Recoding the Boundary: the Code-Jamming Effects of Meta-Reflexive Practices in Consumer Acculturation

Angela Gracia B. Cruz, The University of Auckland, New Zealand
Margo Buchanan-Oliver, The University of Auckland, New Zealand

Beyond reflexively traversing boundaries (Askegaard et al. 2005), this paper shows how acculturating consumers playfully shift boundaries through meta-reflexive practices. By ‘jamming’ dominant socio-cultural codes through the ironic recoding of stereotypes, meta-reflexive practices represent a novel practice of consumer agency whereby culture is not only consumed, but also critiqued.

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Angela Gracia B. Cruz, The University of Auckland, New Zealand
Margo Buchanan-Oliver, The University of Auckland, New Zealand

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While acculturating consumers have been shown to traverse (Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah 2004; Mehta and Belk 1991; Peñaloza 1994), negotiate (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Jafari and Goulding 2008; Regany, Visconti, and Fosse-Gomez 2012), and oscillate between (Askegaard et al. 2005; Jamal and Chapman 2000; Oswald 1999; Regany et al. 2012; Sutton-Brady, Davis, and Jung 2010) wider socio-cultural boundaries, what is less clearly understood in consumer acculturation theory is how acculturating consumers might shift these boundaries and what resources they might use to do so. To address this theoretical gap and extend the current understanding of consumer agency in acculturation, this paper introduces, conceptualizes, and empirically demonstrates the phenomenon of meta-reflexive practices, which refers to the ironic recoding of dominant socio-cultural codes such as stereotypes. By heightening and ‘jamming’ dominant socio-cultural codes, acculturating consumers move beyond reflexively traversing boundaries (Askegaard et al. 2005) towards playfully shifting these boundaries. As such, meta-reflexive practices represent a novel practice of consumer agency whereby culture is not only consumed, but also critiqued.

The concept of meta-reflexivity is rooted in the perspectives of poststructural semiotics and literary theory, wherein socio-cultural categories, boundaries, and codes are viewed as texts-in-process which are consumed by individual consumers as resources for identity construction (Thompson and Haytko 1997). In addition, these socio-cultural codes are unstable and undergo continual ‘retextualization’ (Thompson, Stern, and Arnould 1998). The ongoing ‘coding’ of culture is furthermore conceived as a social process, involving repeated re-mediation and re-performance within diverse social practices and textual forms such as advertising (Phillips 1997; Ritson and Elliott 1995; Scott 1994). These practices of retexualization, in turn, have recursive effects on the socio-cultural codes which shape their construction. Applied to consumer acculturation theory, this view suggests that boundaries are not fixed, but emerge out of the continual repetition of dominant codes. Moreover, this view emphasizes that boundaries have the potential to be re-coded.

Stereotypes, in particular, represent one type of socio-cultural code through which boundaries are reinforced and maintained. As consumer acculturation scholars have previously shown, stereotypes carry stigmatising effects on acculturating consumers (Jafari and Goulding 2008; Luedicke 2011; Tolstikova and Molander 2012). However, these stigmatising effects can potentially be interrupted through meta-reflexive practices, the ironic recoding of dominant socio-cultural codes. Within poststructural semiotics and literary theory, meta-reflexive practices have been characterized as “the attempt to avoid a text being believed by its readers” (Latour 1988, 166) and as “the attempt to render texts ‘unreadable’ by adding self-referrential loops” (Pels 2000, 4). Essentially, meta-reflexive practices rely on irony to “bend [a text] back upon itself” (Pels 2000, 7), undermine its primary message, and subvert its originating codes. Meta-reflexive practices are also distinct from reflexive practices because these are not only self-conscious, but also self-destructive; they are not only strategic, but also playful.

This paper is empirically grounded in a hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997) of depth interviews with 26 Southeast Asian immigrant consumers in New Zealand. To enrich and deepen the consumer narratives, visual and reflexive methods were deployed. First, each participant was asked to select objects and photographs which represent their experiences of migration (Zaltman and Coulter 1995) and use drawings to represent their social networks and social identities (Bagnoli 2009). Second, each participant was interviewed twice in line with open narrative reflexivity (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Thompson et al. 1998). In their second interview, participants were presented with the researchers’ emerging interpretation of their first interview and provided an opportunity to correct, qualify, or further deepen their initial responses.

As summarized in Figure 1 and illustrated in Table 1, participants identified a wide range of stereotypes through which socio-cultural boundaries were encoded. Both negative and positive stereotypes about Asian migrants reinforced boundaries between Southeast Asian and New Zealand cultures, as well as boundaries between migrants and locals. These dominant socio-cultural codes were, in turn, transmitted through media texts, with participants actively decoding stereotypes about Asian migrants in advertising, television, and social media texts. Moreover, participants actively used these stereotypes as resources in their meta-reflexive practices. These ironic, playful, and self-contradictory retexualizations of dominant codes paradoxically resulted in ‘code-jamming’ and code-heightening effects. While meta-reflexive practices enabled participants to playfully subvert, invert, and diminish dominant boundaries, at the same time, these practices relied on repeating the very same socio-cultural codes that they are aimed at eroding. Thus, meta-reflexive practices represent a novel practice of consumer agency through which socio-cultural boundaries are simultaneously shifted and maintained.

Consumer meta-reflexive practices help to advance consumer acculturation theory by extending the current understanding of consumer agency in acculturation. In particular, by presenting a novel practice through which consumers recursively affect wider socio-cultural codes, this paper extends Luedicke’s (2011) dialectical model of agency and structure in acculturation. Further, consumer meta-reflexive practices illustrate how acculturating consumers do not only traverse, negotiate, or oscillate between socio-cultural boundaries (Askegaard et al. 2005), but can also playfully shift these boundaries. In addition, it was surprising to find that stereotypes are not only experienced as negative constraints on the identity projects of acculturating consumers (Jafari and Goulding 2008; Luedicke 2011; Tolstikova and Molander 2012), but are actively used by acculturating consumers as resources for boundary negotiation. Despite the reductive and often negative effects of cultural stereotyping, meta-reflexive practices empower consumers to creatively re-claim and re-code dominant socio-cultural boundaries in positive and productive ways.

Meta-reflexive practices represent a greater level of agency, reflexivity, and playfulness in the way acculturating consumers consume socio-cultural codes than is currently theorized in marketing. Ultimately, meta-reflexive practices show that culture is not merely consumed (Askegaard et al. 2005), it can also be critiqued.
REFERENCES


