Negotiating Beauty: Local Readings of Global Cultural Flows

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Basing on cultural consumer studies, this paper focuses on tension between global mass-mediated consumer culture(s) and localized meaning making. The common discourse of globalization as global unicity is problematized with a study indicating that local historical and socio-cultural context is used as a resource in consumer sense making of global cultural flows. Specifically, the empirical research looks into how local readings of beauty are formed in Nordic (Finnish) context. Despite of acculturation into global consumer culture, local symbolic and mythical resources, such as the Finnish ideal of naturalness, were utilized in making sense of international advertising images.

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Negotiating Beauty: Local Readings of Global Cultural Flows
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ABSTRACT

Drawing from cultural consumer studies, this paper focuses on the tension between global mass-mediated consumer culture(s) and localized meaning making. The common discourse of globalization as global unicity is problematized with a study indicating that local historical and socio-cultural context is used as a resource in consumer sense making of global cultural flows. More specifically, the empirical research looks into how local readings of beauty are formed in a Nordic (Finnish) context. Despite acculturation into global consumer culture, local symbolic and mythical resources, such as the Finnish ideal of naturalness, are utilized by consumers in making sense of international advertising images.

INTRODUCTION

"Technology has now created the possibility and even the likelihood of a global culture. The Internet, fax machines, satellites, and cable TV are sweeping away cultural boundaries. Global entertainment companies shape the perceptions and dreams of ordinary citizens, wherever they live. This spread of values, norms, and culture tends to promote Western ideals of capitalism. Will local cultures inevitably fall victim to this global "consumer" culture? (Globalization of Culture, Global Policy Forum http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/cultural/index.htm)

Drawing from cultural consumer studies (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Moisander and Valtonen 2006), this paper focuses on the tension between global mass-mediated consumer culture(s) and localized meaning making. We look at how consumers draw from their local, socio-historical contexts to constitute and negotiate meanings for marketplace offerings and practices, using advertising as elicitation material.

In marketing theory there has been a tendency to think about globalization as described in the cultural homogenization discourse (e.g. Hannenz 1990; 1992; Appadurai 1990; Jameson 1998; Sklair 1998; Tomlinson 1999). In other words, globalization has become synonymous with forming uniform consumption habits, homogenizing tastes and ultimately erasing local cultures to the point where we can start talking about a global consumer culture (Tomlinson 1999). From this viewpoint, the mass-media, or the "mediascapes", is seen as a key vehicle in spreading global cultural flows (Appadurai 1990). The mass-mediated messages, advertising included, are played out as promoting relatively unified, typically Westernized or Americanized, tastes and norms. The cultural homogenization argument may seem overwhelming but there is, at least on the superficial level of visual signs, plenty of evidence to confirm such notions; people all over the world are consuming the same (American) foods, watching the same TV-shows and movies, listening to the same music, and wearing the same clothing and make-up brands.

However, in academic research, the view of globalization and cultural production has been questioned and problematized. Instead of taking global cultural production in the form of the classic "cultural transfer model" (McCracken 1986) where meaning is understood as moving in one direction from producers to consumers, it is rather seen as being produced in dialectics between consumers and marketers, where both consumers and marketers imbue and attribute meanings and values to marketplace offerings and practices (e.g. Peñaloza and Gilly 1999; Peñaloza 2000; Arnould and Thompson 2005; Firat and Dholakia 2006; Moisander and Valtonen 2006). In this sense, the global consumer culture cannot be seen as something that is imposed on consumers, as a standardizing force or the culture-ideology of consumption discussed by Sklair (1998), but something that is constantly negotiated and appropriated in the ongoing marketplace activities and interactions (Peñaloza and Gilly 1999). Thus, the interpretive framework that guides our analysis takes that consumers' consumption practices and meaning making stem from their local sociocultural, historically constituted contexts (Holt 1997; Thompson 1994; Thompson and Troester 2002), and these resources form the basis for negotiating and appropriating global meanings.

Many accounts have theorized the new global cultural economy as a consequence of intensification of human interaction, interconnectedness, and global consciousness suggesting that the world can be conceived as a ‘single social space’ (McGrew 1997, 65). However, we need to bear in mind that the global cultural economy is to be comprehended first and foremost as a “complex, overlapping, and disjunctive order” that cannot be understood only under such simplified conditions (Appadurai 1990). It is therefore necessary—as it is our attempt in this paper—to better understand the circulation of transnational and global cultural flows, such as global advertising, streaming large and complex repertoires of images and narratives to peoples throughout the world. These cultural symbolic resources play an important part in providing people with materials that they can use in making sense of their everyday lives and identities.

