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Poverty Consumption: Consumer Behavior of Refugees in Industrialized Countries

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ABSTRACT

To date, consumer research has devoted no attention to the consumer behavior of the unprivileged group of refugees in industrialized nations. This article summarizes research investigating the experiences of young refugees in a western country and the coping strategies they develop in consumer behavior in order to deal with the new situation of living in an affluent society. Moreover, the study focuses on “sacred” possessions and on the question of whether they have a significant meaning for the refugees and for what reasons. The research was conducted in an Austrian shelter for adolescent refugees and was based chiefly on ethnographic fieldwork, collage techniques and long interviews, especially making use of male informants from Africa and Asia.

INTRODUCTION

In industrialized countries, consumption plays an important part in everyday life. The affluent members of society can satisfy their needs and desires from a variety of goods and services. On the other hand, there are people living in poverty with little or no consumer choice-and to this group belong the refugees. Hill (2001, p. 2) stated in his study about the poor that “the material lives of such individuals are markedly different from those of the affluent population” as they suffer from constraints and restrictions.

This article should draw the attention on the particular situation of refugees and show the restrictions and difficulties they endure in a consumer society by portraying their living situation here. Thus, the awareness of politicians and the society should increase by highlighting the fact that this subpopulation constitutes a relevant group in western societies and that especially with regard to their integration, a profound knowledge about these individuals living in a consumer world is required. Consequently, the study should contribute to a better understanding of refugees asking for asylum and “help rid society of the common stereotypes”, as Hill (2001, p. 7) stated relating to the poor. It is important that the citizens in industrialized countries get a more complex picture of the refugees’ lives to avoid evaluations often based on little knowledge which only takes into consideration the own point of view.

In this context, also the differences between average consumers of industrialized countries and refugees who have to deal with poverty, uncertainty about their future prospects and sometimes with psychological traumata due to their flight and/or their former living conditions are emphasized.

Two aspects are stressed in this work:

The primary part of this paper presents an analysis of adolescent refugees’ experiences in and perceptions of an affluent society and the resultant coping strategies they develop in order to deal with these circumstances. Thereby, the characteristics of this group of people who are nearly adults when they first encounter the western world where they face legal and financial restrictions are highlighted.

Furthermore, “sacred” possessions also have been investigated as they may have a significant meaning for the refugees. Sacred entities which may embrace people, things and places involve some mystery or myth and they are exclusive, powerful, and unique, as stated by Wallendorf, Belk and Heisley (1988). Further, they are worshiped and treated with inordinate respect unlike ordinary consumer commodities.

To date, consumer research has devoted no attention to the consumer behavior of refugees in industrialized countries. While earlier research investigated the consumer behavior of immigrants and of various subpopulations among the poor in western countries (Hill and Stamey 1990; Hill 1991, 1992; Penaloza 1994; Gilly 1995; Hill and Somin 1996; Hill 2001), this paper focuses on refugees, highlighting three particular aspects of this group of the population.

Firstly, while immigrants leave their countries voluntarily in search of a better life, the refugees are forced to flee their homes due to (the threat of) persecution, with no possibility of returning given the risks (whether real or perceived) to their health and safety. Moreover, most of them do not bring anything with them, mainly because of their short term decision to flee, as well as due to political concerns not risking to alert the authorities (Hill, Somin 1996, p. 207).

Secondly, those refugees who come from very poor countries in general were not part of a consumer society before and therefore have to face a different situation here than those who have grown up in industrialized cities of threshold countries. Nevertheless, both groups suffer from their status of being refugees. As stated by one of the informants: “You are born into this world like a baby with the big difference that you are shaped already by a completely different culture. You are in the situation of being a refugee and thus reduced to a Mr or Mrs ‘Nothing’ who have to orientate themselves in the new world.”

Finally, despite the fact that many of the refugees are not accustomed to a consumer society, this topic is interesting particularly with regard to the fact that certain consumer products such as for example cuddly toys or mobile phones gain special values for all refugees in the course of time. Some of them are even considered as “sacred” possessions and serve as coping strategy for the young people helping them to deal with the difficulties they encounter in a foreign country.

Unlike immigrants, the refugees have to deal with a significant uncertainty concerning their future prospects as they do not know whether their application for asylum will be supported. At least during the initial period of their stay, they do not have the right to work in the host country, which may have a very negative impact on their lives, not only with regard to their financial situation but also to their psychological health. These restrictions affect their self-esteem since they feel useless and not integrated in society, as stated by some of the informants.

