

Consumption in Transnational Social Spaces: A Study of Turkish Transmigrants

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a study on the consumption practices of transmigrant consumers whose numbers are increasing in the marketplace. It claims that the study of immigrants in the consumer research field needs to be expanded by going beyond the boundaries of nation-states by focusing on transnational social spaces. This multi-sited ethnography studies Turkish immigrants in Denmark as an example of transmigrant consumers who continue to live their lives moving back and forth between localities.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

This paper aims to provide a better understanding of the consumption practices of transmigrant consumers whose numbers are increasing in the marketplace. It claims that the study of immigrants in the consumer research field needs to be expanded by going beyond the limiting boundaries of nation-states and by focusing on transnational social spaces. This allows us to investigate how some consumer identities are becoming transnational. This "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 1995) studies Turkish¹ immigrants in Denmark as an example of transmigrant consumers who continue to live their lives moving back and forth between multiple localities.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A Brief Review and Critique of Research on Immigrants' Consumer Behavior

The relatively large number of immigrant-related consumption studies in the late 1980s until the mid-1990s were focused mainly on acculturation and assimilation processes. These were later followed by post-assimilationist research that negated a linear assimilation model and introduced contextual nuances to existing conceptualizations.

The majority of these studies on assimilation and acculturation processes deals with Asian and Hispanic immigrants in North America leaving the European context, which differs historically and demographically, highly under-studied. Acculturation and assimilation studies aim to identify the ways in which immigrants adapt to their new market environments as they supposedly leave another one behind. In these studies, immigrants are assumed to be a group of people that took part in a one-time, unidirectional movement. The focus of investigation is mainly on the changes in the behavioral and attitudinal patterns that take place as a result of contact with a new culture.

Even though the concepts of assimilation and acculturation are often used interchangeably, they do have different meanings. While assimilation suggests an immersion in the culture of settlement by means of moving away from the culture of origin, acculturation does not assume a loss in the values and norms of the original culture in the process of learning new ones and thus refers to a cultural pluralism. Peñaloza (1989) adapts the acculturation concept to consumer research, in which consumer acculturation is described as

"the acquisition of skills and knowledge relevant to engaging in consumer behavior in one culture by members of another culture" (p. 110). The study of consumer acculturation primarily focuses on cultural adaptation as manifest in the marketplace and examines the cultural bases of consumption behavior and the processes of consumer learning that are affected by the interactions of two or more cultures (ibid.).

One common finding of the consumer acculturation/assimilation studies is the understanding that, however labeled, the process that immigrants experience in their host cultures is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon with more than a simple linear progression. This claim has been supported by several pieces of research (Wallendorf and Reilly 1983; Reilly and Wallendorf 1984; Jun et al. 1994) that attempt to test the validity of the traditional assimilation model which postulates that, over time the individual's behavior patterns will become less like those of the culture of origin and more like those of the culture of residence. Peñaloza (1994) acknowledges that "immigrants may have two conflicting sets of consumer acculturation agents: one corresponding to their culture of origin and one corresponding to the existing culture" (p. 35).

A critique and extension of the post-assimilationist studies suggest that in addition to the suggested adaptation/assimilation processes such as 'rejection' and 'integration', other strategies such as one that resembles an "oscillating pendulum" between home and host cultures are adopted by immigrants (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005). It is argued that, in addition to the influences of home and host cultures on consumption patterns, a third factor, that of transnational consumer culture, also affects immigrants' identity constructs.

Consumption and possessions play an important role in the construction of immigrant identities since possessions can allow immigrants to "transport" previous identities to new places and cultural contexts (Mehta and Belk 1991) and the acquisition of new possessions may allow for consumer integration or assimilation (Peñaloza 1994). However, the culture of origin is renegotiated and expressed in consumption behaviour and practices (Mehta and Belk 1991; Ger and Østergaard 1998). Oswald (1999) suggests that not only are immigrant identity formation processes not linear, but they are also fluid. According to Oswald (1999), immigrant consumers may "culture swap" as they use goods to move between their varied cultural identities and negotiate relations between home and host cultures. This fluidity is not without costs in terms of feelings of individual integrity and feelings of belonging, as is pointed out by Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard (2005).

