

How Hispanic and Asian populations influence US food culture

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Media and academics often equate assimilation with the process of immigrants becoming more similar to U.S.-born populations over time and across generations, says University of Arizona researcher Christina

Diaz.

"But assimilation is likely a two-way street. And we see this, but there have been no tests done," said Diaz, an assistant professor in the School of Sociology in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

In a new study, Diaz and co-author Peter Ore, a graduate student in sociology, looked for evidence that the U.S. community is impacted by [minority populations](#). They used ethnic restaurants—both national chains and local eateries—as test cases.

The study, "Landscapes of Appropriation and Assimilation: The Impact of Immigrant-Origin Populations on U.S. Cuisine," is published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. A portion of the research was conducted while Diaz was a 2018 Career Enhancement Fellow through the Woodrow Wilson Foundation.

The researchers found strong evidence that Asian and Hispanic populations are important contributors to local food culture. Those populations predict the number of Hispanic and Asian local ethnic restaurants—but not chains—in a given county. The size of local Hispanic and Asian populations also is linked to non-ethnic ownership of ethnic restaurants, and the availability of local Asian and Hispanic cuisine is strongly associated with education levels of the white majority [population](#).

Focusing on Food

Diaz says the study was a unique effort to investigate, on a national level, whether Asians and Hispanics exert cultural influence on local populations. Assimilation is difficult to empirically test, she said.

To tackle that problem, Diaz and Ore pooled county-level data from the

U.S. census, the American Community Survey, the Economic Research Service, the Voting and Elections Collection from CQ Press, Reference U.S. and Nielsen marketing data.

"This paper was a big introduction to me of the complexities of creating this whole architecture of data from a lot of different sources," Ore said.

Diaz and Ore included both immigrants and U.S.-born persons in the ethnic groupings, because, "oftentimes those outside of the ethnic group tend to code ethnic people as foreigners regardless of where they're born, and also because food is an enduring cultural attribute that gets passed down through generations," Diaz said.

Diaz added that data analysis revealed the same pattern of findings when the ethnic grouping only included immigrants.

Why focus on restaurants to test assimilation? Assimilation scholars argue that cuisine is among the first markers of ethnicity to become absorbed in local communities, Diaz said.

"If we do not observe patterns that suggest Asians and Hispanics are associated with local tastes via restaurants, it is unlikely these populations will transform other dimensions of social life," Diaz said.

Diaz acknowledges that just because someone enjoys Mexican and Asian food doesn't mean they welcome immigrants.

"A greater acceptance of food ways is not going to be reflective of increasingly positive intergroup relations or dynamics," Diaz said. "This is a small initial step to provide spaces for people across different ethnic groups and different racial categories to potentially interact."

Models of Assimilation

Diaz and Ore tested three competing models of assimilation: relational assimilation, appropriative assimilation, and racial or ethnic threat.

With relational assimilation, the demand for ethnic products is linked to the ethnic population; when one increases, the other increases.

"This theory suggests ethno-racial hierarchies may potentially weaken with prolonged intergroup exposure," Diaz said.

With appropriative assimilation, an increase in ethnic products is unrelated to the growth in the ethnic population, suggesting that ethnic goods are being appropriated by the dominant groups without minority involvement.

"This would expand mainstream food preferences and possibly bolster the economic status of majority populations while doing very little to reduce structural disadvantages faced by minority populations," Diaz said.

In the third scenario, racial or ethnic threat, ethnic restaurants would be lower in areas with the highest concentration of immigrants. Some research suggests there is a "tipping point" when increased immigration results in "natives shying away from immigrant food or culture because of perceived political threat or competition for employment," Diaz said.

Diaz and Ore primarily found evidence for relational assimilation. Counties with proportionally larger numbers of Asians and Hispanics had significantly more Asian and Hispanic restaurants.

They ran various tests to ensure that the relationship between ethnic groups and [ethnic restaurants](#) was not driven solely by the Hispanic or Asian demand for ethnic cuisine.

"We found that restaurant availability is also highest in really diverse areas, so we have reason to believe that there really is something about these intergroup interactions that are fertile for ethnic restaurant demand," Diaz said.

Analysis of restaurant ownership resulted in an interesting finding: Those outside of the ethnic community were more likely to own Hispanic or Asian restaurants in densely Hispanic or Asian populated areas.

"We interpret this as evidence that ethnic populations can transform tastes, demands and opportunities for those outside of the ethnic community," Diaz said.

Might this also be evidence of appropriation?

"We are agnostic about whether non-ethnic ownership is necessarily appropriation," Diaz said. "We are interpreting high rate of ownership among non-ethnics as relational assimilation because we see evidence of a heightened relationship in areas with a dense co-ethnic population."

The same cannot be said of fast-food ethnic chain restaurant ownership, where non-ethnic ownership was unrelated to the actual size of the ethnic community, suggesting appropriative assimilation.

Diaz and Ore did not find evidence of racial or ethnic threat.

"We suspect that [restaurant](#) spaces may be less likely to invoke hardened protest by majority groups than other markers of ethnicity, such as foreign-language programs in schools or employer preferences for specific skills," Diaz said.

Education's Impact

Another key finding is that the availability of local Asian and Hispanic restaurants in a community is strongly associated with the share of the majority populations with a college degree.

Research has shown that educated populations may be more likely to engage in cultural exchanges with immigrant and minority communities, particularly as consumers of ethnic products and services.

"More educated people tend to signal their status by presenting themselves as being eclectic or omnivorous," Ore said.

Diaz and Ore also analyzed Nielsen grocery data to obtain a secondary indicator of the impact of [ethnic groups](#) on food consumption and found the same pattern. An increase in the ethnic population resulted in an increase in ethnic grocery purchases by the majority population.

Diaz emphasizes that the study does not illustrate any decrease in the assimilation of immigrant groups.

"We're trying to shift the focus to demonstrate that the fabric of U.S. culture can transform as a result of immigration," Diaz said. "This doesn't mean that immigrants are assimilating any less."

More information: Christina J. Diaz et al, Landscapes of appropriation and assimilation: the impact of immigrant-origin populations on U.S. cuisine, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2020.1811653](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1811653)

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