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Consumption and Identity in Arduous Situations : How the Adaptation of Travel Practices Among Very Elderly People Modifies Their Identity

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

The aging process can be considered under biological, psychological or sociological aspects, all of those having an impact on consumption (Moschis 2012). The biological aging of cells modifies one's behavior (Moschis 1991 ; Goldberg 2009). Psychological aging focuses on the alteration of the decision and seeking information process (Yoon et al. 2009), and the changing of personality (Brown and Lewis 2003). Social aging is characterized by the emergence of new roles like that of grandparent (Schewe and Balazs 1992) or the way social ruptures like retirement influence consumption (Schau et al. 2009).

Generally, the process of aging is considered either from a euphoric perspective, in which personal developments and other benefits are highlighted, or through a dysphoric one, in which the elderly face a global degeneration. From this perspective, elderly people are fragilized and the role of marketing and consumption is to assist and to take care of them. Notwithstanding that numerous research goes beyond a restrictive approach of aging based on the age of people and includes multi-dimensional aspects of aging (cognitive, psychological and social), it addresses the process of aging from a determinist perspective (Wells and Gubar 1966 ; Kang and Ridgway 1996 ; Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent 2010). To schematize, becoming an elderly person gives one an intrinsic status, whose consequences over consumption are ineluctable.

Recent developments in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) have deconstructed this approach while considering the elderly as having a plastic identity (Arnould and Thompson 2005). This stream of research has two consequences concerning research about aging. The elderly and their personal entourage can modify and transform their identity (Barnhardt and Penaloza 2013). This research also shines a light on the role of consumption by inversing the relationship between consumption and aging. They apprehended how consumption could influence the process of aging (Schau et al. 2009; Barnhart and Penaloza 2013).

Our research aligns with this perspective and prolongs the role of consumption. The identity of an elderly person is perceived as a continuous negociation on a meso-social (Barnhard and Penaloza 2013) or micro-individual level (Schau et. al. 2009). Our research shifts this perspective when observing the role of consumption for the elderly who do assume their identity as such. Under the prism of consumption, we investigate how elderly people navigate between a macro-social image of old age and micro-social interactions and how this navigation influences their identity. The impact of socio-material settings of objects is an essential piece of this research. We describe how elderly consumers interact with objects not designed for them, and how those strategies of adaptation nurture a redefinition of their identity. Our paper begins with the relationship between old age and consumption. Then we present our data gathering process based on an ethnographic investigation among elderly people in the French railways. Our results present their pratices of adaptation during their journey along a semiotic square of analysis.

IMAGINARY OF OLDNESS AND CONSUMPTION

The social imaginary of oldness remains mostly negative (Gullette 1997). The evolution of the age pyramid and the increasing number of elderly people following the aging of the baby-boomer generation contributes to a better perception of the elderly. Notwithstanding, researchers remark a gap between the image of the elderly and the values promoted by our modern societies, what Kuyper and Bengtson describe as a social breakdown syndrom (1973). The emergence of liquidity and acceleration as values in the late modernity of capitalism (Bauman 2000 ; Rosa 2010) tends to ostracize elderly people as slow and backwards. Even among the elderly, those who are positively appreciated embrace the value of "jeunisme" (Ahmadi 2001, quoted by Rosa 2010). Rather than wisdom due to their old age, Ahmadi (2001) reveals that they put forward their youthfulness, particularly their flexibility and adapation to new situations. They appreciate the features that mask their old age and distance themselves from other seniors. The elderly have to deal with this imaginary, which assigns them an expected role, that of the old man (Goffman 1959).

