

## THE IRISH AMERICANS: A CONSUMER AWAKENING TO THE CELTIC CULTURE

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### ABSTRACT

In the burgeoning age of multiculturalism, the Irish Americans have not been studied as a subculture from the consumer behavior standpoint, even though the 1990 census reported 38.7 million Americans of Irish decent. Despite its enormous size, the Irish market has been a "virgin territory" for the business world, including consumer analysts, marketing researchers and practitioners. Unlike the Protestant Irish, who are considered to have gone through the melting pot, there is ample evidence that the Irish Catholics identify themselves as Americans—but still earnestly Irish. Arguably, the erosive forces of assimilation have not yet erased the enduring emblem of the shamrock deeply stamped on the hearts of the Irish Americans. Equipping oneself with fundamental knowledge about the parameters and preferences of such a large subculture would enable a marketer to cater to its members' needs and wants more efficiently, and to communicate with them rather effectively. Two major tasks are tackled: one is to shed some light on the characteristics of the Irish ethnic group as a subculture, and the other task is to delineate the preferences of the Irish Americans from a consumer behavior perspective.

### INTRODUCTION

The blight, a malefic fungus, ruined the Irish potato crops in the 1840s, provoking a famine that led to the deaths of at least one million people. Shannon (1963) calls it the "nadir" of Irish history. To survive such and unprecedented national calamity, thousands upon thousands were strewn on this planet, thus being transplanted in the four corners of the earth (Rapple, 1995). The Irish population was literally scattered all over the world. Mainly landing in English speaking countries, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and a lion's share of the population immigrated into the U.S.A.

The exodus from Ireland began to build the roads, rails, bridges, tunnels, dams and other public works, which comprise the infrastructure of an economy. In the diaspora, they worked hard, they drank Irish whiskey, and often times, they got into feisty fights (McGoldrick, et al., 1982). According to one old and often cited saying, "God invented the whiskey so that the Irish won't rule the world." The intention of mentioning this hackneyed saying here is not meant, of course, to be derogatory, but rather to emphasize the extensive contributions the Irish people have made wherever they happened to immigrate.

Like most newcomers, they were clannish and tended to stay within their own colonies of Irish American communities in major cities in different parts of United States.

It has been observed that many Americans are of Irish decent. Where are they now? Have the imperceptibly merged into the mainstream America? Have they been assimilated beyond recognition and stripped of their ancestral values, traditions, and customs? Have they gone through the melting pot and turned into the "American soup." Is there a revival in Irish culture? Is there a viable Irish American market now? Has recent immigration from Ireland began to rekindle interest in the Celtic culture?

During the last several decades, the tide has turned against the melting pot (Allen, 1988). Now the United States is being hailed as a veritable salad bowl of various ethnic groups making up the American population. The drive has been toward preserving ethnic heritage on the predicate that American people would be happier and stronger if various subcultures were recognized and celebrated. The dawning of the "multicultural" era in America has become a reality (Boyd, 1995).

Despite the increasing interest in multiculturalism and the recent renaissance of the reacceptance all that is Irish, none of the consumer behavior literature, especially the textbooks (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2001; Hawkins, et al., 2001; Hanna and Wozniak, 2001) mention Irish Americans as a distinct group. Unlike some other subcultures, such as the African-American, or Hispanic, the Irish subculture is not even mentioned in Marketing in general, and in consumer behavior textbooks in particular.

McCourt (1998) echos the same observation in an interview by stating that "The story of the Irish in America is still virgin territory" even though he was not referring to the negligence of it being studied by Marketing. Shinagawa and Jang (1998) recently published an atlas of American diversity, in which nothing was mentioned of Irish Americans except their population concentration by state and country via two figures on only one page, giving percentage ranges in each state and county. The bulk of the discussion centered on African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans.

The consumer analyst as well as the student need to know about the Irish subculture. The foundation of every sound marketing strategy is the marketer's knowledge of a target market. The purpose of this paper is, first, to explore the

characteristics of the Irish Americans and to determine if there is a viable Celtic subculture market. Secondly, an attempt will be made to delineate the preferences of such a market from a consumer behavior standpoint. Finally, recommendations will be made to further study this subculture.

