Coming Home: the Role of Consumption in the (Re)Construction of Heritage Among African Americans.

Session Chair: Laura Oswald, Stony Brook College of Business, the State University of New York
Discussion Leader: Laura Oswald, Stony Brook College of Business, the State University of New York

SPECIAL SESSION: Coming Home: The Role of Consumption in the (Re)Construction of Heritage among African Americans.

SHORT ABSTRACTS

INTRODUCTION: The Heritage Quest as Transformative Consumption Practice, Laura R. Oswald, Chair and Discussion Leader. Essec Business School, Paris, France. The objective of this session is to stimulate dialogue, discussion, and more comprehensive theorizing about transformative consumption theory and practice in relation to cross-cultural consumption rituals among middle class African Americans in search of cultural “roots.” To this end, the session is targeted to the consumer researcher interested in cross-cultural consumer behavior, ethnicity, Africana, or post-modern critical inquiry. The heritage quest is a form of symbolic consumption derived from the internalization of meanings associated with cultural rituals, folklore, artifacts and artisan crafts rather than genealogy per se. It is (trans)formative inasmuch as the heritage ritual anchors the individual in a shared cultural past and social solidarity.

PAPER #1. Constructing a Past for Today: Appropriating Collective Memory for Identity (Re)Presentation, Tonya P. Williams, Northwestern University. This study of African American expatriates in South Africa suggests that possessions not only serve to preserve and maintain consumer identity through the migration experience, but provide means to actively experiment with and transform one’s identity through consumption rituals. Findings provide an understanding of how consumers appropriate collective memories of a new culture, resulting in morphed identity (re)presentation. Ritual may be a necessary condition for the appropriation of collective memories. Through ritual, respondents engage new resources in the form of internalized social capital. A conceptual model delineates the process for collective memory appropriation through accumulated capital and resultant identity (re)presentation.

PAPER #2. Wearing Identity: The Symbolic Uses of Native African Clothing by African Americans. Benét DeBerry-Spence and Elif Izberk-Bilgin, University of Illinois at Chicago. This research explores the construct of the consumer heritage quest through an examination of African Americans’ narratives of African clothing consumption. The findings from a multi-site ethnography reveal that the consumption of native African clothing transcends the immediate hedonistic need to look and feel good, and constitutes an on-going symbolic practice of self-completion, social bonding, and cultural identification. Findings point to four types of symbolic consumption practices, including 1) Authentication; 2) Resistance 3) Homecoming, and 4) and Legacy Transmission. Discussion will examine these four practices in the findings and address broader implications for consumer behavior.

PAPER #3 How African Americans Use Relationships with Kenyan Immigrants in the Heritage Quest. L. Wakiuru Wamwara-Mbugua, Wright State University. Findings from an ethnographic study suggest that interactions between African Americans and Kenyan immigrants facilitate reconnection with the African “Motherland.” Through these interactions, the respondents are transformed and aspects of their consumer behavior are also transformed. These transformations have resulted in changed consumption patterns such as: the placement of African artifacts from Kenya and other African countries in their homes; eating and cooking Kenyan recipes, and surrounding themselves with reminders of their imagined “home” in Africa. This study has implications for the evolving African American identity and resultant consumer behavior.

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SESSION OVERVIEW
African-Americans currently enjoy the fastest socio-economic growth of any ethnic group in the United States (MarketResearch.com, 1999), recasting “the problem of the color line” dividing black and white America (Dubois, 1996) within a problematic of the culture lines drawn within African American culture itself. The growth of the African American middle class has reshaped the meaning of “mainstream America” in the more fluid and dynamic terms associated with wealth, education, and social status (Wilson, 1980) in addition to race and ethnicity. It has also contributed new urgency to the question of African-American identity in relation to American as well as African culture, since the growth in personal wealth has enabled African Americans to expand the possibilities for cultural definition through consumption rituals such as collecting, travel, and even relocation to Africa (Ball, 1998, Bonsu & Belk, 2003).

Such “heritage rituals” contribute to the construction/reconstruction of personal and cultural identity in the absence of a clear lineage to ancestors in Africa or the Americas. The slash joining/separating cultural construction and reconstruction symbolizes the problematic relation of African Americans to their native culture, since historical links to their African ancestors were disrupted if not destroyed by slavery (Herskowitz, 1956), which generated a massive diaspora of Africans throughout the Americas beginning in the 17th century (Bennett, 2003).