There is a constant negociation within this role. At a macro-social level, the role the old man should assume is translated in an imaginary of wisdom but also progressive loneliness and distance towards material and mundane issues. Consequently, the elderly are apprehended as disempowered persons. In this perspective, consumption is a way to preserve the daily lives of those people (Kang and Ridgway 1996 ; Wells and Gubar 1966). This function of protection hinders the elderly from consuming as a means of negotiating their plastic identity. At the meso-social level, discussions about the endorsement of this role take place between the elderly and their acquaintances (Barnhard and Penaloza 2013). The consumption is a central issue of this negotiation. There is also denial and acceptance about this role at a micro-social level. "Younger" elderly people would try more to conceal their status (Tepper 1994). In comparison, "Older" elderly people internalize this consumption as a form of assistance (Tepper 1994). They would better accept ways of consuming in accordance with their social role as an elderly person.

This path to disempowerment in their consumption seems all the more accepted as older people become older. However, what appears as an undeniable tendancy should be questioned. Firstly, the increasing number of elderly consumers living alone implies a lot of individual decisions. Secondly, elderly people are still quite often puzzled by consumer situations in which they face challenging situations. They do not only have to develop adaptations like the SOC model (Baltes and Carstensen 1996 ; Freund and Baltes 1998), but also to deal with the specific collective imaginary associated with the elderly. Thus our research tries to understand how elderly consumers who assume their identity use consumption in arduous situations (when they may face the social imaginary of oldness). We chose travel contexts in which they have left their reassuring habits. In analyzing those practices, we articulate how they have an impact on the negociation process of the identity of older people.

METHODS AND RESULTS

We conducted an ethnographic fieldwork with elderly people in the French trains (high-speed, ie TGV and regional, ie TER). The train was an interesting research subject for different reasons. At first, this conveyance overlaps travel practices and forms of consumption as Warde defines them, ie "a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion" (2005, p137). Elderly people are engaged in routinized practices when they use those modes of transportation, and in return those practices structure how they use them as objects and services (Warde 2005).

Secondly, the train can be analyzed under the prism of materiality. Materiality is not considered as a symbol of this collective imaginary, but as a practical frame for the interaction betweeen individuals (Miller 2005 ; Latour1994). The train as a material object can reveal what the discourse about the collective imaginary associated with elderly people might conceal. The socio-material settings (eg. stairs in the station, reservation kiosks) could be challenging for elderly people because they are not designed for them. They translate the collective imaginary, ie the inadequacy between traveling and elderly people.

Furthermore, among trains, differences exist between high-speed and regional. Those two objects overlay two different socio-material settings (in terms of speed, access, reservation) and offer two different experiences. The TGV has high speed, elevated cars, and long platforms whereas the TER has slow speed, short platforms and many stops.

Thirdly, train transportation happens in a social context with other passengers. The theater scene is dressed and senior citizens have to choose their social role in front of this audience. This context is a priori hostile because the elderly have to share this public space with the rest of the population and deal with material settings they do necessarily not fit in.

Our fieldwork was structured in two phases. We began with data collection in regional trains in the region of Rennes and Lyon. The SNCF (French National Railways) gave us full access to the trains between March and April 2014. We recruited senior citizens directly in the stations. They had to be old enough (between 65 and 92 years old) not to contest their social status. The selection was based on physical or cognitive clues (like difficulties finding one's way in the station). After this phase of selection, we accompanied them during their trip inside the train. We followed fifteen elderly people on ten different journeys. We combined passive observation and informal interviews with the people recruited during the trip. Parallel to this stage of participant observation, we conducted twenty-two comprehensive in-home interviews with pre-recruited seniors varying in terms of socio-demographic and physical profiles: they experience some type of difficulty when travelling.

During the second phase, between May and June 2014, we observed four elderly people traveling on the high-speed train, the TGV. We accompanied them from their home to their final destination (we pre-recruited those people because of the obligation to book a reservation before getting on the train). We also observed the behavior of elderly people in the station before taking their train during several days of fieldwork in Parisian stations (Gare de Lyon and Gare Montparnasse). Seventeen in-home interviews with elderly people traveling via high-speed trains were also conducted (based on the same recruitment criteria as the regional train part of the research).