Hence, we regard globalization as a concept that has a tending towards ‘global unicity’ (e.g. Robertson 1992; Tomlinson 1999, 10-12). According to Robertson (1992, 26), this unicity is understood as a context which increasingly determines social relations and simultaneously a frame of reference within which social agents increasingly figure their existence, identities and actions. Thus, global unicity does not necessarily imply a simplistic uniformity, or world culture, but it is a complex social and phenomenological condition in which different orders of human life are brought into articulation with one another. In previous research, global unicity has been viewed as ‘global structures of common difference’ (Wilkinson 1995, 177) referring to tendencies to appropriate and translate global cultural structures, such as the youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), coffee culture (Kjeldgaard and Östberg 2007), or even beauty contests (Wilkinson 1995), to fit the local social-historical structures and particularities. These global but localized, i.e. glocalized (Robertson 1992), structures can serve as a certain kind of blueprint of how to live and act in consumer society. They also highlight the dark side of the powerful multinational conglomerates, who may work to erase local cultural particularities by bringing the global ways to localities (e.g. Thompson and Arsel 2004).

In this article our interest is on how this tendency to appropriate and negotiate global cultural unities in a local context is represented in consumers’ talk. More specifically, the main question guiding our research is: How is a specific historical and sociocultural context used as a resource in consumer sense making of global cultural flows?

The purpose of the empirical research is to explore how consumers discursively constitute and negotiate the notions and meanings of beauty, and make sense of their selves, using global...
advertising images as resources, and appropriating them to their cultural and socio-historical contexts and identity projects. The questions guiding our empirical investigation are: How do Finnish women draw from their local, socio-historical contexts to constitute and negotiate meanings of beauty from global advertising images? What are the culture-specific resources used in this sense making and meaning construction?

We attempt to approach this question through an empirical exploration of the discursive construction of beauty among Finnish consumers. Beauty is a fruitful concept for this type of analysis, as the ideologies and meanings related to Western (American) ideals of beauty have been observed to dominate the bulk of worldwide advertising (Griffin et al. 1994 cited in Frith, Shaw, and Cheng. 2005; Duke 2002); similarly to masculine ideologies (Holt and Thompson 2004) the beauty ideals circulate prominently in global mass culture. These conceptions and figures are championed in films, television, books, sports, music, and news, and act all as semiotic raw ingredients that consumers draw upon to construct their identities.

It has been suggested in advertising research literature that the ideals of (physical) beauty and attractiveness have diversified from dominant singular ideals and taking into account different ethnic groupings. According to Forbes et al. (2007) the Western standards have gone through an evolution in the past century from “the flat-chested flappers of the 1920’s” to the “curvaceous thin beauty icons of the 1990’s”. Martin and Peters (2005) conclude that the contemporary Western standard is based largely on three attributes, namely thinness, fitness, and attractiveness, whereas Sypek et al. (2006) see thinness and female body shape as main aspects associated with female beauty. However, the diversification of representations has been accused of being still very North-American centered; the notions of “short-haired brunettes and boyish blondes” that “have challenged the Christie Brinkley genre of tousled girl next door” and the “overtly ethnic girls” that are “stirring up the modeling melting pot” (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994), fail to acknowledge that the melting pot is still very North-American.

Furthermore, beauty and the ideals associated with beauty have often been seen as oppressive and tyrannical (Wolff 1990); for women physical beauty has customarily been the characteristic they are judged upon and evaluated against (Black and Sharma 2001), regardless whether they wish to follow the idealized standards or not. In the midst of this criticism it seems that, much like the notion of homogenizing globalization, the existence of the universal ideals is held self-evident to the point that they are not questioned.

Previous research has explored the ways in which consumers make sense and appropriate commercial messages and conventional ways of talking about marketplace phenomena to construct personalized consumption meanings (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). These studies have illustrated the role of the so-called Western perspective, or Western fashion pattern (McCrank 1988, cited in Thompson and Haytko 1997), as consumers’ frame of reference through which advertising is interpreted, and shed light on culturally idealized perceptions of beauty (e.g. attractiveness, fashion, and body image). Although many consumer and advertising researchers have pointed out the importance of embedding the study of consumers within their cultural contexts (e.g. Fischer and Arnold 1990; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990; Hirschman 1993) previous fashion and beauty research has centered on North American consumers (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Kates & Shaw-Garlock 1999; Murray 2002; Schouten 1991). While Thompson and Haytko (1997), for example, emphasize the possibility of a multitude of counterbalancing interpretive positions and consumer creativity in appropriating the dominating discourses to fit their personal circumstances, the context of their research seems in some sense limited; little is said about the negotiation and construction of alternative beauty discourses in the ethnically and socially fragmented American environment, let alone in non-American cultural settings.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To illustrate how consumers draw from global cultural flows to construct their perceptions and meanings of beauty, we looked into the discourses emerging among Finnish female consumers. To this end we applied group discussion methods (Valtonen 2005, 223-241) to analyze Finnish female consumers. To emphasize the role of visual rhetoric in consumer interpretations, we also employed projective techniques to generate richer insights (Zaltman and Coulter 1995; Moisander and Valtonen 2005), using print advertising as elicitation material.

