Representations in Consumer Research

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Domesticating the Indian Imagination
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Marketers are selective in picking up consumer differences that lend themselves to representation and incorporation. In India, marketers’ assumptions about Indian identity leads to pan-Indian representations that exclude most religious minorities. In advertising and other arenas of the public sphere, representations that conflate Hindu and Indian identities have become prevalent. This paper problematizes the construction and reception of these representations: how do Muslim viewers respond to representations that implicitly associate Indian tradition with Hinduism? This paper relies on extensive ethnographic fieldwork to examine how marketers cast their audience and how Muslim Indians correspondingly position themselves as consumers.

Representing the Islamist Consumer: Transformation of the Market
Ozlem Sandikci and Guliz Ger, Bilkent University

While there is a wealth of literature dealing with the nature and politics of stereotypical representations in advertising, there is little on how stereotypes are created and transformed as a result of social, cultural, political and economic factors. This ethnographic study looks at how marketers in Turkey construct and represent the Islamist women in advertising and other commercial imagery, what assumptions are embodied in these representations, and how these representations and the market agents themselves are transformed as a result of the local and global forces of consumerism and capitalism.

Consumer Representation: The Age Of Database Marketing
Detlev Zwick and Jacline Nyman, York University

The representational logic of database marketing is discussed for its theoretical and managerial implications. The authors take a poststructuralist approach to conceptualize databases as language that responds to the challenges of modern marketing to manage an increasingly mobile and invisible consumer by transforming consumer bodies into digital data subjects. On a theoretical level, the ubiquitous information gathering and analysis enabled by the database turns mutable and complex consumer practices, indeed life itself, into value. Finally, the authors propose the metaphor of laboratory marketing to capture the fundamentally new modus operandi made possible by data-driven marketing.

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SESSION SUMMARY
This special session investigates one of the key practices of consumer research: representation. Academics, consumers and marketers are all at one point or another engaged in the practice of representing. First, academics make choices about what type of consumer experiences they want to represent and how (Stern 1998). From this perspective, the word “consumers” is not an ontological given but a socially constituted and institutionally-produced category. Second, consumers are often engaged in representing themselves when asked to participate in consumer research (Applbaum 1998; 2000) or when using products and services to enact identities (Firat 1998). Finally, marketers also spend much of their time imagining and constructing consumers. With the increasing institutionalization of markets, producers and consumers rarely meet each other and managers rely on mediated images of consumers to design their strategies. Representations may be seen in the images appearing in television and print ads, in the intermediary stages of market research and theorizing about consumers, in talk and other social practices that give meaning to consumer research, and in symbols that stand in for the experiences of consumers. This session looks specifically at the way marketing practitioners represent consumers.

By focusing on the cultural work of casting consumers in different roles and turning them into actionable targets for action, the present papers converge on the question of how marketers represent. Cayla and Peñalozalook at the lack of representation of Muslims in advertising and other forms of popular media in India. They show advertisers and marketers discussing what it means to be Indian, ignoring certain consumer differences and emphasizing others in the process of developing ads and marketing strategies. The paper then turns to a sample of Muslim consumers and their reaction to the hegemony of Hindu representations. Rather than showing Muslims resisting these representations of Indians as Hindus, the data speaks to a Muslim desire of not being represented. Overall, the paper discusses the politics of consumer representations, in the form of their construction by marketers, their reception by consumers, and the dialectic implication of both processes. Sandikci and Ger also look at the representation of Muslims, but in a very different cultural context: Turkey. Starting from the observation that marketplace activities and religious practices influence each other, they investigate how fashion marketers construct and represent Islamist women in advertising and other commercial imagery, and how these representations transform over time as a result of competition, consumption ideology, and global capitalism. They argue that Islamist style clothing companies have adapted contemporary fashion marketing tools, and the stereotypical image of the veiled Muslim women as the oppressed and the non-fashionable has given way to the images of a modern consumer. Overall, the paper demonstrates how changes in advertising representations relate to the underlying social, economic and political forces.

