50 Shades of Grey: Ancestral Consumption and Conceptual Compromise

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Ancestral consumption is the intentional engagement in behaviors approximating the ideal or authentic self. Modern modes of consumption are rejected in favor of more naturalistic behaviors, such as barefoot running, caveman diets, and home-birthing. Inherent in ancestral consumption are conceptual compromises, which involve trade-offs between the authentic and the attainable.

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ABSTRACT

I am as free as nature first made man,
Ere the base laws of servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble savage ran.


Christopher McDougall’s Born To Run spawned tremendous interest in barefoot running. Told against the backstory of the legendary Tarahumara tribe of barefoot runners from Mexico’s Copper Canyon, a central theme of the book is that modern running shoes are harmful (or at best, superfluous) instruments, sold to us by an unscrupulous shoe industry, standing in the way of happy, healthy and biomechanically-correct running. Eschewing shoes in favor of bare feet is presented as the path to running nirvana, yet in the years following Born To Run’s publication (2009) the running shoe industry grew explosively, fueled in large part by a massive increase in so-called barefoot running shoes. Consumers interested in running without shoes began buying running shoes more frequently than ever before (Austin 2013).

The reverberations of Born To Run illuminate a consumer phenomenon we refer to as ancestral consumption, defined as the intentional engagement in behaviors aimed at approximating one’s ideal, natural self (alternately referred to as seeking the ancestral self). The purpose of this research is to illuminate the concept of ancestral consumption and to propose a conceptual model detailing its motivations and hypothesized processes. Ancestral consumers view many mainstream technological advancements as unnatural, and possibly detrimental to both physical and mental health. They therefore attempt to revert to apparently more authentic forms of consumption, yet the concept of authenticity is so loosely defined and individually malleable that it has become mythical (Brown et al. 2013). Consider, for example, the proliferation of ancestral dietary advice in recent years. The popular Paleo diet (aka the Caveman diet) claims to be “the original human diet” (Wolff & Cordain 2010). At the same time, food writer and activist Michael Pollan instructs his readers to avoid “the original human diet” (Pollan 2008, 149). Though both of these diet prescriptions reference the past, the temporal gap between the caveman and any current living person’s grandmother is enormous. In spite of this gap, however, both ideals from the past appear pure and authentic when compared to modern industrialized food.

The construct of ancestral consumption and its relationship with authenticity have very loose borders, since they emanate from consumers’ perceptions. In this research, we consider ancestral consumption to be anything that consumers determine more authentic, real, or closer to a mythical standard of idealized human existence. The marketplace is filled with examples of this phenomenon, including religious practices, such as Shamanism and sweat-lodging, home birthing, bow hunting, truffle hunting, urban foraging, home brewing, knitting, hiking, fishing and camping. The knowledge and understanding driving ancestral consumption ranges from naïve to sophisticated. Consumers might have a romanticized, wholly inaccurate view of “the way things (never) used to be” – indeed, ancestral consumers often gloss over the fact that conditions in the past frequently included maternal and infant mortality, infectious diseases, malnutrition, backbreaking physical labor, unchecked racism, sexism, and religious intolerance – or they might have scientific, ethical, and/or political motivations for choosing to consume in a more “old fashioned” way. The drivers for ancestral consumption decisions are cognitive, affective, emotional, or symbolic, or some combination thereof. In short, different motivations can lead to identical behavioral outcomes.

Yet one of the most curious aspects of ancestral consumption is its grounding within the boundaries of the contemporary marketplace. Ancestral consumers might find aspects of modern life objectionable, but rather than rejecting them outright, seek to integrate what they perceive as authenticity into their everyday consumption behaviors. Aspiring to a mythical standard of authenticity while simultaneously operating within the conventions of modern economic hegemony (Beverland & Farrelly 2010) gives rise to the paradox at the heart of ancestral consumption, a process we term conceptual compromise. In the case of ancestral consumption, there is conflict between the mythical and the attainable. Much of this tension arises from the often overwhelming stream of information consumers receive from marketers, self-help gurus, popular media, friends and family, salespeople, other consumers, academics, bloggers, and more. In this environment, attempting the optimal decision can become a murky estimation. Furthermore, physical reality often intrudes on people’s best-laid plans. For example, runners who seek the authenticity of unshod running typically wear shoes specifically designed (and marketed) to approximate running barefoot, simply because actually running without shoes is too uncomfortable. In general, Western consumers are savvy enough to recognize that ancestral products are not entirely untainted by modernity, yet consume them nonetheless – hence, engaging in conceptual compromise.