The intensified global connections and interactions of a global cultural economy have made it possible for immigrants to keep stronger ties with their countries of origin. Migration has long been studied as a unidirectional change in location and particular attention has been given to its economic, political, and social impacts on the countries of settlement. In order to make sense of the emerging phenomenon of transmigrant consumers, one needs to look at the transnational social spaces which these consumers occupy and constitute. Hence, the traditional mono-sited focus on nation states does not enable an analysis of transnational aspects of migrants' consumption practices. We propose that, by applying theoretical insights from the emerging field of transmigrant studies, a more comprehensive account is possible which overcomes some of the limitations of previous research.

¹The informants of this study consist of immigrants from Turkey with Turkish and Kurdish ethnic origins. The label "Turkish immigrants" in this paper is used to denote all immigrants from Turkey, regardless of their ethnic background.

Transmigrants and Transnational Social Spaces

A new anthropology of migration has emerged which labels some international migrants as “transmigrants” (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994). According to the advocates of this argument, “transnational migration is the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (ibid., p. 7). It is pointed out that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders and that “[a]n essential element of transnationalism is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies” (ibid.).

The construct of nation-state assumes one social space occupying a precise geographic space. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) argue that both in ethnological and national discourses, the association between the people and places have been taken as solid, commonsensical, and agreed upon, when they are in fact in flux, uncertain, and contested. In support of this argument, Pries (2001) claims that the ties between the social and geographical spaces are weakening as “transnational social spaces” emerge. “[I]n recent centuries the nation-state has increasingly been projected and accepted as the mutual embeddedness of geographic space and social space: in one geographic space (the state) there exists one single social space (the nation), and each social space (nation) has and needs just one geographic space (state)” (Pries 2001, p. 4, emphasis in original).

Despite the fact that most economic and political relations take place between nation-states, with the rise of micro-nationalism and globalization, the relations between social and geographic spaces are being contested and new social spaces that expand over several geographic spaces are coming into being (Appadurai 1990), thus challenging the idea of a one-to-one correspondence between social spaces and geographic spaces. For example, the rise of transnational migration, international organisations (e.g. European Union), and transnational enterprises necessitate our looking beyond the limiting notion of the borders of nation-states when analyzing the consumption practices of those operating in the newly created transnational social spaces.

However, having said that, it must be noted that there is nothing new about challenging the idea of mutual embeddedness of social and geographic spaces. Jurgens (2001) claims that “transnational settings can generate numerous-though probably not historically novel-ways to re-imagine the relationship between identity and territory” (p. 100). In fact, the two thousand year history of the Catholic Church is a good example of social spaces spanning across multiple geographic spaces. What is new, Pries (2001) argues, is that at the start of the present century, transnational social spaces are “no longer a marginal characteristic of a few very special people and groups” (p. 6) but are becoming a common phenomenon as current transnational social relations have reached a critical mass.

Transnational social spaces are geographically pluri-locally situated constructs that are composed of material artifacts and social practices of everyday life as well as systems of symbolic representations that are structured by, and structure human life (Pries 2001, p. 8). Studying consumption practices among transmigrants is an important way to provide an insight into the emerging transnational character of social life and hence of consumer culture.

As transmigrants travel back and forth, both literally and mentally, between their countries of origin and of settlement, they also travel between different national, social and cultural contexts, which results in their having multiple identities and social statuses.

Consumption in these transnational social spaces acts towards the construction, negotiation and maintenance of these changing attributes. It is often the case that migrants have different social statuses and belong to different social classes within the countries of origin and of settlement. This study thus shifts the focus away from the country of settlement to the transnational social spaces that exist beyond and between countries of origin and of settlement.

RESEARCH FIELD BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The empirical focus of this study is Turkish immigrants in Denmark and the transnational aspects of their consumption practices. Similar to other Western European nations, Denmark witnessed rapid economic growth and industrialization at the end of the 1950s, which created a great need for labor. The first Turkish immigrants who came to Denmark to satisfy this need arrived in the late 1960s, mainly as guest workers. Despite the tightening laws and the migration freeze in 1973, the number of immigrants from Turkey continued to rise, as they were soon joined by their family members. Today, Turks are one of the largest minority groups in Europe and the largest in Denmark (Diken 1998). There are close to 54,000 immigrants from Turkey living in Denmark, which itself has a total population of 5,4 million (Statistical Yearbook 2004).

