When Starbucks Meets Turkish Coffee: Cultural Imperialism and Islamism As 'Other' Discourses of Consumer Resistance

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Prior studies situate consumer resistance as a postmodern and postmaterialist reaction to a permeating consumer culture, excessive materialism, and controversial marketing strategies. This research extends existing literature by examining alternative discourses and practices of consumer resistance as shaped by economic, cultural, social, and political consequences of globalization in a developing country context. Cultural imperialism and Islamism are identified as the prominent discourses while situational resistance and concessionary acceptance are found to be culturally idiosyncratic practices of consumer resistance in this context.

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Global brands such as Starbucks, McDonalds, and Nike present marketers tremendous opportunities for growth beyond the saturated shores of American and European markets. The prestige and quality associated with global brands often make them the foci of consumer desire in developing countries. However, their association with powerful nation states and multinational corporations can also render global brands to diverse consumer interpretations. For example, global brands are perceived as symbols of cultural imperialism, threats to national sovereignty, and even enticements of infidel. Such interpretations materialize in both subtle and overt consumer reactions ranging from individuals’ refraining from a particular global brand to vandalism of businesses (Economist 2000).

This form of consumer behavior is theorized as consumer resistance. Past research has conceptualized consumer resistance as a reaction against a permeating consumer culture and hegemonic consumerist ideology, excessive materialism, and controversial marketing strategies ( Penalza and Price 1993, Ozanne and Murray 1995, Firat and Venkatesh 1995). It has been argued that this consumption bonanza leads to a loss of authenticity and meaning. This, in turn, is seen as the basis for a rise in defiant consumers, trying to evade the mainstream marketplace by pursuing alternative lifestyles such as voluntary simplicity or downshifting ( Elgin 1981, Schor 1998). Extending that research, Holt (2002), Kozinets (2002), and Thompson and Arsel (2004) conclude that resistance is a postmodern and postmaterialist phenomenon through which consumers engage in socially and environmentally conscious, anti-materialist, and anti-corporate discourses and practices as they seek authenticity and personal sovereignty in everyday life. However, interpretations of consumer resistance as a postmodern, postmaterialistic phenomenon are not readily applicable to consumer resistance in developing countries. In developing countries, it is not affluence and malaise that shape consumer culture, but rather poverty, unemployment, devaluation of local currency, lack of opportunities for education, migration, corruption, failed state policies, and social polarization.

This research extends the existing literature by examining consumer resistance in a developing country context in light of economic, cultural, social, and political consequences of globalization. More specifically, this study analyzes resistance as a consumer reaction against not just consumer culture and marketers’ practices but also globalization and the problems it bears for consumers in everyday life. Anti-globalization sentiments underlying consumers’ anti-corporate reactions have been addressed by previous research through an examination of Starbucks’ influence on other American coffee shops (Thompson and Arsel 2004). However, cross-cultural contexts, undoubtedly, better represent the full scope of economic, cultural, social, and political tensions that global-local encounters bear. In other words, consumer resistance emerges at full throttle when Starbucks perceptively threatens the reign of Turkish coffee in Turkey. Not surprisingly, the discourses and practices of resistance that such an encounter engenders, as identified through this research, are quite distinct from those noted in previous studies.

The data of this study has been collected over three months of fieldwork in Turkey, a developing country with a prominently Muslim population. Turkey as a transitional country, with its rapidly developing consumer society despite increasing poverty rates, offered a natural setting to observe and understand alternative motivations and practices of consumer resistance as informed by globalization in a non-Western Muslim context. The researcher is a native of Turkey; being fluent in Turkish language and well-versed in local culture has allowed the researcher to establish ethnographic credibility with the informants studied and construct a culturally informed account of resistance in this country context.

The ethnographic fieldwork involved in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and consumer diaries. Thirty depth interview respondents were identified through snowball sampling, a technique frequently applied in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases through social networks ( Patton 2002). Informants were selected from low, middle, and high socio-economic status to capture diverse reactions to globalization and resistance to global brands. The sample included twelve Islamist women and their family members to account for the recent surge in the interest in political Islam among Turkish consumers.

The analysis of interview transcripts, informant diaries, and researcher’s field notes revealed resistance toward many global brands including Coca-Cola, Nestle, McDonalds, Microsoft, Marlboro, Nike, Starbucks, and Shell. In particular, this study identified discourses of cultural imperialism and Islamism as prominent motivators of consumer resistance in this field site.

