Looking For Christmas in a Muslim Country

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Consumer research has examined Christmas from several perspectives. Yet the vast majority of these studies have been conducted in Christian North America. Within North America, Christmas has been found to be a major religious festival, an opportunity for riotous consumption, and a sensory-laden holiday. Prior studies have found specific evidence of materialism, generosity, heightened emotionality, and enhanced interpersonal bonding. But we know little of the experience of Christmas in non-Christian cultures. Using interviews collected in Tunisia, we examine how Christmas is constructed by Christians living in a Muslim setting far removed from wintry evergreens. What happens when Santa must ride his sleigh through the sandy desert and Jesus is not viewed by most inhabitants as a holy child? Come and find out!

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SESSION OVERVIEW

This special session will offer an initial look at consumption behavior in one of the most under-studied cultural domains—the Islamic world. As the process of globalization intensifies, the need for knowledge about the consumption behavior of other cultures has become imperative. However, though the cross-cultural literature generally recognizes the importance of studies in this area, in most cases it focuses on Western and Asian countries. The research on consumer behavior in the Islamic culture in general and, in Islamic countries in particular, is scarce.

Thus, this special session will attempt to provide consumer behavior scholars with the opportunity to acquire a unique insight into various aspects of consumption in the Islamic world. Hopefully, this session will stimulate an exchange of ideas and promote collaboration among researchers revolving around the issue of consumption behavior in different cultures, which ultimately will contribute to the development of the consumer behavior field.

The likely audience will include researchers interested in studying cross-cultural aspects of consumer behavior.

The three papers in this special session revolve around the concept of consumers’ acculturation, spanning a wide range of issues. The first paper explores the meaning of home, space and personal possessions for women and men in Qatar. Using an ethnographic approach, the study finds that, as in Western culture, homes and possessions are expressions of self and family. However, the meaning of home spaces and possessions differs from their interpretation in the West. Middle Eastern cultures generally have a more restricted sense of what is totally private, making a sharper distinction between men’s and women’s spaces and between public and private spaces. The study also examines favorite possessions within Arab Muslim households in Qatar, seeking those characteristics that are unique and common to Middle Eastern and Western cultures.

The second paper examines the meaning of Christmas from the minority point of view of Tunisian Christians. Relying on in-depth interviews, its findings suggest considerable differences between the manner in which Christmas is constructed by Christians living in a Muslim setting vs. those who celebrate it in North America. Expatriates often import holiday food and decorations from their homelands and overstuff their homes with external representations of Christmas in an attempt to create a Christian haven for themselves that resembles the celebration of the holiday in a mythologized childhood in their countries of origin. While they may integrate certain iconic and sensory elements of Islamic traditions into their celebration of Christmas, the holiday creates a cross-cultural bond among Christians that, temporarily at least, distances them from their Muslim friends.

The third paper reports on a four-year ethnographic study in Turkey about the discourse between Islam and consumption. Its results contradict the common Western perception that Islam is opposed to capitalism and consumerism. On the contrary, Islam is deeply embedded in a consumerist and capitalist ethos. As in Western culture, Islamic consumers take pleasure in the consumption experience and adopt global brands. Islamist companies compete in the international market and utilize modern tools of marketing. This paper concludes that the logic and ideology of capitalism and consumerism coexist with the logic and ideology of Islam, and that Islamic consumers exhibit behaviors that are similar to those observed in the Western world.

Each of the following presenters has agreed to serve if the proposal will be accepted: Rana Sobh, Mourad Touzani and Özlem Sandikci.

Finally, our discussant will be Prof. Elizabeth Hirschman, a leading, internationally recognized scholar on cultural aspects of consumer behavior.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Consuming Gendered Space in Islam”
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The idea of personal versus shared spaces within homes is relatively new. Tuan (1982) shows that it is only within the last few hundred years that notions of privacy and separate public and private spaces within the home have emerged. Notions of private space are also encoded architecturally (Sommer 1969). Intimacy within the nuclear family is a concept that has grown as extended families have diminished (Rybczynski 1986). There are also differences in the use and sense of ownership of various spaces within the home by individual family members. Different family members think of areas of the home as being their territories (Altman 1975). Even when a particular area like the bathroom must be shared it is common to temporarily claim private space for hygienic, purifying, and beautification rituals (Kira 1970). When these spaces are encroached upon by others, there is a sense of contagion or violation (Belk 1988). We formally or informally designate boundaries defining personal space, spaces for close kin, and spaces where friends, neighbors, and strangers can meet within the home (Allan 1989). Such concepts have been extensively studied in the West (e.g., Gallagher 2006; Marcus 1995; Munro and Madigan 1999), but little comparable work has been done in non-Western homes.

