Zooming in While Zooming Out: How a Consumption Context Animates a Macro-Focus Investigation and Stimulates New Opportunities For Theoretical Insights

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We discuss and illustrate how a unique context matters for theory development by challenging the prevalent—individual or microsocial—level of analysis linked to particular constructs and shifting it to a macrosocial level, thereby breaking free of inherent assumptions and deriving new opportunities for theoretical insights in consumption research.

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ABSTRACT
Consumer researchers have long recognized the power of contexts in facilitating theoretical insights (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Arnould, Price, and Moiso 2006) and have discussed the importance of historicizing (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2001), as well as the need to pay attention to the context of context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Earley 2014). This conceptual article further expands these discussions on how context matters by focusing attention on the predominant level of analysis linked to particular theoretical constructs. Because consumer researchers have been utilizing contexts as platforms for their theorizations, the ontological status of certain concepts reflects a particular level of analysis demanded by particular contexts. This eventually leads to an inherent link between the conventional understanding of a concept and a particular class of context and level of analysis. In this article, we illustrate and discuss how contexts can be utilized to rethink the ontological status of concepts—once derived through study within particular contexts—by highlighting the importance of a circuit of analysis that involves various levels of analysis.

We exemplify this argument by a focus on the concepts of consumer acculturation and nostalgia, and demonstrate how a particular research context—in this case a divide in consumption patterns between formerly East and West Germany—can challenge the conventional understanding of these concepts colored by prevalent individual or microsocial levels of analysis. By moving the analysis to a macrosocial level we can break free of conceptual conventions derived from earlier contexts and raise novel research questions about the interplay between different scales of observation (Desjeux 1996). This opens the door to rethinking the ontological status of consumer acculturation and nostalgia, to derive new theoretical insights, uncover complex interactions, and identify theoretical boundary conditions that have eluded us so far.

The paper is structured as follows: We start with a description of the facilitating research context before discussing how contexts can be leveraged for theory building using a multilevel circuit of analysis. We proceed with an illustration of a concrete example of this process by taking inventory of existing literature on consumer acculturation and nostalgia, and showcasing how a macrosocial level of analysis stimulates re-inquiry of these concepts. This in turn fertilizes new theoretical insights and links, which are synthesized in Figure 1. We conclude with a discussion of methodological, conceptual, and theoretical contributions and implications.

FACILITATING RESEARCH CONTEXT: CONSUMPTION IN GERMANY
The research context, which serves to illustrate how a shift in the level of analysis exposes voids in previous literature and thus new theoretical connections, revolves around consumption behavior in contemporary Germany. When it comes to consumption, Germany is still a divided country: consumers of the former East (GDR) and West (FRG) differ in their purchase choices and patterns as well as the meanings they attribute to consumption overall.

FIGURE 1
Facilitating research context: Prevailing divide in East and West German Consumption Behavior
What belongs together would soon grow back together: The fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent reunification in 1990 induced a process of adaptation and acculturation to a new market and consumption system among East Germans. A consumption culture characterized by abundance (as opposed to the ubiquitous scarcity previously experienced) was a key driver of the peaceful revolution and something East Germans had yearned for. Hence the expectation was that East German consumers would eagerly adapt and acculturate to the Western consumption culture they had fought so hard to access. However, the assumption that both consumer cultures would soon converge proved delusive. On the contrary, the sphere of consumption across the formerly separate states even today highlights the fact that considerable differences prevail. While some former GDR brands regained an 85% market share in East Germany, they remain largely unknown in the West. In some product categories the disparity appears insurmountable to the point where large Western manufacturers have started to refocus their marketing efforts by concentrating on the former Western territory only, thereby disregarding the East—a market they had once taken by storm after the Wall fell, when East German products were quickly discarded, rejected and replaced by long-desired Western goods perceived to be “the real thing” (Berdahl 1999; Veenis 1999).

