Deciphering the Socio-Temporal Dimensions of Consumer Identity Development: a Cultural Genealogy

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This research analyzes changes in consumers' identities over the course of their lives in relation to others and to marketing practices. Findings track a cultural genealogy of consumption identity across first cultural experiences; day to day consumption of products/services/brands; leisure/holiday activity; language utilization; interactions with others; reactions to the target marketing efforts of firms; community development concerns; and personal hopes and dreams. Theoretical contributions provide a more dynamic, and nuanced account of consumer identity development that expands understandings of consumption as a key domain in which groups negotiate cultural difference over time and elaborates the social legitimizing role of market targeting.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The theme of this year’s ACR conference is “A World of Knowledge At the Point of Confluence.” In congruence with this theme, this session explores various angles of consumer acculturation as they relate to their heterogeneous identity constructs. Identity is seen as a confluence of cultural, social, temporal and contextual influences. The social and cultural aspects of consumption and consumption’s relation to identity construction have been well documented in consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). What has not been sufficiently considered so far was their relation to consumer acculturation of immigrants in combination with other variables, such as gender, temporal evolution, in-group differences or generational factors. In this session, we focus on the mechanisms with which these factors operate in the formation of identity for immigrants and their descendants. The four presentations together attempt to explore the immigrant consumer acculturation and examine it in contexts and from perspectives that have been understudied.

The first paper examines the relationship between the immigrant women’s gender roles and the power discourse in the society. Romanian female immigrants in Italy were interviewed and observed in relation to their food consumption practices. The researchers identify two identity positionings of these female migrants that correspond to two spatial contexts and temporal reference points. They identify four contextual situations that imply different power relations that move between a traditional woman and a modern one. The second paper also takes Italy as the context of study and questions the application of the interpretative model of cultural adaptation—originally elaborated for first generations—to the children of migrants (Portes 1996, p. x). The author discusses the different levels of cultural consciousness that second generations show according to ethnic, local and global consumption, and describes four ways to deploy such consumption to navigate the borders between families and the group of peers. In the next presentation, Peñalolaza elaborates additional differences between first generation immigrants and their descendants, documenting changes in consumers’ identity over time. Based on oral history interviews with a heterogeneous group of Mexican Americans, her cultural genealogy dissects these identity inflections across a realm of social situations and market conditions. The final paper combines the themes of immigrant consumer acculturation, temporal changes, consumption differences within an immigrant community in relation to identity positionings from the previous papers and analyzes a group of immigrants’ changing consumption practices in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the rest of the immigrant community and integrate into the host society. Turkish immigrants in Denmark are chosen as the context of the study.

All the session papers are completed projects and combined offer differing theoretical perspectives. Methodologically, they all adhere to the interpretivist approach and provide empirical knowledge based on ethnographic data. This session thus provides a platform for scholars who are interested in different aspects of immigrant consumer research and would like to familiarize themselves with the latest theory and empirical work in the field.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“She, Who Has the Spoon, Has the Power: Immigrant Women’s Use of Food to Negotiate Power Relations”

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Immigration has been in the centre of scholarly attention for some time now and several studies have investigated consumer acculturation of immigrants. Recently, in the consumer culture tradition (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), the postassimilationist theory has made an important contribution to our understanding of immigrants’ use of marketplace in their movement between home, host and transnational consumer culture (Askegaard et al., 2005). However, it does not consider the effect of hegemonic discourses in the home and host society, as well as the singular power relations the immigrants encounter in their everyday experience. Yet, these elements also play a significant role in their use of marketplace offerings in the everyday pursuit of a satisfying identity. The focus of this research is the intersection of these areas, a lens that would see consumer acculturation as a network of power relations in the immigrants’ lived experience. In accordance with the goal of the research, we concentrate on gender roles as a part of a power discourse in society. This is particularly apparent in societies based on patriarchal values. The women migrating from such a society had been socialized to a traditional gender role. Upon their arrival to the country of destination, they are faced with another concept of womanhood, which, in the case of immigration to an “advanced capitalist country” (Holt, 1997) is based on the host society’s construction of gender roles, but also on the transnational “modern woman” discourse featured in the marketplace as the desirable ideal of womanhood. We argue that such power relations can be studied through the analysis of female immigrants’ everyday food consumption choices. Food is known to act as a key element in power relations (Lupton, 1996) and the responsible for food preparation are usually women. Women also tend to figure more clearly as the dominated part in heterogeneous power relations.

