Learning to Be Cosmopolitan

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This paper examines how consumers learn to be cosmopolitan. It considers the way mobile consumers incorporate and exercise the cosmopolitan ideals of flexibility, adaptability, and competence in three modes: objectified, institutionalized, and embodied cosmopolitanism. By looking at cosmopolitanism as an ideology that reproduces as cultural capital, it identifies important implications for consumer research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cosmopolitanism refers to a perspective that considers that all individuals are citizens of the world. In recent years, it has received considerable research attention from consumer researchers (Cannon and Yaprak 2002; Cleveland, Laroche, and Papadopoulos 2009; Holt 1998; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). These studies recognize the overarching influence of cosmopolitanism as an important shaper of consumption in the global arena, which moderates and mediates many consumer attitudes and values. Despite the fact that consumer researchers agree that cosmopolitanism has a profound impact on consumer behavior, they have not explained how consumers acquire such dispositions.

There is a dearth of studies in the literature which investigate the process of becoming cosmopolitan. Current literature focuses on the relationship between cosmopolitanism and other consumer dimensions such as ethnocentrism and materialism (Cleveland et al. 2009), and fails to the dynamic nature of the construct itself. Thompson and Tambyah (1999), in one of the few studies that view cosmopolitanism as a dynamic process, point out that the expatriate informants of their study are neither completely cosmopolitan nor completely local, but rather aspiring to cosmopolitanism. The authors offer extensive ideographic data on masculine and feminine narratives present in expatriate discourses and relate them to the postcolonial economy. However, they cannot explain why some expatriates can adopt cosmopolitan ideals while others cannot. The literature lacks explanations on how consumers learn to be cosmopolitan. Therefore, this article aims to fill that gap by answering the following questions: How do consumers learn to be cosmopolitan and what are the implications of that for consumer research?

In our first section we differentiate among four types of cosmopolitanism in the literature: a) philosophical cosmopolitanism, a moral and political standpoint that seeks universal rights and global justice; b) analytical cosmopolitanism, an investigative tool and solution for problems created by the second modernity (Beck); c) banal cosmopolitanism, concrete processes of diversification and complexification of the world; and d) ideological cosmopolitanism, a set of neoliberal ideas historically linked to the growth of capitalism and therefore promoting values of mobility, fluidity, individuality, and flexibility. This research addresses the last two types of cosmopolitanism. In other words, we want to know how the cosmopolitan ideology is learned and how it integrates with diversification of the world.

We chose transnational mobile professionals (Bardhi 2004) as our research context, as the literature and travelling patterns indicate a high possibility of finding cosmopolitans among this group. The research took place in Sydney, Australia, a multicultural city that attracts expatriates from all over the world. We conducted 17 in-depth interviews with 11 transnational mobile professionals. Informants were asked to describe their life trajectories and explain their motivations for living in different countries. The identification of major life themes and life projects (Mick and Buhl 1992) together with processes of comparison, dimensionalization, and integration in categories relevant to the processes related to transnational mobility and the reproduction of cosmopolitanism.

Our findings show that cosmopolitanism, as an ideology of dominant classes, reinforces ideals attached to flexibility, adaptability, mobility, and diversity that provide transnational professionals with extra motivation for moving and seeking new and different places. Cosmopolitans process these novel experiences as opportunities for self-development and for exercising mobility skills valued by dominant classes. For cosmopolitans, mobility becomes a means of building up competencies, which are necessary in the competitive capitalist arena. These competencies involve the ability to orchestrate knowledge, experiences, and stories from different places and transform them in resources that are reprocessed as social, cultural or economic capital.

Cosmopolitan ideology, as a set of practices and skills, must be learned. As demonstrated here, it is by experiencing cosmopolitanism in a prolonged manner, through social institutions (e.g., family, schools, workplaces) that especially convey cosmopolitan ideals, that mobile professionals acquire it in an embodied form. However, institutionalized cosmopolitanism is not accessible to everyone. These competencies are class based and represent a form of global-cultural capital that is not accessible to all. Transnational mobile consumers who have little contact with institutionalized forms of cosmopolitanism cannot incorporate embodied forms of cosmopolitanism. As a result, they do not learn how to be cosmopolitan. Moreover, they tend to interpret their mobile experiences in very different ways from those who are more cosmopolitan; rather, they see it as difficult and painful, which only reinforces their class position.

The performance of cosmopolitan practices allows individuals to highlight the benefits of their mobility and underplay the problems caused by it in a way that creates opportunities for capital accumulation and reproduction of the status quo. They actively consume cultural differences and display these differences as assets, which sets them apart from the less travelled. Their cosmopolitan identities are not linked to the objects themselves but to the way they organize consumption practices and objects. These creative uses of consumption products and experiences function as authenticating acts (Arnould and Price 2003) that transform personal agency into cosmopolitan self-narrative. These acts however are only meaningful to the extent they can be used to differentiate the performer from the others.

Explaining cosmopolitanism as an ideology which moves through global dimensions of cultural capital has many implications for consumer research. First, it becomes clear that cosmopolitanism is not accessible to everyone, which implies that underlying the debate around cosmopolitanism in the marketplace, there should be an awareness of how the society is stratified. Second, we use caution when inferring democratization of the marketplace, as different objects and experiences will be filtered differently, depending on the level of embodied cosmopolitanism one has. Third, according to the data, cosmopolitanism as an ideology seems to be adopted by people from different parts of the world, which suggests some isomorphism of structures present in different countries. In analytical terms, this is good because it creates a platform of comparison between marketplaces, in the so-called global structures of common differences (Wilk 1995) Fourth, pointing out the modes in which cosmopolitanism exists (institutionalized, embodied, and objectified) creates constructs that can be further used to explain relationships between consumption and cosmopolitan ideology in the marketplace.
REFERENCES