The data were analyzed to understand how elderly people travelling alone adapt their consumption practices in a hostile context. Different strategies were identified. Those strategies are presented along a semiotic square. The semiotic square organized two forms of opposition (contrary oppositions and contradiction oppositions) (Floch 1990). Another relation (implication) close the square. In our analysis, the semantic opposition is based on the difference between Life and Death (figure 1). Life represents mobility (when the elderly people can travel), and Death Sedentariness (when mobility becomes such a trial that they stay at home). Mobility becomes non-Mobility in a contradictory relation when the natural flow of moving is constrained by physical, financial or symbolical barriers. The other contradictory relation opposes non-Sedentariness to Sedentariness.

Those practices (along the semiotic square) describe how elderly adapt their journey and the consequences on their status role and specifically their own identity.

FIGURE 1

THE DIFFERENT ADAPTATIONS OF TRAVEL PRACTICES AMONG ELDERLY PEOPLE
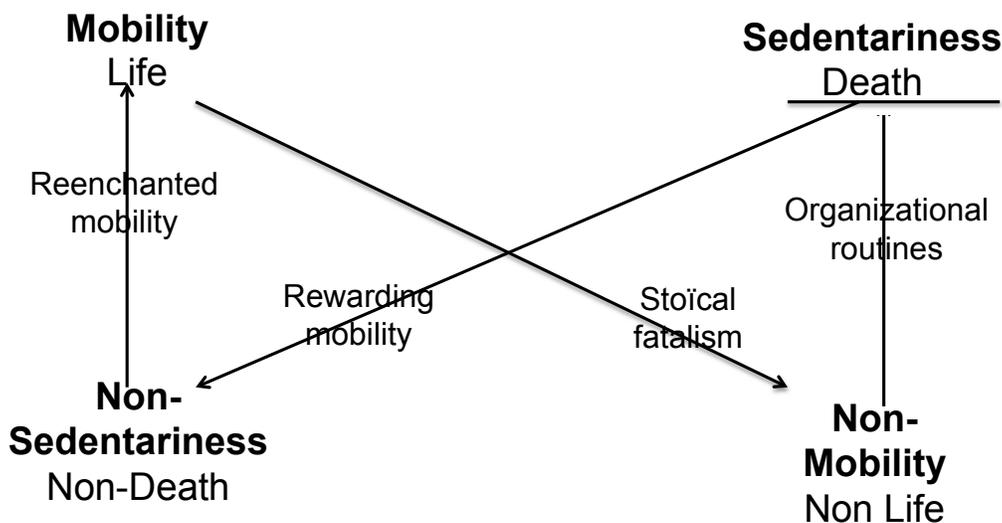
The first practice is a stoïcal fatalism. In this practice, their expectations as travelers are quite low, by simply travelling they are fully satisfied. The ride is an end in itself, they derive individual benefits and pride from this accomplishment. Of course, this test should not be too painful, otherwise they do not repeat the experience. However they often attribute the fact that they accomplish their journey to the services provided by the carrier. Gilbert discusses his expectations for the regional train:

> It is true that train information is displayed at the last moment, sometimes you have to hurry to catch the train. But when I get on the train, I always find available seats. Today I will go to Vitré to see a friend. She will pick me up at the station, and it is a chance because I no longer drive (Gilbert, 82 years, observation TER Rennes/Vitré, March 2014).

Gilbert accepts this transportation as a lesser evil. He realizes that his mobility has been constrained since his abandonment of the car and accepts the difficulties of the regional train, provided he can maintain his individual mobility. This stoïcal fatalism reduces margins of mobility to a bare core : the elderly person has internalized his or her social role as inactive and sedentary. They face growing barriers to their mobility (physical or social). In this tendancy towards non-mobility, maintaining mobility is a chance that is worth sacrifices in transportation.

