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# AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF  
MEXICAN AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION

by

Manon Prévost-Mullane

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2018

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by

Manon Prévost-Mullane

## DEDICATION

For my siblings: Sylvie Marie-Paule Prévost (1962 – 2011) lived life on her own terms, fully present and full of laughter each and every day that I miss dearly, and Richard Philippe Giroux (1960 – 2012) who, even though he was mentally and physically disabled, his perseverance for the quest of knowledge was unmatched and he will always be an inspiration for me. Sylvie and Richard believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. They were so proud of me and I strive to honor their confidence in my abilities. They were gone too soon to see me graduate; siblings were meant to grow old together. I wish we had more time.

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An Exploratory Study of Mexican American  
Perceptions of the American Automobile Association

Abstract

by Manon Prévost-Mullane

University of the Pacific  
2018

The goal of this study was to better understand the needs of the Mexican American community in relation to the services offered and what their perception was of the American Automobile Association (AAA). At the time of the study, the AAA membership rate for the Hispanic/Latino community was 5% (American Automobile Association, 2014) while this same population in the United States was approximately 17.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). White/Caucasian members in the AAA accounted for 87% of total memberships yet was estimated at 77% of the U.S. population. With a steady population growth of the Latino community, the AAA seeks to increase membership from this population to better reflect the corresponding makeup of the United States. For the purposes of this study I focused on the Mexican American community, knowing that it was exclusive of other Latin American populations. The 2010 U.S. Census (2011) revealed 59.87% of Hispanic/Latinos identified as Mexican American.

Historically, new immigrants immersed themselves in their new country and stepped away from not only their culture, but also their language. Ensuing generations of

Mexican Americans are reconnecting with their roots and redefining their social identity, however, they have created new, fluid identities: Mexican American, American, and a blend of the two. To which identity does the American Automobile Association need to market to?

This study suggests that AAA, a predominantly white corporation with low Hispanic/Latino membership rates, is not getting it right. Whites and Hispanics believe different advertising elements would be more relevant to the Mexican American population. Further study that includes face-to-face meetings or focus groups with the community is needed. However, there are clear messages that using the internet would better reach the Hispanic population, and to reach the most underserved group in the AAA, millennials, marketing apps for mobiles would be crucial.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background**

The American Automobile Association (AAA) has a long history of providing various kinds of travel assistance and advice to their members. In 1902 there were approximately 50 small motor clubs in the United States. Nine clubs joined together in Chicago to create the American Automobile Association. Over the ensuing 115 years, the association has added a plethora of services in the categories of travel, insurance, financial and automotive-related services, including the professional inspection and rating of over 59,000 hotels and restaurants in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean. In addition, from the very early years, AAA has worked with government for better roads and has been an advocate for automobile safety, from the use of seatbelts, car seats for babies, driver education for new and senior drivers, to their popular school safety program for elementary and middle school students. This latter program, started in 1920, has had student volunteers that have gone on to become president, (Carter and Clinton) Supreme court justices, (Burger, Kennedy, Breyer, Thomas, and Brennan) astronauts, (Thagard, Cabana, and Weber) Olympic gold medalists, (Jenner, Woodard, Ramsey, Heiden, and Moses) and a Nobel prize winner in economics (Becker) (AAA, 2017). Most Americans, whether they know it or not, have been touched by the efforts of the American Automobile Association for over a century.

At any given time, there are 48 to 54 professional inspectors working with the American Automobile Association evaluating nearly 59,000 properties yearly. The task

is to inspect and rate hotels for cleanliness, condition, safety, and décor using an intricate reporting and rating system that calculates what diamond rating, they have achieved. The ratings are numbered one, being a basic motel-type establishment, to a Five Diamond rating hotel that is extravagant and luxurious in all its detail. Similarly, inspectors must eat at an average of 8 restaurants per week and rate the food, service, cleanliness and décor, all while always remaining anonymous so as not to attract special attention.

It is in the capacity of this work as an inspector that I first became interested in the culture within the AAA. In 2013, there were 52 inspectors and the homogeneity of white faces was startling to me as we gathered for a conference. The following year there was one African American face at the conference, however she resigned within 6 months and the inspector conference returned to one without people of color. This African American inspector relayed to me that she was often treated with disdain and condescension by hotel and restaurant personnel that hindered her ability to properly perform her tasks and that AAA management were ill-equipped or unwilling to address this situation.

This was, to a much lesser extent, reminiscent of the Jim Crow era when “Negro motorists” were unable in many places to safely get gas, eat at restaurants, stay in hotels, or use restrooms. In 1936 Victor H. Green began publishing *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, renamed in 1952 to *The Negro Travelers’ Green Book: The Guide to Travel and Vacations*. The 1938 edition of *The Green Book* included a letter written by William Smith of Hackensack, New Jersey, who went on to describe the book as

a credit to the Negro Race. . . . It is a book badly needed among our Race since the advent of the motor age. Realizing the only way we knew where and how to reach our pleasure resorts was in a way of speaking, by word of mouth, until the publication of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. . . . We earnestly believe that [it]

will mean as much if not more to us as the [American Automobile Association] means to the white race. (Smith, as cited in Seiler, 2006, p. 1102)

The 1955 edition of *The Negro Travelers' Green Book: The Guide to Travel and Vacations* made reference to the increased interest from white businesses as they recognized the potential of the African American market. The book was now being used “by the Esso Standard Oil Co., the [AAA] and its affiliate automobile clubs throughout the country, other automobile clubs, air lines, travel bureaus, travelers aid, libraries and thousands of subscribers” (Hall, M., 2014, pp. 314-315). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 diminished the need for the book and it ceased publication in 1967. However, there has been much interest in this book since January 2017 and it can now be found for sale on Amazon.

I began questioning why my colleague had been treated in the way she was and turned my attention to examining our minority membership following an enlightening conversation with the general manager of a well-known chain hotel in downtown Montreal. This gentleman had previously accompanied me on inspections of his hotel and told me how he made his way to Canada, by way of Greece and France, from a tumultuous Cairo, Egypt 30 years earlier. He asked me why I was the only French-speaking inspector with the company. This was not a new question as I regularly received comments as I travelled throughout the province. Several hotel or restaurant owners had repeatedly submitted formal complaints to the Office québécois de la langue française, (Quebec Board of the French Language) otherwise known as the French language police, as well as the American Automobile Association headquarters over the years, but to no avail. The AAA National Office continued to ignore their requests to

receive documents in French and to have native French-speaking inspectors. This lack of flexibility prevents restaurant owners from fully participating in their native language.

After several years with the company I began requesting report forms be made available in French, as many I was working with could not speak/read English, and I was prepared to do the required translation. I was surprised at being repeatedly rejected. I explained to my supervisor that this small gesture would go a long way to lessen the intercultural communication barriers. I was told, however, that AAA was an American company, even though there exists the subsidiary Canadian Automobile Association, (CAA) and if hotels and restaurants expected American guests they would have to speak English. In light of this lack of accommodation, several properties severed their ties with the AAA.

The marketing of services in Canada is bilingual French and English and done under the umbrella of the Canadian Automobile Association, a subsidiary of the AAA, unlike Mexico and the Caribbean who do not have country-specific subsidiaries for the American Automobile Association. Unfortunately for speakers of Spanish in Mexico, the Caribbean, and in the United States, there are no forms in Spanish.

### **Research Problem**

After the conversation with the Egyptian Canadian, I decided a worthy study would be to explore how AAA might better serve its members and how to grow the African American minority membership. In 2014, African Americans comprised 5% of members whereas the white population comprised 87% of the membership. My proposal made its way to the CEO/president's desk, who asked that I instead concentrate on the Mexican American population as they are the fastest growing community in the United

States in addition to being under-represented within the American Automobile Association.

Membership in the American Automobile Association has surpassed 58 million members across the United States and Canada (American Automobile Association, 2017). The average member however, is getting older and membership growth among younger generations, born after 1980, is slowing. As census data reports, the fastest natural growing population in the United States is that of the Hispanic Community (Pew Research Center, 2014). Market analysts at AAA re-enforced the fact that this target population is underserved. In 2015 Hispanics comprised 17.6 % of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) whereas the entire Hispanic Community held only 5 % of AAA membership enrollment in 2014, down from 6 % in 2013 (American Automobile Association, 2015). For the purposes of this study, the term Mexican American will include references to the Latino and Chicano populations having an ethnic heritage from Mexico. The term Hispanic communities, on the other hand, was used in hopes that the term would be inclusive of populations in the United States with ethnic backgrounds from Mexico, Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Central America, and South America. The term Native American was used in hopes that the term would be inclusive to all indigenous peoples whose ancestors pre-date European colonization. Also, the term first generation is used to refer to the first generation born in the United States.

Determining the perception that Mexican Americans have of the American Automobile Association could assist in improving current services as well as methods of marketing targeted to the population with a goal to effectively increase membership enrollment from the community. Aside from cost, the basic assumption was that there has been little or no introduction to the AAA from parents who were often struggling

financially, had language barriers, and may have been in the United States without official documentation. As a result, the target population was not familiar with the numerous benefits and offerings of the AAA. In addition, Hispanics, particularly Mexican Americans, rather than approach outside sources, have consistently been more likely than white Americans to seek help from their own families or communities (Vega 1995) therefore limiting introduction to the AAA within their population.

Due to the fact that there are many different Hispanic communities, it was necessary to focus solely on the Mexican American community for the purposes of this research. In addition, this study will focus on Mexican Americans with a household income equal to or greater than \$40,000, which is the income utilized by the American Automobile Association to portray the lower level of middle-income status.

Following a previous study, (Prévost-Mullane, 2017) middle-class Mexican American members of the American Automobile Association suggested that their perception of the company was one of a dominant white culture. The goal of this research is to determine if middle-class Mexican Americans' perceptions of the American Automobile Association affect membership enrollment in the organization. To that end, several questions have been raised. What are their expectations and cultural norms? What communication strategies might be most effective? What are the cultural indicators that predict or support Mexican American middle-income individuals joining AAA? How might AAA better reach out to serve members of the Mexican American middle-income population? What would AAA need to do to shift Mexican American perception to see more diversity and inclusivity within the association? To increase and better reflect the mosaic of America today, what might an AAA marketing plan geared to

increase membership penetration rates look like to achieve inclusivity and be part of the Mexican American community?