The objective of this session is to stimulate dialogue, discussion, and more comprehensive theorizing about transformative consumption theory and practice in relation to cross-cultural consumption rituals among middle class African Americans in search of cultural “roots.” To this end, the session is targeted to the consumer researcher interested in cross-cultural consumer behavior, ethnicity, Africana, or post-modern critical inquiry. The heritage quest is a form of symbolic consumption derived from the internalization of meanings associated with cultural rituals, folklore, artifacts and artisan crafts rather than genealogy per se. It is (trans)formative inasmuch as the heritage ritual anchors the individual in a shared cultural past and social solidarity. The African American heritage quest can be theorized in the framework of the post-modern cultural critique, inasmuch as it posits meaning, being, and identity as provisional, rather than transcendent essences. Following writers such as Bourdieu (1979/1984), Baudrillard (1970/1998), and Derrida (1972/1983), meaning, being, and identity are functions of sign production and consumption, always and already divided between memory and anticipation, between meaning and its other (eg. Baudrillard 1970/1998, Derrida 1972/1983, Lacan 1966/2004).

Session participants examine pilgrimage consumption rituals in a variety of ethnographic research settings. The first study entitled “Constructing Pasts, Serving Today: Appropriating Collective Memory for Identity (Re)Presentation,” journeys through sacred pilgrimages and self-identity formations in the context of American expatriate experiences in South Africa. The second study, “Wearing Identity: The Symbolic Uses of Native African Clothing by African Americans,” examines theories of consumer comfort via the comforting practices of African Americans donned in African dress. The final study entitled, “How African Americans Use Relationships with Kenyan Immigrants in the Heritage Quest,” explores how interactions between Africans and African Americans facilitate cultural reconnection and maintenance. Data collection and analysis is complete for each of these studies and all have journal papers in preparation.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS
“Constructing Pasts, Serving Today: Appropriating Collective Memory for Identity (Re)Presentation”
Tonya P. Williams, Northwestern University
John F. Sherry, Jr., University of Notre Dame

Globalization, as a form of movement, may be described as a set of changes in structure, environment, and norms shaping the remembrance of the past while providing a direction for the future. These changes provide the wherewithal for individual and collective identity negotiation and representation (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Globalization is not new yet the range of people participating is (Appadurai, 1996; Harvey, 2000). The globe once provided a stage for the privileged few and is now a pavilion for many, each seeking to ameliorate their lives.

I don’t care however tenuous our connection was, it could be 8, 9, 10, 12 generations ago, to see that [African Americans] come from someplace that is beautiful, that is vast, that is magnificent, it is glorious... Africa… I went there to have an experience and see try to see something different and try to see if I could frame myself in a different way. (170/176)
Through our informants’ experiences, we describe how social capital and collective memory enables the maintenance and representation of identity.

Consumer behaviour literature on possessions and cross-cultural movement has focused on consumers negotiating their identity and environment through possessions across home and host environments (Mehta & Belk, 1991; Oswald, 1999; Penaloz, 1994; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Individuals employ possessions as symbols of self (Belk, 1988) which may be contested during times of transition (Mehta & Belk, 1991; Oswald, 1999; Penaloz, 1994; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Possessions for transitional people has been considered for identity reconstruction reflected in material alterations of the body as well as the recasting of personal history at death (Bonsu & Belk, 2003; Schouten, 1991). That scholarship describes the selection and synthesis of existing and possible aspects of the self that will comprise the (re)present self. The focus of those scholars is the use of cultural capital, as tastes, individuals engage to navigate society and (re)present identity.

What is lacking in prior research is the consideration of an alternate mechanism enabling possessions across the home and host environments to contribute identity (re)presentation. In our research, we describe the role of collective memory, the shared remembrances of a community (Halbwachs, 1992 [1952, 1941]), on identity (re)presentation in cross cultural movements. Consumer behavior researchers have considered the role of nostalgia and the desires of a mythical yesteryear (Brown, 2003). Collective memory, unlike nostalgia, is the remembrance of the past for the purpose of shaping the present and future (Sherry, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996). Previous research has considered cultural capital as the mechanism for possessing objects in the (re)presentation of self while superficially addressing the role of interpersonal relationships across the home and host environment.