Finally, investigating representation in electronic consumption spaces, Zwick and Nyman examine the cultural work of database marketers. Drawing from interviews with customer data workers, the authors examine the logic of the database as it abstracts consumer bodies from their territorial settings, recodes them into a series of data flows, and then reassembles them into distinct data subjects, which can be analyzed and targeted for intervention. The authors argue that database marketing should be regarded as a response to the twin condition of marketing modernity, the increasingly mobile consumer and the disappearing consumer body. Systematic surveillance of consumers’ movement and transactions, an inherently ambiguous process that should not be considered in a merely negative light (Lyon, 2001), produces a new regime of signification, which entails a number of managerial and theoretical implications. Of particular interest is the authors’ claim that equipped with digital facsimiles of consumers, marketers now regard all consumer actions and movements, indeed even life itself, as having value (Arvidsson, 2004). Moreover, the digital format allows for techniques of customer assemblage that the authors call laboratory marketing.

Overall we make three important contributions to consumer research. First, this session explores managerial practices of representation, which has largely been ignored by consumer researchers (exceptions include Kover 1995). Anthropologists have been at the forefront of analyzing marketing practice as discourse for “framing” consumers (e.g. Applbaum 1998). Their studies show how television producers and advertising professionals imagine their audiences and how the shows and commercials they produce are shaped by this act of imagining. Consumer researchers, on the other hand, study representations with regard to their effect on consumer behavior (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997) or as objects of interest in and of themselves (Belk and Pollay 1985), but not as social practice. In addition, while past studies locate representations within their historical, cultural, and social context, consumer researchers rarely analyze how these representations are constructed. Of special importance is what type of consumer differences marketers choose to emphasize and why. Not all differences receive the same treatment. The market is selective in gleanings those parts that lend themselves to representation and incorporation. This session will map how marketers select these differences and why.

Second, illuminating how consumers exist in marketers’ minds and materialize through their practices, we hope to better understand the chasm we see between marketing practitioners, consumer researchers, and consumers. Put differently, all can benefit by examining and potentially overcoming the boundaries that exist between marketers, consumers, and academics’ representational paradigms. Malefyt (2003) shows how advertisers and marketers together represent consumers and eventually come to reinforce the boundary between consumers and themselves. As they work together to define the contours of consumer profile, they come to think of “us versus them.” Our discussion will revisit these practices as well as basic models of consumer behavior that are predicated on separate notions of marketers, consumers, and researchers. A key question here is how these practices and models would change if consumers and marketers were more or less integrated.

Third, we highlight the relationship between the politics of representation and consumer identities. Denzin (2001) remarks that the interpretive rituals and practices surrounding consumption are anchored in a larger system, called the “circuit of culture” (du Gay et al. 1997, p. 3) where meanings are defined by the mass media, including advertising, cinema, and television. These processes mutually influence one another, continually shaping consumers.
By looking at marketers’ practices of representation, we hope to provide a complementary perspective on the circuit of culture and identities that goes beyond representations as texts to integrate structures that constrain their production.

ABSTRACTS

“Domesticating the Indian Imagination”
Julien Cayla, Australian Graduate School of Management

Over the last two decades, advertising and other popular media have increasingly addressed and represented Indians as global consumers. With the liberalization of the Indian economy, the ideology of a self-sufficient socialist nation has receded from the Indian landscape. The ideologies of globalization and capitalism have risen to the fore. Previously, advertising had helped construct the prototype of the patriotic consumer who rejected British and other foreign goods in support of local industries (Doctor and Alikhan 1997). The “new India” is now a postcolonial nation embracing globalization and advertising representations of hybridity abound as modern and traditional, Indian and Western ideas, objects and practices come into articulation.

In constructing representations of modern Indians, marketers and advertisers have to deal with the complexity of the subcontinent: the extreme variety of languages, communities, religions and social classes (Venkatesh and Swamy 1994). Because of this heterogeneity, advertisers heavily borrow from a Hindu ritualistic imagery that most Indians can relate to (Rajagopal 1998, 2001). Hindu gods and goddesses, housewife characters wearing bindis and mangalsutras all endow contemporary domestic commodities with the aura of a Hindu-Indian heritage that cuts across regions and social classes. While advertisements cater to the desire of upper-middle class Indians to join the global elite, many of them combine images of successful Indians with explicitly Hindu and “traditional” signs of Indian identity.

This paper problematizes the construction and reception of these Indian mainstream representations by Indian Muslims. How successful are advertisers in domesticating the Indian imagination? Since Indian advertising predominantly portrays Hindu men and women, many questions emerge about the way religious minorities respond to these messages. There are more than a hundred and forty million Muslims in India. But apart from a few billboards, films and television series representing Muslim families, this huge community remains largely absent from television screens and ads (Mishra 2002). A focus of this research is to examine how Muslim consumers negotiate their sense of identity, citizenship and ‘Indian-ness’ in a cultural world dominated by Hindus.

