

RELATIONAL ASSIMILATION AND DECLINING ETHNIC DISTINCTION: THE CASE OF ETHNIC RESTAURANTS

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Although theories of immigrant assimilation recognize that Americans adopt—and even embrace—aspects of migrant culture, the vast majority of studies continue to focus on the behaviors and trajectories of immigrants and their children. More recently, attempts have been made to examine the process by which American culture is transformed by the presence of immigrants and minority groups. In the event that social boundaries become blurred due to increased contact among immigrants and natives, some posit that elements once considered “ethnic” will be incorporated into American culture if demanded or valued by natives (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964; Hirschman 2012). The result is a new hybrid culture that signifies the *expansion* of the mainstream, whereby the institutions and practices that traditionally define immigrant groups are integrated into American society (Alba and Nee 2003; Jiménez 2017). This paper will examine whether and how these processes play out in the distribution of Hispanic and Asian restaurants across the U.S.

Challenges to traditional conceptualizations of assimilation argue that cultural and social integration operates on multiple, interlocking social scales and within the mediums of political and economic power (e.g. Hirschman 2012). Scholars who investigate spatial assimilation, segregation, and intermarriage argue that minority communities and group members are transformed by entering majority institutions and spaces (e.g. Brown 2006; Iceland and Nelson 2008; Qian and Lichter 2001). And though it is rarely acknowledged, majority members are also transformed as a result of on-going interactions with minority co-workers, romantic partners, and communities; Jiménez (2017) refers to this as relational assimilation. However, relational assimilation can also occur within institutions, corporations and enterprises that attempt to define and manipulate group boundaries to advance their own interests.

We elaborate on Jiménez’s (2017) concept of relational assimilation by distinguishing between two forms of cultural exchange. The first, which we tentatively refer to as *immersive*, occurs when such exchanges are associated with the presence of minority groups. As a

consequence, markers of ethnicity and ethnic distinction are likely to be retained—even if mainstream markets are expanding to include new experiences and products. The second, which we label *appropriative*, reflects the process by which aspects of immigrant and minority culture are incorporated into the local landscape in the absence of the co-ethnic community. As such, products of *appropriative* assimilation should exhibit a weaker relation to traditional markers of ethnicity or ethnic culture.

We operationalize this difference by distinguishing between Hispanic and Asian chain and non-chain restaurants in the U.S. Non-chains are more likely to be owned and operated by those living within or near the community in which the establishment is located (Somashekhar 2018), and hence are more likely to showcase “ethnic” products. Chain restaurants, however, are characterized by central planning, production, and distribution, and are likely to be alienated from the populations and context that gave the product its character. Put succinctly: chain and non-chain establishments should exhibit distinctive relationships to the distribution of communities that carry the same ethnic labels.

The extent to which “ethnic” cuisine is embedded in local cultural landscapes is subject to a number of factors. The age and size of the immigrant community, as well as the size of neighboring immigrant communities, are likely associated with the depth of cultural exchange and volume of capital needed to establish and maintain restaurants. In areas where the immigrant community is new but large, there may be other mitigating factors such as perceptions of the immigrant community as a racial and/or cultural threat (Fennelly and Federico 2008; Griffith 2008; Marrow 2008). Work in the sociology of culture suggests certain features of the wider community may be associated with more intensive relations between immigrant and non-immigrant communities. Peterson and Kern (1996) illustrate that groups with high socioeconomic status are more likely to endorse a wide variety of musical genres (i.e. be culturally “omnivorous”). Others show the same logic applies to high status groups seeking out “authentic” and “exotic” cuisine (Johnston and Baumann 2007); these populations likely engage in a higher number of interactions with immigrant and minority communities than lower-status groups. From this literature, we develop the following predictions:

1. We should observe an increasingly positive relation between the Asian/Hispanic population and non-chain ethnic restaurants if local tastes and communities are indeed influenced by

- ethnic groups (immersive assimilation). Alternately, the number of non-chains could flatten or decrease in counties with larger shares of the corresponding ethnic group (racial threat).
2. If products offered by ethnic chain restaurants are removed from the co-ethnic population, we should observe a weak relationship with the respective Asian and Hispanic population (appropriative assimilation).
 3. If the demand for ethnic foods is driven by socioeconomically advantaged members who seek “authentic” experiences, counties with a larger share of educated residents should have a greater number of non-chain ethnic restaurants (highbrow omnivore).
 4. We anticipate a stronger relation between ethnic populations and restaurants in established destinations relative to new and other destination counties. Ethnic restaurants should be more common in new destinations than in “other” counties.
 5. Finally, we predict that counties with a relatively small Asian/Hispanic population will have a strong representation of ethnic restaurants if there is a large co-ethnic community in surrounding counties.

Data and Measures

To test these hypotheses, we combine county-level data from a total of 5 unique sources: the decennial U.S. Census, the American Community Survey (ACS), the Economic Research Service (ERS), the Voting and Elections Collection from CQ Press, and Reference USA—a proprietary database of nearly 24 million U.S. businesses that is maintained by the Infogroup marketing company. Infogroup relies on yellow page listings, industry and tourism directories, utility records, web-scraping, and places approximately 25 million annual phone calls to verify and update business records. In combination, the efforts employed by Infogroup make Reference USA one of the most comprehensive solutions for business applications.

The outcomes of interest are the number of Asian and Hispanic restaurants in a given county. Using address data obtained from the Reference USA database, we aggregate observations to create a count of Asian and Hispanic restaurants in each county that were operational as of Winter 2017. Unfortunately, we could not convert these counts into percentages as it is extremely difficult to acquire records for all 672,028 food service establishments in the U.S. It will thus be important to adjust for factors that are generally associated with restaurant density—including population size and metropolitan designation. In addition to a basic count of

ethnic non-chain restaurants, we also investigate the number of Asian and Hispanic restaurant chains in each county. Distinguishing between foods that accommodate the palate of majority groups and those that represent the overall landscape of ethnic cuisine could further shed light on the extent to which minority culture has infused with the American mainstream.

