposed cultural fluidity, where certain people feel they have to **“tone down”** or hide parts of themselves, especially those that are culturally-related, like hairstyles, dress, language or tone of voice, etc. In other instances, that fluidity is very much a choice – a young Latino might feel very much Hispanic at home, speaking Spanish and eating traditional foods, but also completely American at the same time, listening to hip-hop and grabbing pizza after school with friends.

## Culture is contextual

When we conduct research, we speak with individuals about their individual experiences. In fact, we explicitly ask them not to project what they think others might think or feel, and instead share their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. But at the same time, we're always cognizant of the larger group and cultural context in which individual experiences take place.

**So as we take in the individual experiences, we're constantly connecting those to the larger sociological context and cultural climate in which those individual experiences take place.**

For example, if we were exploring the role of customer service in a shopping experience with Black customers, it would be critical to put **individual perspectives** in the context of the many ways Black people have been discriminated against in society and specifically as shoppers. Or, in speaking with Asian people about their perspectives on education, it is critical to connect these perspectives to the larger Asian cultural forces that shape perceptions of education, success, and family duty.

# Culture is intersectional

It is tempting to try to look at culture in isolation, because that makes research and marketing simpler and less chaotic. **But the reality is that that culture is connected to, influences, and is influenced by other parts of ones identity: sexual orientation, gender, class, geography, etc.**

When we explore culture, we also aim to understand how other facets of identity play into cultural experiences and perspectives. **How does being female affect the experience of being Black, and vice versa? How does being LGBTQ+ affect the experience of being Hispanic and vice versa?** To assume that culture is the only lens through which people form their identities is to miss the messiness, **but also the richness that exploring identity through multiple perspectives can provide us.**

## The Bottom Line

Really understanding the role culture plays in how we view and experience the world around us **isn't simple, but it is important.** When exploring culture in research, and designing culturally relevant work, **we always make sure we do these three things:**

**1 Embrace cultural fluidity:**

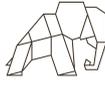
We explore what role culture plays and how it manifests in the specific category, moment, or experience we're trying to understand. **Is culture a primary driver, or more of a contextual factor?**

**2 Connect the macro to the micro:**

We work to connect what we learn from individuals to the larger sociological and cultural context in which they live. **What is the cultural climate and how are these factors driving the way an individual might relate to what we're talking about?**

**3 Take an intersectional view:**

We never look at culture in a vacuum. Instead, we explore identity from an intersectional and multi-faceted perspective, **seeking to understand how different facets of identity shape beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors.**



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