### THE IRISH SUBCULTURE

**Population: A Sad Past.** A glance at the history of Ireland would indicate that the Irish have suffered many stunts in the normal growth of its population. It virtually reads like a ballad of a broken heart somewhat similar to the history of the Armenians and the Jews. For many centuries, the Irish also suffered from the blight of foreign rule. The Irish waited patiently to be free from the yoke of the British Empire for three hundred years. Either they were victimized by massacres or starved to death by famine. For example, Greeley (1981) states that in the year 1741 (called the year of the slaughter), over four hundred thousand (400 thousand) Irish men, women, and children died from famine. Parenthetically, it is unfathomable that the whole country depended mainly on one staple food for subsistence —potatoes! Compared to the Great Famine at the end of the 1840s, the 1741 event pales. In 1841, the population was over 8 million as is shown in Table 1. In 1851, the population dwindled to 6.5 million.

Thus, in 1851, instead of the population increasing to 9 million with a normal growth rate, it was reduced to 6.5 million. Between 1847 and 1850 about one and one and a half million Catholics died. This loss amounts to about 19 percent (18.75%, to be exact). Such a national disaster almost decimated the population and demoralized the nation. To overcome this adversity, the Irish took wholesale to seeking better opportunities outside Ireland. Reluctantly though, Ireland resorted to immigration for the salvation of millions of souls.

TABLE 1

**The Population of the Irish Between 1841, 1851, and 1991.**

1841 -----	8 million
1851 -----	6.5 million
1991 -----	5 million*

\*Of the five (5) million, 3.5 million is for the Republic of Ireland and the one and a half (1.5) is for the Northern Ireland (Rapple, 1995).

**Population: A Vibrant Present.** Up to the 1930's, about five (5) million Irish have crossed the Atlantic to settle in the United States either directly or via Canada (Bernardo, 1981). Munich (1980) argues that Ireland has given up a

greater proportion of its human resources to the United States than any other nation. Levinson and Ember (1977) have included the Irish among other immigrant cultures in the New World as "builders of a nation."

Even today, there is a steady flow of immigrants from Ireland, but at a much slower pace and size. When John F. Kennedy visited Ireland in 1963, he gave a speech at Galway. He told the audience that if they went close to the shores of Boston, they would see O'Neills, O'Malleys working at the docks and other sites. Then he said to the audience: "Raise your hand if you have relatives in America." Instantly, a sea of hands went into the air!

According to the 1990 census, 38.7 million Americans reported they were of Irish decent. One American in six claim Irish ancestry. While the population of Ireland declined after the Great Famine, Hout (1994) points out that the Irish in America prospered from about 5 million in the 1930's to about 40 million people in the 1990's. One can contend that if children of the mixed Irish marriages are factored in, the number of Irish Americans would still be considerably more than the census figure. As Table 2 shows, there is an 8.6 percent increase in the population between the 1971 and 1990 census counts.

TABLE 2

**The Irish American Population in the United States in the Year 1971 and in the Year 1990.**

1971	13.3 million	7% of Americans
1990	38.7 million	15.6% of Americans

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Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1971 and 1990.

Although the census did not break ethnic groups down by religion, the Protestant Irish makes up a large percentage of the total Americans who claimed Irish ancestry (Blessing, 1980). However, most Protestant Irish do not think of themselves as being Irish. McGoldrick et al., (1982) explains that even in the homeland, the Catholic Irish peasants were different in culture and values from the Protestants and the Scotch Irish, who also began to immigrate to the United States in large numbers from Ulster, the northeastern part of the Island.

According to Glazier (1999), there were two major Irish immigrations to the United States: the first was completed before the Civil War with mainly Protestant Irish settling in the rural regions of the south; the second one was completed before the First World War with predominantly Catholic Irish living in the urban regions of the north. The decedents of the second immigration are the most successful ethnic group, while the decedents of the first immigration are the least successful. Rural and southern

sections, the Irish Americans have the critical numbers, but where are all the Shamrocks located?

**Geographical Concentration.** Like the Armenian, the Jewish, and the Hispanic subcultures, the Irish group is not evenly scattered around the mainland. Some of the concentration areas are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4

**The Percentage of Irish Americans Concentrated in Various States.**

California -----	9 percent
New Jersey -----	4 percent
Pennsylvania -----	4 percent
Ohio -----	4 percent
Massachusetts -----	4 percent

Source: Bureau of U.S. Census of 1990.

Over the years, the centers where the Irish have congregated in numbers have changed. It should be noted that California is home of nine (9) percent of Irish Americans. Although Massachusetts has less than what California has, Boston is still considered the capital of the Irish Americans. Shannon (2000) claims that it is the most Irish of all American cities, a city which reminds its Irish visitors of Dublin. Boston College is also one of the icons of Irish higher education. Area concentration of the Irish makes them easy to reach and, therefore, would be attractive to marketers, especially an ethnic group who, according to Rapple (1995), values achievement through education. A cultural norm such as this would make its members end up with enviable disposable and discretionary incomes.

