The Persistence of a “Traditional” Practice: Turkish Tea Encounters Glocal Changes

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We examine how a mundane practice, such as tea-drinking in Turkey, can persist in the global era of changes and diversity, and against the projects and values of modernity and globalization. We find that it survives through the ethos of “traditional” Turkish tea, (re)presenting Turkish culture - values of sociality, characteristic artifacts, and institutions such as the family. It continues by flexible interpretation and practice of canons which in turn afford measured inclusion of new materials and discourses; and through fleeting and/or punctuated enactments of sociality. We show that a routine can persist by becoming special in some spaces and at certain times. However, such transformation does not preclude its ongoing existence as a mundane practice. That is, the ordinary and the special are not divided realms.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1006952/eacr/vol9/E-09

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SESSION OVERVIEW

“The familiar is not necessarily the known”
G.W.F. Hegel

Things like pots and bowls, wine jugs and oil flasks, doorways and door knobs may appear uninteresting, but these objects are representative of the daily lives of past peoples, just as they are ours now. Such mundane, small things used in commonplace activities and ordinary places that housed such activities provide an important understanding of a dense anthropological and cultural texture of social phenomena and social processes (Deetz 1977). In consumer and market culture research, we have given only a scant attention to mundane objects, experiences, and spaces while most consumers, most of the time, engage in ordinary, routine, and continuous consumption practices entailing simple objects in plain spaces. This session turns the focus to the ordinary, the Hegelian “familiar.” By defamiliarizing and examining the familiar practices, objects, and spaces we hope to animate, gain new insights and uncover new perspectives into familiar consumption and market phenomena.

In consumer culture research the focus has been generally on spectacular or extraordinary consumption activities and spaces. Perhaps that’s because we are interested in change and transformation-processes which are generally associated with or more visible among so-called marginal groups, extreme behaviors or happenings, and magical spaces. This focus enabled the field to uncover experiential, symbolic, and resistive consumer experiences; it generated understandings based on identity projects, reflexivity, taste, social positions, and marketplace cultures and ideologies. However, with such a focus, the more mundane consumption, which might entail little reflexivity and may be slower-to-change, went unnoticed. We believe that a focus on the mundane will augment our understanding of consumer and market culture and changes thereof, while charting new sites of investigation. Hence, this session aims to raise two interrelated questions: 1) what can we learn from studying ordinary consumption and spaces; and 2) what can we glean about things that do not change or change slowly.

In broader social sciences, scholars have engaged with the mundane to some extent—common places, provisioning, sugar, laundering, bottled water, and so on—to provide important insights into the workings of consumer culture (e.g., Boym 2001; Miller 1998; Mintz 1985; Shove 2003; Wilk 2004). These studies suggest that the ordinary things, while usually consumed inconspicuously and unreflectively, often govern people’s lives and are tied to remarkable social-cultural processes and systems. Furthermore, while mundane objects, ordinary places and routines are agents of continuity, they often are facilitators of social change as well. This paradox is worthy of consumer research. The issue is however what kinds of empirical, analytical, and theoretical approaches and/or tools are required for consumer researchers to investigate the ordinary, hence the unnoticed, in consumption. Thus, in this session we challenge ourselves to reflect upon the potential of the mundane in enhancing consumer culture research and ponder over the ways mundane things, spaces, and activities could be studied both in terms of methods and ways of theorizing.

The papers in this session engage with the continuing expansion of the contours and repertoires of the Consumer Culture Theorizing (CCT) research domain (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The papers place the mundane—tea-drinking (Ger and Kravets), small stores where contemporary traits of store design have not been applied (Borghini, Sherry, and Joy), and unpretentious hot dog stands (Askegaard, Kjeldgaard, and Østergaard) –as an empirical base for their theoretical arguments. Each paper focuses on a range of cultural experiences in circulation, in particular, residues and continuities against the latest influences be it new tea implements, or new types of uses and forms of hot dog stands in Denmark, or moving away from unspectacular stores in Italy and the USA and emerging cultural changes. The authors focus on various tensions such as the dialectic between the attachment to and detachment from ordinary places in identity (re)construction, the memories and comparisons of the new and the old, romantic versus inconspicuous authenticity of consumption experiences, and the ordinary and the special. Finally, each paper explores the complex dynamics between the mundane and the extraordinary at the intersection of social, cultural, political, and market relations.