Compared to the West, Middle Eastern standards of privacy involve a more restricted sense of what is totally private (e.g., Kadivar 2003), due largely to the moral concerns of Islam. This results in a sharper distinction between public and private space, often with high exterior perimeter walls and inward facing courtyards (Waly 1992). Public and private spheres within Muslim cultures also differ from Western Paradigms (Tarvis, 1992). Within the home, women’s public sphere for instance includes being in the company of non-mahrems (family members/those permanently ineligible for marriage to her). But outside the home women may paradoxically have a more private sphere restricted to Mahrems (Boulanouar, 2006). Furthermore, there is a sense of private space that a Muslim woman carries with her as she goes from home to marketplace (e.g., Asad 2003), facilitated by various forms of veiling.

Within Arab Muslim homes, there is also a sharper distinction between men’s and women’s spaces as well as transitional spaces in moving from one to another, as Farah and Klarqvist (2001) found in Sudan. The basis for such spatial gendering are cultural and do not seem to arise from prescriptions within Islam (Farah and Klarqvist, 2001), although there is some disagreement on this point (Nageeb 2004). While some contend that having a space of their own is extremely important to women’s identities as well as their
sense of social and economic status (Cooper 2001), others call such a space a “neo-harem” and find that it reduces women’s sense of space and of control over their lives (Nageeb 2004). We discuss these contending perspectives based on our findings regarding gendered areas within and boundaries within Qatari homes.

Favorite possessions within the home are a part of our extended self (Belk 1988) and thus serve a key function in our self-definition and expression of cultural values. These possessions and the meanings ascribed to them vary with culture and gender. For instance, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) found that Americans’ favorite objects were more likely to be linked to personal memories, while those from Niger were more likely to mention objects linked to social status. They also found gender differences, with men in Niger more likely to cite the Quran and women more likely to cite silver jewelry as well as objects given to them by others. While some research in this vein has been conducted in other, largely non-Islamic parts of the world, we examine favorite possessions within Arab Muslim households in Qatar and attempt to identify local and regional specifics as well as what is unique and common in Middle Eastern and Western cultures relating to homes and meanings of possessions.

References

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“Looking for Christmas in a Muslim Country”
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Despite the fact that Christmas is celebrated by Christians around the world (e.g., Liebeson 2001; Wernecke 1979), virtually all the research on Christmas familiar to consumer researchers has been conducted in North America (e.g., Barnett 1954; Caplow 1984; Laroche, Saad, Kim and Browne 2000; Time-Life Books 1998; Schaufeli 1981; Guttman 2007). Within this body of inquiry, themes of hedonism (Hirschman and La Barbera 1989), materialism (Belk 1987), communalism (Caplow 1982), generosity (Pollay 1986), selfishness (Moschetti 1979), joy (Hirschman and La Barbera 1989), and anxiety/resentment (Hirschman and La Barbera 1989) have been identified. Further, the familiar secular Christmas iconography of snowy winter sleigh rides, strings of glittering green and red lights, Santa’s reindeer and elves, Christmas trees, mistletoe and holly (despite their Celtic, pagan origins) have been examined from multiple vantage points. As have, of course, the sacred symbols including Mary and Joseph standing near Baby Jesus lying in a manger, while the shepherds, angels and wise men look on (e.g., Belk 1987; Kasser and Sheldon 2004). One reason for the distinctive pattern (and perhaps the narrowness, as well) of these findings is that they emanate from studies set in Christian-dominant cultures. In both the United States and Canada, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, Sikhs and Wiccans are but small minorities operating within a dominant Christian society.

Our purpose in the present study is to learn what happens when the tables are turned, that is, when Christians must celebrate their primary holiday within a non-Christian culture, especially one which is far removed topographically from the Currier and Ives settings associated with the North American Christmas. What happens when Christmas is re-located to North Africa, where Muslims are the majority religion and snow-covered ponds, horse-drawn sleighs and even chimneys are absent?

Tunisia, the site of our study, is positioned on the Mediterranean coast between Libya, Egypt and Algeria. It is hot, arid and sandy, features more palm, date and olive trees than evergreens, and contains a Christian community comprising less than 2% of the population, most of whom are European expatriates drawn from Italy, France, Spain and North America.

In-depth interviews conducted with these Tunisian Christians revealed a dramatically different meaning structure vis a vis that found in North America. Among the most notable differences are:

The necessity of importing holiday-appropriate foodstuffs and decorations from ethnic Christian homelands in Europe and North America, which are viewed as more authentic and nostalgia-inducing than those purchasable locally.
Casting oneself back to a mythologized childhood or ancestral setting in which Christmas is celebrated openly and widely.

A feeling of Christmas scarcity, sparseness and frugality within the surrounding society, contrary to the desired sense of abundance, grandiosity and frivolity found in Christian-dominant cultures. This external sparseness is compensated for by over-stuffing the interior of the home with food, decorations, music and other signifiers of the holiday, creating a Christian/Christmas refuge/haven.

A willingness to embrace iconic and sensory syncretism in which Islamic traditions, foods, songs and décor are blended with the traditional Christmas rituals.

The development of a sense of cross-Christian community that binds together these minority religious affiliates, despite their disparate national origins in Africa, Arabia, Italy, France and North America. The result is a submerging of the racial, ethnic, and national boundaries that usually separate these Christian celebrants.