Fourteen in-depth interviews (from one and a half to three and a half hours) have been carried out with Romanian women in Italy by the first author. These interviews have been complemented by observation at multiple sites of community gathering, such as parks, the Romanian Adventist Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church in Florence, which were either video registered or written up in field notes. The field work also comprised four cooking sessions with the respondents, all video registered. The interviews were integrally transcribed. We analyzed the interviews by alternating between the specific case of each interview and the interviews taken as a whole, and by making use of observation and literature.

The analysis reveals two distinct discourses corresponding to the two spatial and temporal references of the migration experience: the country of origin and of destination and the temporal setting before and after emigration. Such discourses emerged from the respondents’ narratives of migration, which presented a common structure: the emergency situation (economical crisis or the experience of the unknown upon arrival) felt as disempowering, is
solved with great efforts and suffering resulting in an inner peace of the respondent, enlightened state of mind and sense of power achieved through the suffering/self-transformation. The narrative involves general understanding of womanhood in the culture of origin, which is based on a hegemonic patriarchal discourse of the traditional woman’s role. This results in a disempowering relationship network and the consequent loss of the women’s control over their bodies and lives. The central host culture discourse is that of a modern woman, mostly based on a marketplace myth and its liberatory power (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), within a frame of which the woman is depicted as independent, powerful, seizing-the-day. This discourse allows the women to resist their ascribed identity as a traditional woman, providing them with concepts to redefine their understanding of womanhood and to regain the control over their body and life.

These two discourses on womanhood point out the two extreme positions in the power relations of an immigrant’s everyday life. However the resistant acts are performed within heterogeneous power relations that situate the women at neither of the two extremes. The resistance must be played out in accordance with the various contextual relations that exist alongside a continuum between the two extreme situations, each one of them implying a different structure of power between its actors.

In the proposed model, four contextual situations implying different power relations were identified. Such contexts move along the imagined line of control over the self, that we call “regime of control” to illustrate its different structure in the relationship. On the one extreme of the continuum, we collocate situations, in which the actor is in relative control over his/her self. Such situations imply a relative autonomy in the decisions regarding one’s body and life, including those concerning food choices. The contexts positioned on the opposite extreme are characterized by the presence of hegemonic discourses defining the role ascribed to the actor, and implicitly shaping his/her decisions concerning his/her body and life, including the food consumption decisions. The movement between these contextual situations implies a movement closer to or further from the ideal of modern or traditional woman, as well as closer or further from the symbols of these two discourses: the ideal of fast, easy, light cuisine or time-consuming, heavy, and elaborated cuisine. The proposed model permits to uncover a layer in the understanding of immigrants’ consumer behavior that has not yet been explored. It demonstrates that their food preferences are not based solely on their level of acculturation from one culture to another, but are also functional to the heterogeneous power relations formed in their everyday lives and vice versa that these power relations can be studied through the analysis of food practices.

“Cross Generation: Cultural (In)visibility in the Consumption of Second Generations”

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Defining the “children of migration” (Portes, 1996, p. x) is not easy task. Subjectively, second generations (2Gs, in short) are characterized by different strategies of self identification (Rumbaut, 1997) and patterns of segmented assimilation that vary with personal and family conditions (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). The arduousness of 2Gs’ self definition is due to the inapplicability of the interpretative categories that first generations and others deploy to categorize them. On the one hand, human beings are prone to use the “linear bipolar model” of ethnic identity (Schaniger, Bourgeois, and Buss, 1985). The postulated zero sum game thus implies that what is gained in one culture is symmetrically lost in the rival one. On the other hand, the social context imposes ethnic categories from the outside instead of looking for more germane, subjective definitions of the self (the so-called self-designated ethnicity, Stayman and Deshpande, 1989). It is no wonder, that consumer identity projects of 2Gs reflect the complexity, the social and psychological pressures, and the variety of personal and shared narratives originated by the aforementioned scenario.

From an epistemological viewpoint, ethnic studies—both in their traditional and post assimilationist elaboration (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard, 2005)—have grounded a model of cultural adaptation dealing with first generation immigrants (Berry 1980), yet it is not clear that this applies to 2Gs. The constructs of origin and host culture are not strictly applicable to 2Gs and also modify according to the age of arrival in the host country (Rumbaut, 1994). 2Gs are often grown up and identify with the culture of destination of their parents and mostly maintain an imagined connection with the culture of origin of the parents. Frequently, their ethnic culture becomes an ethnoscape constructed by the stereotypical social and market discourse about the origins incorporated in the dominating mediascape (Appadurai 1990, 9).

As such, the adaptation processes characterizing 2Gs not only include ethnic and local cultures—however defined—but also the global and transnational culture (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc, 1992). In making daily reconnection between the local and the global, 2Gs break the boundaries of the national state, and thus constitute a transnational basis where multiple systems of meanings live together regardlessly of their territorial rooting.