It is in hope that the American Automobile Association will look like all Americans within the company, as well as within their membership, that this study is being conducted. In understanding the Mexican American community, their needs, desires, and expectations regarding membership participation, this study might be adapted for use with other organizations and communities to further increase their own market penetration.

In the next chapter, I review key literature focusing on: (a) social identity, (b) contact hypothesis, (c) collectivism vs. individualism, and (d) marketing and advertising. Chapter 3 outlines survey design, selection of survey questions, research tools used, criteria for participant selection, analysis, and limitations of the study. In chapter 4, findings and analysis are presented, concentrating on: (a) demographics, (b) American Automobile Association membership, (c) perceptions of the American Automobile Association, (d) advertising, and (e) limitations, and provide a summary of findings. Chapter 5 analyzes research results, discusses the need for further research, and provides recommendations to improve membership participation.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

Cultural Anthropologist Hall (1989) explained “Culture is a man’s medium; there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture . . . [including] how people express themselves . . . [and] the way they think” (p. 16). This study considered several theories and concepts that suggest culture-appropriate communication in all forms contributes to a better understanding of the message being given. Identified here are concepts of social identity, contact hypothesis, collectivism and individualism, and marketing as it relates to Mexican Americans and, when relevant, as it relates to Hispanic communities.

### **Social Identity**

Adaptation of initial contact with the Mexican American population is needed for successful connections, according to Aguilar (1972). Aguilar stated that “Cultural values and patterns of behavior—and barriers to assimilation in an alien society . . . should [be considered]” (p. 66). I have examined several publications dealing with the broader concept of social identity with particular emphasis on Mexican Americans, and on a larger scale, Latino/Hispanics. I have reviewed works of Aguilar (1972), Condon (1997), Olmos, Ybarra and Monterrey (1999), Suro (1999, 2006), and Newsweek articles of July 12, 1999 on how “generation Ñ”, as dubbed by this Newsweek edition, is changing America. Little has changed in the past two decades and these works are just as relevant today as they were when written.

In the United States there is the expression “keeping up with the Joneses.” In Mexico, and by extension with Mexican Americans, according to Condon (1997), it is more important to be “keeping up with one’s brother-in-law” (p. 27). He went on to say that while “the dominant values of the [United States] culture favor an institutional response” (p. 27) when help is needed, Mexican Americans would first turn to relatives and close friends.

Today however, young Hispanic 20- and 30-somethings are reinventing their identity, possibly even more so than in 1999 when Newsweek published a special edition, “Latin U.S.A.: How young Hispanics are changing America” when they dubbed young Hispanics “Generation Ñ.” Newsweek stated this new generation

navigate[s] an extraordinarily complex web of relationships: with their elders, with Anglos and with each other, inventing identity in the interstices. “For our parents, being Latino was a negative in this country,” says Nely Galan, 35, president of entertainment at the Spanish-language TV network Telemundo. “For us it’s a plus. We get to be 100% American when we want to be, but we can switch and say, I’m not even American today; I’m totally Latin. I’m going to a Latin club, I’m listening to Latin music, I’m speaking in Spanish. (para. 2)

Suro (1999) commented that Latinos are neither white nor non-white and they cannot be labeled within the white majority or the non-white minority. When asked what makes someone Hispanic or Latin, Suro (2006) stated “my responses start getting fuzzy after self-identification. . . . I answer “yes” for myself when asked, but the more I learn, the less I know for certain about identity” (p. 24). He went on to question what the boundaries are for this group and what binds them together. What does it mean when this self-identification is asserted? Suro continued to say this new, younger generation adapt their two cultures from inside and outside the home to fit their own needs and that research showed their identities as “fairly fluid” (p. 25), just as the photo images in

*Americanos: Latino Life in the United States/La Vida Latina en Los Estados Unidos*, (Olmos, et al. 1999) captures the fluidity and diversity of the Latin population.

Now, according to Korzenny and Korzenny (2005), more than ever, multi-generational Hispanic households are fluid in that while they are becoming more bilingually functional, there remain household members that are unilingual. In order to influence the targeted population marketing needs to be culturally appropriate, however, this simplistic ideal becomes murky when dealing with mono-, bi- and multi-cultural homes and individuals.

### **Contact Hypothesis**

The first outline of the contact hypothesis, presented in 1954 by Allport, claimed that with direct intergroup contact prejudices may be lessened and relations improved under certain ideal circumstances, including equal status and common goals. If the contact is positive, an initial attitude change will occur with the participants and the negative stereotypes will be replaced with more positive perceptions. It was thought that the new positive attitude toward one individual would extend to their group in its entirety.

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found by “Synthesizing effects from 696 samples . . . 94% of the samples in [the] study show[ed] an inverse relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice” (p. 766). However, in their 2005 study, Pettigrew and Tropp found that positive intergroup exchanges were more effective with majority status groups while the “ongoing histories of devaluation would inhibit the degree to which intergroup contact would be associated with positive intergroup attitudes among members of minority status groups, relative to the effects that might be observed among members of majority status groups” (p. 952). Their study found that even in a contact situation designed to have an ideal outcome, members of minority status groups have generally

weaker contact-prejudice relationships. This has not been more prevalent than today when minorities, including Mexican Americans, have been and continue to be bombarded with negative remarks for the last several years from the current president of the United States. His actions, stated Heim (2017), has also emboldened majority white groups and individuals to carry the torch, figuratively and literally, such as in Charlottesville, VA on August 12, 2017.

Pre- and post-election chants during Republican Party rallies included “build the wall,” referring to the current president’s promise to

build a great wall – and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me –and I’ll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words. (Trump, as cited by Kolben, 2016)

Then-presidential candidate Trump sought to cut off contact rather than build positive intergroup exchanges. This public declaration, focused on those of Mexican American heritage, goes deeper than a desire of exclusion, Trump continues with remarks that are disparaging and disturbing:

[when] Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems. They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists and some, I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards and they’re telling us what we’re getting. (Trump, as cited in Kolben, 2016)

Healing within the community and with the rest of the nations cannot begin until such prejudice stops, starting with the highest levels of our country’s administration.

Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, 2006 surmised that intergroup relations are more successful when begun online as text only, slowly increasing contact to include a photo, followed by online video, and finally, in person. They also found that in utilizing Allport’s ideal circumstances of using equal status and common goals in addition to

slowed increased contact, a positive outcome was significantly higher than in other samples. In context of what perceptions might Mexican Americans have of the American Automobile Association, the contact theory could serve as guide to gradually introducing the AAA in print, web advertisement, television and in person.

### **Collectivism vs. Individualism**

A contrast of cultures is provided by addressing collectivism versus individualism. A fundamental character of white American identity is its individualism, according to Martin and Nakayama (2001), whereas Mexican American society “emphasize[s] dependency and interdependency among family members” noting that “it makes more sense to speak of a familial or relational self than the self-creation of one’s personal identity” (p. 71).

Whyte and Holmberg (1956) differentiated between types of individualism. For Latin Americans (referred to in their article as being outside the United States) their personalism, or the individual, is most important. However, this is a different concept to American individualism. Latin Americans, they said, have a “personal relation between patrón and peón. There is almost everywhere a distrust in the large and impersonal corporation because such an organization is regarded as being over and above the individuals who are members and employees of it” (p. 3). In the United States, Whyte and Holmberg noted, a higher value or importance is placed on the status and role of a person, whereas in “Latin America, the . . . prime emphasis is on the individual and their uniqueness” (p. 3). Individualism in the United States, they stated, means “to get ahead in the world, do what [you] want to do . . . [and] that the individual, by his own efforts, can achieve ‘success’ –and therefore should be respected for what he has achieved” (p.

4). Whyte and Holmberg's differentiation still holds true today, over 60 years later, and I believe it extends to Latin Americans living in the U.S.

Ting-Toomey (1999) commented that "Many Mexican Americans . . . prefer to experience life and people around them fully in the present" (p. 62) and being of help to family and friends is an important part of the collectivist way of life (though not the focus of this study, this behavior is also polychronic). Triandis (2015) noted that members of a collectivist society "stay in their groups and prefer these relationships even when the costs of staying in these relationships exceed the advantages of remaining" (p. 206). He continued, saying that this was especially true "when resources are limited, [and] one often depends on group members for assistance," (p. 207) therefore concluding that this factor contributes to increased collectivism.

### **Marketing and Advertising**

As of 2014, the American Automobile Association membership consisted of 87% self-identified whites while the total self-identified Hispanic membership accounted for 5% (American Automobile Association, 2014). In comparison, the U.S. Census Bureau (2014) noted that 77% of the population self-identified as white while 13% self-identified as Hispanic. Cultural norms within the AAA lie with its larger white membership while the Hispanic membership lags behind in relation to the American cultural mosaic. To increase market penetration into the Hispanic community, the communication and advertisement strategy may need to be culturally adapted to reach the targeted population, keeping in mind the collectivist nature of the Mexican American population from that of the individualistic white Americans.

Marketing to the Mexican American population necessitates defining which distinctive identity is being targeted: the Spanish-only speaker, the English-only speaker,

or the bilingual speaker. Strategies to reach each of these segments of population vary. The same product should not be advertised the same way in Spanish and English, as the culture of each language is different. In *Ay, caramba! The intricacies of Hispanic marketing* by Dolliver, (2011) it was noted that according to ratings company Nielsen, Spanish-language advertising is generally more effective than English-language advertising for Hispanics because a deeper personal connection is formed.

In 1995, Wilson and Gutierrez stated that “advertisers are advised to use the language and culture that are familiar with their target audience to give their messages the greatest delivery and impact . . . creating the illusion that the product belongs in the Latino home” (p. 289). Similarly, Korzenny and Korzenny (2005) stated “language carries the cultural power of tradition, loyalty, and emotions of pride, success, and yearnings” (p. 117). However, it is not so simple as translating the words from one language into another. Language, they said, is “not just a filter or an influencer of thinking and experience but a part of being and behaving differently in different cultures” (p. 96). It is the lack of understanding this difference that has contributed to “schizophrenic communication” in the United States. Korzenny and Korzenny noted that “Some of the media welcome the diversity and contribution of Hispanics . . . [however] there are still strong remnants of discrimination, media absence and stereotyping” (p. 113).