The discourse of cultural imperialism this research identifies is especially noteworthy given that it challenges recent anthropological theories of ‘hybridity’, ‘creolization’, and ‘glocalization’. In response to claims of imperialism and cultural homogenization, these theories contend that elements from various cultures can be selectively appropriated to structure ‘hybrid’ forms of meaning-making and behavior leading to heterogeneity of cultural expression (Appadurai 1990, Featherstone 1991, Hannerz 1987, Robertson 1995). However, despite anthropological claims of cultural heterogeneity, this research suggests that the discourse of cultural imperialism continues to function as a folk theory that influences consumers’ narratives of resistance in Turkey as evinced in the following informant quote:

McDonalds, Marlboro, Coca Cola, and what is that kahve [café] that all the rich kids go today, oh, Starbucks-I think all of these brands are the instruments of imperialism. These are all polluting our country and our language. Everywhere you look there is a foreign word, brand, or poster. Even in local store names, now they use, let’s say, ‘star’ instead of yıldız to promote admiration for Western culture in an insensible way. Or perhaps they’re [referring to the present and past ruling parties] deliberately preparing the country to be a colony; brainwashing people, destroying the local culture… ( Vural, Artist, Male)

1 I utilize Saktanber’s (2002, p. 257) use of the term Islamist as individuals who are not just “much more pious than other Muslims, but also search for an alternative Islamic life politics and new social order”. This meaning of the term also concurs with Sandıkçı and Ger’s (2005, p. 80) use of Islamist as “those who are politically religious to distinguish it from secular Muslims who are believers without an affiliation to political Islam”.

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Such consumer narratives become even more striking considering Turkey, unlike other developing countries of Asia and Africa did not experience any direct colonial rule. Accordingly, these narratives may suggest that colonial history may indeed motivate consumer resistance in emerging markets of Latin American, North African, and some Southeast Asian countries that fall behind India and China in participating in the global economy.

In addition to the discourses of cultural imperialism and Islamism, this study identified situational resistance and concessionary acceptance as emergent practices of resistance, shaped by the socio-historical conditions peculiar to this field site. For example, concessionary acceptance is a curious form of resistance that requires consumers to break their resistance stance and foreground ideologies by consuming global brands in the absence of satisfactory local alternatives. Even though consumers yield to the global brand, the consumption practice entails a great deal of reluctance, regret, and a fervent criticism of import substitute industrialization policies of 1960s. These statist policies are condemned for providing a protectionist environment for local industrialists to thrive in the absence of adequate regulation and direct foreign competition at the expense of consumer safety and product quality; yet they were tolerated at the time for the nationalist development ideology they espoused (Zürcher 2001). The following informant quote vividly describes the dilemma consumers experience in practicing concessionary acceptance and reluctantly yielding to global brands:

I wish we had not witnessed the Anadols (first mass-manufactured Turkish car by a joint venture with Ford) on fire. Who knows how many people died because these cars would go on fire out of the blue? There were rumors about a missing bolt causing these fires...that it just cost, I don’t know, 30 or 50 kurus (one hundredth of a Turkish Lira) but Koç (local partner of JV) wouldn’t use it to save money...I truly want to support the local industry but after all that one has to be stupid to do that. With small items like I don’t know, a mixer or toaster, it is okay, like my food processor is Arçelik (produced by Koç)...but when we need an appliance I go for a Siemens, Bosch, or Miele. (Ayse, Manager, Female)

Collectively, these discourses and practices suggest nuanced meanings and ways of consuming global brands that have not been well explored in the extant literature. Interpretations of global brands as “colonizers” or “infidels” are striking in this country context given lack of Turkey’s experience with direct colonial rule and commitment to a secular democracy, yet become intelligible when read in light of the country’s prolonged experimentation with modernization, democracy, and globalization. As such, these discourses and practices cannot be simply attributed to ethnocentrism or anti-Americanism.

In conclusion, this study extends both the conceptual and the geographical scope of research on consumer resistance by introducing new discourses and practices of resistance through an examination of the phenomenon in a developing country context in view of globalization. This research may also offer insights into consumer resistance in other emerging economies experimenting with modernization and democracy, as well as countries with colonial history.

References