The Flow of Cosmetic Routines in Iran

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By studying the consumption of cosmetics among young adult women in Iran, this paper examines autotelic consumption in a non-leisure non-Western context. It highlights that autotelic consumption is highly context-bound and extends its application to very mundane life practices that have been largely overlooked in consumer research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Conceptualizing consumption as an experiential process rather than solely a cognitive purchasing behavior (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Bloch 1982; Hawkins et al. 1983; Bloch and Bruce 1984), in the past three decades, researchers have addressed “consumers' subjective and emotional reactions to consumption objects” (Holt 1995, 2). Among a variety of dimensions of consumption as experience (e.g., emotional, experiential, hedonic, aesthetic) (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Bellk et al. 1989; Celsi et al. 1993), autotelic consumption has gained momentum in studying recreational activities in which consumption becomes ‘an end in itself’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). That is, consumers’ deep involvement with the object of consumption results in their self-defined form of recreation, pleasure, and flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1992; Bloch and Bruce 1984).

Within consumer research, Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ has been acknowledged as an important part of autotelic consumption, usually associated with various leisure activities such as games (Holbrook et al. 1984), aesthetic appreciation (Joy and Sherry 2003), sports (Holt 1995; Sherry et al. 2005), extraordinary experiences such as skydiving (Celsi et al. 1993; Celsi 1992) or white water rafting (Arnould et al. 1999), gambling (Cotte 1997), and even online search experience behaviors (Mathwick and Rigdon 2004). Noticeably, although Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1992) highlights opportunities for finding flow in non-leisure activities, and perhaps due to the cultural turn’s emphasis on identity issues, the more mundane aspects of everyday life have been overlooked in the literature on autotelic consumption. Neither has his point about flow’s context-dependency triggered any cross-cultural research, particularly in non-Western societies. Our present study addresses these gaps in the literature and scrutinizes consumption of cosmetics as an everyday life practice among young adult women in Iran.

In our study, first, we were inspired by the fact that with a population of only 70 million (25 million women under the age of 35), Iran achieved the seventh rank in global markets for consumption of cosmetics and toiletries in 2007 (Euromonitor, 2008). Also, given the recent political interpretations of Iranian women’s excessive consumption of make-up (as either a silent rebellion against the political ideology of the Islamic Republic or a sign of Western decadence), we were motivated to explore the potential symbolic meanings (McCracken 1988; Schouten 1991) embedded in these individuals’ consumption of cosmetics. Although our non-participatory observations and memos provided us with a pool of ideas, through our in-depth interviews with 15 young adult women (aged between 21 and 32) in Tehran and Karaj, we gained a deep understanding of our informants’ consumption practices. Our data analysis followed a systematic process of constant comparison in terms of searching for similarities and differences (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Quite contrary to our expectations, our emergent findings revealed that our informants’ make-up practices were less to do with identity construction (Schouten 1991; Merskin 2007; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Askegaard et al. 2002; Reynolds et al. 1977; Bloch and Richins 1992; Brownmiller 1984; Ragas and Kozlowski 1998; Peiss 1990) and more to do with a total immersion in the experiential and creative aspects of make-up use and as a way to uplift their tired spirits in a monotonous environment. Despite facing various challenges, including frequent stigmatization on account of their often excessive use of make-up, our informants derived high levels of satisfaction from their make-up routines.

The consumption of cosmetics, as our study reveals, is a way of sustaining wellbeing for those women who have less exciting lives. They use their body as an immediate natural environment (Tuan 1997) and a great potential source of joy (Csikszentmihalyi 1992; Stebbins 1977, 2009). Their ‘escapist’ (Hirschman 1983) engagement with make-up as a source of ‘flow’ provides them with a sense of solace, pleasure, and creativity (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Bloch and Bruce 1984). In the absence of extrinsic satisfaction and appreciation from their society (Csikszentmihalyi 1992; Bloch and Bruce 1984), they continue to engage in their make-up rituals on a daily basis. Although they do not necessarily believe that make-up makes them more beautiful or relate its use to their self-esteem, they still experience ‘significant mood changes’ (Celsi 1992). For them, flow (i.e., application of make-up) becomes its own reward and offers intrinsic satisfaction (Bloch and Bruce 1984) and brings feelings of serenity and ecstasy. Yet, for these women, the real challenge of flow experience lies not in the task itself (i.e., consumption of cosmetics) (Csikszentmihalyi 1975) but in the consequences of accomplishing the task, which are related to the dominant cultural order of their society (Jafari and Taheri 2004). Generally speaking, excessive use of make-up is frowned upon in Iran. The state views it as an un-Islamic behavior and a sign of Western decadence. Therefore, women with heavy make-up are labeled as ‘street women’ and are usually stopped and advised by the morality police. Likewise, conservative families do not approve of their female members’ excessive use of make-up as it signals lack of dignity. Such women are also more susceptible to sexual harassment.

Despite all these problems, these individuals accomplish the task of wearing make-up with determination. They feel more “alert, concentrated, happy, satisfied and creative” (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989, 816). The ‘activation energy’ embedded in their autotelic experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1975) focuses them in total absorption on the task in hand to the exclusion of all else around them. Although they know that make-up will do little to change their situation in real life, they can escape into a fantasy world for some part of the day. They give themselves up to the processes of its application, losing themselves in the creative play and artistry that these processes facilitate without giving much thought to final outcomes.

Based on our findings from this context, we stress that changing socio-cultural dynamics in contemporary societies give rise to new forms of autotelic consumption which need to be investigated. By extending the application of autotelic consumption to very mundane life practices, we also emphasize that flow is context-bound and what may lead to flow for one person in a particular socio-cultural context may not necessarily hold true across different socio-cultural environments.