Following the initial phase of hyperconsumption of Western brands, we now witness a nostalgic revival of formerly disliked GDR-associated brands, objects, practices and consumptionscapes (Merkel 2006). Formerly discontinued products reappear on supermarket shelves with retailers offering “GDR product” promotions customized only for the former GDR territory. Mail order companies selling solely GDR brands are flourishing and dispatching parcels to East Germans living inside and outside their former home base. The love and idealization for East German consumer products is accompanied by a resurgence of consumptionscapes such as GDR-themed hotels, “city safaris” in the iconic Trabant car, restaurants offering GDR cuisine, GDR product fairs, as well as consumption communities celebrating GDR consumption objects and practices in social media spaces. After 25 years of consumer adaptation and acculturation, the undiminishing disparity in consumption cultures and resurgence of formerly despised and rejected consumption objects and services surprises.

The paradoxical nature of the persistent gap in consumption behavior in a country that has been politically reunified in 1990 renders it a highly stimulating context for research. Contexts with extreme features are valuable in that they enable detection of previously uncovered constructs, processes and relationships as well as interactions with other constructs (Arnould et al. 2006; Mook 1983). When compared to similar research contexts, such as nostalgia in Eastern Europe, the German context presents an extreme case. While the evolution from a socialist to a capitalist society took place gradually in the rest of the former Soviet Bloc, the sudden nature with which these two opposing cultures collided and had to be negotiated by East German consumers presents an ideal opportunity to rethink existing theories and their boundary conditions, as exemplified in the latter part of this paper.

The consumer acculturative processes of adapting to a new market system that followed the fall of the Wall, as well as the observed nostalgic revival of GDR-related consumption, foreground consumer acculturation and nostalgia. Comparing opposing consumption cultures and their negotiation moreover allows for a re-framing of similarity and difference in fruitful ways (Arnould et al. 2006). Hence we follow the call for extraordinary research contexts which, based on their extreme features, enable us to scrutinize and expand extant theories, their boundary conditions and interactions (Mook 1983).

LEVERAGING THE CONTEXT FOR THEORY BUILDING – THE MULTILEVEL CIRCUIT OF ANALYSIS

There are several approaches to levels of analysis: be it the rigid abandoning of levels of hierarchical relationships such as those advocated by some theoretical lenses like Actor-network theory (ANT) that rely on flattening levels of analysis to derive theorizations on consumption and marketing phenomena (Bajide 2013; Giesler 2012); the recognition of the interplay between more immediate microlevel consumer experiences and more hidden macrosociological processes (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Earley 2014); and Desjeux’s (1996) scales of observation that suggest biological, individual, microsocial, or macrosocial levels of analysis as starting points for observing social reality in order to break down the complexity that emerges in attempts to observe social and cultural dimensions at once.

While Arnould and Thompson (2005, 875) state that consumer culture theoretical (CCT) research in particular strives to “systematically link individual (or idiosyncratic) meanings to different levels of cultural processes and structure” situated “within historical and marketplace contexts,” researchers have come to critique the shortcoming of CCT research to deliver the kind of integrative theorizing it set out to achieve, and pointed out that the existential-phenomenological tradition endemic in consumer research has led to an overemphasis on the individual level of analysis, and therefore neglects the macrosociological forces that shape consumption behavior (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Earley 2014). We intend to encourage more research that takes advantage of a circuit of various levels of analysis, thereby complementing insights from one level of analysis with another one. This is grounded in Desjeux’s (1996) original argument that a particular scale of observation serves merely as the entry point for analyzing consumption, followed by what we call a circuit of investigation: the subsequent, hermeneutical and triangulated use of various levels of observation. Because knowledge is co-constituted in Desjeux’s (1996) terms between the different scales of observation—biological, individual, microsocial, macrosocial—theorizing within contexts requires a greater focus on the forces that shape the consumption phenomenon under investigation, which contextualize the predominantly used scale of observation. This means it is crucial to shed light on the meaning of the context—in Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) terms “the context of context”—and acknowledge that ontological claims about concepts are derived from the use of a particular level of analysis; albeit that these claims have to be situated vis-à-vis knowledge that is derived from the use of other levels of observation.