Research on consumers’ interest in extraordinary experiences (e.g., Arnold & Price 1993, Celsi, Rose & Leigh 1992, Kozinets 2002, Tumbat & Belk 2011) finds that modern life is tedious, enervating, and repetitive. Consumers seek transformation through hedonic consumption, e.g., skydiving, mountaineering, river rafting, that allows them to feel fully alive (Campbell 1987). Though motivated – in part – by similar dissatisfaction with modern conventions, ancestral consumers seek vitality through hedonic consumption that is not extraordinary. Rather, their focal behaviors involve everyday, routine consumption, such as diet and exercise.

Regardless of their motivations, consumers pick and choose which products and industries to avoid in favor of ancestral alternatives. For example, someone might work for a large, multinational corporation, yet consume only organic, heirloom, locally-grown foods. Very few consumers attempt to entirely avoid technological/marketing advances (Austin et al. 2007), lest they completely alienate themselves from the flow of modern life (Dobscha 1998). Given the strictures of modernity, i.e., how bound up people are with markets and technologies, including the poorest people in the world (Prahalad 2010), it is actually quite challenging for consumers to simplify their lives and still take advantage of the health and lifestyle advances of the 20th century. Conceptual compromise exists because people want to live “authentically,” but only as long as the discomfort authenticity engenders is tolerable.

This conceptual investigation integrates literature from academia and the popular press to examine consumer pursuit of the ancestral self. We focus on ancestral consumers’ preference for products and brands that support and reinforce their desire for au-
authenticity, but which simultaneously keep them embedded within Western socioeconomic convention (Brickman & Campbell 1971). We investigate the dimensions of two focal constructs – ancestral consumption and conceptual compromise, explore the tensions between the aspirational and normative aspects of these constructs, and present a conceptual model of decision-making in this domain.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND
The forces of both modernism and postmodernism contribute to consumers’ sense of being unmoored in the marketplace. In the late 19th century, modernism ushered in “boundless opportunities for self-transformation” (Kozinets & Handelman 2004, 692), contributing to the dilemma of consumer hyperchoice (Mick, Broniarczyk & Haidt 2004). In the current, postmodern/social media era, empirical information has become fragmented and de-centered, leading consumers to see “truth” as a subjective construct (e.g., Arnould and Thompson 2005, Arias and Acebron 2001, Firat and Venkatesh 1995). When overwhelmed by complexity, consumers typically cherry-pick information to support whatever belief is most desirable or involves the least effort (Tversky & Kahneman 1974, Fiske & Taylor 1991).

Extant research describes Western consumers’ tendency to seek stability, authenticity and “realness” through experiences and products that promise a return to a romantic concept of simplicity. Unlike the quest for “primitivism,” which has been researched extensively, ancestral consumption does not embrace foreignness as superior to the consumer’s native culture (cf. Canniford & Shankar 2007). Nor do ancestral consumers necessarily engage in cultural appropriation of “exotic,” “lower” cultures (Canniford & Karababa 2012, Costa 1998) in their pursuit of more authentic lifestyles. Rather, the search for the ancestral self involves looking to a generalized (or even fictionalized) human past that offers simplified guidance for how life “should be,” without disrupting how life already is.

A plausible explanation for the popularity of ancestral consumption lies in its mythic nature (Brown et al. 2013), since it accommodates a variety of consumer desires to re-create a past when humans were supposedly happier and healthier than we are now: a time and place where people were not indoors most of the time, largely sedentary, obese, disconnected from their food sources, and interacting more often with screens than with faces. Although mythic, the idea of ancestral consumption is normative, insofar as people believe that it’s the way we have evolved, as organisms, to flourish. Ancestral consumers believe that although our built environment has changed radically, we are not so different from the Homo sapiens of 30,000 years ago, and should therefore consume accordingly. Hence, the appeal and success of Born to Run and similar titles. However, our understanding of how our ancestors lived 30,000 years ago is extremely limited; our understanding how our ancestors lived even 300 years ago is not entirely clear. Therefore, ancestral consumption, while normative on its face, is guesswork, at best. In other words, the ancestral self is a myth.