Interpersonal relationships support the desire to maintain or alter identity (re)presentation. In our research, we describe the relationship between movements, appropriation of collective memory, and identity (re)presentation evidenced in consumer behavior through possessions. Identity (re)presentation draws upon notions of liminality (MacCannell, 1976), and negotiating between host and home identity (Mehta & Belk, 1991; Oswald, 1999; Penaloz, 1994; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). From our data, we derive a framework for the appropriation of collective memory and identity (re)presentation.

Appropriation of collective memory is the result of investing resources to navigate social space (Bourdieu 1984), emphasizing relationships with the self, and their mnemonic communities. The resource enabling African Americans to construct an alternate (re)presentation is social capital, accumulated as entelechy. Entelechy is the vital force fueling the individual pursuit of self fulfillment. Pursuit of self fulfillment requires modification and or construction of the self, including a relevant past, enabled by appropriating collective memory. We describe how African Americans expatriate in South Africa construct and (re)present identity focusing on the appropriation of home and host collective memories. The contribution of this research is the understanding of the role of collective memory in identity construction and representation for people in transition.

In addition to contributing to the consumer behavior literature, this research will inform the collective memory literature. Researchers of collective memory focus primarily on the creation of collective memories in mnemonic communities, periodic commemoration, and the influence on collective identity. The present research illustrates how collective memory is deployed in daily living and is evidenced in consumer behaviors related to identity (re)presentations.

References

“Wearing Identity: The Symbolic Uses of Native African Clothing by African Americans”
Bené DeBerry-Spence, University of Illinois at Chicago
Elif Ízberk-Bilgin, University of Illinois at Chicago
This research explores the construct of consumer comfort through an examination of African Americans’ narratives of African clothing consumption. For many African Americans, wearing African clothing is a pilgrimage, as it enables them to (re)connect with Africa and African peoples, both past and present. Their comfort in this dress attire reflects perceived extensions of African traditions and their ability to use this clothing as a vehicle for expressing social disaffection. Consumers recall the political significance of African clothing in the United States during the 1960s, employing both cultural and historical references as a means of creating personalized comfort.

Comfort is an important construct given that consumers frequently use this term to describe their own thoughts and feelings
about consumption experiences. Yet, its abstractness can make it difficult to study as a theoretical concept and may account for the lack of scholarly research focused solely on the concept of comfort. Existing consumer behavior research conceptualizes comfort as a multidimensional construct with physical, physiological, and psychological aspects (Scitovsky 1992) and situates comfort as an endpoint of consumer activity that yields a stable (Cabanac 2000) and balanced state (Simmons 2001). Studies on consumer convenience address personal comfort as it relates to the value placed on products and services that provide personal comfort and/or save time in performing various activities (Brown 1990). Comfort has also been operationalized as a psychological state that promotes risk avoidance in the context of service encounters (Spake et al. 2003). While the research on comfort has examined the construct as a stable end goal for consumers, little attention has been given to comfort as a means to an end except Shove (2003), which conceptualized comfort as a creative and dynamic process. We extend current theorizing by empirically examining comfort as ongoing practices.

Because consumer comfort is contextual, a multi-site ethnography of African Americans wearing African clothing across multiple consumption settings was conducted. The study comprises depth studies of 8 informants per context, wherein each of the informants was observed wearing African clothing in at least three different consumption settings. In addition to the core consumers, over 70 single informant interviews were conducted. The final research product included a compilation of single interviews with different informants, a series of depth interviews with the same informant and extensive observational data.

Our study findings indicate comfort is both an end-goal consumers desire (i.e., to be comfortable), and a practice in which consumers actively engage (i.e., comforting). African Americans seek comfort from African clothing in four ways: 1) an Authenticating practice-sifting through socially constructed images and personalized ideals of African and African American culture; 2) a Resistance practice—using African clothing to symbolize solidarity with current and historical struggles of African Americans in the United States (Field, 1990); 3) a Homecoming practice—using African clothing to connect with an idealized traditional world or “Motherland” that never existed (Rabine 2002), something that Diasporic Africans have sought since their forcible transportation to the Americas (Boateng, 2004); and 4) a Legacy Transmission practice—using clothing to inhabit a “walking history lesson” for self, family, and others.