Our research context presented above exposes the predominantly applied foci of individual and microsocial lenses as embedded in complex larger political, institutional and cultural environments and conditions. The one-to-one transfer of West German hegemonic structures turned East Germans into largely passive receivers (vs. active co-creators) of a new political, economic and social system. The dominant manner in which systemic changes occurred sowed the seeds for later contestations. In terms of consumption, East and West Germany were characterized by opposing cultures, each with their own value grids, patterns and ideological infrastructures. While West Germany’s culture of consumption was adhering to a capitalist market ideology, East Germany’s culture of consumption followed a socialist ideology. This context therefore specifically foregrounds the negotiation of these two diverging consumer cultures rooted in
opposing market systems and political value systems and therefore presents an opportunity to explore as yet untouched facets of consumer acculturation and nostalgia by emphasizing the relevance of macrosocial levels of analysis. That is, the German context highlights how supposedly microsocial and individual consumption phenomena of acculturation and nostalgia have to be understood vis-à-vis the larger institutional, political and historical trajectories of which they are part.

AN INVENTORY OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Using Desjeux’s (1996) scales of observation to analyze extant research on consumer acculturation and nostalgia, it becomes clear how theorizations and conceptualizations are tainted by the use of a particular level of analysis, rather than a circuit of investigation exploiting the range of different scales of observation. Predominantly, we find that individual and microsocial scales of observation are used to research nostalgia and acculturation. As argued previously, we suspect that this is related to the particular contexts chosen for studying the operation of these concepts.

Consumer acculturation. In the case of consumer acculturation, with a few exceptions that analyze the concept at the individual level of analysis, such as Chai and Dibb’s (2014) recent exploration of how acculturation influences interpersonal trust, the majority of studies take a microsocial approach based on contexts of migrating groups of consumers and their adaptation to subjectively new host cultures (e.g., Chytkova 2011; Dion, Sitz, and Remy 2011; Fernandez, Veer, and Lastovicka 2011; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994; Vihalem and Keller 2011). Only a few studies explicitly address the interplay between microsocial and macrosocial levels. For example, Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard (2005) relate the construction of ethnic identities to larger scales of global consumer culture and home/host culture, and others integrate institutional domination in acculturative processes (Üstüner and Holt 2007; Üstüner and Thompson 2012). While these recent studies have begun taking advantage of macrosocial levels of observation to inform consumer acculturation, they still conceptualize consumer acculturation primarily as a microsocial phenomenon shaped by macrosocial forces. Through the lens of the context of Germany’s reunification, however, questions arise as to how consumer acculturation can be understood primarily as a macrosocial phenomenon shaped by microsocial forces, because it challenges the ontological status of acculturation involving physical migration of particular groups of consumers.

Nostalgia. As for nostalgia, a similar pattern emerges, with the individual level of observation as its predominant anchor point instead. While there are studies conceptualizing nostalgia through a biological scale of observation, such as Hofer’s (1688) description of nostalgia as a medical condition linked to homesickness and melancholy and Zhou et al.’s (2012) conceptualization of nostalgia as maintaining physiological comfort and mental health by increasing perceptions of physical warmth, the majority of consumer research portrays nostalgia as an individual phenomenon. This is reflected in the conventional understanding of nostalgia as sentimental longing for the past (Holbrook and Schindler 1991) and the interpretation of this “longing” as an emotion, cognition or experience on the individual level that has either some consequences for consumption or is reflected in consumption choices. In this line of thought, prior research includes a focus on the emotional and cognitive components of nostalgia (Holak and Havlena 1996; Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikis, and Wildschut 2012), consumption preferences (Holbrook 1993; Holbrook and Schindler 2003; Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010), and proneness to nostalgia (Holak, Havlena, and Matveev 2005). Interestingly, a number of studies suggest microsocial and macrosocial facets that play a role in consumers’ individual nostalgic projects (Havlina and Holak 1996; Kao 2012). However, these studies are grounded in the individualistic conceptualization of nostalgia. Only very few studies develop a perspective on nostalgia through the use of micro- or macrosocial levels of observation such as Holak’s (2014) investigation of nostalgia in the context of a consumer group’s diaspora (microsocial), or Stamboli and Visconti’s (2012) work opening up the (macrosocial) study of nostalgia as the collective quest for cultural comfort. Yet we know surprisingly little about the operation of nostalgia on a macroscope. Comprehending nostalgia through the lens of the context described above highlights our limited understanding in terms of the macrosocial facets and roles of nostalgia against the backdrop of political and cultural trajectories.

