Exploring Needs, Desires, and Hopes: a Study of Impoverished Migrated Consumers

Berna Tari, Bilkent University, Turkey
Ozlem Sandikci, Bilkent University, Turkey
Sahver Omeraki, Bilkent University, Turkey

Our main research question is how poor, rural-to-urban immigrant consumers talk about their needs, desires, and hopes and how their interpretations are structured by various institutional and cultural discourses and norms. We argue that migrated consumers are different from the urban poor; and that their desires and hopes are as important as their needs and wants. Results indicate that their needs and wants are shaped by what they observe in each others’ houses in the squatter area. The relation between desire and hope in our case reveals a different situation where one might desire an object without necessarily hoping it.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Realizing differences in the consumption behaviors of economically better-off and impoverished consumers, many consumer behavior researchers explored how poor consumers cope with economic restrictions. Impoverished consumers are generally assumed to be living in the center of the city, such as the urban poor (Hill 2002a, 2002b) or homeless people (Hill and Stamey 1990); therefore, they are assumed to know the prevailing rules, norms, values, and orientations in the city, as well as meanings attached to consumption objects. However, poor and immigrant consumers present a different case than homeless or urban poor consumers because they have migrated from village to the city, without any advance knowledge of city culture and prevalent consumption practices. We argue that immigrant consumers are different from other poor consumers because they experience a change in their lives, mainly in the form acculturation (e.g. Oswald 1999; Penaloz 1989, 1994; Sandikci et al 2006; Ustuner and Holt forthcoming).

On the other hand, studies of economically impoverished consumers have mostly studied these consumers in terms of their basic needs and wants, i.e. what they essentially need in order to survive. However, desires and hopes seem to be other important factors influencing their consumption practices. As Belk et al (2003) note, how consumer desires are negotiated among people who have not grown up in an urban, marketizing society remains an understudied area. We aim to contribute to existing literature on consumption patterns of economically deprived consumers by explicating their needs, wants, desires, and hopes in an integrative manner. Therefore our main research question in this study is how poor, immigrant consumers talk about their needs, desires, and hopes and how their interpretations are structured by various institutional and cultural discourses and norms.

The context of our study is rural-to-urban migrants in Ankara, capital city of Turkey. Turkey provides an interesting context to study poor, migrant consumers because there are different modes of modernities that involve Western and non-Western imaginations at the same time. Ethnographic data collection method was chosen in order to understand an ‘unfamiliar world’ and bring the lived experience of consumers living in shanty towns (Van Mannen 1988). Ten in-depth interviews were conducted in two different regions of shantytowns in Ankara.

Results indicate that immigrants’ needs and wants were mostly shaped by what they observe in each others’ houses in the squatter area, which is a close-knit community, somewhat isolated from the city culture. Relatives and friends provide sources of comparison for migrated consumers. As a community, they together create their own consumption relationships, providing support for Bourdieus’s (1984) observation that different ways of life involve different systems of thinking about what is ‘necessary’. Immigrant poor consumers’ ‘baseline standard’ (Hill 2002b) does not depend on the dominant consumption culture prevalent in the city, but on what other poor consumers in the same squatter area have.

There was also support for the idea that immigrant consumers’ desires were not achievable. The pleasure, creativity, and fantasy of consumption liberate their desires (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), however these consumers were consciously convinced that they would not achieve their desires because of two main reasons. The first reason is money; apparently, they lack the resources needed to purchase the desired objects. Secondly, the desired object requires a dramatic transformation of the individual. This dramatic transformation is achievable but totally inappropriate because of the nature of their desires. For example, one of our female respondents stated her desire to be a very attractive woman. Although this was not impossible, it would require her to be open, apply make-up, and exercise, most of which, she believes, are against her values and religious beliefs.

Contrary to Belk et al.’s (2003) findings, we found that desire is not kept alive until the object is acquired; it is kept alive as long as it brings enjoyment since the object will never be acquired. Desire is beyond hope but it still exists, yet this does not create depression. The relation between desire and hope in our case reveals a different situation where one might desire an object without necessarily hoping it. Hope is towards a goal-congruent outcome (MacInnis and de Mello 2005); and like a plan, it shapes immigrant consumers’ consumption routines. But desire is not goal-congruent; to desire is to live, to hope, and to be alive (Belk et al. 2003).

Our study was limited in terms of the depth of information collected. Future studies might focus on different contexts, differentiate between first- and second-generation immigrants, and include male respondents and children. Continuation of this research has the potential to extend the notion of the ‘desire for the other’, in ways that reveal who the other is and what that desire involves in relation to hope.