Consuming Global Brandscapes As Home

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This study examines the meanings consumers ascribe to global brands consumed in out-of-the ordinary settings. In an interpretive study of consumers temporarily crossing cultures from the U.S. to China, we show that contrary to conventional brand management dogma, brands take on different meanings when consumed in an unfamiliar context. Our study reveals that global brands take on the meaning of home not in the familial, material sense of the word, but in the phenomenological, metaphoric, and symbolic sense, and this home became a means for consumers to reconstitute their sense of self and make sense of their culture-crossing experience.

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SESSION SUMMARY

The concept of home represents one of the fundamental structures of orientation in time and space (Altman and Werner 1985), a salient aspect of the extended self (McCracken 1988; Tian and Belk 2004), as well as an important context of consumer decision-making and commercial exchange (Frenzen and Davis 1990; Grayson 1998). Contemporary life conditions have transformed emic notions of home and have increased the role of the market in the social construction of home (Bardhi and Arnold 2005; Miller 2001; Venkatraman et al. 2001). However consumer research on home and its influence on consumer behavior remain scarce. This special session attempts to a) examine the different influences that home has on certain consumer behavior aspects, such as consumption and meanings of technology, brand relationships and meanings, consumption of place, and family relationships; and b) advance our understanding of consumers’ relationships to meanings of home. Each of the papers in the session presents new, empirical studies.

The three papers in this session examine the relationship between home and consumer behavior in three diverse contexts under which the cultural framework of home becomes salient, such as cross-cultural consumer experiences as well as fragmented, mobile, and intergenerational families. More specifically, taking a domestic perspective, the first paper by Venkatraman, Coulter and Bardhi examines the relationship between home and technology among military families living in military posts. Through 18 interviews and observations with military wives, the paper demonstrates that consumption and meaning of technology in domestic spaces is influenced by consumers’ notions of home. Further, the meaning and use of technology are continuously negotiated as part of a consumer identity project of sustaining the moral economy of the home, characterized as the identity project of being the “stoic military wife”. The second paper by Bengtsson and Venkatraman looks at home and brand consumption in the context of cross-cultural experiences. The study illustrates how consumers’ relationships to brands change during cross-cultural experiences. These relationships are shaped by a much valorized interpretative framework of home. They find that global brands can become home symbols for tourists abroad by providing them with a sense of order, predictability, and national identity. The third paper by Epp and Price is part of an ongoing research project on family identity based on 23 intergenerational family dyads. This study examines how family identity is acted out to make the home as well as the ways that home shapes the family identity. The study argues that family identity defines the meaning and value system of the home and sets the spatial and relational boundaries of the home. As such, possessions and consumption practices associated with family identity come to symbolize and sustain the home through time and space.

This session contributes to consumer research in several ways. First, the papers illuminate two different ways that consumers relate to home. On one hand, home represents a moral and symbolic interpretative framework from which consumers draw meanings that shape consumption. As such, the session argues for the importance of research in developing cultural models of home from consumers’ perspective. On the other hand, these studies suggest that home is an important on-going consumer project carried out through consumption and as such not only structures consumer behavior related with it, but also is shaped by consumption processes. Second, these papers further suggest that the home models are situated in consumer’s socio-economic and childhood experiences. Third, the session shows that consideration of the home concept in consumer research shifts the research focus from an individual or a community unit of analysis to the much neglected mezzo level of family.

ABSTRACTS

“Harnessing the Power of Technology in the Home: The Case of Military Households in the US”
Meera Venkatraman, Suffolk University
Robin Coulter, University of Connecticut
Fleura Bardhi, Northeastern University

How do consumers integrate technology into the home? While prior research has investigated the ways technology has transformed the home, little is known about the ways that home shapes meanings and consumption of technology. Through a qualitative study of military families living in two different military posts, this research illustrates how meanings of home are being nuanced by technology and its use. More importantly, however, our research indicates the fundamental nature of technology to the meaning of home—to maintaining the day-to-day routines, nurturing the family, educating and entertaining the children, inculcating a sense of values, and sustaining the moral economy of the home.

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“Performing Home: The Storied Life of Objects, Spaces, and Identity Practices”
Amber M. Epp, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Linda L. Price, University of Arizona

Given the importance of home to consumers and the tightly linked ideologies of home, family, and identity (Carsten 2004; McCracken 1989; Oswald 1999), we examined how constellations of spaces, objects, and identity practices shape the participatory roles of particular consumption objects in the performance of home. Based on a longitudinal case study and 48 depth interviews with 21 families, we uncovered variations in family identity that are reflected in goals for the articulation of home. In addition, we observed that contextual shifts as well as object–spatial constellations that alter the roles of objects may in turn modify and displace self, relational, and family identity practices over time.

References Available on Request!