The second practice identified in the semiotic square is organizational routines. Those routines enact non-mobility situations but try to avoid the horizon of sedentariness. In the tendancy to immobility, they sound like active strategies to compensate the encountered difficulties. In the logic of the semiotic square, non-mobility implies a sedentary lifetsyle, and organizational routines are desperate attempts to stand up against this inevitable reality. These routines can be analyzed as an illustration of the SOC (Selection Optimization Compensation) theory (Freund and Baltes,1998; 2002). They illustrate the need to secure mobility by reducing all sources of anxiety and uncertainty arising from transportation disabilities. The senior incorporates "habitus" of traveling like arriving long in advance at the train station or using luggage with a comfortable grip.

Those routines are a resurgence of former individual travel habits they duplicate now that they face disabilities.

But they are embedded in a more global organization managed by the train authorities. To reduce this potential gap, elderly travelers valorize human contact with employees of the station. They also crave interactions with other passengers. Those multiple experiences of human contact offer them a security blanket throughout their trip. They have a practical finality (to find their way for example), but in doing so, elderly people also assume their status. To arouse some feelings in other travelers, seniors play the role of the old man. They insert their behavior in social interactions related to this codification. When elderly people are playing this role they try to engage the other passengers. The case of Andrée explains such strategies:

> The rise in the train is laborious because everybody has to arrange his luggage. The entrance is often crowded and it is not always easy to get on and off either especially at my age… and often there is a nice person to offer to carry your luggage then I accept. You have to be in warm dispositions toward others. People have pity on you (Andrée, 81 ans, observation TER Brest/Rennes, March 2014).

These first two practices identified (stoïcal fatalism and organizational routines) are mechanisms to delay the "death of mobility", akin to a sedentary lifestyle. Their old routines do not bridge a growing gap with the socio-material settings of a travel environment (luggage to carry, a train to catch in a limited time, a cogntive timetable to understand…). Those solutions can be seen as a bandaid solution that new constraints would irremediably break down. Finally, they emphasize the difficulties regarding mobility and express publicly the social status of elderly people. Those two practices in the semiotic square also appear as a tacit acceptance of the reduction in the horizon of mobility.

The last two practices along the semiotic square introduce a shift in perspective. Instead of considering a narrowing mobility horizon, elderly people incorporate this perspective to better overcome it. The third practice identified is one of rewarding mobility. Mobility makes sense for seniors, especially through an easier grip with the train considered as a material object. Regional trains are assimilated to such an object, particularly when they are compared with the "trial" of taking the TGV. The TER is a train whose socio-material features are easily appropriated by elderly people. They can get on the train with level access of use (without stairs) ; inside the train, moving from one car to another is possible ; there are no reservations needed, anyone can sit anywhere ; and next to the door, individual seats are available, where many elderly people enjoy resting before getting off. Through their socio-material properties regional trains offer elderly people the possibilities of exploration and marking, two aspects of appropriation (Caru et Cova, 2003). Commuting during the day is also possible because of the short travel distance. When they take regional trains, elderly people rediscover control over mobility. The example of Ali is enlightening :

> Ali lives in Venissieux and takes the train to Verpillère two/three times a month to visit his daughter and grand-daughter. With regional trains he can make same day return trips. During the way back to Venissieux, he keeps an eye on the screen inside the train on which the next stations are displayed. He doesn't get up immediately when Venissieux is announced as the next station. He knows this journey quite well, and calculates he has enough time to get ready before arrival. He leaves his place just before the train enters the station, he stays on the first stair while the train is stopping, then walks down. Downstairs, he himself opens the door and leaves the train without difficulties (Ali, 74 ans, observation TER Lyon/Bourgoin Jallieu, March 2014).

Ali does not travel despite the ruggedness of the trip, but thanks to the socio-material characteristics of the train which give him a physical fluency and a symbolic pride. Despite growing problems hindering his ability to drive, his independence in the inner circle of his family is maintained by the properties of the regional trains. While many modes of transportation like the TGV underscore their inadequacy in a mobility context, the regional train is an object which corresponds to his capacities.