This paper relies on eleven months of ethnographic work in Mumbai and Hyderabad. I spent the first nine months of fieldwork engaging in participant observation and interviewing advertising executives about the development of advertising campaigns. During the remaining time, I interviewed fourteen informants from the Indian middle and lower middle social classes, focusing on the ways they negotiate their position of consumers. Field notes, interim transcripts, in-depth interviews, archives of agency correspondence and artefacts (i.e. local newspaper articles; print and television ads) comprise the data.

Preliminary analysis indicates that while upper-middle class Muslim Indians easily play the role of global consumers, Muslims from the lower social classes tend to resist this position. This is nuanced, however, by their desire to connect, through the consumption of TV programs and products from the Middle-East, to another sphere of globality which is less influenced by Western consumerism. Another key finding is Indian Muslims’ desire to blend in as well as their reticence to being represented as a marketing group standing out to be targeted. Finally, Muslim consumers seem to be especially responsive to the depiction of family life in advertising, despite the prevalence of Hindu symbols in such depictions. These representations seem to transcend the Hindu/Muslim divide and continue to symbolize what it means to be Indian.

“Representing the Islamist Consumer: Transformation of the Market”
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One of the fundamental ways that the consumerist ethos circulates and continuously reproduces itself is through commercial imagery. Advertising, marketing and fashion discourses construct and disseminate aestheticized and stereotyped images of the modern consumer. Who is represented how in the marketing discourse reveals forms of identity that are legitimized and privileged over other identity formations. As Schroeder and Zwick argue “advertising representations influence cultural and individual conceptions of identity, and must be understood as the result of changing social and cultural practices” (2004, p.24). While there is a wealth of literature dealing with the nature and politics of stereotypical representations in advertising, there is little on how stereotypes are created and transformed as a result of social, cultural, political and economic factors. This study looks at how marketers in Turkey construct and represent the Islamist women in advertising and other commercial imagery, and how these representations are influenced and transformed by the local and global forces of consumerism and capitalism.

The issues of who is represented and how become critical in the case of Islam and fashion where the conventional images of the veiled Muslim woman almost always take the form of the oppressed, non-modern and non-fashionable. In contrast to these stereotypical images, contemporary advertising and other commercial representations of the Islamist women in Turkey portray a modern consumer who draws from multiple cultural references and resources. In this paper, we map out various representations of Islamist female as a modern consumer and the marketing agents authoring these representations. Specifically, we investigate the following questions: How Islamist women are constructed and represented in advertisements, catalogues and other commercial media? What assumptions are embodied in these representations? How do marketing and advertising representations create, reinforce, subvert or mock the existing assumptions about the Islamist female identity?

Previous studies outline the emergence of a prolific Islamic consumption transscape in Turkey in last decade, and indicate that consumption orientation has become particularly visible in the domain of fashion (Klicibay and Binak 2002; Sandikci and Ger 2001, 2002, forthcoming; Navaro-Yashin 2002). While these studies trace the changes of the meanings and practices of the headscarf, they remain mostly silent on the relation between marketing activities and religious practices. Religion affects marketplace activities (Mittelstaedt 2002; Mittelstaedt, Klein and Mittelstaedt 1998). Religious traditions and institutions can influence the rules of trade, prohibit or obligate the trade of certain products, and affect the time and place of markets. Spiritual practices and belief translate into demand for certain goods and services and markets develop to meet that demand. Market forces, however, also affect religious practices and traditions. Mittelstaedt (2002) argues that through political, institutional, moral and competitive mechanisms, markets can affect the parameters of religion and can force the organizations to make choices between being faithful and competitive, and the
believers to reevaluate what it means to be faithful. We focus on Islamist market agents, namely companies that sell clothing and related products to Islamist women in Turkey, and explore how their discursive practices influence religious identities and activities as well as how they themselves are affected and transformed as a result of local and global forces of market and consumption cultures.