The refugees consequently depend on welfare which provides the basic commodities. They have to renounce many things a typical middle-class consumer takes for granted due to the small subsidy. On the other hand, they dispose of a lot of time, not knowing how to pass it since they often do not have the financial means to undertake specific activities. One informant has huge problems with his actual situation, saying: “If you consume, you have to pay back. Only consumption is not good!” He suffers from the fact that for the next months he will not have any possibility to earn his own money, neither being able to do professional sports nor
any other kind of work. The fact that he gets a weekly pocket-money, that allows him to a certain extent that he can go shopping or go out without doing nothing does not make any sense to him.

This may also explain the danger that individuals who have lost any hope for a better future and thus are deeply despaired may drift easily into criminality. Moreover, the young people during the rite of passage from adolescents to adults associated with the forming of their own identity may become open for ideological ideas and may even get deeply influenced by extremist body of thought.

According to recent statistics of UNHCR (2005), 368,000 refugees applied for asylum in 38 industry nations in 2004. But the total number of refugees is significantly higher: about 17 Mio. people are ‘of concern’ to UNHCR, such as refugees or asylum seekers who crossed the borders of their countries, while other 25 Mio. people are considered as refugees in the inland because of civil wars or other internal conflicts. Thus, the issue of refugees is still a pressing one, also in western societies. These individuals constitute an important group of the population worth to investigate since politics as well as societies of industrialized countries are concerned with this specific phenomenon.

The refugees’ situation in an affluent society is maybe best pointed out by Hill and Somin (1996, p.208), although they referred to immigrants in the U.S.: “Unfortunately, when they arrived they often experienced profound disappointment at the lack of opportunity and overt or covert racism. National debate, of course, will continue to concentrate on the ethnocratic issue of how many, but a humane society also must consider the quality of life of these individuals once they exist with our borders.”

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the available literature about various subpopulations among the poor, there are, firstly, studies about poor U.S. citizens such as homeless people, people who move from one shelter to another, welfare mothers and their children, etc. Another interesting group are the immigrants in the U.S. Finally, former research of “sacred” possessions is relevant in this context as it depicts their meaning for the various subpopulations, also including the immigrants.

**Poverty consumption**

An example of the former type of study is that of Hill (2001, p. 162) who undertook ethnographic fieldwork to investigate the lives and survival strategies of various subpopulations among the poor in the U.S. such as homeless people, welfare mothers and their children or those of children who are in prison because they committed property crimes with the purpose to gain access to the material world presented to them by the media. Hill finds that these groups are excluded from the affluent society and have to face considerable constraints in order to satisfy their basic consumption needs. Thus, unlike the average consumers, they spend a lot of time in search of basic commodities.

This is best depicted in Hill’s stories about the poor (2001, p. 53). One of his stories for example is about a welfare mother and her child who is in continuous search for the fulfilment of her basic needs which has a substantial impact on her life as her decisions are strongly influenced by this fact (even regarding the choice of her man). Only after the basic commodities are satisfied, she detaches from material possessions considering them as merely functional objects not worth focusing too much on them. In other stories, Hill (2001, p. 3) reveals the homeless’ manner of acquisition and consumption of basic commodities by describing on the one hand the lives of homeless mothers and their children who depend on shelters for their lodging, food, and clothing. On the other hand, he describes the living conditions of other homeless people who try to live on their own by constructing their own homes of materials scavenged from construction sites and who earn their living by scavenging recyclable objects. Hill states that the homeless often use items such as for example clothes or shoes until they are consumed at their maximum and thus cannot be worn any longer. Moreover, they rarely waste food, even if it is spoiled. Consequently, they are considered as secondhand consumers because they consume what others have thrown or given away.

**Immigrant consumers**

Focusing on immigrants, Hill and Somin (1996) conduct long interviews with recently arrived immigrants and find that their informants, when confronted by reality, have “lowered their expectations” substantially regarding material fantasies. The few items brought from their home countries, “as well as customs such as food preparation, play an important role in the maintenance of the pre-immigration self”. As one of the “atypical” possessions is mentioned the acquisition of English language skills seen as indispensable for a successful integration into the foreign society.

In an overview regarding the acculturation of immigrants, migrants and expatriates, Mary C. Gilly (1995) cites two aspects of the cross-cultural living experience: on the one hand, the ways in which consumers adapt to and adopt their new culture’s products and behaviors and, on the other hand, the meaning of possessions. She describes emigration as a special challenge since it implies “daily cross-cultural consumer experiences” due to the differences in consumption concerning the “products available and the way of conducting transactions.”

Immigrant consumers face difficulties in the evaluation of goods due to little knowledge of the country as well as language barriers (see Penaloza 1989). McCracken (1986) demonstrates in his work the particularities of a “consumer society” and the cultural meaning of consumer goods drawn from a “culturally constituted world and transferred to an individual consumer”.

The ethnographic investigation of the consumer acculturation of Mexican immigrants by Penaloza (1994) describes their consumption experiences in the U.S. Her study leads to outcomes of assimilation, maintenance, resistance, and segregation.