Previous research has found that myths provide salvation in times of socio-cultural and identity uncertainty (Brown et al. 2013), and acquire widespread popularity because they are both universal and singularizable. Prominent myths take hold in the public psyche because they have broad appeal, yet are vague enough to allow each individual to derive his or her own understanding of what the myth means. The mythology underlying ancestral consumption addresses consumers’ unarticulated fears (Brown et al. 2013) in this case, their health and well being, and the confusing nature of an asymmetrical, technocentric, modern marketplace. (“Are my choices causing me more harm than good? How do we really know what’s best? The science is always changing.”) For many consumers, ancestral consumption represents an unconscious flight from complexity (Simon 1957), and finding a simple and actionable coping strategy for such vexing questions is a source of relief for consumers, even if it’s built on a myth.

As a mythical concept, the ancestral self is amorphous, closely linked with the zeitgeist, and therefore easily shaped, promoted and manipulated by marketers. (Consider the impact of Born to Run on consumers and the market, from supply chains through point of sale.) The fact that the ancestral self is a moving target, susceptible to market forces, means that the reality of pursuing it is far from simple, and not necessarily beneficial to the consumer. Given that people seeking ancestral products and experiences are not typically interested in fundamentally altering their consumption patterns, i.e., consuming less and disengage from modern economic structures, the ancestral consumer is for sale.

This has powerful implications for marketers. The paradox of “barefoot running shoes” is a case in point. In theory, barefoot running should simplify the act of running, and require less time, effort, and money than conventional running. In fact, the popularity of Born to Run sparked enormous consumer interest in specialized shoes. Consumers intrigued with the idea of running barefoot ironically began to believe that they needed more shoes in order to run “better,” e.g. more efficiently, faster, with fewer injuries (Austin 2013). This effect has been so powerful that even dilettante runners are now likely to have a wardrobe of differentiated shoes.

The notion that one needs to purchase additional equipment in order to run “barefoot” highlights the contradictions and compromises central to ancestral consumption. Ancestral consumers are not necessarily voluntary simplifiers (Gregg 1936), consumer rebels (Dobscha & Ozanne 2001), or activists (Kozinets & Handelman 2004) – previously studied populations with superficial similarities to ancestral consumers. Rather, ancestral consumers pursue “authenticity” without challenging or venturing beyond the normative structure of accepted/acceptable market exchanges. As Daniel Lieberman writes in The Story of the Human Body, “advocates of primal lifestyles are not advocating that you quit your job, move to the Kalahari Desert, and abandon all the best conveniences of modern life such as toilets, cars, and the Internet (which is essential to blog about your Stone Age experiences to other similarly minded folks)” (Lieberman 2013, 7).

Blogging aside, most manifestations of ancestral consumption are individualistic, in both philosophical orientation and in practice (Christopher & Hickinbottom 2008). This is a significant departure from other forms of alternative consumption documented in prior research, which tend to be community - or ecosystem - oriented. For example, in his examination of “consumer emancipation,” Kozinets (2002) finds that consumers at the annual Burning Man celebration seek authentic community with their fellow participants and often carry the lessons they learn back to their “regular” lives. Dobscha and Ozanne (2001) interview environmentally focused subjects whose everyday choices reflect their desires to protect themselves, their community, and the natural environment from as many environmental adulterants as possible. Sandikci and Ger’s (2010) female Turkish subjects seek a simple guiding principle that “provides a solution to the macro and micro anxieties of the modern world” (24). On the surface, these sentiments echo the desires of ancestral consumers, yet all these behaviors result in the formation of new communities. Ancestral consumers appear largely unconcerned with the community implications of their consumption. They are not hostile toward their fellow travelers (cf. Tumbat & Belk 2011), they simply co-exist. Those who socialize and exchange information related to their behavioral choices and associated conceptual compro-
mises (e.g., bloggers) could be considered a community of practice (Wenger 2011), but they are generally not cohesive enough form a brand community (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001).