The paper is based on a three year field investigation of the 2Gs residing in the North of Italy. Data include 412 questionnaires and 32 depth interviews run afterwards to better investigate 2Gs’ symbolic consumption and religious ties. Questionnaire data were elaborated in terms of descriptive statistics for quantitative information and content analyzed for the qualitative answers. Depth interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed according to the criteria of interpretative ethnography.

First, findings illustrate the different level of cultural (in)visibility (i.e., salience) in the consumption of 2Gs when moving back and forth ethnic and local consumption. 2Gs tend to alternate higher and lower levels of awareness about the cultural basis of their consumption. When consuming global (e.g., jeans, English music, etc.) or local (e.g., pasta, television, etc.) artifacts, these teens are less conscious about the cultural rooting of their consumption but easily acknowledge the cultural loading of ethnic consumptions. Four main explanations about the alternating level of cultural (in)visibility are offered: i) cultural embeddedness; ii) iterated ethnocentrism; iii) unquestioned dominating culture; and iv) cultural appropriability.

Second, when visible to the eyes of the consumer, cultural meanings embedded in consumer goods can be manipulated and deployed to “navigate the border crossings between household and societal contexts” (Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah, 2004, p. 211). Field investigation confirms the intentional, transactional, and dialogic use of 2Gs’ consumption when facing the requirements expressed by family members and the group of peers. Further, four main uses of consumption for 2Gs are detailed: i) consumption as trade; ii) consumption as gift; iii) consumption as opposition; and, iv) consumption as mediation.

By questioning the applicability of the traditional models of cultural adaptation, the paper identifies local, ethnic, global and transnational culture impacting 2Gs’ identity structures. Findings unpack the motivations of cultural (in)visibility and show the use of consumption to cope with the double structural violence (Farmer, 2006) exerted by families and peers.
“Deciphering the Socio-Temporal Dimensions of Consumer Identity Development: A Cultural Genealogy”
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Identity is one of the most basic constructs in consumer behavior. The existential question, “who one is” finds noteworthy expression in contemporary consumer behavior as a key domain of activity in which people continually reinscribe and constitute their identity in relation to others (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Previous work has documented how persons alter their consumption to commune with particular groups (Deshpandé, Hoyer and Donthu, 1986) and diverge from them (Berger and Heath, 2007) in expressing important aspects of their identity. Notably, this previous work points to the importance of in-out group relations in consumption. Yet because it is based on rather static, snap shot glimpses, it leaves open a number of important questions such as the changing nature of identity over the course of consumers’ lives, how identity is expressed in consumption in relation to others over time, and the long term impacts on identity of selectively displaying consumption in relation to majority/minority groups and of target marketing and segmenting efforts. Such socio-temporal dimensions of identity development are particularly important for immigrants (Oswald, 1999; Peñaloza, 1994; Visconti, 2006), ethnic minorities (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard, 2005) and immigrants (Ustuner and Holt, 2007), although they are also relevant to the growing body of work on mainstream consumers (Burton, forthcoming; Peñaloza and Barnhart, 2009).

This research extends previous work on the sociology of consumption by adding temporality to the study of identity projects. Of particular interest is dissecting changes in consumers’ identities over time, as impacted by minority and majority group relations and marketing practices targeting group members. The research design features oral history interviews with 15 Mexican Americans who vary by generation in the U.S., age, gender, social class, color, residential area, language, and political sentiments. Findings trace a cultural genealogy of consumption identity across first cultural experiences; identity terminology; day to day consumption of specific products/services/brands at home, work, in neighborhoods, stores, and tourist areas; leisure/holiday activity; language development and utilization; interactions with family and friends, both subcultural group members and members of other subcultural groups; thoughts and reactions to the segmenting and target marketing efforts of firms, community development concerns, and personal hopes and dreams. Analysis proceeds to identify economic, social, and cultural dimensions of capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in the genealogy and map disjunctions and overlaps between these various types of capital. These disjunctions and overlaps are useful in highlighting the dynamic and highly charged nature of in-out group relations and tracking their impacts on consumption and identity over time, as this cultural consumption genealogy focuses on the subcultural group rather than a specific brand (Holt, 2004). Specific changes over time feature the “hostile,” “welcoming,” and “neutral” zones where informants have been blocked by others in their expression of their culture or received neutral treatment versus those where they have nurtured their identity in consumption and interacted favorably with members of other cultural groups. Finally, I draw attention to the transformation of these various dimensions of capital from cultural to social and economic in making sense of observed changes in identity, consumption, social relations, and marketing activities over time. Notably, the negative stigma older informants experienced decreased over time, in contrast to the more positive valuation of younger informants. The more positive valuation of both cohorts corresponded temporally with the advent of cultural tourism in the area and the segmenting and target marketing efforts by firms. Yet despite some increasing power in the ownership, representation, and exchange of cultural artifacts, a paradoxical social valuation for their subculture is juxtaposed with the economic deterioration of their neighborhoods, pointing to important limitations of consumption in identity maintenance and negotiation of social relations. Theoretical contributions provide a more comprehensive, dynamic, and nuanced account of identity development that expands understandings of consumption as an important domain through which individuals and groups negotiate cultural difference over time and elaborates the social legitimizing role of market targeting.