**Sacred possessions**

When one decides to go and live abroad, this is always linked with the leaving behind of possessions as well as familiar products. Thus these may gain in importance “for the emigrant” (Belk, 1992). Certain possessions have a “deep meaning” for the lives of the informants because they are considered beyond the status of “merely utilitarian things” (Wallendorf, Belk, Heisley, 1988). They further note that some of these possessions even gain a sacred status as they are treated like sacred religious icons, and are therefore considered as priceless things and not as mere consumer products (see also Hill 1991).

Hill investigates in this context the meaning of possession and finds consistent with former studies that possessions representing a better life in the past or future hold symbolic value for the individuals (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Hill 1992). One respondent, for example, considers those items most valuable which reminds her of better times such as a small gift from her father and photographs of her family (Hill 2001, p.53). But also objects which symbolize ethnic or religious identities are meaningful (Mehta and Belk 1991; see also Belk 1988).

As a result of the actual political and social situation of refugees, it has to be emphasized that the investigation of this subgroup is important as they are part of our consumer society. This
work thus should contribute to a better understanding of these individuals and enhance the peaceful living together based on mutual respect and tolerance.

METHODS

The present study is based on ethnographic fieldwork, projective data involving collage techniques and long interviews with the informants. The fieldwork was performed in an Austrian shelter for adolescent refugees where one author acted as a volunteer for two months for data collection. By choosing the various methods, the prudent attitude of the informants waiting for the official permission to remain here had been taken into consideration. Thus, the ethnographic method should help to gain a deep insight into the informants’ lives, citing Hammersley and Atkinson (2002): “The ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned.” In this context, it was important to establish a trustworthy relationship with the informants. In order to fulfil these conditions, one author volunteered at the shelter between twice and three times a week for three to five hours and performed some work in the kitchen where the author got easily in touch with a group of individuals at the same time. The author usually arrived in the morning and remained until noon as this period of time was the most active part in the shelter (see also Hill 1992, p. 276). Sometimes, the author took lunch together with the people there and participated also at various events organized by the shelter such as a Samba workshop or a so-called “literature café” where several refugees recited their own-written poems. Such occasions provided an excellent opportunity for observation as well as talks.

In order to elicit detailed information and to learn more about the informants’ psycho-social characteristics (Levy 1985, p. 69) and thus, about their thoughts and feelings often unconscious or difficult to express for them, the refugees were invited to construct a collage, (also others used this method as for example Belk et al. (2003)).

This technique had been chosen in view of the specific living conditions of the informants, following Levy (1985, p. 80) who states that projective techniques often enable people to overcome constraints and express themselves in a more fully and subtly manner. In this case, such techniques achieve greater validity than traditional research because qualitative as well as quantitative methods may be limited (Belk et al., 1997, p. 24).

Therefore, the author met the informants twice for a couple of hours in the shelter. The first time, the informants were given various magazines and asked to choose pictures which would best express their perception of a material world as well as their consumption desires and to stick them on a big piece of paper. The next day, when they had finished their collages, they were invited to interpret them by means of short interviews.

As far as this technique is concerned, it has to be pointed out that the informants had been beforehand prepared for the issue of consumption, for during their German lessons they had been dealing with the various expressions regarding this subject. As they had never lived in a consumer society before, they had little or no knowledge about the meaning of the relevant terms.

Finally, to complete the study, long interviews were conducted according to the interviewer’s guide (see Table) with four voluntary male refugees at the shelter. The females, who constitute only a marginal percentage of the refugees, were not disposed to provide any information about themselves apart from the collage technique where they participated assiduously. The informants were between 17 and 18 years old and came from different cultures and social backgrounds.

Further, one interview was conducted with an African university teacher who came to this country about 20 years ago on a scholarship. Despite the different circumstances, he had made similar experiences and developed coping strategies similar to those of the refugees. Moreover, he was the director of a shelter for refugees for some years. Therefore, the information obtained from him represents an important part of this study.

The interviews were conducted in English or German depending on the informants’ language skills.

All the data gathered by the different methods was analyzed and the findings presented by means of four short stories including the collages to provide a “vivid portrait of the lived experience” of each informant (Hill 2001, p. 3). In this regard, the author used “thick description” as suggested by Geertz (1973).

According to former studies with an interpretative approach, subcategories of this research direction were identified on an “iterative basis” as discovered by the data during fieldwork (Fetterman 1989; Ozanne and Hudson 1989). The various points were discussed in the Findings of this work and emergent themes were identified to clarify the meanings inherent in these experiences for the refugees (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

Consistent with Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf (1988), Sherry (1990) and Hill (2001), real names were changed and their countries of origin not mentioned in order to avoid any identification of the informants.