Although building community is not a priority for ancestral consumers, the motivation to engage in ancestral behavior is not completely intrinsic. Promotional messages associated with this phenomenon are often based on socially oriented intrinsic motivations (Nicholls 1984), i.e., building a community of individuals. For example, Vibram, a dominant player in the barefoot running market, is currently running a “What’s Your Story?” campaign, leveraging the notoriously eccentric Olympic skier Bode Miller to champion the notion of “carving [your] own path” (Vibram 2014). This appeal is in line with optimal distinctiveness theory, which holds that consumers cultivate “optimal identities” by balancing their need for uniqueness and need for affiliation (Brewer, 1991, 2003; Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). In general, the factors driving ancestral consumption appear to favor individualism over collectivism, while couching the appeal of the behavior in terminology that is non-threatening to modern market structures.

**METHODOLOGY AND MODEL**

The objective of this research is not only the descriptive illumination of ancestral consumption and conceptual compromise, but also the development of a conceptual model delineating potential drivers of these consumer behaviors. Throughout the model development process, we were particularly interested in the apparent or implied contradictions at play in consumers’ pursuit of ancestral consumption. These contradictions, and how consumers resolve them, are the basis for our realization that consumer compromise and ancestral consumption are inextricably linked.

We derived this model by conducting an iterative analysis (Spiggle 1994) in the constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Miller 2010). Following the protocol modeled in Tumbat & Belk (2011), both authors relied on our personal experience as runners – one as a recreational runner, the other as a competitive ultra-distance runner – to inform the initial conceptual data collection (Creswell & Miller 2010). The concept was not running-specific, and included sources such as popular media, documentary films, blogs and discussion boards, books, consumer booklists on Amazon, and survivalist television shows. Although it would be impossible to ignore our experiences as we engaged in the research process, this is not an autoethnography (Holt 2003). On the contrary, to limit first-person analytical bias, we consciously bracketed ourselves out of the analysis, and used qualitative analyses independently generated by a trained student research assistant familiar with the material to help assure the validity of our interpretations (Dreyfuss1982; Creswell 2007).

Examining and sorting the data, we inductively developed themes related to running in particular, then ancestral consumption and conceptual compromise more generally, that sharpened the focus of our evolving research questions (Spiggle 1994). We used theoretical lenses suggested by related research on hedonic self-seeking behaviors to inform and deepen our ongoing data collection and analysis, generating avenues for future research to test the concepts that were emerging. This inductive process produced an extensive and wide-ranging literature review (e.g., history, philosophy, economics), which further guided development of the major constructs in our model. Using these interpretive methods of data collection and analysis, i.e., “dialectical tacking” (Beverland & Farrelly 2010, 841, Geertz 1975, 52), we thus arrived at the general model of ancestral consumption and conceptual compromise presented here.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

One possible explanation for people’s interest in ancestral consumption is the desire to return to a simpler, more natural way of life, yet the majority of consumers show little interest in simplifying their lives more broadly. This apparent contradiction speaks to the tensions and compromises involved in ancestral consumption. Seeking their ancestral selves, consumers run a gauntlet of marketplace dichotomies – compromising all along the way – in search of behaviors to adopt that are satisfactorily “authentic” (cf. Beverland & Farrelly 2010).

Our work extends the research on hedonic consumption, much of which is built upon on a dichotomous paradigm that frames issues around often-weighty consumer choices. Tumbat and Belk (2011), drawing on extant research (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993), explore the domains of “authentic versus commercial, community versus market, nature versus culture, extraordinary versus quotidian, sacred versus profane, liminal versus everyday, and liberating versus constraining” consumption (2011, 44). These dyads, and the consumer culture theory (CCT) work on extraordinary experiences that illuminates them, are invaluable for conceptualizing and understanding the phenomenon of conceptual compromise.