As the Hispanic American household and their linguistic identity is changing, Korzenny and Korzenny (2005) stated that members of these often-multi-generational homes are “coexisting and evolving together” (p. 115), but results in the need for multiple, or integrated marketing. Kutchera (2011) reported that Hispanics are “more receptive to online advertising than non-Hispanics” (p. xiv) and estimates that 70% of US

Hispanics are online. This would suggest online advertising to Mexican Americans by the American Automobile Association might have a higher-than-normal viewing rate than to non-Hispanics.

In reviewing the work of Valdes (2002), there is a clear message for marketing to Latinos. Not only did she think we should target advertising to the hearts and minds of American Latinos, she cautioned,

Last but not least, *do not*, I repeat, *do not* skip the face-to-face research phase with the target consumer. At least invest in a couple of focus groups. The research study cost will be a small portion of your budget, but it can save you millions of dollars. (p. 245)

Research findings and conclusions, as well as theories and concepts that have emerged from the initial literature review, have led me to believe that the Mexican American community, as well as the larger Hispanic community, have tended to rely on each other as they look towards members of their own community for their various needs. This familial reliance negates the necessity or urgency of memberships in outgroups, or outside organizations, such as the American Automobile Association.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The intent of my research was to quantitatively explore whether Mexican American perceptions of the American Automobile Association (AAA) affect their membership participation. This study followed a previous qualitative study using purposive sampling and conducted through personal interviews to determine what perception the Mexican American population held of the American Automobile Association (Prévost-Mullane, 2017). The results revealed that many Mexican Americans view the American Automobile Association as a large corporation consisting of mostly white people serving the interests of white people. This view presented unique challenges for the AAA in its quest to increase membership participation rates of Mexican Americans and the Hispanic community in general.

Exploring the causal relationship between the perception of a company and membership participation, requires responses based on opinion. Bailey (1994) stated that “survey studies are studies that ask a sample of respondents questions (often about opinions but commonly about factual matters as well)” (p. 36). This cross-sectional survey complements opinion with facts regarding participants’ knowledge of the American Automobile Association and whether they have seen or heard any, advertising. I determined a survey involving data collection drawn from a well-defined population would best suit the needs of this research.

## Survey Design

Rossmann and Wilson (1985) determined how combined qualitative and quantitative approaches could be used in complimentary, combined or mixed ways, also known respectively as purest, situationalist or pragmatist. Using this approach, Creswell (1995) developed an exploratory design, the instrument development model (Figure 1) identifying the mixed ways, or pragmatist, method I used in this study. The process of qualitative data analysis from my previous study (Prevost-Mullane, 2017) using in-depth interviews was based on data reduction and interpretation to determine a larger, consolidated picture resulting in identifying the perception of AAA by Mexican Americans. Building on my previous study I set out to determine if perceptions of the AAA by Mexican Americans curbed their desire to become members of the association.

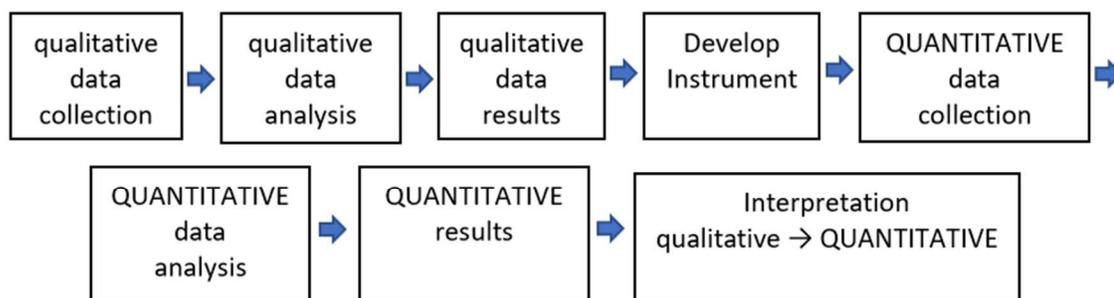


Figure 1. Exploratory design: Instrument development model (Creswell 1995, p. 76)

Having determined that a quantitative mixed method study best addressed the needs of this study to further investigate issues arising from my previous study, I turned to designing the survey. The qualitative results of my previous study informed my subsequent survey in that it provided questions needed, as did survey data from the American Automobile Association, to build the questionnaire.

In keeping with the instrument development model, I needed to resolve “which data to use from the qualitative phase to build the quantitative instrument and how to use these data to generate quantitative measures” (Creswell, 1995, p. 79). The mixing occurred in specifying research questions and sequentially connecting the two data types (Figure 2).

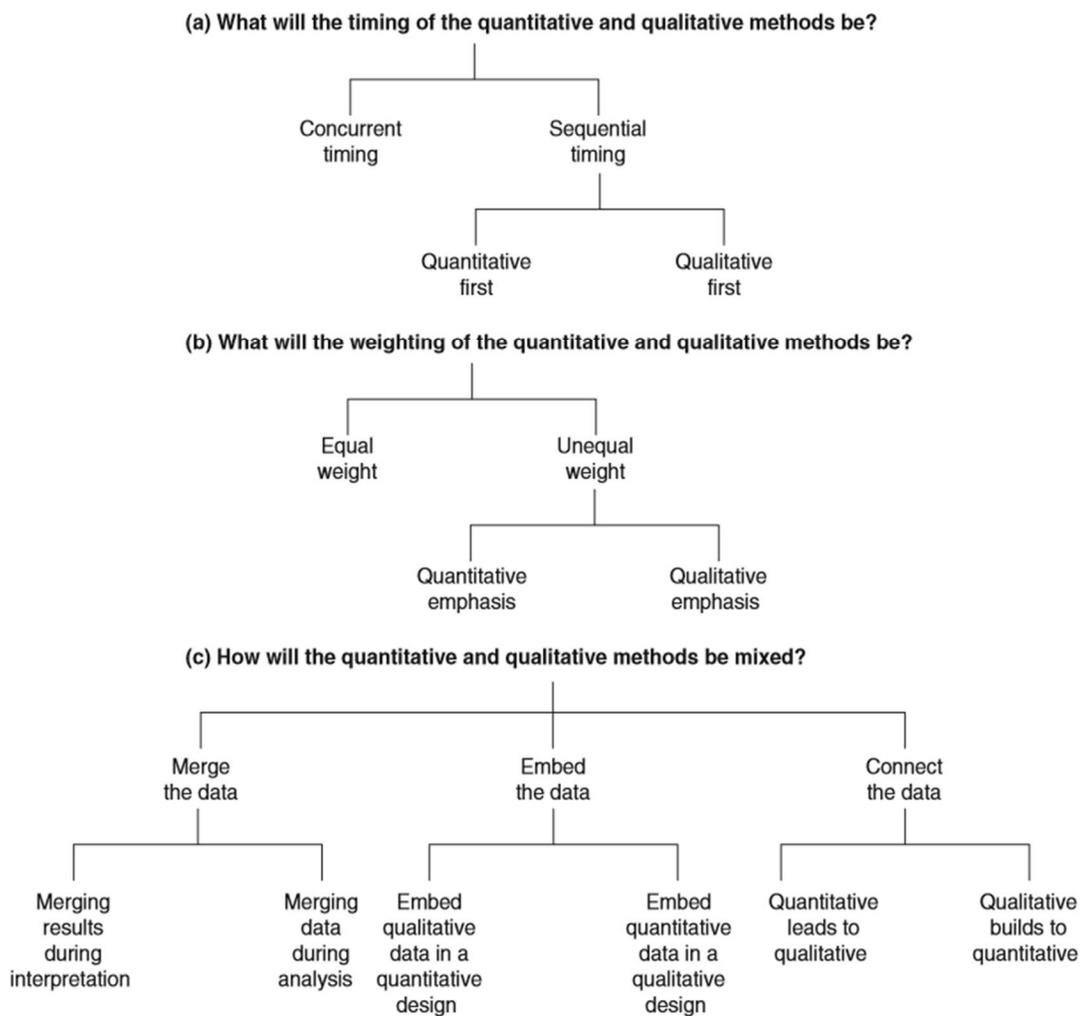


Figure 2. Decision tree for mixed methods design criteria for timing, weighting, and mixing (Creswell, 1995, p. 80)

## Survey Questions

A previous study (Prévost-Mullane, 2017) showed that the Mexican American community held the perception that the American Automobile Association was a dominant white organization catering to the needs of white, non-Hispanic Americans. Using this premise, I developed questions that directly related to perception in order to confirm results of the previous study and to determine whether the perceptions held contributed to the low market penetration rates of Mexican Americans.

To address this issue, I needed to determine whether the target community was aware of AAA advertising, and what experience they had with the organization. The questionnaire (Appendix A) was developed using the results of a previous study of in-depth interviews (Prévost-Mullane, 2017) as well as from a compendium of American Automobile Association survey questions and data from 2012 through 2104. The use of AAA materials, survey questions, and collected data, was justified since this research was specific to this organization in its relationship to the specific ethnic community being studied. The AAA questionnaires were profile studies of membership households and there was every reason to accept their reliability. In addition to the questionnaire, I included an informed consent form (Appendix B) outlining what the purpose of the study was and what the survey participation expectations were.

The survey needed to be short, simple, and easy to navigate. I decided on using a mix of multiple choice, response scale, and open-ended questions to allow the participant to share specifics if they wished to. I began the survey by establishing whether the participant had ever been a member of the American Automobile Association and if so, was their experience a positive, negative, or neutral. If the participant had never been a member of the AAA, I inquired if their perception was positive, negative, or neutral. For

both questions, I requested that the participant describe their experience with the organization. Next was a series of multiple choice questions aimed at determining what they believed to be true of the staff, and for whom the organization was intended. Mid-way I asked if the cultural background of AAA employees would have an impact on membership rates, and why. The following series of questions focused on AAA advertising. If seen or heard, what was the medium and in what language was the advertising? Was the advertising relevant to the Mexican American community? Would more relevant content in Spanish and by visually Hispanic actors/models encourage membership, and if not, what would make it more relevant? The remaining questions were demographic related, which would allow me to determine generational, education attained, household income, and race/ethnicity trends.