We draw from data collected through ethnographic work conducted over a period of three years in Turkey. These include indepth interviews with owners and personnel of Islamist style clothing stores in Ankara and Istanbul, observations at Islamist fashion shows, shopping centers and hotels, and a visual archive that consists of pictures taken by us as well as pictures circulating in the media, advertisements and company catalogues. We find that Islamist advertisements and catalogues represent covered women as attractive and well-groomed females with shapely bodies, much like the representation of uncovered women. The global ideals of beauty of both the face and the body are evident in these images. These representations counter the existing assumption that covering is a practice of faith and the secularist supposition that the sight of a covered woman is ugly and outdated. We also observe that the market agents have evolved over time, adapting fashion marketing tools and practices in order to compete with their secular counterparts. They now employ more globally fashionable looks as well as looks that they consider would be more acceptable to the secularists. The shift from “religious attire” to “fashionable outfit” indicates a change in the understanding of the identity—from a “pious woman” to a “modern consumer.” We argue that this shift is a co-production of the political milieu, the global and local market forces, and the demands of the urban Islamist women.

“Consumer Representation: The Age of Database Marketing”
Detlev Zwick, York University
Jacline Nyman, York University

At the beginning of the 21st century, data-driven marketing is ubiquitous and shaping business practice in a growing number of industrial and consumer markets. Consumers are under permanent and systematic surveillance by marketers, whose panoptic techniques are capable of capturing the physical, social, and cultural mobility of consumers that has been described as the hallmark of postmodern life (Arvidsson 2004). With the rise of database technologies and electronically mediated communications, new forms of marketing power have emerged that are typically realized as improved market segmentation and targeting capabilities and often captured in concepts such as customization, customerization, personalization, one-on-one relationships, and interactivity. In this sense, customer databases constitute massive computer-assisted classification systems that operate, according to Haggerty and Ericson (2000, p. 606), “by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct ‘data doubles’ which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention.”

Marketing and consumer researchers have ignored the “cultural innovations brought about by the integration of database technology into existing political, economic, and social institutions” (Poster 1995, p. 78). In particular the role of databases as language constructing markets and consumers has not been given due attention by marketing and consumer theorists (cf. O’Shaughnessy and Holbrook 1988). A poststructuralist perspective upholds that new systems of representation—be it writing, statistics, or digits—articulate newly ordered spaces of knowledge in which the object of representation (e.g. the consumer) becomes observable, measurable, quantifiable, in short, known (Foucault 1972; Poster 1995; Holt 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The systematic surveillance of consumers’ movement and activities, an ambiguous process that should not be considered in a merely negative light (Lyon 2001), produces such a new regime of representation that results in the constitution of consumers as data subjects. Hence, database marketing enables what Michel Foucault called biopower: making people up by classifying them according to categories.

Whether consumers accept the digital representation of themselves or not and under what circumstances is an empirical question. However, contrary to the logic of traditional types of market-produced consumer representations such as advertisements, for database representations to “work” consumer acceptance of the category is not essential. In other words, as soon as consumers are abstracted from the “real” and subsequently reassembled as data flows they always already constitute actionable representations. Paul du Gay’s observation that market research, while aiming at capturing the ‘Real’, in fact produces ‘Reality’ (du Gay 1996, p. 60) seems instructive for understanding the theoretical effect of the representational power of the database.

For this paper, we draw from interviews with database marketers in a wide range of industries to illustrate a number of managerial and theoretical implications of the recoding of consumers into digital representations.

First we elaborate on our claim that database marketing should be regarded as a response to the twin condition of marketing modernity: the increasingly mobile (spatially, economically, culturally) consumer and the disappearing consumer body (Dholakia and Zwick 2004; Lyon 2003). Then we argue that the ability of the customer database to appropriate what Arvidsson (2004, p. 467) calls “the communicative action of life in all its walks” effectively turns increasingly complex and mutable consumer practices into value. In other words, ubiquitous information gathering transforms what has previously been seen as a problem in need of to be contained and reduced—the mobile and disappearing consumer and her changing activities and diverse practices into a productive force. Finally, we theorize the effects of database-driven customer intelligence on marketing practice by proposing the metaphor of laboratory marketing. This term refers to a process that conceptualizes the database as an experimental structure akin to the scientific laboratory where marketers, in an attempt to continuously valorize consumer life, generate an ongoing cycle of testing, revelation, discovery, and evaluation of the representations they create. Herein lies in fact one of the most fascinating contradictions of database marketing. The possibility of generating an unlimited amount of digital customer representation via creative yet undertheorized data mining activities at the same time facilitates and always already undermines the process of materially defining the consumer object for targeted intervention.

SELECTED REFERENCES


