Consuming Community: the Impacts of Mainstream/Marginal Social Relations on Community Development

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Drawing from a multiyear ethnographic study of Mexican American community in South Texas, U.S.A., I examine various forms of consumption and detail their impact on community development. Discussion elaborates distinctions between this group and the White mainstream and details various forms and sites of their consumption in tracing their respective impacts on the development of the Mexican American community.

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SYMPOSIA SUMMARY

Bridging Cultures: Theorizing the Spaces between Disciplines, Peoples and Consumer Identities

Laurel Anderson, Arizona State University, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

The goal of this session is to advance research and stimulate multi-disciplinary debate on current issues in cross-cultural consumer behavior that have emerged in relation to dramatic changes in society at large. Market globalization, ethnic conflict, massive population upheaval and displacement, and the deconstruction of national cultures characterize the 21st century and demand a rethinking of a broad spectrum of acculturation models of consumer socialization (Hirschman 1981; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983; Deshpande’, Hoyer and Donthu 1986; Stayman and Deshpande’ 1989; Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994). By bridging differences between various units of analysis, theoretical frameworks, ethnicities and ‘contact zones,’ this symposium proposes a multi-dimensional approach to cross-cultural consumer behavior that defies reduction to an oppositional in-group against out-group–“us against them” model. The four papers strive to account for multi-directional movements of meaning, material, and power between and among consumers and consumer groups.

The authors shift the focus of cross-cultural consumer research from the study of ethnicity per se to the fluid and dynamic process joining/separating ethnic groups in various material, figured and virtual zones which serve to structure social interactions, activities, and institutions such as networks, media, organizations, and markets. This approach foregrounds the complexity and fluidity of cultural identity, socialization and consumer behavior (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1973: 77; Bell, 1980: 243) and the strategies consumers employ to navigate these complex and ever-changing social spaces.

The likely audience for this session includes marketing and public policy researchers and practitioners interested in:

1. the sociology of consumption at large, focalizing on the dialogical deployment of products in mainstream-minority market and social negotiations (e.g., value conflicts, cultural capital elaboration, construction and deconstruction of social boundaries);
2. consumer ethnic studies, covering theoretical domains such as postassimilationist, cross-cultural and international research on consumer behavior, identity, transculturation.
3. transformative consumer research, since the evolution of ethnic and cultural studies suggests implication in terms of consumers’ quality of life and community development.

- In the first paper, Anderson articulates a “third space” in the dialogue/bridge zones forming and differentiating ethnic cultures. She also examines the fluidity of acculturation and “reculturation” strategies across generations and at developmental points in consumer’s lifetime.
- In the second paper, Visconti documents cultural alternating identities of Egyptians rooting in the Italian socio-economic context. If alternation enforces win-win logics of acculturation processes and supports multiculturalism and individual flow experience, it also makes harder immigrants’ categorization, leading to possible subjective uncertainty and social distrust.
- Next, Oswald examines ways the minority experience engages multiple stakeholders in a complex, bi-directional dynamic of sharing, borrowing and bartering back and forth across ideological lines formed by race and ethnicity.
- And finally, Peñaloza reverses the direction of the usual ethnic research in examining the dialogue and impact of mainstream consumers’ consumption of Mexican-American cultural artifacts on the development of Mexican American community.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Dynamic Inbetweeness: Ethnic Consumer Dialogue Zones”
Laurel Anderson, Arizona State University

Disparate and contrasting ethnic cultures with their collective voices play a part in the development of multi-voiced consumers. Consumer researchers have discussed aspects of moving between ethnic cultures (c.f. Stayman and Deshpande’ 1989, Peñaloza 1994, Oswald 1999, Askegaard, Arnold, Kjeldgaard 2006). This research focuses on the process dynamic of going between cultures and finds a dialectic that illuminates an inbetweeness space—a third space. Inbetweeness is the space at the bridge, the crossing and intersection of two cultural worlds, two points of view, two sets of evaluations, two voices trying to talk over each other—a dialogic collision. The people that operate in this third space at the margins of two cultures deal with conscious agency, sometimes irreducible differences between cultures, constant dynamism. Thus this research focuses on the bridging space between two ethnic cultures.