This study is a “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus 1995) that follows the immigrants from their country of settlement back to their country of origin in line with Marcus’s research strategy of “following the people” and applying insights from “ethnoconsumerism” (Venkatesh 1995). Ethnoconsumerism suggests that the theoretical categories of a given culture should be developed emically, and from there, study consumption from the point of view of the social or cultural group that is the subject of study. Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and photography were used as the main techniques to collect data from a variety of informants in Denmark and Turkey. Purposive sampling was used so that informants represented variety in terms of age, education level, occupation, ethnic and religious affiliation, area of residence in host country and area of origin in home country. The fieldwork stretched over a period of one year, which included preliminary data collection in Denmark, followed by more data collection in Turkey with the immigrant families and their communities in multiple sites. Formal and informal interviews were made with 12 Turkish immigrant families in both countries. Other informants included individual Turkish immigrants living in Denmark, immigrants’ families and locals living in Turkey. Observations, supported by photography, were made at social events such as weddings and other gatherings in multiple localities. Print and broadcast media in both Turkish and Danish were used as additional data.

Research Findings

The lives of our informants in multiple localities were characterized by a feeling of liminality that resulted in changes in consumption patterns over generations, over time and across social contexts. Even though there are certain cultural characteristics that bind Turkish immigrants together as a community, different demographic characteristics have significant outcomes on their consumption patterns.

In the following, we provide a brief historical background of Turkish migrants in Denmark and an overview of our informants’ consumption practices. Our data analyses discuss changes in consumption practices evoked by the experience of liminality and the resulting identity strategies – ‘myth of return’ and ‘myth of settlement’.

As is reported in other research (Abadan-Unat 2002), first-generation Turkish immigrants arrived in Denmark and other parts of Europe with the intention of saving money for their return to Turkey after only a few years. That dream in most cases was never realized. Rather than returning to Turkey, they started bringing their families and settling down, living in close clusters with fellow Turkish immigrants. As the main reason for their stay was to save money, they limited their consumption to the barest minimum. Chief among their investment practices are buying land and property in Turkey, depositing money in Turkish bank accounts, buying gold jewelry and becoming shareholders in Turkish companies.

Accordingly, the findings of this research also suggest that, in general a group of immigrants that are mainly first generation chose to live in such immigrant neighbourhoods. These immigrants tend to have a lower level of formal education, are unskilled labourers, have a desire to return to Turkey, and therefore allocate most of their income for consumption in Turkey.

In marked contrast, another group who are mostly descendants, tend to live outside the immigrant neighbourhoods. Additionally, they tend to be better educated, have more highly skilled occupations of greater status, and do not desire to return to Turkey, but rather hope to improve their standard of living in Denmark.

Next, we provide a discussion of the specific identity constructions of transmigrants that constantly negotiate and navigate between socio-cultural and national contexts in an attempt to attain and maintain a higher social status. Being a constant "other" in the host nation and not being quite like the others in the home nation, these immigrants acquire liminal identities. The categories that emerge from the data suggest a division between those with tendencies towards a future in the home country versus those who seek to build their future in their host country; in other words, between those who subscribe to the "myth of return" (Anwar 1979) versus those intent on settling.

Liminal identities. At the centre of most of our informants' accounts of their transnational life experiences is a feeling of liminality. The majority of the Turkish immigrants who live in Denmark today continue to maintain their cultural, social, economic and political ties with their home countries. Every year they spend their summer vacations in the villages and towns from which they came more than 30 years ago. Pensioners stay for as long as six months at a time. They sustain lifestyles that stretch across national boundaries, forming transnational communities. As they move between their country of origin and country of settlement, and among the communities within these national contexts, various identities come into play. Some migrants experience a constant sense of being an outsider. Salih (2002) suggests that rather than belonging simultaneously to two countries, these migrants feel as though they are "living in more than one country but belonging to 'neither' place" (p. 52). These movements between social worlds, often theorised as "multi-local belongingness" (Jurgens 2001, p. 98), gain a slightly more negative connotation in our informants' accounts of living in and with two diverse localities. Makbule², a Turkish immigrant housewife in her forties expresses her feelings on this issue, stating that:

"time comes you neither feel at home there [Turkey] nor here [Denmark]. We are like a migrant in between forever, we are stuck. Here the Danes see you as foreigners, you go there to your homeland, they do the same. We are like outcasts" (personal interview 2003).

Our informant's experience having liminal identities that are situated somewhere in-between the two national identities of home and host nations forming a third, distinct identity. They constitute a unique culture in the sense that they neither continue the lifestyles and consumption patterns of their country of origin, nor resemble fully the members of the host culture. Their in-between status is reflected in their identity constructions and can be detected in their consumption patterns. The feeling of liminality becomes the driving force for developing suitable identity strategies.