Our main predictors are the percentage of county residents who are Hispanic or non-Hispanic Asian in the 2010-14 period (ACS). We believe that the inclusion of immigrant and native-born persons best aligns with our goals for two reasons: first, a large body of work finds majority groups often conflate race/ethnicity with nativity. In settings with large stocks (and continued flows) of immigrants, individuals who share the same skin color or physical appearance are perceived as foreign—regardless of their place of birth (Fennelly 2008; Jimenez 2008). Second, it would be naïve to assume that Asian and Hispanic immigrants are the sole transmitters of cultural traditions. We adjust for two factors that are associated with overall restaurant demand: the size of the total population (logged) and the county's metropolitan designation. We then include political, socioeconomic, and demographic factors that are likely to confound the relation of interest, such as: county-level voting patterns, unemployment rates, median household income, and the percent of workers in professional, construction, and farming/fishing/forestry occupations.

Analytic Approach

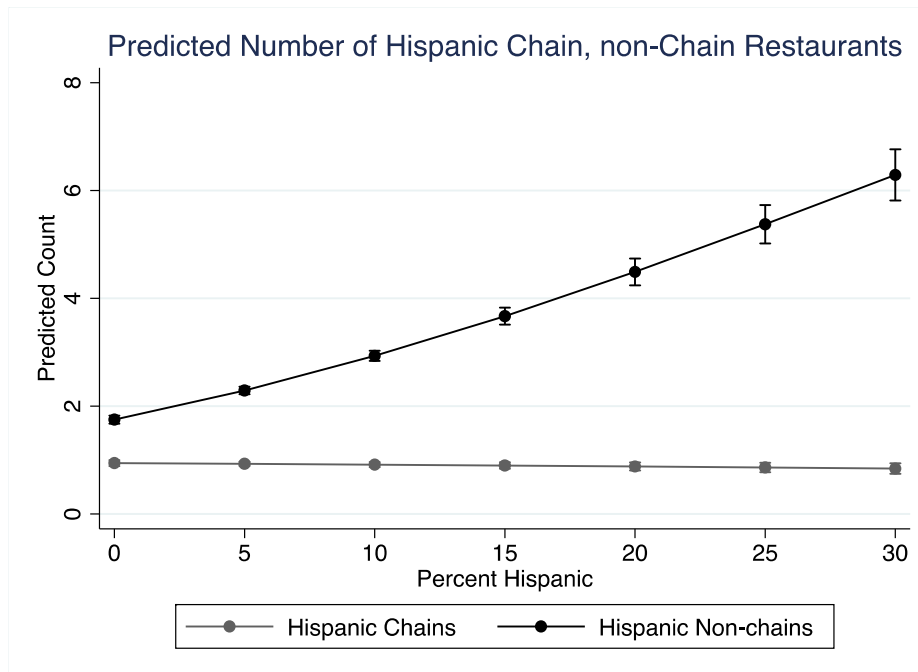
We rely on count data estimation techniques to test whether local tastes for ethnic cuisine are correlated with population composition. Univariate descriptives illustrate that the outcome variances are more than 10 times greater than the corresponding means, suggesting a flexible estimation strategy is needed to avoid artificially small standard errors and inflated test statistics (Land et al. 1996). The expected count of ethnic restaurants (denoted by: $\exp[\sum bX + \varepsilon]$) is obtained using a vector of slopes (b), predictors (X), and an error term (ε) via maximum likelihood estimation. Likelihood ratio tests of alpha and BIC goodness-of-fit tests indicate that negative binomial models are indeed preferable to Poisson models for each of our specifications.

We will conclude by performing 2 additional analyses. First, we assess whether the ethnicity of restaurant managers/owners is associated with the local population using a set of generalized linear models. Here, the Asian/Hispanic population is used to predict the share of chain and non-chain restaurants that are *not* owned or managed by co-ethnics. If the local

population has the potential to influence and transform communities, we should observe a larger share of Asian (Hispanic) restaurants owned by non-Asians (non-Hispanics) in areas with additional co-ethnics. Finally, we conduct placebo tests to help rule out plausible alternative explanations. Counties could presumably attract large minority populations and host numerous ethnic restaurants if residents highly value diversity, for instance. If local tastes are truly moving closer to Hispanic culture due to the size and influence of this group, a large Asian presence should not be associated with a higher demand for Hispanic cuisine. In a similar vein, a sizable Hispanic population should not yield additional demands for Asian cuisine. Placebo tests are generated by exchanging the outcome variable so that the percent Asian serves as the primary predictor for the total number of Hispanic restaurants, and vice versa.

Preliminary Results

The figure below highlights results from 2 separate regression models that illustrate the relation between the number of Hispanic restaurants and the co-ethnic population after adjusting for covariates. Although we identify a strong, positive association between the size of the local Hispanic population and estimated number of non-chain restaurants, we observe a remarkably flat relation for chain establishments. Findings for Asian restaurants and the co-ethnic population are smaller in magnitude, but otherwise similar. These contrasting patterns offer preliminary support for our immersive and appropriative hypotheses. And we also find that counties with higher percentages of highly educated whites—but not minority populations—offer a larger number of non-chain establishments (not pictured). This provides some indication that advantaged majority members demand and/or seek out new cultural experiences. Our results highlight that additional efforts should be made to further theorize and empirically assess the myriad of ways that American society is transformed by immigrants and racial minorities.



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