We conducted five group discussion sessions with total of 24 participants, from 20 to 66 years of age, and from different occupational and educational backgrounds. The sessions were approximately two hours in length. The discussion took place in four different geographical regions in Finland, including both Southern and Northern Finland, and the capital region (see Appendix 1 for more details on the informants). There has been criticism for the overt focus on individual consumers, which, as has been argued, does not fully illustrate “the cultural and social implications of studied phenomena” (Firat and Dholakia 2006, 142). We thus also attempt to address this call to shift attention to other social contexts, and study the beauty phenomena with a more social approach in terms of our methodological choices.

Several international women’s magazines were chosen to facilitate conversation. A similar procedure has been applied in previous research (Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999), as magazines feature stories specifically geared to female consumers, and portray plenty of advertisements of products they frequently use. Furthermore, as the informants reported not only being familiar with, but also subscribing to the magazines, they provided a familiar setting to look at and talk about the advertising images.

The informants were asked to leaf through the magazines, and select images (advertising or other) portraying female characters that they found either beautiful/attractive, or unattractive. They were further asked to elaborate their thoughts; in what way they found the images attractive/unattractive; what they thought and how they felt about the images and freely discuss their views with the other informants. In the search of spontaneous reactions, and in order to ensure variation in imagery, the informants were also shown a collection of 40 pre-selected advertisements. In our instruction we did not restrict beauty to refer only to the facial or bodily attributes, but let the informants freely construct their own perception of what beauty consists of.

We understand the interaction process between the consumer and advertising as elaborated in reader-response theory (Scott 1994) in the sense of a dialogical reading experience between “a historically situated intentional author and a culturally informed self-motivated reader”. Thus, the possibility of multiple reading strategies, uses and motives for text are celebrated. However, we would like to emphasize that our interest does not reside in the structures of ads or their possible impacts on consumers/consumer responses to advertising but on how consumers draw and give meanings from them.

The group discussions were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The produced texts were read both independently and...
jointly, and analyzed using the basic procedures and techniques of discourse analysis as suggested by Burman and Parker (1993) and Potter and Wetherell (1987). The advertisements that informants referred to were documented and saved in digital form. The study is based on the assumption of discourse where the active role of language is emphasized in communicating and constructing meanings in human interaction. Language is seen as producing and constraining shared meanings that give means (e.g. accepted or countering ideas, vocabulary) for talking about and understanding social topics and phenomena (Burman and Parker 1993: 4).

FINDINGS – CULTURAL RESOURCES IN CONSUMERS’ BEAUTY TALK

In contrast with the idea of homogenous beauty ideals our informants talked about beauty in several different, partly overlapping, partly contrasting ways. Finnish consumers seem well acculturated in and informed about Americanized popular and celebrity cultures. However, it is difficult to see them as victims of American cultural imperialism or computer created, unrealistic beauty ideals. Although the female icons of contemporary global consumer culture (like Barbie, Lolita, and various Hollywood stars) are mentioned, the markedly Finnish characters are not absent either. The interpretations draw fluently from both contemporary Hollywood figures and Finnish national myths.

Natural beauties

One of the most prominent ways of approaching beauty in the group discussions was through the idea of ‘naturalness’, which was strongly linked to Finnishness, and to Finnish ideals of beauty.

“...she isn’t wearing any makeup. Like, if your skin is so illuminated like it seems to be, it doesn’t matter whether you’re blond or not, one is pretty when there’s isn’t almost any make-up at all.” (Sini, 26)

“This is a real Miss Finland, there’s joy, softness. She looks and feels natural, somehow positive. And she’s blonde” (Olga, 43)

The informants often linked naturalness to cleanliness and pureness, which culminated in the amount of cosmetics used. “Too much” make-up was associated with messiness, which could conceal or “ruin” an otherwise beautiful woman. The concept of naturalness was strongly associated with simplicity; not only is less more, but the boundaries of high-regarded naturalness were constructed rather to be strict. The pure, fresh Miss Finland was often contrasted with the “unnaturally beautiful”, “perfect” models or celebrities like Christina Aguilera, Pamela Anderson, or Paris Hilton.

