Generation Y on the Move: How Consumer-Brand Relationships Act As Coping Mechanisms

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Utilising a longitudinal research design to explore inexperienced Generation Y sojourners’ consumer acculturation sheds light on the importance of consumer-brand relationships in mobility. Home brands are sacralised similar to special object possessions whilst host brands are seen as ‘holiday romances’, post-return acting as bearers of the experiences gained abroad.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In today’s globalised world, transnational mobility has become almost a necessity, as young adult consumers increasingly facilitate short-term interactions with foreign cultures to establish their individualized life paths (Bauman 1998; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Wiers-Jenssen 2008). For younger consumers, short-term travels abroad are nowadays regarded as rite-of-passage into adulthood and student or work life (van Gennep 1960) in addition to establishing high-profile curriculum vitae (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003). The youth and student travel segment, consisting mostly of Generation Y (or ‘Millennial Generation’) consumers, currently represents 20% of global tourism, underscoring the increased economical significance of these consumers’ global intercultural exchanges (WySE 2012). As a consequence of their initial temporary dislocation, young adult consumers are confronted with the loss of their familiar home brandscape (or totality of brands available) whilst negotiating through an oftentimes relatively unfamiliar brandscape (Biel 1991; 1993; Sherry 1998). The aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998) help young consumers cope with cultural change and negotiate a relatively unfamiliar brandscape in the local host.

The increasing prevalence of transnational mobility has led consumer behavior researchers to investigate the consumer acculturation of permanent immigrants moving to the United States (Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983) and, more recently, from and to non-North American countries (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah 2004; Luedicke and Giesler 2009). Whereas this stream of literature has primarily focused on immigrants’ movement and adaptation to the host culture, in both the assimilation and post-assimilation phases, Bengtsson, Bardhi, and Venkatraman (2010) explored global brand consistency and meanings using mass tourists whilst Rahman and Cherrier (2010) provided a one-off snapshot of international tertiary students’ feelings for brands in a host culture. Additionally, Thompson and Tambyah (1999) and Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould (2012) investigated affluent expatriates’ cosmopolitanism and elite global nomads’ liquid relationships to possessions respectively. The latter two papers illuminate that experienced and mostly affluent mobile professionals are accustomed to a life of constantly being ‘on the move’ (Sheller and Urry 2006), resulting in a heightened cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) allowing for the navigation of the particular local host brandscape.

However, young consumers are socialized to effectively function as consumers only in the home culture (Ward 1974), building a personal brandscape “with marketplace products, images, and messages that they invest with local meaning” (Sherry 1998). This, in turn, allows them to define their identity, make sense of the world around themselves and navigate through everyday life with the assurance that key brands will provide the essential tools to help resolve arising life themes (Belk 1988; 1991; 1993; Fournier 1998; 2009). During a sojourn, young consumers may experience a state of liminality (van Gennep 1960), separated from their favourite brands and not yet accustomed to the local brandscape. Therefore, we ask: Do, and how do, young sojourners cope with cultural change in a relatively unfamiliar brandscape?

We conducted multiple in-depth interviews and participant observation in form of shopping with consumers (Otnes, McGrath, and Lowrey 1995) with 23 female German au pairs prior to, during and after living and working within a New Zealand host family. The informants belong to Generation Y, ranging from 18-26 years, were recent high school or apprenticeship graduates, and came from middle-class families of which many had never travelled outside of Germany before. The suitability of the sample for this study was based on a) female consumers’ possession of stronger relationships to fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) brands (Fournier 1998), and b) Germany’s representation of being the number one source country for au pairs and their role as integral part of a host family (IAPA 2011). Data collection and analysis was iterative (Spiggle 1994).

Our findings demonstrate that understudied Generation Y sojourners are in a unique transition period as they undertake an independently organized rite of passage, separated from their home network (family, peers, institutions) and shared consumption symbols and rituals defining their group membership (Belk 1988; van Gennep 1960). Initially lacking the necessary social and cultural capital to participate in the host, acculturation issues such as homesickness and culture shock arise. Especially in this liminal phase, similar to special possessions (e.g. photos, jewelry) investigated in prior research (Mehta and Belk 1991; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), home brands are sacralised. Unlike global nomads (Bardhi et al. 2012), young sojourners possess close home brand attachments in form of strong commitment and even dependency (Fournier 1998), indicated by the active search for familiar brands in New Zealand’s diverse brandscape which culminates in the request of care packages sent from home, even though a return home is foreseeable. Contrary to mass tourists’ experiences (Bengtsson et al. 2010), tensions arise between established home brand relationships and the constant exposure to the brandscape of the host family to which the au pairs inevitably need to adapt. Using the host family as consumer socialization agent, these young sojourners eventually become experimental with host brands, resulting in ‘holiday romances’ that last for the duration of their stay and which, post-return, act as reminders of the experiences gained abroad. Both home and host brands are used as country-specific artifacts during and post-return respectively, bridging the gap between the two cultures and letting the respective Other hyper-experience the home or host in form of tasting, smelling, and trying typical branded products.

This study contributes to consumer acculturation research in three ways: 1) Exploring Generation Y, first-time sojourners, situated between mass tourists and expatriates / global nomads regarding the permanence of their stay and predictability of their return, sheds light on an understudied but economically important acculturating group; 2) Young sojourners experience particular acculturation issues due to their inexperience with independent travels, undergoing a liminal phase where they cope with homesickness, culture shock and the lack of social and cultural capital; 3) In mobility, some home brands are sacralised similar to special possessions, bridging the gap between home and host, whilst some host brands are seen as ‘holiday romances’.
REFERENCES