Regarding ethnic inbetweeness/a third space, one informant says:

“There is a group of us, and it’s not small anymore, that go through that. Only those that go through that understand what you feel like because of the choices you made. That group has evolved into a subgroup of us…”

This ethnographic research focuses on Mexican-American professionals whose careers exist in the mainstream world. These consumers must operate competently in both the mainstream culture and the Mexican-American culture. Photo essays developed by participants, in-depth interviews and observations were used to explore these dialogue zones between the Mexican-American culture and the mainstream culture. Extensive improvisation is found (Bakhtin 1987, Bourdieu 1997), creativity and resourcefulness by the individuals that inhabit this space. Improvisation creates new social competences in newly figured worlds at the margins of culturally regulated space and time. The resources of the two original cultural worlds are used opportunistically—yet sometimes without the regulations of the overarching cultural structure of those worlds. It is this component that is unpacked in this research. Improvisation commands our attention because without this attention to it we may miss the back and forth of engagement with different ethnic cultures. Furthermore, it celebrates consumer agency.

This data finds in particular:

1. Dynamic inbetweeness occurs at different levels and is especially pronounced in three different dialogue zones: between home and work, at different developmental points in life and between generations.
2. Creativity and improvisation often occur in these dialogue zones through the consumption of symbols/products. Two creative uses of symbols are especially pronounced: utilization to ensure that others that enter their dialogical zones are “comfortable,” and utilization as triggers or pivots to enter one or the other of the cultural worlds.

3. This process is often one of conscious agency. The cultural and cognitive heuristics of one cultural world that allows an individual residing in that culture to be a cognitive miser are not available in the inbetweeness space. There is a vivid consciousness that one must be making choices. The social structure of the cultural worlds is made more vivid along with an implication for change.

Luca M. Visconti, Bocconi University

The multicultural stream is smoothing the stony definition of nation, and marketplaces are arenas where ethnic minorities and mainstream consumers, together with marketers, negotiate their identities through artifacts cross-consumption (Grier, Brumbaugh, and Tortone 2006). In this light, my ethnographic work on Egyptians in Italy acknowledges the idea of ethnic identity as: (i) situational (Stayman and Deshpande 1989), (ii) diasporic and hybrid (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005; Lindridge, Hogg and Shah 2004; Oswald 1999), (iii) socially embedded, and (iv) controversial as a result of problematical processes of migrants’ self/social categorization. Relying on this basis, the work aims to bridge the micro and macro contributions in the field of ethnic acculturation through the specific lens of cultural alternation (Berry, 1980). As such, the paper discusses the way ethnic consumer identity and practices (Peñaloza 1994) are intertwined with the socio-cultural patterning of consumer acculturation (Üstünér and Holt 2007). (Trans)-cultural psychology has long confirmed how cultural adaptation may lead to multiple exits (Berry 1980; Laframboise, Coleman and Gerton 1993), including acculturation, assimilation, rejection, deculturation, and cultural alternation. Alternation stems from a state of migrants’ double cultural competence/consciousness (DuBois 1961), which endorses a win-win logic of cultural encounters. Dynamically, it hypothesizes that migrants can combine or switch to different cultural identities according to situations, social ties, emotions, goal-achievement tactics, rituals, etc.

Reverting to the consumer literature, assimilation and acculturation have been largely described, whereas cultural alternation has remained almost at the margins. Postassimilationist ethnic studies have elaborated close constructs, such as those of border crossing individuals (Peñaloza 1994), cultural swappers (Oswald 1999), or diasporic (Lindridge, Hogg and Shah 2004) and pendulum identities (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005). Recently, Üstünér and Holt have unpacked the social conditioning to creolized identities when discussing the case of Turkish women living in a squatter in Ankara (2007).

If the more micro approach has been labeled “postmodern consumer acculturation” and opposed to the socio-centered, macro view defined “dominated consumer acculturation” (Üstünér and Holt 2007), this work aims to reconcile the micro/macro lectures. Consequently, it explores the antecedents and play of culturally alternating identities so to: (i) untangle the subjective impact of the socio-cultural forces on migrants’ life/market experience; and (ii) appreciate the resources and individual strategies that migrants deploy to cope with these supporting/oppositional social forces.

Data are the result of a two years field observation on a purposive sample of 21 Egyptian immigrants, selected according to variety and contrast principles (Miles and Huberman 1984). Food, linguistic and media preferences, family and social ties, personal elaboration of cultural conflicts, migration projects, and life stages have been cross-analyzed relying on the tenets of interpretative ethnography.

Findings support a melted overlapping of individual and social dimensions, and deeply discuss:

1. cultural alternation’s antecedents, which explain why and how certain Egyptian migrants acquire multiple identities. Individual as well as socio-cultural resources are illustrated;
2. cultural alternation epiphany, both in market and social contexts. The interplay between social and individual forces is mirrored by the high variety of alternating patterns (e.g., hybridized vs. polarized manifestation; instrumental vs. terminal relation to culture; subtractive vs. additive dynamics between cultures);
3. finally, cultural alternation living experience. Antecedents and play impact migrants’ life/market experience. Data document how migrants negotiate social identities in terms of their (i) means of conflict elaboration (tragic vs. comic), (ii) principles of identities reconciliation (self-to-self vs. self-to-context) and (iii) rates of autonomy in adapting to the new cultural environments.