The comforting practices employed by African Americans in this study highlight the duality of consumer comfort, specifically illustrating both the static and continual nature of this construct. We believe this has important implications for our understanding of consumer behavior. Just as comfort has been shown to be a key element of consumer goals, like customer satisfaction and convenience, understanding comfort as a consumer practice may enable more comprehensive theorizing about other ongoing consumer behavior, such as identity construction, product meaning development, and acculturation, where comforting is most likely an underlying component.

References

“How African Americans Use Relationships with Kenyan Immigrants in the Heritage Quest”

*L. Wakiuru Wamwara-Mbugua, Wright State University*

Although extant research explores issues of racism, discrimination and identity formulation among African Americans, no research has examined the role that African immigrants play in the maintenance and reconnection to African culture by African Americans. In recent times, the attempts to reconnect with Africa can be seen through the adoption of the term African American which was intended to stress the cultural aspects of African ancestry and to move away from the distinction between ethnic groups and racial groups (Waters 1991).

This research examines the role of Kenyan immigrants in the maintenance of African culture among African Americans. Interviews were conducted with twenty-four African Americans (12 men and 12 women) who were the friends, spouses or significant others of Kenyan immigrants in a Southern city. Proper interviewing techniques (Wallendorf and Belk 1989) were utilized in order to ensure that trustworthy data was obtained. The data was analyzed by means of coding patterns and themes with the use of the constant comparative method (Glazer and Strauss 1967). The findings demonstrate that the respondents interact with Kenyans as a way to remain connected to the “Motherland.” These interactions were comprised of such things as: a) attending Kenyan parties; b) attending fund raising events; c) becoming members of the Kenyan Association in the city. Five of the respondents had been to Kenya with their friends and six of the respondents were either dating or were married to Kenyans. Twelve of the respondents indicated that they had attended church services with their Kenyan friends. The above examples show varying degrees of interaction but clearly show an active attempt to become a part of the Kenyan community.

Respondents described many ways that they attempted to integrate aspects of the Kenyan culture into their lives, including the placement of African artifacts from Kenya and other countries in their homes, eating and cooking Kenyan recipes, and surrounding themselves with reminders of their imagined “home” in Africa. The respondents also described eating goat and subsequently buying goat meat from the international grocery stores. Our findings are consistent with McCracken (1986) who suggests that cultural
meaning is usually drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good. As such the consumption of “goat” and other Kenyan recipes enables the respondents to metaphorically reconnect with their African heritage through the act of consumption.

Interestingly, the respondents exhibited some degree of situational ethnicity (Stayman and Deshpande 1989) with regards to their identity. Some of the respondents described themselves as African (from a Pan Africanist perspective), while others said that they identify as African American, because the African is first in this descriptor. One of the respondents indicated that when he was around Kenyans that he identified himself as a Kenyan who was born here. He argued that since his ancestors were from Africa that picking a country was just an extension of this recognition of his ancestry. This was also done to ensure that he was fully accepted when he was at a Kenyan party.

Respondents described the mutual benefits that could be derived from positive relationships between the two groups. To this end, some of the respondents described the influence of hairstyles from Africa among African Americans and in turn the influence of African American hairstyles on Africans. Other examples of this dual influence include such things as clothing, music and dance styles. A recent New York Times article suggested that over fifty thousand legal African immigrants enter the United States every year (Roberts 2005). The article further suggests that more African immigrants have migrated from Africa since 1990 than had migrated in the entire preceding two centuries. If these migration patterns continue then opportunities for mutual benefits as well as dual influences will abound. Since going back to Africa is certainly not feasible for many African Americans, then the next best opportunity for them to reconnect with their African heritage will be through interaction with their African brothers and sisters. Given the evolving identity of African Americans in the United States, the future may result in a redefinition of African American identity. A possibility might be that the term “African” might describe all black people and this will add another dimension to the problem of identity in relation to African Americans in the United States.

References