In the following section, we discuss the two predominant identity strategies found among our informants. We discuss how the consumption patterns and practices in different localities are efforts to mobilize economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) in order to attain and maintain social status through consumption. Transmigrants use material possessions to construct their fluid identities and as markers of social status in different social contexts within their home and host nations.

1. The myth of return. The first Turkish immigrants that migrated to Denmark almost four decades ago came from rural parts of Turkey and were mainly peasants and farmers in their towns and villages, if they had a job, or else were unemployed. They had low social status in their country of origin, both within their local communities as well as within the broader Turkish society. Arriving in Denmark as guest workers, they tended to hold low status jobs, mainly in factories, and thus also had a low social status in the Danish society. Their main aim was to return back to their towns and villages as wealthier people with an elevated social status. Years later, they came back to the villages from which they left, now as landowners.

To many of our informants, living with the myth of return means while living frugal lifestyles in Denmark, having extravagant lifestyles, characterised by "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 1899/1975) in Turkey. The following comment by Erdem, a 40-year-old Turkish immigrant, on how the lifestyles of these immigrants change from one community to another depicts the situation very well:

"You know what this man does? In fact there are many who live like him. For example he goes and buys a house or an apartment in Sivas [city of origin in Turkey]. He is quite well off in relation to his neighborhood. When you go to Turkey and exchange your foreign currency it pays well. But he receives social benefits here [in Denmark]. He saves money here and buys a car in Turkey. Because he is going to drive it only one month when he goes there. The car waits for him in the garage for nine, ten months. He also decorates his house nicely. This is like fasting. I mean in order to drive a car for one month you live poorly here for so many months." (personal interview 2002).

The constant back and forth traveling of transmigrants whose lives span across their home and host nations results in them entering into different social positioning in different social contexts. The following social contexts are the most prominent ones for the Turkish transmigrants: i) immigrant community in Denmark, ii) Danish national society, iii) local community in the town of origin in Turkey, iv) Turkish national society.

As Erdem's wife, Sevgi, critically comments in the following paragraph, while physically existing in Denmark, many immigrants are mentally living in Turkey, at least living for a life in Turkey.

"Turkey is in the minds of eighty percent of the Turks living in Brabrand [an immigrant neighbourhood]. They only live in

²Names of informants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

FIGURE 1

A Turkish immigrant's homes in Denmark and in Turkey



Turkey, I mean every step they take here [Denmark], when they are buying a glass they think that I'll buy it if I can take it back to Turkey or else I won't buy it. That's why many of them do not speak Danish. Because they are still running after a dream that won't happen" (personal interview 2002).

As the years passed, frugality became a lifestyle among this group of immigrants. Never intending to stay too long in Denmark, and always living with the "myth of return", their integration into the Danish society and culture was limited. For them, it was their local community back in Turkey that mattered. That was where they wanted to improve their social status, where economic wealth is the main source of high social status (Jurgens 2001). Furthermore, the economic capital they can bring into play has a higher value in the Turkish social field as compared to the Danish social field. In the 1970s, the heyday of migration, it was common to see convoys of Turkish immigrants driving from Europe with their Mercedeses or BMWs full of European goods which were not available in Turkey at the time. They bought mainly electrical appliances such as VCRs, colour TVs, which were considered as items of prestige and status symbols among the immigrants and the local Turks. They brought these appliances to villages which often had no electricity at the time, only to stack them up in rooms waiting for the electricity to be connected (Abadan-Unat 2002). Thus, the same person who wore second-hand clothing in Denmark was often found giving relatively expensive gifts to his or her relatives in Turkey.

This multi-local belongingness and the discrepancy in the lifestyles between home and host nations are well depicted in Figure 1 which shows a Turkish immigrant's dwellings in Denmark and Turkey.

A Turkish immigrant who lives in an apartment in social housing (photo on the left) within a lower-income, immigrant neighbourhood in Denmark, in contrast to that, owns an apartment building (photo on the right) in his hometown in Turkey. His frugal, working-class, immigrant lifestyle in Denmark is compensated by the elevated social status that this economizing affords him in Turkey. Conspicuous consumption can be observed with the immi-

grants who give a higher degree of importance to own property and spend their money in Turkey rather than in their host country. The prestige of owning a Mercedes Benz car in Turkey, even though it might only be used for a few months each year, is worth the money-saving bus rides in Denmark for the rest of the year.