This session will contribute to the ongoing debates regarding the contexts, methods, and ways of theorizing in consumer culture studies. We expect the session to appeal to the researchers interested in consumption and relationships between markets, cultures, and everyday living. Because of the diversity of cultures represented by the research sites (Turkey, Denmark, Italy and the USA), and the thought-provoking undertone of the session, we expect a very lively discussion session. The discussant, Daniel Miller, will open the session up with reflections on his own research about mundane aspects of consumption. After the paper presentations, which we suggest to be fifteen minutes each, Daniel Miller will ensure rich opportunities for discussion.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The Persistence of a “Traditional” Practice: Turkish Tea Encounters Glocal Changes”

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When you arrive at the airport, a poster of Turkish tea in tulip-shaped glasses on a round tray with a tri-legged handle announces the welcome. For most people, a typical day in Turkey starts with the morning tea, continues with tea at work, and ends with tea at dinner. Turkey is more known for its coffee than tea; yet, it is the tea that greets one everywhere—offices, hospitals, buses, trains, restaurants, repair shops, and homes. In the streets, one can see a tea-waiter making his nonstop tea delivery rounds. In many workplaces and homes, the teapot continuously boils, so that steaming hot tea is ready all the time. Conventionally, tea is brewed in a double teapot and is defined by a slightly tangy taste and a ruby-red color and is served in tulip-shaped glasses that display the color. Like water, there is a single taste of some variety. While this conventional drink of any time, any place, and anyone continues to circulate, recently popular cafes, shopping malls, and vending machines promote world coffees, soft drinks, and flavored or herbal teas. Most recently, Coke acquired a domestic producer of herbal teas and started making black Turkish tea.

How can consuming something as plain as the one-taste, one-color black tea from a one-shape glass persist amidst the diversity of the global era? This is the question we seek to answer by exploring the continuities and changes in the tea drinking prac-
tice in Turkey. This empirical context provides an opportunity to examine the dynamics between the continuities, represented by the vision of “traditional” Turkish tea, and changes, fostered by strong market forces, such as multinational producers and vendors of coffees, flavored teas, and soft drinks. We explore the continuities and the discontinuities in the micro-practices, routines, and material constituents thereof, including the material aspects of tea itself. We examine how the slow-to-make, one-kind-only, and just “there” tea can persist against the governing projects of modernity, and globalization, ethos of consumerism, and the potent values of convenience, practicality, healthy or fashionable living, and choice. Through interviews and observations, we examine the nexus of the social and the material in trying to understand how materials and discourses afford and/or impede sedimentation and transformation in the tea drinking practice.

We find that tea drinking is a distinctly sensual aesthetic experience, animated by the “magical sound” of the kettle boiling, smell of a tea leaves blend, radiating color, clinking of a tiny spoon, warmth of the glass in one’s hand, and the melody of sipping. All cumulate into pleasures of tea drinking, which is ongoing, routine, and almost a background activity. Tea drinking is a cultural practice, implicating the cherished ideal(s) of hospitality, sharing, and togetherness. Indeed, it both brings about and helps to enact particular forms of sociality. We find that the continuities can be emphasized, negotiated, and challenged with new tea drinking implements. For example, the ruby-red color is reified as ideal and normal, when teabags offering this color are produced, when people choose transparent over foam disposable cups, and when they ask for a lighter (color) tea as opposed to “normal.” Likewise, the fast pace of life and the discourse of efficiency are negotiated through, for instance, adoption of larger tulip-shaped glasses, requiring fewer refill trips. That is, new materials and sensibilities take root alongside the old. Interestingly, this occurs against the backdrop of the rhetoric of Turkish sociality, and the discussions of why the Turkish tea would never disappear.

