Fields of Transcultural Practices: the Role of Religion in Multicultural Marketplaces

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Beyond dominant conceptualizations of religion as a driver of consumer differences, this paper reframes religion as a field of transcultural practices. Five key transcultural practices underline the role of religion in facilitating entry into and mutual entanglement within multicultural marketplaces, thereby fueling their transcultural character.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While previous studies of the intersections between religion and consumer behavior have largely conceptualized religion as a source of marketplace differences (Delener 1994; Engelland 2014; Hirschman 1983; Minton et al. 2015; Wilkes et al. 1986), based on a view of religion as stable belief systems within homogenous, ordered, and bounded consumer cultures, what is less developed is an account of the role of religious practices in light of increasing cultural complexity. In particular, there is further scope to consider the role of religion in relation to the dynamics and complexities of multicultural marketplaces (Demangeot et al. 2015; Jamal 2003; Kipnis et al. 2014). Specifically, what role does religion play in shaping multicultural marketplaces?

To redress this theoretical gap, this paper draws on the concept of transculturality (Welsch 1999), shifting our attention beyond religion as a stable belief system toward religion as a field of transcultural practices. The concept of transculturality can be understood both as a distinct theoretical perspective of cultures and as a unique approach for exploring cultural dynamics (Flüchter and Schüttli 2014). Transculturality contests the traditional Herderian perspective of cultures, where cultures are conceived as self-contained and homogenous entities delimited from external influences (Herder 1966). Instead, transculturality posits that cultures are inherently dynamic, hybridized, and deeply entangled. Whereas other approaches would be either concerned with comparing and contrasting one culture to another (i.e., a cross-cultural approach) or exploring ways in which the ‘clashes’ between separate cultures can be mitigated (i.e., an intercultural approach), a transcultural approach involves understanding the beliefs and practices that transcend borders (Brink 1994) and fostering cultural interconnections at a more abstract level than the content and meaning of individual cultures.

Our conceptualization of religion as a field of transcultural practices is empirically grounded in a hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997) of depth interviews with 24 Southeast Asian immigrant consumers living in Auckland, 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 (Thompson et al. 1998). In their second interview, participants were presented with the researchers’ emerging interpretations and provided an opportunity to correct, qualify, or further deepen their initial responses.

Our analysis identified two interrelated sets of transcultural practices through which religion shapes multicultural marketplaces. The first set of practices facilitates entry into multicultural marketplaces, by easing the process of border crossing and enabling social capital development. While transnational migration is a challenging process requiring adaptation and socialization on multiple fronts (Peñaloza 1994), religious fields offer a modicum of stability through the stresses of transition. In doing so, religious fields ease the process of border crossing for consumers entering into a new marketplace. An additional mechanism through which religions can facilitate an entry into multicultural marketplaces is by enabling the development of social capital, which has been shown to be a crucial ingredient in fueling integration into a new society (Luedicke 2011; Üstün and Holt 2007).

The second set of practices facilitates mutual entanglement within multicultural marketplaces, by fostering intercultural competency development, sharing of cultural consumption rituals, and enabling the flows of material resources. First, through the development of skills and experience in communicating with people from other cultural backgrounds, religious practices enable participants to observe, learn, and practice intercultural competency (Demangeot et al. 2013). Second, mutual entanglement is further facilitated through the sharing of cultural consumption rituals across cultural boundaries. Finally, religious practices facilitate transcultural entanglement through the diffusion of material resources, reflecting the local- and global-scale “travel of material things in everyday life” (Brembeck et al. 2015, 1).

This paper helps to advance the growing literature on religion and marketing in two ways. First, beyond the dominant treatment of religion as a ‘micro-culture’ (Cleveland et al. 2013; Hirschman 2001; Lindridge 2005; Minton et al. 2015; Steenkamp 2001), a transcultural approach moves religion beyond a view of each religious tradition as a bounded system. Instead, religion emerges as an open and dynamic system which is deeply contextualized and whose function morphs to meet the character of the cultural context in which it is embedded. Second, in addition to the present focus on how religion produces differences in marketplace behaviors (Delener 1994; Engelland 2014; Hirschman 1983; Minton et al. 2015; Wilkes et al. 1986), this paper also sheds light on the transcultural properties of religion which are held in common across diverse religious traditions. Rather than becoming a dividing force in contemporary multicultural marketplaces, religious fields are also revealed to be hybridized and hybridizing fields of transcultural flows. Overall, in the context of multicultural marketplaces, religion emerges as a key site for the performance of practices which fuel transcultural dynamics.

REFERENCES