The next stage of development was a pretesting process using Mexican American cultural specialists to review the questions for clarity, non-offensive language, understanding, and flow. The initial draft began with demographics, however, it was pointed out that to keep someone's interest in a topic, I should give them the meat of the issue at hand first, so the demographic section was moved to the end of the survey. The questions were then pretested by two Mexican Americans who met the exact criteria of the study and were interested in the topic being studied. There were no changes following the pretest.

### **Research Tool**

I decided SurveyMonkey was the ideal platform to create the questionnaire. Existing templates were easy to adapt to my needs and, more importantly, were user-friendly. I determined it would be best to have each question on a separate page and having the participant click on the 'next' button to move to the next question.

SurveyMonkey also had the advantage of allowing custom reports of data collected in addition to discovering survey trends. Once the questionnaire was designed and inputted into a modified template, a link was automatically created by SurveyMonkey. I was able to control when the survey went live and what the duration would be. I decided on a 3-week timeframe for respondents to participate, from February 2 to 23, 2017, which resulted in 14 eligible participants. The date was further extended to March 23, 2017 to allow for a greater number of respondents, resulting in an additional 9 participants.

### **Participants**

I was intentional in selecting people from the Mexican American community who had a middle-income household economic status of \$50,000 to \$89,999, as defined by the American Automobile Association and justified as AAA recognizes this as being in middle-income status. A notice was sent by the President and CEO, Marshall Doney, of the American Automobile Association National Office in Heathrow, Florida, and to individual clubs within the AAA (Appendix C). In addition, a request for participation was posted on the Facebook page of current and past students in the Master of Arts in Intercultural Relations program at the University of the Pacific. Wanting a snowball sampling for greater dissemination, I requested that all who read the notice share the SurveyMonkey link with 2 or 3 members of their community who might be interested in participating in the study.

Every effort was made to have survey participants meet the exact criteria to conduct a consistent accounting of the Mexican American communities' perception of the American Automobile Association. Anyone who had the time and wished to participate in the survey was encouraged to complete it. As I do not possess fluent Spanish speaking/reading abilities, the survey was only offered in English.

## **Analysis**

A total of 33 surveys were received, of which 12 self-identified as Mexican American: two surveys were received blank and 3 were disqualified for not having answered most of the questions. Having only 7 participants meet the conditions of being from the Mexican American community, I decided to include all survey participants, thus eliminating the requirement of being from a middle-class economic status as well as eliminating the ethnicity of the respondent. The intent was to use the constant comparative method to determine if in answering the questions there were different trends between ethnicity, generations, household income, and education completed of respondents. A further 9 surveys were disqualified for not having answered any demographic questions. Data were analyzed using the survey responses from the remaining 19 individuals and augmented with data collected from my previous study (Prévost-Mullane, 2017) as well as American Automobile Association (2014) member survey data collected in 2012 to 2014.

To begin, I disaggregated data using open coding followed by categorizing that data. A graph of each separate demographical answer by respondents, numbered R1 to R19 was created using the research tool SurveyMonkey. Generational information, language ability, household income, education, and cultural perceptions of AAA by creating open-ended questions were organized by key words and phrases, and subsequently grouped into themes and categories. During open coding, data collected were divided into segments, disaggregated data for each response, scrutinized and grouped for commonalities that could reflect categories or themes. I then proceeded to link the disaggregated data with AAA membership participation using the constant comparative method.

## Limitations

I recognized that respondents may have been less than completely open or were restrained in their answers due to the personal nature of some questions and the fact that the researcher was not part of the community's culture. Since the survey was only available in English, this may have contributed to the low response rate. It became necessary to remove the household income range of \$50,000 to \$90,000 in order to reach an adequate number of valid participants at the higher and lower thresholds of yearly household income. In addition, as I was using the constant comparative method in my analysis, I realized some previous studies included household income ranges that were slightly different than in this study. Previous ranges were: less than \$40,000, \$40,000 to \$59,999, \$60,000 to \$99,999, \$100,000 to \$149,999, and greater than \$150,000. The change, however, was justified as I was requested by the marketing director at AAA to use the preferred *sweet spot* amount of \$50,000 as a base amount because it was more in line with the desired household income ranges of the American Automobile Association.

In chapter 4, findings and data analysis are presented, concentrating on: (a) demographics, (b) American Automobile Association membership, (c) perceptions of the American Automobile Association, (d) advertising, (e) limitations, and (f) a summary of findings.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Data Analysis

Following completion of the survey questionnaires, data were coded into categories, analyzed, and cross-referenced looking for themes, interpretations, and patterns. This allowed for the observation of data that were provided by specific population groups in relation to age/generation, household income, education, race/ethnicity, and state of permanent residence. The observations also considered what was missing, which in and of itself has helped in determining what I would change and do differently should this study be replicated.

### **Demographics**

Due to the sensitive nature of financial inquiries, 21% of survey respondents did not reply to the request of providing the range of their yearly household income. When relevant, I did not allow for unanswered household income questions in calculating averages. Eleven percent of the respondents did not meet the \$50,000 threshold of middle-class income as used by the American Automobile Association. Those not meeting the \$50,000 threshold all identified as Native American and were over the age of 55. The household income of \$50,000 is known in the AAA marketing division as the financial *sweet spot* that delineates the lowest yearly income for households more apt to have newer vehicles, thus requiring fewer emergency roadside assistance. In addition, households earning \$50,000 or more per year are more likely to have disposable income to utilize for travel and other services the company provides. Eighty-three percent of self-identified Hispanics/Latinos responded to the request of household income, while

17% did not. Of those that provided a response, 80% had a household income between \$50,000 to \$69,999. The remaining 20% of self-identified Hispanic/Latinos also identified as white, and their household income increased to the \$70,000 to \$89,999 range.

Participants mono-ethnically identifying as Hispanic/Latino averaged \$60,000 in annual household income, half that of participants self-identifying as mono-ethnically white, at \$120,000. Hispanics/Latinos who also identified as white averaged \$80,000. I assumed the median of each economic range except those over \$150,000 where I was unable to calculate a median due to it not having an upper value. For this group I erred on the side of caution and used the lowest household income of \$150,000 in calculations. Income for the white population increased with having achieved higher levels of education, whereas within the mono-ethnic Hispanic/Latino population, there was no change to their financial status regardless of their achieving higher levels of education.

Age groups were organized in 6 groupings: 34 and under, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64, 65 to 74, and 75 and over. Seventeen percent of respondents were in the youngest group, all of whom were white/Caucasian with either a master's degree or a terminal degree and averaging \$100,000 per household per year. The next group was composed of 35 to 44-year-olds and they represented 6% of respondents and were white, college graduates earning an annual household income of over \$150,000. The third and largest generational grouping, 45 to 54-year-olds, represented 33% of respondents who averaged \$110,000 yearly household incomes. Within this group, one-third graduated college and two thirds earned a master's degree. In this age range, 50% were white/Caucasian and 17% each were African American and white, Hispanic and white, or mono-Hispanic/Latino.

The 55 to 64 age group represented 22% of respondents and their education ranged from completing high school to completing a terminal degree. With an average yearly household income of \$58,000, the ethnic/racial background of respondents included 60% Hispanic/Latino, 30% white, and 30% white and Native American. For the age group 65 to 74, representing 17% of respondents, there were 50% Native American and 50% multi-racial white, black, and Hispanic. There was not sufficient data to determine an average household income due to lack of financial responses for this age group. The education of this group was divided equally with half having completed some college and half having completed a master's degree. The eldest category, representing 6% of respondents, included those aged 75 and over. This group consisted of mono-ethnic white/Caucasians with some college completed. The question regarding household income for those 75 years and over was not answered.

Survey participants were well educated with 78% completing college or higher. Of these, 28% completed college, 39% earned a master's degree and 11% a terminal degree. The remaining participants included 6% having completed high school, and 17% having completed some college. Connecting education with race/ethnicity (Table 1), 50% of those self-identifying as mono-ethnically Hispanic/Latino completed high school or some college, while 11% of those identifying as mono-ethnic white/Caucasian had some college education. The other 50% self-identifying mono-ethnic Hispanic/Latinos completed a master's degree or a terminal degree. In contrast, 22% self-identifying as white completed college while the remaining 67% had completed a master's degree or a terminal degree. Bi- or multi-racial individuals that included white in their self-identification all completed college with 25% completed advanced degrees.