Recapitulating, it can be stated that the decision for the variety of methods employed in this study was crucial for data collection. First, the ethnographic fieldwork established the necessary trustworthy relationship between the author and the informants. But only the collage technique enabled the authors to obtain relevant data because this method facilitated their access to the informants’ thoughts and feelings. Finally, both methods served for conducting successfully the final interviews which took place only at the end of the fieldwork.

FINDINGS

The findings are divided into the following parts: 1) insights into the refugees’ former lives and the reasons for their flight, 2) their experiences in an industrialized country with reference to the completely different way of living, focusing on the role of consumption, 3) their coping strategies in consumer behavior taking into consideration the significance of “sacred” possessions, and finally, 4) their future dreams and desires as presented in their own collages (see Fig. 1 and 2).

Having the results, it is important to point out that the informants are unaccompanied adolescent refugees and that most of them have been living here for less than a year.

Insights into the refugees’ former lives and the reasons for their flight

In order to provide an understanding of the refugees’ coping strategies in consumer behavior and with regard to their appropriate interpretation, it is important to portray their former living conditions. Starting with the question about the informants’ former lives two aspects become apparent: firstly, the reasons for their flight such as violence, oppression, persecution were still occupying their minds. An Asian stated: “People fear to express themselves in public. I didn’t even have the right to learn my mother tongue at school.” An African explained: “I did not run away in order to have enjoyment but to save my life. I fled the war!” This condition was...
1. Tell me a bit about yourself. (Probe for age, note sex and race, education, country of origin, mother tongue). Does anyone from your family or former friends live abroad?

2. How long have you been staying here? Did you live elsewhere in this country before coming to the shelter?

3. What was your image of this country before your arrival? (Probe for the political and economic system—same or similar products as in industrialized countries). How did you come to adopt this image? (Media, school, specific individuals).

4. What is your impression now? How do you experience the affluent society? (Positive and negative sides—probe for material things like shopping-centres, clothes, food, etc.; opportunities; restrictions, racism, etc.).

5. Tell me a bit about your day? (Probe for living in a shelter, structure of a normal day). How do you pass your spare time? (Hobbies, friends).

6. What did you bring from your home country that is especially important for you or what would you have brought with you if you had had the opportunity? (Probe for special possessions, especially “sacred” ones like photographs, gift, etc.). What do you miss from your home country and how do you compensate for it? Are there certain traditions or rituals of your home country which you still practise here? (Probe for cultural meaning in relation to the self).

7. How much money do you have at your disposal and how do you spend it? (Probe for coping strategy in consumer behavior). What did you buy first after your arrival and why? Do you buy some products of your home country here and why?

8. What are your expectations of this country? (Probe for future desires, plan for living).

Perhaps best depicted in an African’s collage (Fig. 1) that highlighted a skeleton reminding him of violence and death caused by a civil war. Also the following poem written by one of the refugees deals with violent death since it is about the loss of some family members in his homeland:

Sag mir, wo steht ihr auf dem Himmel? 
Tell me, where are you in the sky?
Wie eine Wolke so schön.
Beautiful like a cloud.
Sind in Frieden gegangen.
Gone in peace.
Nehmen Lieben mit.
Take the loved with them.

(Asian refugee, 18 years old)

The second aspect concerned the material situation in their home countries. The informants did not live in a consumer society and had therefore no access to the material world a middle-class family in an industrialized country takes for granted. One group of informants did not know anything about the country they fled to; the others only knew that it was a democratic nation and that people there had a good life. Thus, they had to face a completely new situation, learning to deal with the material world.

Experiences in an industrialized country

One of the first challenges confronting the refugees was the climate since most of them were used to considerably warmer temperatures; in addition, the refugees had to come to terms with the food and the German language. Only later did they have to face up to the issue of consumption and making consumer choices.

When asked about their perception of the consumer society, the refugees’ answers depended on the length of their stay here to date. Those informants who had only recently come to this country were overwhelmed by feelings of being lost, disorientation, homesickness and nostalgia for their families whereas those already living longer here were well accustomed to consumer society, appreciating especially the cleanliness, high technical standard, functionality and the high quality of life. One African stated: “Walking around is still like cinema to me! I can’t believe my eyes seeing all these beautiful things” (referring to the houses, cars, shopping-centres, goods, etc.). Another informant was particularly impressed by the shopping centres: “If you enter (the shopping centre), there is all in one. There is a big door, then lifts, light everywhere. You can either take the steps or the elevator. Ah, it’s beautiful! They are selling a lot of things there. It’s expensive, I know. But the beauty in the hall and the shops there, they are super, they are cool!” One Asian noted that he liked going into town and admiring the nice products shown in the numerous shops although he knew very well that he could not afford them and was thus restricted to window shopping. However, just the fact that he has the opportunity to enter a shop where so many of the goods promoted by the media can even be tried out for free, fascinates and provides a certain satisfaction to him. Most of the informants know the shopping centres of the city very well and are able to distinguish precisely the various kinds of supermarkets. Consequently, they know where to buy nice items cheap.