A MACROSOCIAL SCOPE: REINQUIRING EXISTING CONCEPTS AND FERTILIZING THEORETICAL LINKS

Because previous literature indicates, but does not develop further, the role of macrosocial facets in the operation of both consumer acculturation and consumer nostalgia, these concepts invite re-examination from a macrosocial perspective. As illustrated in Figure 1, the selection of a unique research context can facilitate such shifts in scales of observation, thereby exposing limitations of conventional understandings of these concepts, which shall be briefly discussed hereafter.

Rethinking acculturation and its spatial dimensions: Consumer acculturation is generally considered as a “process of movement and adaptation to the consumer cultural environment in one country by persons from another country” (Peñaloza 1994). Hence the majority of previous consumer research frames consumer acculturation as a process of physical migration. While this is accurate for a certain class of contexts, the German case highlights another class of context for acculturative processes. Here, with the fall of the Wall, East German consumers were crossed by the border (rather than physically migrating across the border), and thereby exposed to a new cultural environment. Such acculturation without migration presents a new form of adaptation currently not captured by a microsocial definition of acculturation. Because the dominant view of acculturation holds that territorial frames are generally considered fixed, there is little known about how shifts in territorial definitions impact consumer culture. The German context exposes this boundary condition.

With territorial changes and redefinitions ongoing globally (e.g., new countries forming, borders being built and falling, ethnic groups striving for independence), this class of context presents opportunities for rethinking the spatial dimensions of consumer acculturation.

Macroinstitutional variables shape acculturative processes: As previously highlighted, prior studies focused mainly on microsocial processes of migrants. The historical instance of a political merger in Germany foregrounds the previously underexplored role of macroinstitutional forces in shaping consumers’ acculturative processes and their subsequent manifestations in consumption behavior. Very little attention has been devoted to the role of macroinstitutional variables in consumer acculturation. Hence the German context presents a unique opportunity to explore how macroinstitutional variables impact patterns of consumer adaptation, and it opens the door to the study of ways in which other institutional forces (e.g., economic crises, military conflicts, globalization) may shape acculturative processes.

Exposing a conceptual link between acculturation and nostalgia: The shared goal of consumer acculturation theory is “to understand and conceptualize the various forces that define, allow,
facilitate, or complicate consumer acculturation under specific cultural conditions” (Luedicke 2011, 238). While the concepts of acculturation and nostalgia have been treated largely separately in the literature, conceptual links are suggested when the level of analysis is raised to macro perspectives. Acculturative processes still ongoing in Germany today are intertwined with nostalgia. The dominated cultural conditions of the reunification suggest that in addition to the acculturation forces identified and defined by Luedicke (2011), nostalgia is likely to be a previously unaccounted for cultural resource that shapes acculturation processes by facilitating, inhibiting or reversing adaptation. Hence the German context reveals the opportunity to study the interaction of these concepts by investigating the cultural roles of nostalgia in acculturative processes.