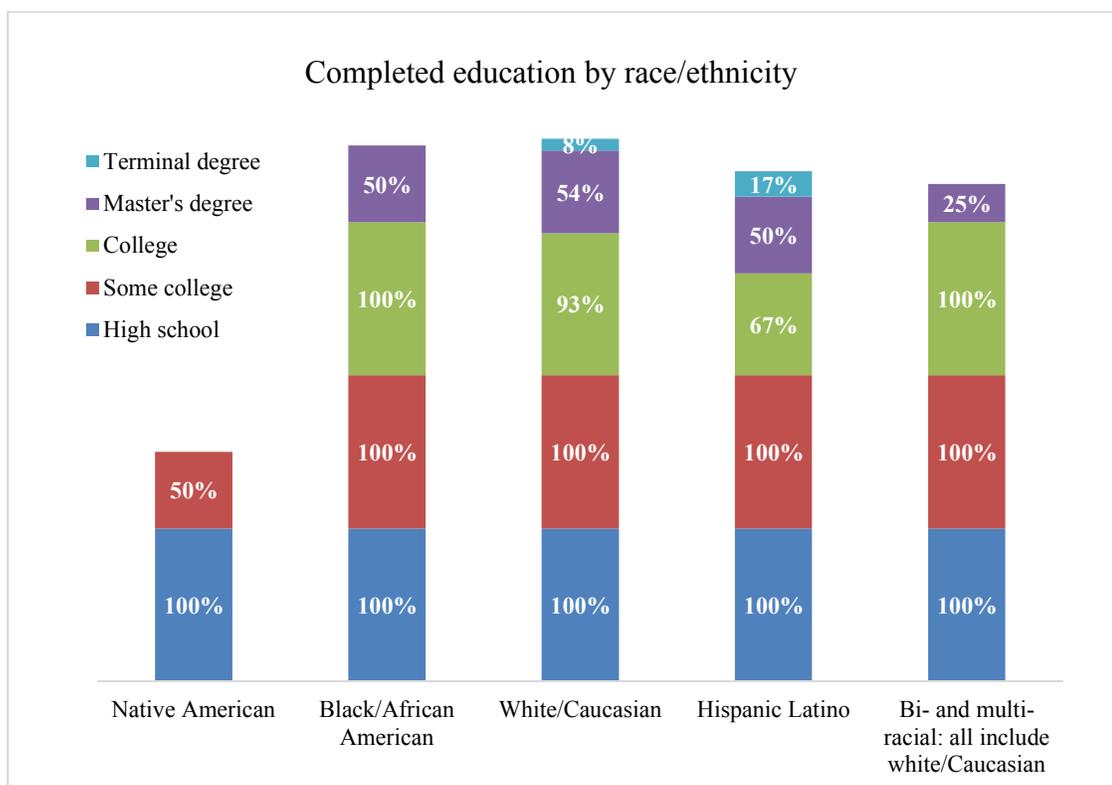


Figure 3: Completed education by race/ethnicity

### **American Automobile Association membership**

Eighty-nine percent of respondents were or had been members of the American Automobile Association and 11% had not. Of the 11% not having held an AAA membership, all self-identified as Hispanic/Latino in the 55-64 age group, had a household income of \$50,000-\$69,999, and lived in Arizona. In addition, of those who had never been members of the AAA, 50% completed high school and 50% had completed some college work but did not graduate.

In comparison, of the 89% who had been members of the AAA, 11% self-identified as mono-ethnically Hispanic/Latino, and a further 11% as multi-racial that included white/Caucasian and/or black/African American. All who listed Hispanic/Latino as part of their ethnicity/race were college graduates: 25% completed

college, 50% held a master's degree, and 25% held a terminal degree. The remaining individuals were 45 to 64 years of age with 75% having a household income of \$50,000 to \$69,999 and 25% with a household income of \$70,000 to \$89,999. The higher incomes derived from those who included white in their ethnic/racial makeup in addition to identifying as Hispanic/Latino, representing one-third of Hispanic/Latino participants.

Seventy-one percent of white/Caucasian participants, who were or had previously been members of the American Automobile Association, had household incomes greater than \$70,000. The remaining mono-ethnic white participants earned from \$50,000 to \$69,999 in annual household income with 50% having completed some college education and 50% holding terminal degrees. The lower income participants self-identified as mono-ethnic white/Caucasian with terminal degrees were under the age of 35 and those having completed some college education were between the ages of 55 and 64.

### **Perceptions of the American Automobile Association**

When asked about their experiences with AAA, 82% of respondents said their experience was positive while the remaining 18% were neutral. The trends to this question, rather than by any demographic, were related to services provided by the American Automobile Association: positive experiences for those that had used services and neutral for those members that had never needed or used offered services. All participants that had never held membership in the AAA were neutral in answering this question, stating that they believed it was a good organization and that it was helpful if you were in an accident and needed a tow, or if your battery died.

Addressing the perception of what the cultural background of American Automobile Association staff, 53% of participants responded they did not feel qualified to answer this question as they had either never communicated with the company or had

only interacted with the AAA by phone or online. Of the remaining 47%, 22% believed there was an equal mixture of staff from various cultural backgrounds: they were between the ages of 55 and 74, had less than \$70,000 in household income, either had some college or graduated college, and were white or Native American. The remaining 78% who indicated their belief that staff were predominantly from Caucasian cultural backgrounds were from all age groups, had household incomes upward of \$50,000, had education from high school graduate to holding a master's degree, and were from all ethnic backgrounds except Native American. One participant noted that most, if not all, staff were women.

In responding to the target audience of the American Automobile Association, 54% listed membership was geared to all Americans regardless of income, and 47% believed the AAA was for middle-to high income Americans. However, 80% of Hispanic/Latino members reported AAA was for all Americans regardless of income contrasting with 20% reporting AAA was for middle-to high income Americans. Twice the number of white/Caucasians not identifying with other ethnicities believed the American Automobile Association was more for middle-to high income Americans rather than all Americans. Seventy-five percent of bi- or multi-racial individuals that included white in their race/ethnicity believed AAA was for all Americans and 25% thought membership was more for middle-to high income Americans. When asked if the American Automobile Association was for Native Americans, white/Caucasians, black/African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, other minority Americans, or all Americans regardless of race/ethnicity, every participant responded that the American Automobile Association was for all Americans.

Eighty-four percent of participants responded to the question: does the cultural background of employees have an impact on the effectiveness of membership rates of the American Automobile Association? Of that group, 44% believed the cultural background of employees did have an impact. Sixty-six percent of self-identified Hispanic/Latinos believed this as well, stating, “people like to be served by those from their own culture, it helps them feel a sense of belonging.” Other comments included that customers like to see a reflection of themselves: it would be important for potential customers to see themselves in the employees; and minorities would “feel more welcome if staff could speak languages other than English and look like me.” Thirty-three percent of Hispanic/Latino participants commented it would not matter what the cultural background of AAA employees were because everything is done online, so “why would it matter.”

### **Advertising**

Over half of the participants, 56%, have seen advertisements for the American Automobile Association. Forty percent of participants listed seeing television infomercials and mailing advertisements by the AAA, 20% recalled seeing stickers on vehicles and advertising on AAA vehicles, and 20% recalled seeing a billboard. One participant commented on seeing television infomercials on Sunday mornings that explained all the membership benefits offered by the American Automobile Association. Only 17% of self-identified Hispanics had seen advertising, all on television only. There was no clear trend from populations with other ethnic/racial identities on whether they had seen any advertisements or not. This remained true for different education levels and household income as well.

Participants overwhelmingly received most of their advertising by Internet, 83% (Figure 4). Other ways participants encountered advertisements were 44% by radio, 39% by television, 33% through magazine advertisements, 28% in newspapers, and 11% by signs on public transportation. The self-identified Hispanic/Latino participants also had 83% receiving advertisements on the Internet followed by the television and radio both at 67%, and 17% seeing advertising in magazines.

In identifying what language participants tend to see or hear advertising, 82% of respondents replied that they tend to see or hear advertising predominantly in English. The remaining 18% indicated they mainly saw or heard advertising in both English and Spanish. Forty percent of self-identified Hispanic/Latinos responded they saw or heard advertising in both English and Spanish, leaving 60% of self-identified Hispanic/Latinos seeing and hearing advertising mostly in English.

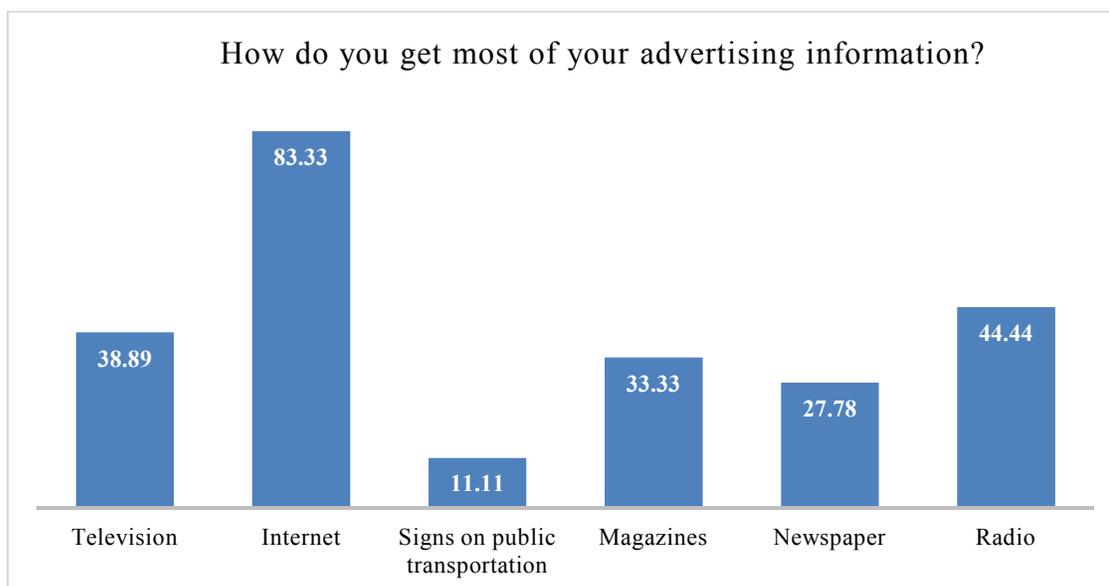


Figure 4: How do you get most of your advertising information?

Using a Likert scale with 1 being not relevant and 5 being most relevant, respondents were more apt to believe that advertising as it relates to the Mexican American community was divided between not relevant or neutral. The weighted average for all respondents was 2.74, with 36% believing it was not relevant, 7% not very relevant, 36% neutral, 7% a little relevant and 14% most relevant. The Hispanic/Latino population believed it was even less relevant with a value of 1.8 on a scale of 1 to 5. All Native Americans believed advertising was most relevant as it relates to the Mexican American community. Sixty-seven percent of Hispanic/Latinos believed AAA advertising was not relevant to Mexican Americans while 33% indicated it was neutral. Without exception, all participants indicated more advertising as it relates to Mexican Americans would encourage membership participation.

To further explore how the American Automobile Association can make advertisements more relevant to Mexican Americans, survey participants were asked how this might be achieved. Forty-four percent of respondents believed advertising in Spanish would be more relevant while 56% believed it would be more relevant for advertisements to be in both Spanish and English. Having advertisements in a location that was in a visually Hispanic environment was found to be more relevant to Mexican Americans by 44% of respondents. The largest percentage of relevance to Mexican Americans, 63%, was that actors/models should be visually of Hispanic ethnicity. One participant did not select any pre-defined answer, instead, commented that they did not know which would be best but “all four couldn’t hurt.” In addition to the pre-defined answers, there were three constructive comments that highlighted steps the AAA might take to expand membership within the Mexican American community. Two highlighted the need for personal contact by staff at the American Automobile Association; one went

further in suggesting the AAA “come to our community days, church bazaar, or wherever else we gather.” The third comment highlighted the nature of many Mexican American families. They “do their own car maintenance. I think [AAA] should emphasize the family benefits over the car services.”