The conversations repeated the ideal qualities of straight out of the sauna freshness and Nordic luminousness, both embodied in the iconic Elovena-girl. Launched in 1925, Elovena is a Finnish oatmeal brand, in whose package a drawing of a young blond girl with blue eyes, wearing a traditional Finnish costume, standing in an oat field with a bunch of freshly cut oats, has been featured for decades. In Finland the brand is often associated with a healthy life style as it is considered a proper basis for breakfast. As stated on the brand’s website, Elovena has come to embody not only the traditional Finnish beauty, but also “genuineness, Finnishness, innocence, rustic country life, integrity, solicitude, traditionality, and positivity” (Raisio Group)

Naturalness, which is repeated in the informants’ talk, has previously been identified as an important form of commercial fashion discourse (Thompson and Haytko 1997). This ‘natural look’ is, however, not to be equated with naturally transpiring or an easily obtained state of being, but it is rather another form of beauty ideal (Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999) which one has to work to attain. In the North-American context, consumers have been described as being preoccupied with different often extreme ways of dieting, exercise, or even painful bodily modification in order to conform to idealized beauty standards (Schouten 1991). In the Finnish context, on the other hand, naturalness needs to be understood differently; the ideal form of naturalness is something that comes about spontaneously, without effort. The natural ideal, which is on the surface level manifested as a particular type of non-descript appearance, stems from certain mental characteristics that are rooted in Scandinavian-protestant worldview (i.e. modesty, equality, value of labor).

Athletic and healthy beauties

Our informants associated the body and the healthiness of the body to their conception of beauty. The body was also seen as an essential aspect of beauty by the informants. In contemporary consumer culture disciplining one’s body in can be associated with both appearance and health pursuits (Featherstone cited in Howson 2004, 104). “Being fit” translated to beauty, though only within limits; overt athleticism, was seen unfeminine and thus also unattractive, described as “testosterone babes” or “bodybuilders”. Being fit was not, however, equated to being thin. Many of the informants mentioned Dove’s Real Beauty campaign as an example of advertising featuring healthy looking women who seemed to be comfortable in their own bodies.

“She’s not been tortured skinny. This [Dove] campaign is all about saying that all bodies can be beautiful when you have good skin. I still remember the women in [a Dove television commercial] where they had the potbellies and bouncy castle booties” (Elsa, 31)

In the Dove campaign the execution of advertisements has been unified all over the world. It has also received a great deal of media interest for its outwardly ground-breaking “focus on promoting real, natural beauty, in an effort to offset the unrealistically thin and unhealthy archetypal images associated with modeling” (Media Awareness network). The campaign has, however, attracted also criticism for seemingly expanding the boundaries of the ideal, but at the same time reproducing the very standards it sets to challenge by promoting cellulite creams and hair-shine formulas, and using size 4 models, when the true average size in the US is 14.

In the Finnish context the appeal of Dove can be understood in terms of equality values; beauty is promoted as available to anyone. Everybody can potentially be called to pose as a model, a role which has traditionally been very restricted and conditional to possessing certain rare physical qualities. In the last few years there have been a number of Finnish marketers introducing their own versions of

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86 / Negotiating Beauty: Local Readings of Global Cultural Flows
real beauty campaigns. Some recent examples include Finnish clothing retailer Seppälä, and a supermarket chain’s monthly customer magazine Pirkka. Seppälä’s campaign “Be the supermodel of your own life” campaign launched in 2006 depicts young “ordinary” women and men (girls and boys) modeling on television ads as well as in their catalogue. Pirkka invites “all aged and sized people” to send their picture to model in feature stories such as for example for beauty tips, cooking recipes, swimsuit modeling or exercising tips (Pirkka, 6-7 2007).