Nonetheless, the authors noticed that some of the refugees had serious problems dealing with the way of consumption here as well as the vast choice of products most of which they were not at all acquainted with as they have never been members of an affluent society before in their lives. They seemed being lost in a material world in which they were dropped inexperienced like babies without a real sense of how things were going on. As a result, they measured the goods solely by the different price levels. Only expensive items seemed desirable to them as a high price was
equalled with high quality and prestige. The author noticed that the informants’ perception of the material world was related with their desire to own a high number of brand products. This is comparable with the study of Dasgupta (1989) who found that Indian immigrants in the U.S. try to acquire “high-status material goods” in order to fit in.

Coping strategies in consumer behavior and “sacred” possessions

However, in practical terms, most of the goods and services on offer are not available to the refugees since they must live within the constraints and restrictions imposed by their legal and financial situation. Therefore, they develop their own coping strategies in consumer behavior. Some informants explained that they had a selective perception referring to goods they cannot afford—thus, they simply ignored them. Another method was not going to upscale boutiques in order to avoid “falling in love with too expensive products which one as a consequence would permanently think of and torture one’s mind about how to obtain them”, as one informant explained. Others said that they would plan exactly how to spend their money in order to fulfil their basic needs and wants. They compare the prices of the products in the various supermarkets. Moreover, they try to save money so as to buy a long desired item such as a mobile phone, a few pieces of clothing of a certain brand or simply to go out with several friends. On the other hand, some of the informants try to economize in order to dispose of some reserve in cases of emergency.

Despite their financial restrictions, most of the informants enjoy the fact that they can go to a shop and try out various consumer goods, especially mobile phones or the latest products in the computer sector. Being up to date with the latest consumption trends emphasizes their awareness to live in an affluent society which they appreciate a lot. At the same time, they may feel excluded from the consumer world, especially on occasions like this when they are surrounded by innumerable products they only can have a glance on it. Although they live here, they do not have access to the material world of average consumers due to their financial situation and they are not sure if they would ever have.

When asked what they would have brought from home if they had had the possibility, they mentioned only a few items such as photographs of their families. An African wanted to have his traditional bracelet and necklace with him as it was a sign of belonging to a royal family as well as of unity. These items would have tended to be “sacred” possessions (Belk et al. 1989; Hill 1991) because they were “symbolic of their previous lives and families” and “served to ground our informants in their previous ‘worlds’ and social identities” (see Hill, Somin 1996). For this reason, also the traditional food that the informants were used to, continues to play an important part in their lives because the ingredients, the way of preparation, as well as the taste differ substantially to the food they get here. As one of the informants explained, people were attracted by the little shops which cater to the nationalities. The products there, their taste and their labelling provide a sense of familiarity and cultural identity. To buy such goods is more than a trip down memory lane but in fact a bringing back of their experience of being at home. “Eating or drinking as I did at home means to have a kind of vivid connection to my country.” This was confirmed by the remark of another informant: “When I eat this rice (originating of his home country), I miss my [traditional] food—and also my parents.”

For this reason, they are looking for goods they know from home especially in the beginning of their stay. Some of these products, however, are not available here such as special magazines from their homelands or certain songs as well as some soaps, creams and perfumes of a specific brand. In turn, they get in touch with many other consumer goods which are completely new for them.
Meanwhile, they found some parallels between certain well-known products from home and those offered here, as explained by one informant.

By the time, they agree to a compromise in consumption patterns (Mehta and Belk 1991), as for example to food, they appreciate the meals offered at the shelter but when they have the possibility to cook for themselves, most of them often prepare some traditional dishes of their home countries.

Unlike immigrants, refugees usually arrive in the country they flee to with nothing else than the clothes on their back. Consequently, they do not dispose of any item of their home countries that might serve as transitional object providing to some extent security (Halpern 1968; Kahne 1967; Nemy 1986; Mehta and Belk 1991) and comfort like the so-called “security blankets” for children separated from their mothers (see Hong 1978; Passman and Halonen 1979). As compensation for the missing items, the informants focus on a few products they had acquired in the host country and that gained “deep meaning” in their lives (Wallendorf et al. 1988), amongst others also cuddly toys. The authors noted that surprisingly almost every refugee in the shelter owned one, even the male. This was also depicted in the various collages (see also in Fig. 1 and 2) of the informants. By means of observation and further discussions, it turned out that they had one in order to deal with the difficulties they encountered by living abroad, alone from their families, facing racism. Thus they clung to something providing a bit of personal security, in this case even to a consumer good.