“From Resistance to Integration: Changing Consumer Acculturation Practices of Immigrants”
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Consumer acculturation and identity have been two of the most popular topics studied by immigrant consumer researchers. Berry (1980), a highly referenced source on the topic of acculturation, classifies the varieties of acculturation as assimilation, integration, rejection and deculturation. Berry’s classification has provided a schema for many researchers (e.g. Peñaloza, 1989 & 1994) who studied immigrant consumer acculturation. Peñaloza (1989) adapts the acculturation concept to consumer behavior in which consumer acculturation is described as “the acquisition of skills and knowledge relevant to engaging in consumer behavior in one culture by members of another culture” (p. 110). The study of consumer acculturation primarily focuses on cultural adaptation as manifest in the marketplace and examines the cultural bases of consumption behavior and the processes of consumer learning that are affected by the interactions of two or more cultures (ibid.). Peñaloza (1994) acknowledges that “immigrants may have two conflicting sets of consumer acculturation agents: one corresponding to their culture of origin and one corresponding to the existing culture” (p. 35). Reminiscent of Berry’s (1980) modes of acculturation she suggests the following possible acculturation outcomes: assimilation, maintenance, resistance, and segregation. Subsequently, other post-assimilationist researchers (Askegaard et al., 2005) have argued that immigrant consumer acculturation is a more complex phenomenon which rather than lying on a linear continuum, embraces elements from both the home and host cultures, as well as a transnational consumer culture.

The main research question that is addressed in this presentation is what happens when the resistance takes place within the cultural group? More specifically, what are the factors that trigger a sub-group within the greater immigrant community to differentiate itself from that community, what are the practices that lead to this differentiation and how is this achieved?

The findings presented in this paper are part of a bigger study that investigates the Turkish (trans)migrants in Denmark (Üçok, 2007) based on data collected from 13 Turkish immigrant families. This research can be described as a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), which included in-depth interviews and in situ observations in multiple locations. Historically the Turkish immigrants arrived in Europe as guest workers, hired to work in factories as blue-collar laborers. Their integration into their host societies were minimal as their main intention was to save money and return to their homelands wealthier and with higher social status. The size of this population rapidly grew due to family reunification. Today, there are 54,000 Turkish immigrants in Denmark. However, they do not constitute a homogeneous group.

The focus of this paper is a subgroup within this community that tries to differentiate itself from the above-mentioned type of Turkish immigrants and attempts to integrate into the host society
by consciously adopting differentiating consumption practices. Some examples of these practices are: moving out of the immigrant neighborhoods into neighborhoods populated by the host society, giving importance to higher education and encouraging their children to further their education, buying a brand new car as opposed to a second-hand one, decorating their homes in a style less reminiscent of the other Turkish immigrants’ style, adopting consumption practices like wine drinking which is not typical of the Turkish immigrant community, going to vacation to places other than the home country.

The point in which this study departs from previous research on immigrant consumers is that the focus of study here moves away from the identity positionings between the home and host cultures to the one that is acquired in relation to the greater immigrant community. The resistance becomes not to the culture of origin or to the host culture but to the other members of the immigrant community. Integration becomes the desired immigrant consumer acculturation outcome. These immigrants strive to improve their social status and in relation to that their social and cultural capital in their host societies by means of their consumption practices (Üçok & Kjeldgaard, 2006).

This research contributes to the field of immigrant consumer research by providing empirical data on the in-group differences. Furthermore, I argue that these in-group differences stem from a desire to integrate better into the host culture and improve one’s social status within this society. This is achieved through the transfer of various types of capital from one type to another (Bourdieu, 1984). The results extend the findings of previous research on immigrant consumer acculturation patterns by accentuating the in-group differences through fleshing out the identity positionings and the factors that influence the consumption decisions that shape these identity positionings.

REFERENCES


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