**Education.** In the early waves of immigration, mostly Irish peasants and farmers came to the new world (Galens, 1995). Like most émigré ethnic groups, they were not well educated. However, the Irish who immigrate to the United States have an enviable advantage over most other ethnic groups such as the Hispanics. As luck would have it, the Irish émigré does not have a language barrier in the new country. Such a condition makes them very privileged. Although Irish children are not educated at Eton in England (where the British aristocracy pays an annual tuition of over \$12,000), there is a great educational system in Ireland (Kraft, 1993). Therefore, it would be safe to assume that the average income of the Irish American is equivalent to the average income of other European ethnic groups.

**Occupation.** Although the early Irish immigrants resorted mostly to unskilled jobs, the second generation Irish in America became the architects, engineers of bridges, earth movers, pub owners of the world; later on, the Irish also

sent men to the White House to serve as presidents, among them are Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, and John F. Kennedy. Due to their fluency in the English language and because of their great educational background, Kraft (1993) points out that the Irish in the United States are much in demand.

Unlike the early Irish immigrants who worked in the mines and in infrastructure construction, most Irish Americans hold white-collar positions. The smiling Irish eyes, the affability of Irish personality have made them very popular with other subcultures in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although, as Wasserman and Morgan (1976) report, frictions had existed between the Irish and some other ethnic groups, such as the Jews and the African Americans during early immigration period.

**Income.** Finding some data on the income of the Irish in America was akin to the quest for the Holy Grail. The Irish, like the Jews, seem to refuse to answer income questions. Greeley (1981) contends that in the 1970s the Irish were catching up with the Jews in terms of income. If that were true, then the Irish Americans would command now one of the highest income averages in the United States.

Since current Irish immigrants hold mainly white-collar jobs, their average income should be equal to that of any other English speaking European ethnic groups, including WASPs (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants). The average U.S. income was \$31,200 in 1990. Although the average reflects mainstream Americans' income, WASP income is higher.

**A Viable Market.** The Irish subculture as shown in the preceding sections has the prime requisite ingredients for a viable market: The Irish have the numbers to make the market substantial; the Irish also have the buying power to make it a lucrative market. Central to the paradigm of a viable market is the notion that both large numbers and high buying power make the Irish subculture a mega market. Yes, Mr. O'Malley, there is a large Shamrock market right here in the United States.

**CONSUMER BEHAVIOR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IRISH AMERICANS**

An extensive search of the literature failed to disclose any recent studies pertaining to Irish Americans preferences for durable goods. One is led to believe that the Irish have similar preferences as those of mainstream Americans.

**Product Preferences.** If Irish Americans are behaviorally and attitudinally different from other ethnic groups in America, they would tend to prefer certain products based on the Irish culture. Rapple (1995) maintains that most Irish Americans eat "generic American food," including

cuisine from various other ethnic groups; however, many Irish Americans do cook some dishes that make up the distinctive Irish cuisine.

Naturally, potatoes have always been the traditional staple at the Irish dinner table. After Sir Walter Raleigh introduced the potato into Europe in 1565, it soon became ubiquitous in Irish culinary culture. Some of the other preferences include dairy products as butter, milk, large quantities of cheese, oatmeal stirabout or porridge for breakfast and Irish stew, which is a favorite dish. Smoked salmon from Ireland is a delicacy for many Irish Americans. Some of the other traditional foods include soda bread (made with flour, soda, buttermilk and salt or raisins); coddle (a Dublin dish prepared with bacon, sausages, onions, and potatoes); and drisheens (made from sheep's blood, milk, bread crumbs, and chopped mutton suet).

Rapple (1995) also claims that there is a "good market" for the many shops in America that sell such Irish favorites as rashers (bacon), bangers (sausages), black and white pudding, and soda bread. The Irish Americans also consume special dishes on holidays such as corned beef and cabbage (sometimes served with juniper berries) on Easter Sunday; boxty bread (a potato bread marked with a cross) is eaten on Halloween or on the eve of All Saint's Day; and colcannon (a mixture of cabbage of kale and mashed potatoes) and barmbrack (an unleavened cake made with raisins, sulstans, and currants) are at the table on Halloween.