Evidence on Egyptians in Italy confirms the relevance of the social pattering of consumer acculturation and its interplay with the resource-basis of individuals. The ongoing debate about the threat of Islamism to Western cultures is almost ignored in consumer literature, with the main exception of Üstünér’s and Holt’s recent contribution on Turkish consumers, whereas it has received much more emphasis within the psychological realm (e.g., Florack et al. 2003). My data sheds light on the way informants have modified their socialized sense of self after September 11th. Further, as part of the overall Mediterranean culture—offers Egyptians a kind of meta-ground where autochthonous and migrants share the same Meridien core cultural values (Cova 2005).

On this empirical basis, cultural alternation is not a static consequence of adaptation praxes, but it serves as an active and deliberate strategy immigrants dispose of in order to contest, confirm and question their own identities both within and across minority/mainstream groups.

“The Role of Consumption in Cultural Co-Existence Strategies”
Laura Oswald, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana

Sociologists stress that successful minority socialization depends on the acquisition of the cultural capital—including education, tastes, values, and consumption rituals—of the more powerful mainstream group (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Dimaggio 1992; Simpson 2001). In this paper I propose a Cultural Co-Existence model of minority socialization that emphasizes the two-way flow of influence between underprivileged African Americans and the dominant society as they negotiate the racial divide that currently perpetuates a cycle of poverty, isolation and despair in the inner city. Findings demonstrate that multicultural contexts engage multiple stakeholders in a bi-directional dynamic of sharing, borrowing and bartering back and forth across ideological lines formed by race, gender and ethnicity. This approach extends the consumer
acculturation literature (Penaloza 1994, Oswald 1999; Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005; Üstünler, and Holt 2006) by interpreting the mainstream/minority dialectic in terms of a dynamic of push and pull between informal sociality at the level of the subculture, and the formal organization of society–laws, public policy, and institutions at the level of the mass culture.

America has been the ancestral home to African Americans much longer than most Americans of European origin (1805/1840s), but they continue to constitute a separate cultural entity because of prolonged racial segregation. Furthermore, the population under study has lived on the West Side of Chicago for over 40 years and do not plan to leave (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). Findings from an ethnography conducted on the West Side of Chicago between 1998-2001 illustrate how African Americans living in the inner city leverage local networks and cultural identity—grounded in custom and charged with meaning—to negotiate with the dominant social and political establishment for the satisfaction of basic needs for safety, employment, housing, and transportation. Isolated from the mainstream by race and economic disadvantage, the subjects of this study struggle to maintain social order, economic survival and personal dignity by means of informal, voluntary activities such as street gardening (LaGuerre 1994). These activities both contribute to the neighborhood’s social capital by building community networks (Bourdieu 1984/1979, Glover 2004), and also create a kind of collective cultural capital that empowers the group in relation to the dominant social order (LaGuerre 1994).

The author bridges the research streams of cross-cultural consumer research, public horticulture, and minority socialization by taking a pluralistic approach to the interpretation of urban gardening as a site for consolidating ethnic identity and solidarity, for producing cultural capital, and for circulating goods, services and favors between minority and dominant sectors of society. As previous studies on community gardens show (Coley, and Sullivan 1997; Rishbeth 2004; Glover, Shinew and Parry 2005), the West Side community gardens engage the individual at personal, social, and symbolic levels of consumer behavior. Gardeners are initially moved to action out of a need for personal control over their neighborhoods, which are plagued by street crime and urban decay. Gardeners hold fundraisers and bake sales to buy plants and materials and socialize with their neighbors.

However, most of the community gardening literature is published in journals on leisure and recreation, while the informants in the present study garden to survive in the face of extreme social conditions produced by gang activity, violent crime, drug traffic, general poverty, and high unemployment that do not exist in the settings studied by previous researchers. The current study extends the research on community gardening by 1) focusing on inner city African American communities rather than predominantly white communities, 2) taking a cross-cultural view of the community garden as a site for the circulation of goods, services and favors between the community and the dominant social system, including City Hall, social services agencies, and private organizations, and 3) showing how gardens and gardening not only bring people together (a form of social capital), but become symbols for group identification and ethnic identity (a form of cultural capital).