In breaking down by generational demographics, those 55 to 64 years of age were more likely to respond, as they all did, to the question of how to make advertising more relevant to Mexican Americans. All believed offering advertising in Spanish and English as well as having a visually Hispanic actor/model would have more impact. Sixty percent believed having the location in a visually Hispanic environment would be important, and 40% thought advertising in Spanish would be more relevant as it relates to Mexican Americans. There were no other age groups that favored any question so completely. This trend was very similar when applied to household income. Participants who earned between \$50,000 and \$69,999 all answered this question with identical results of the generational respondents. Education accomplishments of being a college graduate also followed this same pattern with one participant declining to answer.

In looking at race and ethnicity in relation to what would make advertising more relevant to Mexican Americans, Hispanic/Latinos believed, at a greater percentage rate than whites/Caucasians, in all but one category: advertising in both Spanish and English (Figure 5). Those responding that advertising would be more relevant to Mexican Americans if it were offered in Spanish and English, were 88% white and 22% Hispanic. Twice as many Hispanic/Latinos believed advertising in Spanish would be more relevant to Mexican Americans than advertising in English and Spanish. One hundred percent of Hispanic/Latino survey participants believed using actors/models that are visually of

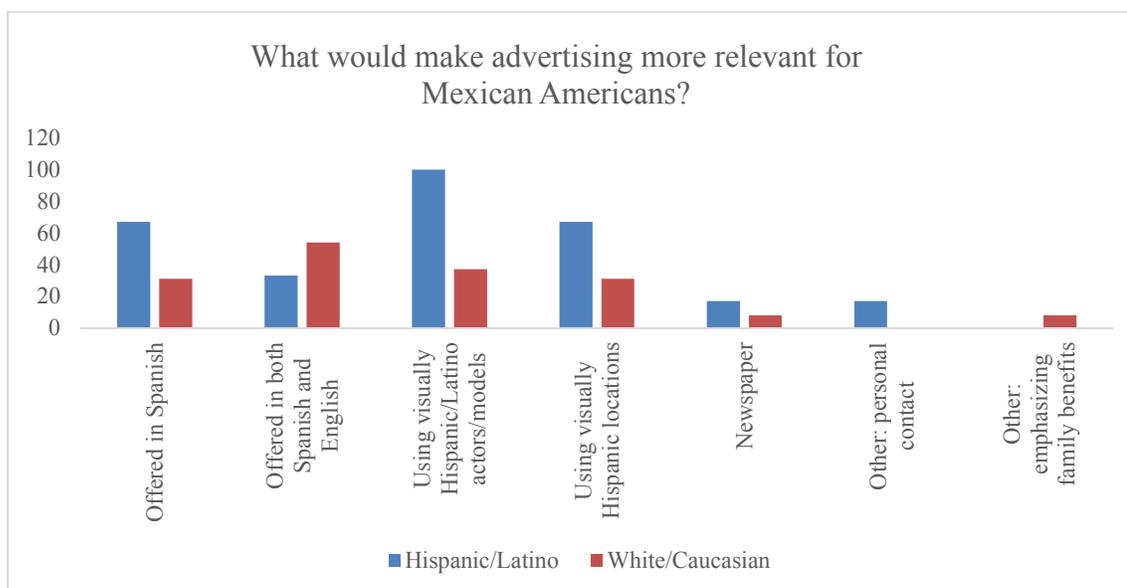


Figure 5: What would make advertising more relevant for Mexican Americans?

Hispanic race/ethnicity would be more relevant for Mexican Americans whereas only 16% of other race/ethnic participants believed this.

### Limitations

There were concerns some participants would not answer more personal demographics and 21% did not answer the question regarding their household financial situation. This percentage seemed high; however, I do not believe it affected the outcome as this study focused on exploring the perception of the American Automobile Association by Mexican Americans and while the financial situation may be helpful in determining perceptions from participants of a certain demographic, perceptions may have been formed when the participant was in a different household income category.

When designing the survey, I consulted the AAA marketing team and it was suggested I use the *sweet spot* of \$50,000 as my lower baseline household income. I capitulated and designed my survey beginning at < \$50,000 and followed with the first

AAA *sweet spot* range of, \$50,000 to \$69,999. The ranges were continued in groupings until we reached the > \$149,999 household income. Following the instructions of the head of Market and Research at the American Automobile Association, I failed to independently determine what income ranges were being used by the American Automobile Association member surveys and by the U.S. Census; both used the lower < \$40,000 rather than the < \$50,000, and the income ranges were therefore not identical to that used by this study, instead rather, in a step ahead, and meeting at the highest income range of > \$150,000. In addition, when considering household income in combination with other demographics, I did not consider whether the participant shared a household with a financially contributing adult.

If there was an opportunity to further this particular study once more, and a prospective participant did not self-identify as Hispanic/Latino, I would automatically disqualify the responses and not allow the continuation of the survey, responding instead with *thank you for your time, however the number of participants matching your demographics have already been met*. On the other hand, having a survey that is inclusive of all racial/ethnic identification has allowed me to compare how different or similar answers are between different populations. Also, if all demographics are missing from a survey, it should be automatically disqualified within established parameters on SurveyMonkey.

The support of the President of American Automobile Association and the marketing team at the national office was integral in conducting this study. I had originally planned on studying a different racial/ethnic group, one that I was well acquainted with, however I was asked by the president to take on the Hispanic/Latino population, even though I was not familiar with the community. I was requested to work

with the marketing team who would help by providing data and assistance where possible. I assumed they would be more helpful in contacting individual clubs across the country. A notice was sent out (Appendix C), however there was no indication that my research was in fact supported by the AAA and my follow-ups went unanswered. Instead, the email stated that I was an inspector of region 2 (Quebec, northern Ontario, northeastern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Grenada, and Trinidad and Tobago) working independently on research for graduate studies. When I contacted individual clubs, the responses were non-committal and I have doubts as to whether Hispanic/Latino members were notified. I asked to have a notice published on individual club websites for a period of 2 weeks, however no club would allow this. Should I embark on future research of this type, I would travel to various clubs and spend time in their offices to have personal contact with staff as well as with clients visiting the office, whether they were members or not.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I have presented data collected from an open survey. The process has been, to some extent, more revealing than the results of the survey data itself. The results have given me not only a road map to perceptions held of the American Automobile Association, but also how best to reach Mexican Americans in an advertising campaign. This is particularly useful because the makeup of the Mexican American home can carry three distinct identities in the one home: mono-English speaker, mono-Spanish speaker, and a fluent bilingual speaker who can be a chameleon in any of the three identities.

In the next chapter, I further analyze the research findings in relation to literature discussed in chapter 2 and discuss what expected and unexpected results have surfaced

and how that information may be used to better understand the target population. I will discuss in more detail limitations of the study and what I would do differently in a future study in addition to what I would replicate. The emerging findings will be used to make recommendations to corporations that are currently perceived as similar in makeup to the American Automobile Association, that is a company run by white people for white people.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

To better understand what the needs of the Mexican American community are in relation to services offered by the American Automobile Association we must first understand the people who make up the community and determine what their perception of the AAA as a company is. This, however, is not a task without challenges. The Mexican American population includes Spanish-speaking individuals with cultural values that are similar to Mexicans: focused on family, religiously Roman Catholic, and have brown hair, brown eyes, and brown skin. While this statement may be true of some, it is a sweeping generalization to assume the identity of any population, especially if that company is targeting the Mexican American community for marketing purposes.

The identity of Mexican Americans is complex, even in something as basic as their physical appearance. Suro (1999) articulates that Latinos are neither white nor non-white and cannot be labeled within the white majority or the non-white minority. This becomes important when using actors/models to portray Mexican Americans in various advertising campaigns. All Mexican Americans in this study believed it was important that models/actors be visually of Hispanic ethnicity. In contrast, only 16% of other race/ethnic participants believed this would be relevant. However, who does the community believe represents them visually? The 2010 U.S. Census (2011) reported 52.8% of Mexican Americans self-identified as white while 39.5% listed two or more races. A future study might explore, within the Mexican American population, what a visual representation would look like.

Identifying as Mexican American does not necessarily mean being able to speak Spanish. The U.S. Census (2016) estimates 72.9% of Hispanic/Latinos over the age of 5 spoke Spanish in 2015. Now, more than ever, there are multi-generational households and while they are increasingly becoming bilingually functional, Korzenny and Korzenny (2005) state that there remain unilingual household members. These households are coexisting and evolving together, often with unilingual Spanish speakers, unilingual English speakers, and bilingual speakers all living under one roof. This complicates the notion of a singular advertising campaign. In addition, there are many linguistic nuances that exist within every culture. Research on a much larger scale than this current study would be necessary to determine those nuanced differences and whether or not there would be a need for regional advertising or if a single campaign could be executed with inclusivity.

Today, a new generation of Mexican Americans have not only embraced their heritage, they have also reinvented themselves. They have the option to be American, Mexican American (Latino/Hispanic), or any blend of these identities along with others as they see fit. In other words, members of the new Latin generation, dubbed Ñ by Newsweek (1999), have become expert at code switching. They are neither solely American nor Hispanic, yet they are both: a blend of identities that can be utilized in any configuration at any time, creating their own social construct. I myself (Prévost-Mullane, 2017) have experienced, and continue to experience, being such a blend and am able to be whomever I choose based on the current situation. I am French Canadian with my family and friends who are French, whenever I interact with other native French Canadian speakers, and when I travel to the Province of Quebec, regardless of what language is spoken. I am English Canadian with my friends who are native English

speakers. Those of us who have been raised bilingually and consider ourselves as having two native languages and have navigated the cultural line between the two worlds have created our own social identity. We get to pick and choose who we want to be, and we have a gift for creating, and understanding, our own special blend of the English and French Canadian cultures and languages, otherwise known as “Franglais.”