Also mobile phones played an important role for the informants. Apart from the fact that everybody possesses one, they are also well informed about the latest models. In order to be able to purchase at least one phone offering more than the standard functionality, they accept the need to renounce many other items so as to keep up with the youths of industrialized countries, as noted by the remarks of the informants. Besides, it serves as an important means of communication as expressed by the informants saying that they would need it to arrange appointments with their friends, but mainly to be reachable for their families.

It was also striking that all informants wear an earring. When asked about the motivation for it, one informant answered, “because all of my friends wear one” and he wanted to be part of them.

Further, all informants mentioned clothing. Despite the financial restrictions, they, like the youths of industrialized countries, set high value on wearing smart, fashionable clothes preferable of a certain brand to impress people as one informant remarked: “People would say—oh, sexy, cool!” It procures him a sense of social affiliation to a group of people who define themselves by consumer goods. One of the refugees used to wear a red cap of a certain brand and comfort like the so-called “security blankets” for children separated from their mothers (see Hong 1978; Passman and Halonen 1979). As compensation for the missing items, the informants focus on a few products they had acquired in the host country and that gained “deep meaning” in their lives (Wallendorf et al. 1988), amongst others also cuddly toys. The authors noted that surprisingly almost every refugee in the shelter owned one, even the male. This was also depicted in the various collages (see also in Fig. 1 and 2) of the informants. By means of observation and further discussions, it turned out that they had one in order to deal with the difficulties they encountered by living abroad, alone from their families, facing racism. Thus they clung to something providing a bit of personal security, in this case even to a consumer good.

Apart from certain products, there are also some activities that have a very special, almost “sacred” meaning for them, namely sports, like football, and music. Since playing football was an important part of their former lives, practising it here reminds them of home and help them to accommodate to their new environment. On the other hand, practising a kind of sport or playing an instrument like drums (as offered by the shelter) are some of the few possibilities to pass their time, since they do not have the right to work. These activities provide some stability in their lives as refugees. Some of the informants even dream of a football-career, however, being aware that it would be very hard to succeed. But they make efforts in their daily training in order to be accepted by a club.

As to music, the informants are used to listening to English or American Pop music as well as to interpreters of their home countries, but their favourites are Rap music or HipHop. An African explained: “When I listen to HipHop, I forget my family. I miss them so much! (…) HipHop gives me a sense of delight.” Besides, he believes that the texts of those songs correspond to the reality like those of Bob Marley, “no matter you come from, no matter who you are, if you are white, if you are black, we are all one.” It helps him to cope with the problems he has to face as a black in a western country.

Moreover, according to the study of Mehta and Belk (1991), it could be observed that the informants treasure photographs of their families (are part of these items the informants miss most), food and music of their home countries as well as certain activities like sports or rituals like praying they used to do at home because they offer a “symbolic source of security and cultural identity” as well as a connection to their former lives and “some familiar continuity in behavior” (Mehta and Belk 1991).

Finally, the German language as an “atypical possession” is considered as a condition precedent to a successful acculturation and to economic success by the informants (Hill, Somin 1996, p. 207). Besides all these issues, the most important “possession”, however, is the positive official notification giving them the right to remain in a democratic and industrialized country which is crucial for their further lives.

Dreams and desires

Future dreams and desires are best expressed in the collages (see Fig. 1 and 2) being similar to those of a typical middle-class family as they wished to own a house and a car. But they differ with regard to their significance for the refugees because possessing such objects would go beyond the meaning of merely status symbols but imply a considerable turn towards quality and stability and thus towards a “better life” for the informants.

An African explained that his favourite house would dispose of many windows and glass-doors giving a bright, modern impression not comparable to the mud cottages in his country. Another informant said he would like to have a bright, modern apartment equipped with a stylish furniture, including a big refrigerator which provides enough space for a lot of food. Disposing of enough food has an essential meaning for all refugees, especially for those who suffered from starvation. In the shelter, it could be observed that these individuals took their plates full to the brim and gorged their meal as if they would not get anything to eat for the next week. One informant explained: “At home, I often ate some rotten bananas for dinner.” As to cars, all informants would like to have one as they consider them as prestige objects and they have a weakness for certain brands like also the youths here. At present, however, they do not aspire for one of a certain brand because just the fact that one possesses a car at all means something special to them, as they could not have afforded one in their home countries.

Also electric and electronic facilities are desired as they serve to make life more comfortable such as a washing machine, a television set or a stereo set. For some of them, a computer constitutes one of the most important items stating: “It seems that everywhere you go, people talk about computers!” Some of them aspire to a job in this field and would like to acquire the necessary skills for it.