On the West Side, volunteerism evolves into social activism, as the informal social connections forged through gardening develop into organized networks. Gardeners encourage their neighbors to apply for social services and vote in elections, and train children in the arts of horticulture. In the course of cleaning up abandoned lots, cultivating the land and planting flowers and vegetables, they engage with City Hall to tear down abandoned buildings, build sidewalks and increase police protection. Furthermore, over time residents have claimed the gardens as sites for perpetuating their unique cultural heritage, growing collard greens, okra and black-eyed peas reminiscent of the rural South. Grounded in African American folk culture and reconstructed in the form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984/1979), the gardening effort contributes to the social distinction of the group in relation to the dominant culture at both social and political levels. To celebrate Black History month on the West Side, gardeners commemorate the legacy of residents whose ancestors either worked on plantations or, after Abolition, worked as sharecroppers on large estates in the Mississippi Delta (Lehman 1992). In one garden, residents cultivate cotton and tobacco as symbolic reminders of their southern roots. Over time this cultural distinction has acquired ‘social sacred’ status (Durkheim 1995/1912). Informants repeatedly stated, “green space is sacred.” Even the gangs in this distressed community “respect the gardens and leave them alone.” In other words, the community garden becomes a symbolic treasure that binds the minority community internally and enables residents to garner material benefits—in the form of services and goods—from City Hall.

Finally, there is an interdependency between the gardening community and City Hall, since the gardeners—as social activists—have the power to organize the local community, influence the vote, and ease the way for the implementation of public policy.

“Consuming Community: The Impacts of Mainstream/Margin Social Relations on Community Development”
Lisa Peñaloza, EDHEC. France and University of Utah

This presentation continues the project of theorizing the spaces between disciplines, peoples, and consumer identities in shifting consumption and community as alternatively phenomena and domains in better understanding the place of consumption in community development. Over the past decade consumer researchers have produced a stream of work concerned with the forms and processes whereby consumers make community. These researchers extrapolated insights from ethnic/racial and religious subcultural communities in making sense of the social bonds they observed in the consumption of brands of products and services (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Kozinets 2001). In doing so, this work shifted attention from the phenomena of consumption within the domain of community to the phenomena of community within the domain of consumption.

This research reinstates the community as domain of study, specifically a Mexican American community in South Texas, in investigating various consumption phenomena and tracing their impacts on its development. Importantly, this community does not exist in a vacuum; as part of the minority Latino/a subculture in the U.S., fundamental are its relations with the White mainstream. As I will show, consumption plays a key role in community development in the ways it reflects and potentially alters social relations between the two groups. That is, these social relations serve as the raw material from which consumers produce cultural meanings, at the same time consumers are able to renovate extant social relations in their consumption meanings and practices.

The research employs an ethnographic design comprised of interviews and participant observation. The 48 informants were selected to vary by generation in the U.S., age, sex, social class, color, neighborhood residence, and language. Questions examine consumption patterns for transportation, communication, food, fashion, and holidays; together with ethnic identity and subjective understandings of being in a targeted subgroup, and relations with other social groups in and outside the market. Participant observation took place in homes, stores, neighborhoods, marketplaces, tourist sites, churches, and public parks and public transportation.

Findings contrast the colonial history of people of Mexican descent in the U.S. Southwest with dramatic market growth since
the mid 1980’s. As the nation’s largest minority, Latinas/os currently number over 43 million persons (U.S. Census Bureau 2006), with over $650 billion in annual expenditures (Conference Board 2004). Community characteristics include common activities and values, intense interactions, loose and volatile organizational forms, socio-economic composition, and relations with other social groups and the market. To highlight, the median income for Mexican Americans is in the mid 20k range as compared to the high 40k range for non-Hispanic Whites (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Interactions and intermarriage with Whites are increasingly common; juxtaposed with greater tolerance on the job and as consumers, continued pressures for assimilation, and persistent White dominance in local government. The community exhibits a complex, layered, dialectical market genealogy. Mexican American consumers commune in their use of products and services and constitute their culture in deploying symbols and offerings provided by marketers at home, in their neighborhoods, and in tourist sites where they are joined by Non-Latinos/as who outnumber them in reproducing distorted forms of the culture in restaurants, bars, and souvenir shops.

Discussion elaborates various forms of consumption in relation to minority/majority group status in tracing their impacts on the development of the Mexican American community. As Non-Latino/a consumers consume Mexican American culture at many of the sites, they exert profound social legitimizing effects supporting and validating Mexican American cultures. Yet the forms of Latino/a culture they consume are geographically and culturally distanced from the Mexican American community in San Antonio, and as such, contested by many cultural members. This market distancing and distortion reflects and impacts relations between the two groups, and in turn affects the development of Mexican American community. Theoretical implications discuss 1) how cultural consumption takes place in and outside the market and 2) how community is produced in cultural consumption by members and nonmembers; while research implications argue for the importance of social relations in consumer research to render it more appropriate to U.S. multicultural society and the global economy.

REFERENCES


