What Happens When Consumers Acculturate to Multiple Cultural Contexts?

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We examine the consequences of consumers’ multi-acculturation – a process whereby circulating consumers acculturate to multiple cultural contexts. We reveal the development of high cultural reflexivity through four different aspects of cultural awareness. We also find an idiosyncratic spiral notion of time. Implications for consumer research are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Movement is a key process in global consumer culture. Globalization and advances in technology, communication and transportation have intensified the circulation of goods, services, and people (Appadurai 1990; Ger and Belk 1996; Sherry 1998). Flows of information and ideas “from one culture enter another culture, and create individuals who exhibit elements of multiple cultures” (Craig and Douglas 2006,330). As a consequence, exposure to multiple cultural contexts (through media, through extensive travelling, or by living in large multicultural cities) is an everyday reality for millions of consumers (Klugman 2009).

Despite this, the consumer acculturation literature, i.e. the body of literature concerned with the behavior of consumers and other marketplace actors in their movement from one cultural context to another, has not yet examined the case of very mobile consumers, professionals who frequently shift locations and cultural contexts, people we call circulating consumers. The goal of this article is to bridge this gap by examining this process of circulation as “more than simply the movement of people, ideas, and commodities from one culture to another”, but also as “a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraints” (Lee and LiPuma 2002,6).

The consumer acculturation literature has made important contributions to understanding consumer behavior of migrants. Studies from the assimilationist phase have shown that ethnic groups have particular patterns of consumption and that understanding them is important for organizations as they try to develop advertising and sales promotions targeting these communities (Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986; O’Guinn and Faber 1985).

Later, works from the post-assimilationist phase (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Oswald 1999; Penaloza 1994; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Üstünler and Holt 2007) challenged the idea of assimilation - i.e. the idea that immigrants are eventually assimilated into the mainstream culture, and advanced the theory on consumer acculturation in three main ways: 1) They have demonstrated that consumer acculturation processes are complex phenomena that involve processes of movement, adaptation and translation, diverse agents from home and host cultures, diverse identity outcomes and elements from the marketplace (Askegaard et al. 2005; Oswald 1999; Penaloza 1994); 2) They have shown how marketers, retailers, middleman, products, services, brands shape and are shaped by consumers’ efforts to acculturate (Peñaloza 2000); 3) They have explained how cultural and social structures (e.g.: social class positions, ideological compatibility, consumer culture) can lead to differing patterns of consumer acculturation (Üstünler and Holt 2007).

However, the consumer acculturation literature has tended to focus on movement from one place to another. As noticed by Üstünler and Holt (2007,41) acculturation has been treated as “what happens when peoples socialized in one (minority) culture migrate and so come into continuous first-hand contact with a new (dominant) culture”. They have not addressed cases of consumers having to adapt and acculturate more than once. Nor has it considered the cumulative effect of acculturation on consumers’ subsequent experiences. Given that to multiple cultural contexts – or multi-acculturation - has become a much more common phenomenon, especially among employees of multinational corporations (Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou 1991; Nowicka 2006; Sklair 2001), the need to address this gap becomes crucial. In short, the purpose of this paper is to examine how consumers acculturate to multiple cultural contexts. More specifically, what is particular to consumer multi-acculturation? How is it different from single acculturation processes? How does it help us to expand current understanding about consumer behavior?

We interviewed 38 expatriates, from 20 different countries of origins, ranging from 25-55 years old, 19 having a partner and 19 single or divorced. They were all professionals with a tertiary degree, diverse occupations and diverse geographic mobility paths. Informants were asked to describe their life trajectories and explain their motivations for living in different countries (McC racken 1988). The identification of major life themes and life projects (Mick and Buhl 1992) together with iterative processes of comparison, dimensionalization, and integration (Spiggle 1994) created the necessary conditions to compare and contrast consumers’ histories of living in different countries and find the most relevant categories which allowed researchers to group findings by themes.

We contribute to the expansion of consumer acculturation literature in three different ways. First, by looking at circulating consumers, we identify a specific type of consumer behavior characterized by very pronounced cultural reflexivity. This reflexivity is expressed through four different aspects: 1) Awareness that one’s own cultural identity may vary and that it can even be multiple; 2) Awareness that different cultural identities are perceived differently by different people or in different contexts; 3) Realization that cultural identities may be learned; 4) Indexicality based on first-hand experiences. Second, we show that multiple acculturation affects consumers notions’ of time. It is suggested that reflexive time of multi-acculturated consumers can be represented by a spiral shape, as it cyclical and progressive at the same time. We detail the effects of such notions on consumption practices.

Finally, our research advances the understanding of what it means to live in a global and multicultural marketplace, especially as it deals with consumers’ adaptation to multiple cultural contexts. Through our circulating consumers we show that multi-acculturation (i.e. multiple processes of acculturation) may lead to metacculturation (i.e. a higher order of acculturation characterized by high cultural reflexivity). We also show that consumer metacculturation (Askegaard, Kjeldgaard, and Arnould 2010) is a level of acculturation with its own dynamics. Metacculturated consumers are aware of different aspects of their cultural identities and they will try to monitor and manage these aspects in order produce diverse identity outcomes. The consumption of cultures (Firat 1995) becomes a way of managing the self.

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