Rethinking nostalgia: As highlighted by the literature review, nostalgia has been primarily investigated by applying individual (and very few microsocial) scales of observation. Our context suggests that nostalgia in East Germany emerges as a special form of collective nostalgia rooted in contested sociohistorical processes. Thus it is important to conceptualize nostalgia as a sociocultural phenomenon vis-à-vis existing individualistic and microsocial concepts and explore the macrosocial facets and roles of nostalgia against the backdrop of political and cultural trajectories.

Ex tant literature fails to explain the processes inherent in Germany’s reunification with regard to consumer acculturation of consumers who have become migrants in their own country, and with regard to the role of nostalgia in contemporary German consumer culture against the backdrop of historical and institutional trajectories on the macroscope (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Brown et al. 2001). That is, the context explicitly foregrounds the interrelation of individual-level experiences with microsocial practices with the German reunification as a macrosocial process. As summarized by Figure 1, zooming out in the scale of observation (i.e., shifting attention toward these macrosocial levels) allows researchers to zoom in on new opportunities for theoretical insights by making previously undiscovered conceptual links discernible.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Neither consumer acculturation nor nostalgia take place exclusively on biological, individual, microsocial, or macrosocial levels, and therefore should not be studied through an exclusive application of just one scale of observation. Rather, we encourage more research to take advantage of the circuit of various levels of analysis. Our contribution to the field of interpretive consumer research is threefold, namely of methodological, conceptual, as well as theoretical nature:

1) Following Arnould et al. (2006) we contribute to a much-needed discussion on how to make unique contexts matter theoretically, by showing how a change in the scale of observation facilitates breaking free of pre-existing assumptions, leading to theoretical insights and the exposure of boundary conditions as well as conceptual interactions previously undetected.

2) We conceptualize and substantiate our suggestion with the help of a concrete example and showcase how the unique context of a prevailing divide in East and West Germany’s consumption behavior, if moved to a macrosocial level of analysis, can not only extend existing theories of consumer acculturation and nostalgia, but moreover expose conceptual links between both bodies of literature that were previously treated as separate.

3) From a theoretical perspective, our context informs four important extensions to existing research on acculturation and nostalgia. Firstly, the situation presented here of consumers being “crossed by a border” rather than physically crossing the border into a new sociocultural environment exposes a boundary condition of extant acculturation literature, namely that territorial frames are generally considered fixed and little is known about how shifts in territorial definitions impact on consumption culture. Secondly, the case of a political merger foregrounds the previously underexplored role of macroinstitutional forces in shaping consumers’ acculturative processes and their subsequent manifestations in consumption behavior. Thirdly, the dominated cultural conditions of the reunification suggest that in addition to the acculturation forces identified and defined by Luedicke (2011), nostalgia is likely to be a previously unaccounted cultural resource that shapes acculturation processes. Raising the analysis to a macrosocial level exposes a complex conceptual interaction between theories of nostalgia and acculturation that has so far been largely neglected. Fourthly, in contrast to the largely biological, individual, or microsocial contexts informing the study of nostalgia thus far, nostalgia also emerges as a special form of collective, sociocultural resource that has roots in contested sociohistorical processes. Hence existing individualistic and psychological theories of nostalgia have to be complemented by sociocultural conceptions that explore the macrosocial facets and cultural roles of nostalgia against the backdrop of historical, political and cultural trajectories.

In this article, we have suggested that the application of a macrosocial scale of observation to a particular context—zooming out, in the scale of observation—is conducive to zooming in on a theoretical and conceptual level, i.e., the operation of such concepts within consumer culture. That is, we advocate zooming out as an important step in the multilevel circuit of analysis—an approach that challenges the assumption that a concept, here exemplified with nostalgia or consumer acculturation, can be accurately understood through an exclusive focus on either individual and/or microsocial levels of analysis.

The challenge ahead for consumer researchers lies in tackling the emerging complexity that goes hand-in-hand with the application of macrosocial scales of observation. For this, prior knowledge created using other (individual or microsocial) scales of observation provides important landmarks and conceptual starting points for macrosocial investigations and the subsequent exposure of theoretical voids and boundary conditions.

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