This convergence also relies on the symbiosis of two imaginaries.The TER connects many rural stations and villages abandoned by modern means of transport. The meshing of the territory evokes memories and nostalgia for seniors who lived there, or grew up with these evocative names. In elderly people's minds, regional trains are the last bastion of an idealized rural past. This rewarding mobility is a strategy based on physical and symbolical appropriation from elderly people. This appropriation offers their identity a narrative continuity. They can accept who they are at present (through their mastering of the journey) while remembering themselves who they were before (through memories).

The last practice identified is that of reenchanted mobility. The elderly may have a difficult time coming to terms with their reduced mobility. Elderly people fantasize new trips through the possibilities trains offer them. The destinations served trigger new travel opportunities and a resurgence of the desire. Gisèle's trips to Saint-Malo are one such example of reenchantment :

This morning Gisèle decided to take a little excursion to Saint-Malo to « see the ocean » because the weather in Rennes was pretty nice. She decided to leave her 90 years old husband for the day when she discover the shining sun in the morning. During the trip, quietly installed in the train she reads some magazines. Halfway, she noticed that her excursion was compromised by the fog. The weather was completely deteriorated when arriving in Saint-Malo, so …she immediately took the next train to Rennes (Gisèle, 82 ans, observation TER Rennes/ Saint-Malo, March 2014).

Departing is a quick decision for Gisèle. She is always ready to travel. Her mobility is restricted by her age and her disabled husband. She can not travel long distances, but considers the train as an opportunity for escape which can be easily mobilised. The structural restrictions in her mobility do not eradicate her desire for consumption. When other modes of transportation are impossible, trains and particularly regional trains allow her access to new opportunities to travel. With the TER, Gisele has a window through which to escape from the routine of her mundane life and her identity as a devoted wife.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research identifies four practices in which the elderly adapt their journer while their mobility tends to reduce.We specifically analyzed the role of transportation in these arrangements. Such adaptations also mobilize the social status associated with their old age, and have an impact on them in return. Our results can be discussed and bring contributions with several streams of research.

Our first contribution concerns the role of consumption in relation to the identity of the elderly. Consumer research and particularly CCT have explained how elderly people may renegociate their identity through consumption (Barnhart and Penaloza 2013 ; Schau et al. 2009 ; Price et al. 2000). Our research confirms those results but also emphasizes the fact that this renegociation is marginalized by growing constraints. They tend to nuance the theory of a successful aging process that stresses self-fulfillment strengthened by consumption (Steverink et al. 1991 ; Tornstam 1997 ; Schau et al. 2009). Consumer research considers mostly discourse from seniors about their aging, whereas our research tends to focus on their effective behavior. Our research stresses that the influence of consumption in the redefinition of their identity reduces as the physical and symbolical constraints expand. But we precise that this process still functions with people becoming very old. Elderly people always deny their own limit through desire (Comte-Sponville 1984). In this research, regional trains like the TER are a source of desire. This dialectic (to push away the boundaries through opportunites of consumption) maintains a constant albeit less effective redefinition of their identity.

The second contribution of this research concerns the link between objects and identity. Previous research exposes how the socio-material properties of the object can frame the interaction betweeen individuals (Miller 2005 ; Latour 1994). Our results underline also identical-material properties of the object. Through their materiality, conveyances (high-speed and regional trains in our research) circumscribe the possibilities of elderly people (what they can do and what becomes impossible for them). They also reflect how the identity of elderly people is evolving. However, people do not actively use the properties of objects as in other research (Schouten 1991). The process is passive, and properties of the objects follow the identity of people. In this research, seniors are diminished by the pressure of high-speed trains whereas they appreciate the peaceful slowness and the rural itineraries of regional trains which correspond to their own pace. Like a mirror which reflects their self-image, the regional train, in an isomorphic process, accompanies their own evolution.

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