Shared Happiness and Relational Identities Among French Grandmothers and Grandchildren

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We aim to understand the dynamics between happiness and consumer identity projects by means of a qualitative search among French grandmothers and their grandchildren. Our findings show how relational identity may originate, rise and fade. We suggest that shared happiness may pervade the crafting of a particular relational identity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There has been a growing interest in happiness among scholars and intergovernmental organizations over the last decade. We generally agree that being happy is about feeling good (e.g., Costley et al. 2007). Most of the research on happiness belongs to the psychological and economic realms (Gilbert 2015). In consumer research, happiness has been extensively studied in its relations to materialism (Belk 1985; Richins 1994) and, more recently, in its impact on consumer choice (Mogilner, Aaker and Kamvar 2012). But a gap remains in our knowledge on consumer happiness and its relations to consumers’ life projects. While consumer happiness is largely conceived as private matters (e.g., Lee and Chakravarti 2006), insight from recent studies indicates that people may be happy when they feel connected to others (Costley et al. 2007) and to their family (Nelson et al. 2013), in particular.

In this research, we aim to extend our knowledge on consumer happiness. In particular, we seek to understand the dynamics between happiness and consumers’ identity projects. We raise the following questions. First, how does happiness manifest in consumption experiences? Second, how does happiness relate to consumers’ identity projects? Third, what are the underlying interpersonal dynamics?

In the pursuit of understanding identity building, we located our research among French grandmothers and grandchildren. Family appears indeed as a remarkable context to study the wide range of consumer identities (Epp and Price 2008). Family members build diverse individual, relational and collective identities. Relational identity is conceived as the qualities and attributes of a sub-group that make it particular. It can be enacted, among others, from inter-generational transfers or everyday interactions (Epp and Price 2008). Data collection consisted of interviews with 23 French grandmothers and grandchildren dyads. Informants were selected according to established principles of variety and contrast.

Our analysis of grandmothers and grandchildren discourses advocates three stages that characterize happiness and relational identity. First, we observed that happiness may permeate the genesis of a grandmother identity at a grandchild birth. Happiness is manifest in our elderly informants’ discourses when telling about their grandchild’s birth. They often experience an unequal experience of their first meeting with a newborn grandchild. Moreover, grandmothers may find in particular spaces (e.g., the newborn care department) a set of resources that facilitate the genesis of a specific grandmother identity that is directed to the newborn. In short, each grandmother identity appears as a unique identity that is crafted after the birth of a particular grandchild and that is pervaded with particular emotions.

Second, we suggest that happiness may pervade the building of a relational identity between a grandmother and a particular grandchild. During the first years of a grandchild, many grandmothers expressed an intense happiness that is enacted through the presence of the grandchild. While the grandchild grows up, he-she may also express forms of happiness while sharing consumption activities with his-her grandmother (e.g., shopping, playing games, or watching cartoons together). Research has shown that sharing the same traits, temperaments, common tastes or common values characterize relational identities (Epp and Price 2008). We suggest that sharing the same happiness is also a core element that facilitates the building of a unique relational identity.

Third, our findings show happiness and relational identity may fade when the grandchild enters adolescence. Many informants report sharp changes when the grandchild turns into adolescence, as visits become scarce, and friends are taking more importance in the teenager’s life. In such case, grandmothers fear the fade of their relational identity. Though nostalgia and anxiety pervade their discourses, grandmothers still express a sense of shy happiness. They often keep tangible souvenirs (e.g., grandchild drawings, presents), as reminiscence of their fading relational identity with their grandchildren. These treasures from the past have the potential to revive a sense of happiness. Authors advocate that the marketplace structure impacts on consumer emotions (Beruchashvili and Moisio 2014). Here, we find that grandmothers use consumption to balance their emotions.

While most research has depicted consumer happiness as an intrapersonal emotion (e.g., Costley et al. 2007), we suggest that happiness may (1) be situated at the (sub)group level and (2) be shared among the (sub)group members. Further, we show how happiness may evolve among a grandmother-grandchild sub-group. Happiness may first manifest at the grandmother level, than it may be shared between the grandmother and the grandchild, and finally, happiness may fade and leave room for individual nostalgia. In short, our findings suggest that happiness may harmonize a set of consumer identity projects and consumption activities.

REFERENCES


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