**Artificial beauties**

The informants voiced strong criticism towards the manipulating or handling of the photos and referred mainly negatively to the ‘photoshopping’ of the pictures. The so called photoshopped women were considered unrealistic and artificial. The informants analyzed spontaneously in detail where the pictures had been manipulated. In addition informants displayed skepticism in their detailed reading of advertisements, and questioned the purpose of the advertisements or judged the characteristics of a specific advertising category. In general, the participants displayed a high degree of advertising persuasion knowledge, and were conscious of the manipulations of the advertising industry. The manipulating of advertising images was almost expected, like the following comments illustrate:

> “Yeah, but she’s prettier with the dark hair. Somehow. But that seems really manipulated” (Sini, 26)
> “This [picture] has been tampered with. It’s L’Oreal’s ad, and it’s been photoshopped… but all the ads are” (Henna, 25)

Although photoshopping as a phenomenon was often judged negatively, it did not automatically prevent the manipulated images from being considered beautiful, even if in some cases they did not conform to the informants’ beauty ideals, and were considered a turn-off. Photoshopping of images, let alone the superficial, aesthetic modification of body through cosmetic surgery, also formed a common object for irony and fun making. In informants’ talk, this idea of genuineness or authenticity was clearly represented as a separate feature from the naturalness aspect of beauty. Authenticity/artificiality thus presents us with yet another, distinctive continuity through which beauty is interpreted and negotiated; a digitally unenhanced image does not necessarily guarantee naturalness.

**DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to the cultural consumer research investigating issues of global and globalizing consumer culture and localized meaning making. A number of research projects have sought to understand the new global cultural economy from the perspective of consumer research, for example by identifying global structures of everyday consumption practices (Arnauld and Thompson 2005); delving into global homogeneity of sub-cultures or consumer segments (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006); explaining global fragmentation of consumer cultures (Firat 1997); or the hegemony of global brands (Thompson and Arsel 2004). We believe, however, that further research is still needed in order to create understanding of how consumers negotiate global cultural flows, such as global advertising, by drawing on their socio-historical and culture specific resources in the sense making processes.

This study offers an alternative way to theorize the global structures of common difference. Wilk (1995) has argued that while “different cultures continue to be quite distinct and varied, they are becoming different in very uniform ways”. In other words, Wilk conceptualizes the structures of common difference to be organized and expressed along certain, global mutual dimensions; the variance of difference therefore being narrowed and constrained down to different objectified scales and measures of dimensions or standardized vocabulary for describing difference. This common structuration works as the homogenizing element of globalization.

However, our findings suggest that the dimensions across which the differentiation occur are also locally negotiated; for example the naturalness-unnaturalness dimension was appropriated differently in the Finnish context as compared to the natural look identified by Thompson and Haytko (1997) in the North-American context. Thus, while the extremes of dimension may have uniform labels (i.e. natural-unnatural), the meanings ascribed to these labels can be context specific, and draw from rich cultural-historical meanings and traditions. Thus instead of attempting to explore and identify certain global structures around which beauty ideals are constructed, we would like to bring into question the extent to which it is actually possible to assume common global structures.

On the other hand, the local readings of beauty drawn from global cultural flows demonstrates how international advertising, circulating and streaming large and complex repertoires of images and narratives to peoples throughout the world, is used in the sense making of their everyday lives and identities. Therefore, we see global cultural flows playing an important role in providing symbolic resources and materials for consumers but not necessarily in producing a global unicity of beauty ideals. For example, the Nordic consumers can be conceptualized as being well acculturated to the often Americanized media and popular culture, recognizing and being able to reflect on international advertising campaigns, identifying celebrities and evaluating their public images, and elaborating the advertisers’ motives to influence the consumers. At the same time, our findings imply that context specific and socio-historically grounded meanings and mythological resources were informing the consumers’ ways of understanding and sense-making of advertising images. The image of the Elovena-girl, for example, that was reflected upon in the advertising readings can be rooted all the way to the mythical female characters prominent both in literature and in arts, such as Aino in Finnish national epic Kalevala and Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s paintings.

So while marketers and advertisers may seek to hand down certain meanings to products and brands, and while their representations may become increasingly similar, the consumer experiences and understanding of them are by no means globally uniform. Therefore we wish to emphasize the importance of embedding the study of consumers’ meaning making processes to diverse socially and historically specific contexts in order to gain understanding of dynamics of particular local resources of global flows, as much of the cultural consumer research has centered on North-American context. In addition, regarding future research, we would like to study whether the Finnish emphasis on natural beauty and nature related myths symbols has a wider resonance in a larger Nordic context which can be seen as sharing similar e.g. societal, environmental, religious conditions.

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Pirkka-lehti no. 6-7, 2007.


Seppälä Supermodel of your own life campaign. Avaiable at: http://www.seppala.fi


**APPENDIX 1**

In Informant Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Place of living</th>
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<td>Allisa</td>
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<td>Aune</td>
<td>64</td>
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