In terms of beverage, tea is consumed at any time of the day, Irish coffee (made from whiskey and coffee), and naturally Irish whiskey, uisce beatha (the water of life) is considered to be a finer drink than the Scotch whiskey and it is extensively drunk. Such product preferences indicate cultural continuity patterns in consumption in which the Irish retain the cultural characteristics of their heritage.

**Communications.** For marketing to be able to reach the Irish American market, in addition to mainstream publications, the Irish have four magazines: "Irish America Magazine" publishes information about Ireland and Irish Americans, including book, play, and film reviews; "Irish Echo" contains articles of interest to the Irish American community; "Irish Herald" as a newspaper covers news of interest to the Irish Americans; and "Stars and Harp" carries profiles of Irish Americans and their contributions to the formation of the United States.

In terms of radio broadcasting, the Irish Americans also have four stations which can be used by marketing to reach the Irish subculture: Radio WFUV-FM (90.7) in Bronx, New York, which broadcasts Celtic programs on Saturdays and Sundays; WGBH-FM (89.7) in Boston, Massachusetts, airs Celtic programs on Sundays only; WNTN-AM (1550)

"The Sound of Erin," in Belmont, Massachusetts, has programs on Saturdays only; and finally, WPNA-AM (1490) in Oak Park, Illinois, has Irish programming each Saturday.

In packaging, green would be effective color to attract the Irish eyes and hearts. In advertising, Irish music and dance can be used to appeal to the Irish and to the other ethnic groups as well. Recently, a Chihuahua was used extensively in an advertising campaign for Taco Bell. Advertisers could also use Irish Setters, or Irish hounds to attract the attention of the Irish Americans. Compared to the Hispanic and the Jewish subcultures, the Irish lack in terms of media power. This deficiency may not present a major problem, since more and more of the networks are being used to reach various ethnic groups in the United States.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

It has been shown that the Irish Americans constitute a large portion of the United States population and because of the recent resurgence in immigration, there has been a renaissance in Irish culture and products. Greeley states that "...the Irish are still identifiably Irish." Angela Houston (2001) has recently remarked: "Once you see the green Emerald Isle, a part of it stays with you forever." Being Irish seems to be "in" on both sides of the Atlantic.

Further research is needed to explore and clarify the needs and wants of such a large and lucrative market. Among other questions, the following would be of great interest to marketers and to the Irish American community:

- \*What other Irish products would the Irish Americans want to see imported from Ireland?
- \*What percentage of the Irish Americans listen to various Irish radio programs?
- \*How many Irish Americans subscribe to the Irish American magazines?

Answers to the above questions and others would equip the marketing professional with the necessary knowledge about the Irish American consumers for the formulation of marketing strategies. Tapping such a large market through Irish themes such as special events, holidays, art, music and dance would be highly effective.

**A Concluding Note.** If there is a revival in Irish spirituality, it would be safe to assume that there is also a rekindled interest in Irish products, literature, music, dance, etc. These tendencies would "re-green" the Shamrock market. Against the backdrop of the "re-greening" of the Irish American market, books are being written and greeting cards are being made for the Irish Americans. Cafes, pubs, restaurants, travel agencies, etc., are springing up in today's retailing landscape to serve the

Irish Americans. "Riverdance" has come to symbolize Irish dance. Such rejuvenations indicate that the Irish subculture seems to be alive and well and that a mega Irish market is ready to be serviced profitably by imaginative and innovative marketers.

Even a cursory review of the Irish American subject shows the resiliency of the Irish people in the face of adversity. The Irish have had a long history of happy and very hard times. This paradox is captured in a saying: "The Great Gaels of Ireland are the men that God made mad, for all their wars are merry, and all their songs are sad." Perhaps the famine, a calamity to the Irish, has been an enduring blessing in disguise to the world. The world ought to enshrine the spirit of the Irish for their tireless contributions—despite the difficulty of living in strange lands, often rejected by other ethnic groups, frequently fighting for acceptance, and always being miles away from their friends or families, and from their beloved homeland, Erin, the Eternal Isle.

Anyone researching the Irish subculture cannot help but realize that without the Irish, the world would be a dull, dour, and downright dreary place in which to live. With their wit, dreams, tragedies, and triumphs, they add color to the rainbow of human cultures around the world. Any subculture who has a toast like the following, shows the gentle and warm touch of humanity:

"May the road rise to meet you  
 May the wind be always at your back  
 The sun shine warm upon your face  
 The rain fall soft upon your fields  
 And until we meet again  
 May God hold you in the hollow of His hand." (Bailey, 1997)

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