My identity is fluid, as is that of the new generation of Mexican Americans. Suro (2006) articulates that a new, younger generation has adapted their two cultures of being Hispanic/Latino and American to fit their own needs and that their identities are “fairly fluid” (p. 25). Similarly, Olmos, Ybarra, and Monterrey (1999) capture the fluidity and diversity of the Latin population in photographic images in their publication *Americanos: Latino Life in the United States/La Vida Latina en Los Estados Unidos*.

Historically, many new immigrants immersed themselves in their new country and stepped away from not only their culture, but their language as well. This led to first generation Mexican Americans (those born in the U.S.) not learning Spanish or where they come from, culturally speaking. Second and third generation Mexican Americans are reconnecting with their roots and are redefining their social identity, however, it is not one identity that they are discovering and claiming. It is three: Mexican American, American, and their own unique blend of the two. This creates a challenge for the AAA and other businesses. In seeking what the Mexican American perception of the American Automobile Association is, it remains unclear if the participants are immigrants, first generation, or subsequent generations. This would affect how the identity of a participant regarding language ability and social construct is viewed. Future study of perception would be advisable and the AAA, or other similar organizations, would need to identify

which combination of language and social identity would best attract Mexican Americans to become members of the American Automobile Association.

To further confound the issue, does the American Automobile Association market to households or to individuals? Many Mexican American homes are multi-generational and have bilingual, mono-English, and mono-Spanish members of the family. Who does AAA target for membership purposes? Memberships are based on a primary holder and those living in the same household as the primary member can become associate members (American Automobile Association, 2018).

This study revealed 88% of participants believed it would be more relevant to Mexican Americans for advertising to be in Spanish and English, however, only 22% of Mexican Americans believed this. At 67%, Mexican Americans indicated that advertising in Spanish would be more relevant whereas 22% of white/Caucasians believed this relevance to be more important. The responses obtained in this study highlight a very real difference between the perceptions of the two populations. A major takeaway from a previous study of interviews with Mexican American members of the AAA (Prévost-Mullane, 2017) came to the inference that Mexican Americans perceived the American Automobile Association to be a corporation of white people and for white people. Given that conclusion, it is not surprising that a different belief exists in how best to address the low membership rates of Mexican Americans. The AAA, and other corporations that have low Hispanic/Latino participation, need to target advertising to the hearts and minds of American Latinos (Valdes, 2002). However, to do this, Valdes emphasizes that there needs to be a “face-to-face research phase with the target consumer. At least invest in a couple of focus groups” (p. 245) as it is an inexpensive way to know what Mexican Americans would respond to in a positive way and in the

long run, “can save you millions of dollars” (p. 245). This phase should never be skipped.

Determining how the AAA is viewed by the Mexican American population is a starting point in addressing the issue of low membership penetration rates into the Hispanic community. In reviewing the core beliefs of the American Automobile Association (Appendix D) and the 2018 Association Strategic Plan, (Appendix E) there is a single reference to equality in employment opportunities. There lacks a mention of diversity or inclusivity in all four Basic Beliefs: Commitment to AAA Members, Commitment to the Association, Commitment to AAA Employees, and Commitment to Community and Country. There is no mention of reaching out to minority communities to grow membership with a view to creating members for life. The association aims to be receptive to differing points of view and respecting individual dignity towards employees, however, as illustrated earlier, the sole minority and person of color, an African American woman, was denied her individual dignity. Also previously illustrated, my differing points of view and that of French Canadian clients requesting French-speaking inspectors and documentation in French were dismissed as not meeting “the flexibility required to respond to local conditions” as noted in the AAA Basic Beliefs. This dismissal of responding to local conditions also extends not only to Mexico and French and Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean, but also to all Francophone and Hispanic/Latino members who request to be served in their official and/or native language. This exclusion, contrary to the AAA Basic Beliefs, may be a key factor in why membership rates are low among Mexican Americans as well as the Hispanic/Latino community as a whole.

Other factors to consider for low membership rates include age, household income, education, and social constructs. The average age of an AAA primary member (AAA, 2014) is increasing, with 59% being over the age of 55 while only 41% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2014) is over the age of 55 (Figure 6). The largest gap

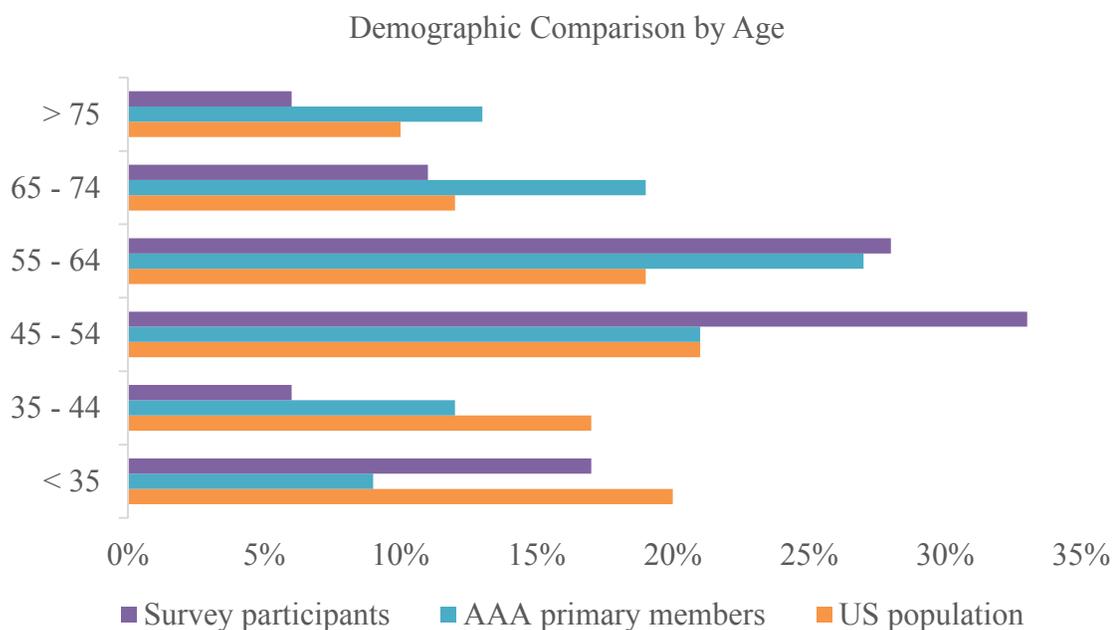


Figure 6: Demographic Comparison by age

between the AAA and the U.S. population lies in those under 45 years of age where there is a 16% difference. Markedly concerning for the AAA is that while there is a 5% difference in the 35-44 age range, that difference increases to 11% for those under 35 years of age. As the population ages, there will be fewer drivers in the older age groups and those members are being replaced by younger generations at a slower rate. To address this issue, the AAA would need to target millennials, those born between 1981 and 1997. Kutchera (2011) states

if marketers want to reach millennial kids, both Latinos and non-Latinos, they need to develop content—games, videos, articles, tools, and helpful

information—and distribute it on platforms like YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, websites, and mobile applications. Just as importantly, the need to market to the Spanish-speaking and bilingual Hispanic community online. Truly helpful, interesting, funny, and informative content can attract the right audiences and the best place to do that is on the Internet and on mobile phones. (p. xiii)

Less of a concern for the American Automobile Association marketing team is the issue of household income. Seventy-seven percent of AAA members earn \$40,000 per year or more in yearly household income. With the ideal having been determined at \$50,000 or greater, the association is successful in attracting members meeting and surpassing this yearly household income.

The final demographic category addressed in this study, education, shows that primary members of the American Automobile Association have a higher level of education than that of the U.S. population (Table 1). Fifty-four percent of members have

Table 1.

*Demographic comparison of survey participants, AAA members and the U.S. population*

Education	U.S. population <sup>1</sup>	AAA <sup>2</sup>	Survey participants
Not high school graduate	10.9%	2%	0%
High school graduate	26.0%	14%	6%
Some college	26.7	30%	17%
College graduate	21.3	54%	28%
Master's degree	9.5	N/A	39%
Terminal degree	3.4	N/A	11%

<sup>1</sup>Source: U.S. Census, 2014

<sup>2</sup> Source: Automobile Association, 2014

earned a college degree or more (AAA, 2014) and according to the U.S. Census (2014) 34.2% of the U.S. population have graduated college. The participants of this survey

were well educated with 78% having earned a college degree or greater. In this regard, they are more similar to current AAA primary membership holders than the general U.S. population and demonstrate a potential for increasing membership participation in targeting those underserved populations.

Traditionally “many Mexican Americans . . . prefer to experience life and people around them fully in the present” notes Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 62). Embracing contemporary life and being of help to family and friends is an important part of the Mexican American collectivist way of life. Similarly, when a need for goods or services arises, collectivists first look to family and friends and being present- and family-orientated would impede the desire to plan for future services, be it roadside assistance, travel, or life insurance. They may not acknowledge or recognize the need for the planning of future services.

In a 2002 survey, Hispanics were asked about fatalism, which is a sense of not being in control of one’s own destiny (Suro, 2006). For those “who [spoke] only Spanish, 59 percent agreed . . . ‘it doesn’t do any good to plan for the future because you don’t have any control over it’” (p. 26). This number dropped to 24 percent for Hispanics who only speak English and 17 percent for non-Hispanics. Addressing this concern by highlighting services that serve to benefit families and protect their future is vital in attracting this community to the American Automobile Association. The welfare of families is inherent to the Hispanic/Latino community and face-to-face meetings and/or focus groups play an essential part in guiding the AAA in determining the needs and desires of the community. Fifty-seven and a half million was “the Hispanic population of the United States as of July 1, 2016, making people of Hispanic origin the nation’s largest ethnic or racial minority. Hispanics constituted 17.8 percent of the nation’s total

population” (U.S. Census, 2016). In 2017, Hispanic/Latino membership in the AAA represented 5% (American Automobile Association, 2014) allowing for a substantial growth potential.

Further study from focus groups would direct the AAA, and similar companies, to create a targeted marketing campaign to the Mexican American population. This study indicates that the most effective advertising medium would be the Internet as members of the Mexican American community currently receive 83% of their advertising on the World Wide Web. This is a sharp contrast to the 17% of self-identified Mexican Americans who have seen any advertising for the American Automobile Association, all of which was seen on television. Sixty-seven percent of Hispanic/Latinos received advertising by radio and television. In the current political climate, advertising must now, more than ever, be sensitive to Hispanic/Latino perceptions.