However, we hypothesize that the paired concepts in our proposed compromise model represent endpoints of fluid continuums, rather than dichotomous choices. In other words, conceptual compromise is fluid and idiosyncratic. There are examples of this type of decision-making in the literature as well. Turkish women’s veiling (Sandikci and Ger 2010) is an individual choice that represents a conceptual and behavioral compromise between liberation and constraint. Similarly, shoppers at farmers’ markets (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007) find harmonies between community and market orientations. As they wend their way through modern life, ancestral consumers do not have to choose one side of the model or the other; rather, conceptual compromise rests on the premise of simultaneity. Consumers can decide what shade of grey best fits their individual needs and satisfies their understanding of the ancestral myth.

Conceptual compromise occurs in an environment that is rich with information and opinions – highly informed, and woefully not – and most consumers’ perception of what constitutes the social construct of “authenticity” is filtered through contemporary marketing and media practices (Peterson 2005). For example, for most people, the decision to shop at farmers’ markets occurs not because they grew up on farms themselves (USDA 2002), but because they have
learned – from magazines, word of mouth, online, etc. – that this food is somehow better: better for them, better for the environment, better tasting, better all around. Given that consumers’ perception of ancestral consumption is similarly formed by interactions with other people (most of whom aren’t scientists or historians), we posit that this construct is largely disconnected from the boundaries of time, space, and physical reality.

However, benefits do exist for ancestral consumers, even under artificial, commercialized conditions such as “extreme” obstacle racing, where they set goals, improve their dietary and exercise habits, feel the satisfaction of accomplishment, and have fun (Widdicombe 2014). Nonetheless, instead of natural consumption, ancestral consumers largely engage in naturalistic consumption, thanks to the compromises they make. Therefore, we must consider the strong possibility that “the usurpation of reality by the fake” (Brown et al. 2013, 603) has monetary, psychic, and physical consequences. As Sklar (1995, 504) writes,

> Ordinary so-called ‘counter-cultures’ are regularly incorporated into the consumer culture and pose little threat. Indeed, by offering both real and illusory variety and choice, they are a source of great strength to the global capitalist system and of personal enrichment for those able to enjoy the abundance of cultural forms undeniably available.

In other words, their willingness to conceptually compromise makes ancestral consumers susceptible to exploitation in an increasingly complicated marketplace.

**CONCLUSION**

The primary limitation of this research is its conceptual nature. We do not know how large the phenomenon of ancestral consumption is, nor whether it is particularly Western, or even American (the current primary target market for ancestral consumption), or perhaps even upper-middle class white American – a solution to so-called “First World problems” (Oxford Dictionary 2014). Therefore, future research must include exploring the boundaries of such consumption, what forms it takes across populations, and the diversity of consumer desires in this domain. Additionally, since we have argued that conceptual compromise is a process occurring within individual ancestral consumers, we must also consider differences in this process across various consumer segments. Future work can build on the conceptual framework and model presented here by examining how businesses – perhaps even entire markets – emerge in response to consumer demand for ancestral human experiences. In turn, consumer responses to these market developments, both behavioral and emotional, also merit investigation.

Many consumers believe that modern humans have become domesticated to disastrous effect, and seek to reverse this process and its consequences by pursuing the ancestral self. Ironically, from a historical perspective, “the idea of a self that can determine the good through inward reflection would be incomprehensible to residents of ancient and pre-modern societies” (Christopher & Hickinbottom 2008, 567). In other words, ancestral consumers’ motivations and behaviors would be unintelligible to the very types of people they are trying to emulate. Conceptual compromising allows modern, Western consumers to approximate traditional behaviors while essentially ignoring the profound philosophical underpinnings of those behaviors. Irrespective of physiology, diet, training, Westerners will never be able to run like the Tarahumara because they are not Tarahumara (McDougall 2009). Potentially more troubling is the prospect that “for many non-Western folk and indigenous psychologies, the kind of separate sense of self that is taken for granted and promoted in Western cultures is seen as illusory, limited, and the source of suffering” (Christopher & Hickinbottom 2008, 568). By so strongly linking ancestral consumption and self-determination, consumers who seek enlightenment through these pursuits and behaviors might actually be moving further from it.

**REFERENCES**