We learn that the tea-drinking practice survives through the ethos of “traditional” Turkish tea, as (re)presenting Turkish culture, its values and norms such as sociality and hospitality (at home and work), its artifacts such as the double teapot (large enough for sharing), and its institutions such as the family. It lives on by flexible interpretation and practice of canons, such as color, which in turn affords measured inclusion of new material implements and discourses. Importantly, the Turkish tea-drinking spirit endures through fleeting and/or punctuated enactments, such as backgammon playing accompanied by tea or the workplace sociality accompanied by tea. Furthermore, we see that the arrival and adoption of new tea-drinking implements demarcated the “traditional” tea drinking as a special and dedicated activity, in contrast to the ordinary, mundane, and taken-for-granted activity: a routine became a ritual to be engaged in on special occasions and times. When juxtaposed to the novel trendy mugs, colorful teabags, and fancy electric kettles, the well-worn tulip-shaped glasses, loose tea, and çaydanlık articulate and emphasize anew the significance and cultural meanings associated with tea-drinking practice in Turkey, such as hospitality, generosity, and sociality. Notably, the emergence of the “traditional” tea in some spatiotemporal realms does not preclude the continuation of its invisible existence in others. That is, contrary to Bourdieu (1984), becoming a sign of “good taste” did not make Turkish tea less accessible.

Overall, we highlight the movement between the ordinary and the special; the two are not distinct realms. We suggest that we need to focus on continuities when studying change, since the two exist in the context of one another. We show that such focus requires attending the (typically unnoticed) mundane, everyday activities and material matters, rather than the usual emphasis on the symbolic aspects of changes.

“Ordinary Spaces and Sense of Place”
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Commercial spaces have always represented meaningful places for consumers. From ancient times they have stimulated the call of the exotic, the magical, discovery and entertainment (Goss 1993; McGrath 1998; Maclaran and Stevens 1998). Nowadays thematized and experiential retail environments are more than the simple background of our lives. Leveraging aesthetic and hedonistic pleasure (e.g., Arnold and Reynolds 2003), such stores are the settings for pleasurable experiences in increasingly sophisticated ways. They celebrate consumers’ gender identity (Borghini et al. 2009), materialize personal utopias (Maclaran and Brown 2005), and provide therapeutic value and opportunities for spiritual growth, thus contributing to consumers’ culture and self-affirmation (Koznets et al. 2002).

The strategies of marketers are increasingly focused on the idea of designing and improving commercial settings in such a way as to generate specific experiences and meanings in consumers. The agenda of retailers is therefore full of interventions aimed at capitalizing on this trend by elaborating and enriching commercial spaces. Theorists have eagerly responded to this escalation of retail spectacle.

Our study challenges this path by looking at the meaningful bonds that consumers have with what we call ordinary places, i.e. small, informally branded or unthemed stores or restaurants. In the light of the dialectics of small and large, discreet and pervasive, hidden and manifest, placid and aggressive inspired by Bachelard (1964), these ordinary commercial settings fall into the former category, while themed and branded stores fall into the latter. The dimensions of our familiar places accord well with the reformist agenda articulated by Gronow and Warde (2001, p.4) in their exploration of ordinary consumption.

In analyzing the essence of store attachment, we reveal how the deepest and strongest links with significant commercial spaces are often the ones forged with those mundane spaces where contemporary traits of store design have not been applied. Data were collected by means of ethnographic methods including direct observation, in-depth interviews and the application of projective techniques. With the help of three research assistants trained as interviewers, about 80 interviews lasting between 10 and 120 minutes were carried out. Overall, the interviews resulted in a data set of approximately 360 pages. Our findings reveal a complex picture of the relations which consumers establish with commercial locations.

Places and emotions always intertwine, creating a fabric of memories and sensations which mark individuals’ lives and become part of their identities, their cultural and personal heritage. Ordinary, small places, undorned by any strong trait of brand essence or marketers’ intervention, very gradually become important and inescapable partners of their habitual visitors. In small locations which provide unobtrusive and discreet settings for individual exploration, consumers feel safer and more protected. The social pressure of fitting the positioning of the store brand to its visitors is almost absent. Social interactions with both salespeople and visitors are more intense, which reinforces emotional and social bonds. Thus, ordinary places come to remind consumers’ of their domestic settings, becoming like a second home, or a source of emotional shelter, to them. Additionally, original and distinctive