In general, the collages are dominated by various prototypical consumer goods (see also Fig. 1 and 2), the informants daily encounter and it is noticeable that they are highly familiar with
brands, in spite of the fact that only a few number of items are available for them. Most of them declare that if they had the choice, they would prefer products of a certain brand rather than no names, especially with respect to clothing or electronic items as brands stand for high quality in their eyes.

Apart from these material wants, the informants wished to have a family of their own, one day. They prefer attractive, erotic and feminine-looking women wearing elegant or fashionable clothes with adequate accessories and jewellery as expressed in some of the collages (see Fig. 2). An African found that in his country, there were very beautiful women dressed worse than the Europeans but in his opinion the latter were very pale. One informant desired to be accepted inspite of being black, stating “Liebe kennt keine Farbe.” (Love does not look at the color.)

Further, it could be observed that due to the difficulties the refugees have to face abroad including the hardships they experienced at home, they became more sensible for values and attitudes and are concerned with issues rather unusual for people at their age. This may also explain the following statement of one informant: “Children are like angels! They cannot do any harm”, or the opinion of another: “The main task of a mother is to protect her child”, expressing his fear of violence and his longing for protection. Being alive and being healthy plays thus an important role for them since the respect of their lives and appropriate health care was not provided in their home countries. As a result, the informants put much value on cleanliness and a cozy atmosphere that should contribute to their health and pleasure. In one of the collages (see Fig. 1), there is the picture of an ice-bear having a “soft silky fur” representing strength and health. Also the perfumes refer to this tendency citing one of the informants: “If you put perfume on your skin, you make it smell nice. Having a pleasant smell means you are healthy.”

But the majority of the informants showed serious concern about their future situation: they neither know whether they will obtain the permission to stay in this country nor how they were to improve their financial situation from the day they had to leave the shelter. As a result, it could be observed that all of the young people were torn between feelings of hope and fear.

In a consumer society desiring is life-affirming. Since the poor members of the population cannot hope to fulfil their desires, they have to find other means such as avoiding to desire or imagine the consumption in their fantasies (Belk et al., 2003, p. 347; see also Hill 1991). However, not everybody succeeds in doing so. Some of the adolescents found that the best way to take their minds off their

![Collage of African refugee](image-url)
difficult situation was to sleep long hours. Others smoked a lot of cigarettes to get some relaxation. Depending on their religious identity, they hope to find confidence and sustain in the continuity of their religious practises. It was striking that some informants often mentioned “God” in conjunction with their future desires: “God helps me, maybe, to stay on my own,” or “Let’s pray that I’ll make it.” Others put their confidence in the help of the angels and some young men determine their lives by the rules of the Koran.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The experiences the informants had made here can be summarized by the following aspects: on the one hand, they consider the industrialized countries as a consumer paradise for those who fulfil the premises to take part in it. On the other hand, they often feel discriminated by certain rules established by a part of the society, excluding special individuals from the consumer world even having enough money. The African informants for example said: “We mustn’t enter the disco because the door steward said ‘No Blacks admitted!’” Other refugees remarked that they did not feel treated as individuals but stereotyped as asylum-seekers or criminals.

Besides, they believe that a high developed infrastructure including numerous shops full of goods attest to a well-functioning business system where new jobs are created and thereby a high living-standard is provided. They think that the citizens of the western world in general dispose of enough money to acquire the desired goods and services.

It was striking that although most of the informants have not lived in a consumer society before, they were well acquainted with a high number of brands which they considered as symbols of a modern way of life. Thus, they were longing for brands which seemed desirable to them expressing the lifestyle of the affluent members of western societies. This fact shows also their wish to be part of those individuals who define themselves by consumption.

The informants unlike the typical middle-class youth of western countries suffer from restrictions and must renounce a lot of things. They often feel like unwelcome guests waiting in front of the door for the permission to enter and to participate, instead they only can have a glance on a world in affluence and their wish to fit in seems unrealistic.

One substantial difference between members of affluent societies and those who are not part of them is that the latter have limited access to the numerous goods and services on offer. Thus, their consumer behavior is markedly different from the average consumer of western countries since their primary goal is to come along with their financial means in order to satisfy their basic needs.

Furthermore, due to their status as refugees in the host country and accordingly the feelings, experiences, and difficulties involved, consumption can take on a very special meaning for them as it may serve as coping strategy helping them to come to terms with the problems they encounter abroad.

The authors found that there are certain possessions getting a special meaning for the informants such as cuddly toys helping them to cope with loneliness or homesickness on the one hand and special pieces of clothing of a certain brand or even mobile phones giving them the feeling of being similar to the youths of the western countries on the other hand.