Concurrently, there is a tendency to temporarily distance oneself from Muslim friends and associates, in order to maintain a sense of sacred and social boundaries.

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“Islam and Consumption: Beyond Essentialism”
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Guliz Ger, Bilkent University, Turkey

The rise of Islam is generally seen as an opposition to capitalism and Western consumerism (Barber 1996; Bocock 1993; Ray 1993; Witkowski 1999). For instance, Turner argues that “consumerism offers or promises a range of possible lifestyles which compete with, and in many cases, contradict the uniform lifestyle demanded by Islamic fundamentalism” (1994, p.90). According to Turner the cultural, aesthetic and stylistic pluralism fostered by postmodernism and the spread of global system of consumption contrast with the fundamentalist commitment to a unified world organized around incontrovertibly true values and beliefs. While “the consumer market threatens to break out into a new stage of fragmented postmodernity in late capitalism,” fundamentalism “acts as a brake on the historical development of world capitalism” (Turner 1994, p.80).

We argue that such essentialist readings mystify the relationship between Islam and consumption and willingly or unwillingly contribute to the discourse of the “clash of civilizations”. Drawing upon a four-year long ethnographic project we have undertaken in Turkey we argue that Islam, at least in the context of urban Turkey, does not oppose consumption or offer an alternative to consumerism. Rather, Islamism is deeply embedded in a consumerist and capitalist ethos.

We find that the more ascetic and orthodox Islamists may restrict their consumption and refrain from purchasing products or brands that are perceived to be associated with the West: e.g., Coca Cola or McDonalds. However, most of the Islamists do not oppose consumption—they actively engage in consumption albeit in an Islamic way: for example, hanging a picture of Kaba rather than a figurative painting on the wall, or drinking juice rather than beer. The urban Turkish case demonstrates that consumption patterns can be and are appropriated into religiously acceptable styles without undermining consumption itself. This is perhaps even easier in the case of Islam for which hedonism is an accepted way to life and is less of a sin than Christianity. Islam permits the pursuit of desires as long as they are integrated with moral principles such as generosity, sharing, giving to the poor, and fairness, and one is not enslaved by passionate attachment (Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2000). Islam accepts that material things are important in life. However, it requires that acquisitiveness and competition are balanced by fair play and compassion. That is, material goods are to be distributed and wealth is to be shared among all in a just manner. Being honest, fulfilling commitments, seeking virtue, providing for dependents generously, and being socially conscious legitimize consumption.

We also find that Islamism is in alliance with capitalism. Since the 1980s, companies which identify themselves as Islamist businesses have emerged in Turkey. However, far from opposing capitalism, these companies utilize capitalist tools and compete with national and global brands both in Turkey and in foreign markets. The development of the Islamist companies coincided with the economic restructuring of the Turkish economy beginning in the mid 1980s. As the economy was privatized, liberalized, and globalized, both the manufacturingscape and the consumptionscape changed. In order to boost export revenues, the governments encouraged both the big, established companies as well as the entrepreneurs of conservative smaller towns to develop their businesses and form transnational connections. Backed with government incentives as well as international funding coming mainly from the Islamist organizations in Germany and Saudi Arabia, the small- to mid-size companies grew rapidly, creating an Islamist business sector that came to compete head on with the secular sector in almost every field. A wide variety of products and services positioned as “Islamic,” ranging over summer resorts, financial institutions, clothing, food, newspapers, decorative objects, and shopping centers targeted the newly-emerging Islamist middle/upper classes.

In 1990, an association called MUSIAD (the Independent Industrialist and Businessmen Association) was founded to repre-
sent the interests of Islamist companies. MUSIAD supports market capitalism with an accentuated Islamic business ethics. It has close ties to the Islamist parties and strong transnational connections, including a very prominent presence in Germany. MUSIAD emphasizes the compatibility of Islam with capitalism and uses Islam as a basis for cooperation and solidarity among both local and international producers, and advocates a model of development sensitive to the cultural identities (Bugra 1998). Given that the prophet Mohammed himself was a merchant and Islam had always been wedded to commerce, the development of globally-oriented Islamist businesses suggest a “natural” course of economic progress.

We observe greater differences between social classes than between Islamists and Westernized seculars. Religious convictions seem to blend with cultural capital, taste, and related discourses of aesthetics all of which construct different lifestyles and consumption patterns along class lines. Religion provides yet another discourse, one among many others that shape and legitimize consumption practices. Religious or not, so long as consumers invent justifications for their consumption, they consume what they deem desirable and affordable.

Overall, we find that Islamism, as it is experienced in urban Turkey, does not oppose capitalism and the consumerist ethos. Islamist companies adopt and utilize the tools of modern marketing and forge international business connections. Similarly, consumers who identify with Islamism do not generally oppose consumption or global brands. On the contrary, they enjoy the fleeting pleasures of consumption. The logic of capitalist markets and the ideology of consumerism coexist with the logic and ideology of Islam, constructing consumption practices that negotiate daily tensions, just like in any other context.

References