Even though there is effort by some media to be inclusive and diverse, this type of targeted prejudice not only maintains the history of devaluation, but also marginalizes the population further. This is conceivably affecting their perception of companies that are perceived as being for, and run by, white Americans. It is for this reason that Korzenny and Korzenny (2005) called communication with Hispanics in the United States schizophrenic. Many white Americans have been emboldened by the current president’s remarks regarding Mexican Americans that are hateful and filled with prejudice, and rather than work to build positive intergroup exchanges, the effect of the words essentially seek to disparage and cut off contact.

The Mexican American community, now more than ever, need to see and hear that there are companies that will go the extra mile, be inclusive and express their desire to help Mexican American families plan for their future and plan for unplanned events.

This study also shows that 67% of Mexican American survey participants believe that using actors and models that look like them in advertising is critical. They also believe that personal contact would increase the likelihood of obtaining membership in the AAA. The perception of being represented, accepted, and included is key.

Perception is a powerful tool. It can be used to sway thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. It can be positive, negative, or simply neutral. In a previous study, I interviewed Mexican Americans who were members of the American Automobile Association (Prévost-Mullane, 2017). It was surprising that there was little emotion attached regarding these memberships because each had been using AAA benefits between 17 and 38 years and, even then, the two individuals with memberships less than 20 years were both second generation members. The most emotion I observed was when the interviewees were detailing how they were rescued by AAA emergency roadside assistance.

This study revealed much the same thing. Although 80% of survey participants replied they had a positive experience, each response was followed by an emergency roadside assistance comment. “It gives me peace of mind” is a common response, along with “I pay each year and forget about it until the bill comes the following year.” The remaining participants rated their experience or perception as neutral. There is no *feeling* toward the company. As Valdes (2002) noted, marketing to the Hispanic/Latino community needs to be targeted to their hearts and minds. The perception of the AAA needs to change, needs to convey a *feeling*. They live their lives with passion. That *feeling*, for Mexican Americans, is their life, their family.

## Recommendations

Based on this study, I conclude with recommendations for the American Automobile Association and similar organizations. These fall into two categories: the first is to focus on the target population, Mexican Americans, and the second is directed at the diversity and inclusivity within the organization.

1. Know your audience. Further study is needed on a much larger scale than this research and it is necessary to have face-to-face meetings and/or focus groups.

Determine:

- a. what language would best reach the Mexican American population:  
Spanish, English, or bilingual
  - b. what actors and models would visually look like to best represent Mexican Americans
2. Being a socially familial community, it is highly beneficial to take part in multiple community activities
  3. Talk about the importance of planning for the future of their family
  4. Target millennials using the internet and mobile apps
  5. Include diversity and inclusivity in the AAA Basic Beliefs and Strategic Plan by:
    - a. honoring intent to be receptive to differing points of view
    - b. working with employees when they feel their individual dignity is being disrespected
    - c. honoring intent for flexibility required in responding to local conditions

Do not forget the passion with which lives are lived. To re-focus inclusive endeavors, a personal connection will help you reach out and engage the Latin/Hispanic population. I write this in hopes the findings of this study are helpful to AAA and similar corporations.

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## APPENDIX A. QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION

**Introduction:** I am doing a research study that aims to determine the perception of the American Automobile Association and if those perceptions affect membership rates. Some of the questions are personal in nature and you are in no way obligated to answer them or, you may choose to answer some in general terms rather than specific. Please see attached Informed Consent Form and confidentiality statement. For the purposes of this study the American Automobile Association will be referred to as AAA.

1) Are you or have you ever been a member of the AAA? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

2) If yes, would you say your experience was:

- positive
- negative
- neutral
- Please describe your experience with AAA:  

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3) If no, what is your perception of the organization?

- positive,
- negative
- neutral
- Please describe your experience with AAA as a non-member:  

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4) Which of the following statements do you believe is true of the AAA staff?

- An equal mixture of staff from various cultural backgrounds.
- Staff from predominantly Caucasian cultural backgrounds.

- Staff from predominantly non-Caucasian cultural backgrounds.
  - Other (please comment).
- 

5) Please respond with the most accurate statement:

- AAA membership is for all Americans.
- AAA membership is for low-to middle income Americans.
- AAA membership is for middle-to high income Americans.

6) Please select all that apply:

- AAA membership is for Hispanic or Latino Americans.
- AAA membership is for White/Caucasian Americans.
- AAA membership is for Black/African Americans.
- AAA membership is for other minority Americans.
- AAA membership is for all Americans.

7) Does the cultural background of employees have an impact on the effectiveness of membership rates of the AAA? Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_

- Why? \_\_\_\_\_

8) Have you seen or heard any advertisements for the AAA? Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_

- If yes, please list:
- 
- 

9) How to you get most of your advertising information from? (Select your top 3 choices) television, the internet, signs on public transportation, magazines, newspaper, radio

10) In what language do you tend to see or hear advertising information?

- Please list:
-

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11) On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not relevant and 5 being most relevant would you rate AAA advertising as it relates to the Mexican American community?

1      2      3      4      5

12) Would more advertising as it relates to Mexican Americans encourage membership? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

13) What would make advertisement more relevant to Mexican Americans? (select all that apply)

- Offered in Spanish
  - Offered in both Spanish and English
  - Using actors/models that are visually of Hispanic race/ethnicity
  - Location of advertisement in visually Hispanic environment
  - None of the above
  - Other (please list)
- 

14) To what age group do you belong?

- 34 and under
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75 and over

15) In what economic group does your household belong?

- Less than \$50,000
- \$50,000-69,999
- \$70,000-89,999

- \$90,000-149,000
- more than \$150,000

16) What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

- Not a high school graduate
  - High school
  - Some college
  - College graduates with bachelor's degree
  - Advanced college/university degree (please identify the degree)
- 

17) What race(s)/ethnicity do you identify with? (You may include more than one answer)

- Native-American
  - White/Caucasian
  - Black/African-American
  - Asian/Pacific Islander
  - Asian/Indian
  - Hispanic or Latino
  - Other (please specify)
- 

18) What state is your primary residence?

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19) Additional comments of any nature are encouraged and welcome.

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## APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### INFORMED CONSENT AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION

You are invited to participate in a research study which will involve taking an on-line questionnaire.

My name is Manon Prévost-Mullane, and I am a graduate student at the University of the Pacific, School of International Studies. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your economic status and you identify as a Mexican American.

The purpose of this research is to determine how perceptions of the American Automobile Association decisions of Mexican Americans to join the organization. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an on-line questionnaire. Your participation in this study will last no more than 20 minutes.

There should be no risks involved for participating since you will be able to take the questionnaire in the comfort of your homes. Every effort will be made to keep your identity confidential and the risk of it being made known is minimal. There are some potential benefits to this research, particularly a possible change to the approach of membership marketing and benefits as it pertains to the Mexican American community and possibly for the Hispanic community as a whole.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me 518-637-7287, or my advisor Kent Warren at 760-656-8371. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Research & Graduate Studies Office, University of the Pacific (209) 946-7367.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality include keeping identifying information secure in a safe, locked location and kept separate from the data obtained, also in a safe, locked location. These materials will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

Results of this study will be presented in my thesis and can be obtained by contacting The Intercultural Communication Institute, 8835 SW Canyon Lane, Suite 238, Portland, OR 97225, [503-297-4622](tel:503-297-4622) (phone), [503-297-4695](tel:503-297-4695) (fax).

You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep.

Signature

Date

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APPENDIX C. MESSAGE FROM AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION  
TO INDIVIDUAL CLUBS REQUESTING COOPERATION  
WITH INDIVIDUAL GRADUATE STUDY

From: American Automobile Association, National Office

To: AAA/CAA Clubs

Re: Requesting cooperation with individual graduate study

You are encouraged to reach out to Mexican American members and inform them of a request to partake in a research study which will involve taking an on-line questionnaire.

AAA Inspector Manon Prevost-Mullane, represents Territory 2: Quebec, Ontario, Northern New York, Vermont, Maine, Trinidad and Tobago, and Grenada. As part of her individual thesis research for a Master of Arts degree in Intercultural Relations at the University of the Pacific / Intercultural Communication Institute, she aims to determine what the Mexican American perception is of the American Automobile Association and if those perceptions affect membership rates.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

American Automobile Association  
National Office

## APPENDIX D. AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION BASIC BELIEFS

## AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION

**BASIC BELIEFS**

## PREAMBLE

*Basic Beliefs are fundamental and enduring principles that guide the Association's mission, operations and corporate behavior. They are a collective commitment by the AAA National Office, clubs, employees and governing bodies to those we serve and to each other. They determine the culture of our organization; how we work with each other, our members, other customers, suppliers and the public.*

 COMMITMENT TO AAA MEMBERS

We exist for our members and will judge everything we do by how well it serves their needs. AAA services, programs, and products will meet the highest standards of quality, and will be continually reviewed to ensure maximum member benefit. AAA services and products will be tested, proved practical and reliable, and offered only to add value to membership.

 COMMITMENT TO THE ASSOCIATION

We are committed to protecting the AAA brand, to enhancing member benefits and our competitive strengths, and to growing both membership and retention rates. We are committed to the federation structure and to the sovereignty of affiliated clubs. We will seek a balance between the uniformity needed to bind us together and the flexibility required to respond to local conditions. Our goal is long-term success and stability, not short-term advantage. We will devote adequate study to business and policy decisions to be confident we are acting correctly.

 COMMITMENT TO AAA EMPLOYEES

We will maintain a competently managed working environment offering fair compensation, equality in employment opportunities and potential for advancement, education and training. We will reward meritorious performance, be receptive to differing points of view and respect individual dignity.

 COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY

We will be good corporate neighbors, engaging in public service consistent with our mission, the needs of members, the communities we serve, and the national interest. In pursuing public policy positions, AAA will remain objective and responsible, relying on our credibility, expertise, and research in public policy formulation.

## APPENDIX E. 2018 ASSOCIATION STRATEGIC PLAN