As the informants do not have the same security as the members of affluent societies that their basic commodities are met, they often imagine their future in fantasy how life should be like, serving as coping method.

Despite all the difficulties the informants have to face, they wish nothing more than to obtain the permission for staying in a democratic country where they are in safety and where their basic needs are satisfied. They cannot imagine to go back to their home countries citing one informant: “I only want to have security and the permission to live here because I am accustomed to so many things (referring to all the facilities and commodities) here.” Although the adolescents enjoy living in an affluent society and therefore aspire to become a member of it, they are highly aware that the respect of their life is more important than consumption.

In their desperate strive for remaining here, they would be disposed to accept also such opportunities which might seem strange to members of the affluent societies and not find their moral approval.

Hill (2001, p. 167) stated in his work about the poor, “when we remove our middle class lenses of affluence and opportunity and replace them with lenses of poverty and restriction, our understanding of how and why people become or remain impoverished is forever changed.” In the case of the refugees, it would also mean to take into consideration the reasons for their flight and the problems they have to deal with in the host countries.

Since there exist conditions in countries which will threaten people’s life, there will be always refugees fleeing to get in safety. In order to provide a climate facilitating the untroubled living together of different races among a society, the politics as well as the media are claimed to get over stereotypes and prejudices, so that a revise of people’s opinion can take place. For a successful integration of refugees who are a significant group in western countries, it is therefore important to develop strategies which take into consideration their particular consumption habits and avoid that they remain a disadvantaged group in a consumer society.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The first limitation of this research is that the author cannot be absolutely sure that the informants are political refugees rather than economic ones. But the various methods employed such as shelter fieldwork and collage technique depicting torture scenes or other signs of violence provided a deep insight into the informants’ lives. Having observed how they behaved and what they said, it can be supposed that the refugees’ flight was politically rather than economically motivated.

Other limitations of this study stem from the particularities of informants and of the field sites examined. As a result, it was very difficult to get access to potential informants. Due to the psychological and emotional state of some refugees as well as the fact that the procedure for granting asylum to the informants was pending, only four persons were willing to give an interview. In this context, it has to be pointed out that their approval to an interview depended on the trustworthy relationship established during the previous two months of fieldwork and that the interviews were conducted only in the end of this period and after having employed the collage technique. Only by means of this projective method, the authors obtained relevant data. Moreover, it facilitated a lot the interview situation as the informants already concentrated on this very subject.

As stated already in the beginning, the investigation of young refugees is interesting because they are in the rite of passage from adolescents to adults involving the process of forming their own identity. Although they are already shaped by the culture of their homelands and the experiences they made there, they, unlike adults, are more flexible concerning the adaptation and integration process in the foreign country as well as the development of useful coping strategies. The situation of adolescent refugees living in a shelter is a very specific one and as typical to the interpretation of consumer research not generalizable. A comparison between adolescents and
adults would have been interesting but it was not possible to obtain access to adult refugees in time as in general, it is very difficult to gain informants for such delicate issues as this of refugees.

While this work has provided an insight into the consumer behavior of adolescent refugees in industrialized countries, it remains a tentative glimpse into its subject matter. Many questions remain. Thus it is necessary that further research follows informants over time.

In order to obtain a more complex idea of the situation of refugees, there are a number of promising research directions such as the study of other refugee groups in other nations. One question worth investigating is the gender aspect, for it would be interesting to see to what extent the experiences of male and female refugees in a consumer society as well as their behavioral and emotional coping strategies differ from one another.

It would also be interesting to focus more closely on the cultural, social and educational background of the refugees and to examine whether or not these aspects play a significant role in their acculturation process.

Moreover, all informants who were interviewed in this study come from very poor countries. Further research is, therefore, called for that investigates refugees being from highly industrialized cities of threshold countries. This would be particularly interesting with regard to the fact that these individuals have already lived in a consumer society before.

Another question that could be addressed is the situation of children compared to that of adults. Do there exist some parallels as far as the challenges both groups have to face are concerned and to what extent do they develop similar coping strategies?

As to families, it would be interesting to examine whether they, as a closely-knit group, find it less hard to deal with the new situation than refugees who arrive on their own in the foreign country. Is it easier for families to cope with the difficulties arising from their legal and financial situation in the western world?

In this context, the meaning of sacred possessions in the phase of acculturation could be investigated and compared to the present findings.

The present study focused on refugees living in a shelter. It would be interesting to know how refugees who are accommodated in other forms of housing perceive their present situation of living in a material world and whether this has an impact on their consumer behavior.

Further, also the question about the future prospects of refugees could be examined to see whether they have a real chance of becoming a member of the affluent society or instead will remain poor and, as a result, at the low end of consumption. Therefore, it would be necessary to interview those to whom asylum was granted some time ago.

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