2. *The myth of settling.* The mentality of saving in Denmark for a better life in Turkey has changed over time and across generations, most noticeably among the better-educated, second-generation immigrants who show different consumption patterns from those of their parents. Erdem illustrates this change in mentality by observing that:

"the new generations say "what shall I do with them [houses in Turkey]? Why did you buy them? I wish you bought a Mercedes here so we can drive it" . . . things have changed. The new generations, the second-generation does not want to invest in Turkey anymore, they do not want to go and bury money in the mountains of Sivas and Çorum" (personal interview 2002).

Perhaps the arena for consuming conspicuously has shifted toward the host society for those immigrants who wish to settle in Denmark where they strive to improve their social status. Yet the status symbols remain the same as in the example of the second-generation's wish for a Mercedes Benz to be driven in Denmark.

Sevgi, a 39-year-old social worker who came to Denmark as Erdem's wife when she was 16, describes the changes in their lifestyle as they moved out of the apartment that they shared for four years with Erdem's parents, brother and sister-in-law. She says it was a conscious decision of theirs to move into a non-immigrant neighbourhood, where their two daughters could go to school with Danish children. Her family members distinguish themselves from other "traditional" Turkish immigrants. They no longer save in Denmark to buy a house in Turkey. They send their teenage daughter to school trips abroad and one year sacrificed going on vacation to Turkey in order to buy her a personal computer. She describes the change in her family over time by saying:

"We didn't have any social life. For example we never used to go out to the theatre, to the cinema, or to eat. We used to work only to save. Slowly, slowly our mentality started to change. We started to divert our attention to other things. For example we started to buy newspapers, give importance to other things, read more books, go out more to dine. Then our kids grew up and we felt obliged to do other social activities. ...our main aim was to save money and buy a house in Turkey. But we didn't have any preference about how to decorate our home, what style of clothes to wear. It was not important at the time, we used to wear whatever we found in the sales. We didn't care whether our furniture matched or not. But now, if I like something, I buy it whether it is expensive or not. Because now I am thinking since I live here I want to live according to my taste and wants. But I didn't used to think that way before" (personal interview 2002).

For these immigrants the changes in the consumption practices have been taking place in an effort to "integrate" better into the Danish society which has become the chosen point of reference. However, as much as the immigrants wish to associate with a certain community, it is also necessary that they are accepted by that community or society at large. Next we discuss the discrepancy between the desired and ascribed social status of these transmigrants which result from the differences in their economic and cultural and social capital.

DISCUSSION: THE CONTEXTUALITY OF SOCIAL STATUS

Migration does not only allow one to move from one society to another, but it also allows one to make a change in one's social class and status. The consumption practices of Turkish immigrants in Denmark change across time, generations, and communities in an effort to improve their social status. Differences are observed in this group in terms of the social context in which they strive to improve their social status; those who live with the "myth of return" and those who settle down. These differences manifest themselves in their consumption patterns.

Material possessions not only construct immigrant identities but also serve as symbols of social class and status. In a community in which economic wealth is a source of high social status, material goods are used to achieve the desired social status. Yet, in other communities where one's family background, education level, and occupation act as more pertinent indicators of higher social status, having only economic wealth fails to achieve the desired social recognition. For the first-generation Turkish immigrants, migration has provided an improvement in their economic conditions, but without a commensurate improvement in their education levels. The improved social status from this economic gain has been, for the most part, restricted to their local communities in Turkey. And yet, among the upper middle class Turks, they are disparagingly regarded as *nouveau riches* or *Almanci*³ because of their high economic, but low cultural capital. At the same time, their social status remains low in the Danish society due to their low status occupations and low education levels. Even the better-educated

ones have not achieved the high social status they would like in the Danish or the Turkish societies due to their low social and cultural capital.

Whether yearning for a better life in their country of origin or to attain a better social status in their country of settlement, transmigrants continue their liminal existence in transnational social spaces. Despite their attempts at belonging to the country of origin or of settlement, they are regarded as the "other" in both places.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the existing literature on consumption practices of immigrants by bringing attention to the phenomenon of transmigrants, who continue to forge and sustain their lives across national communities and also by providing empirical data collected in a non-North American context.

It is not credible to deny the importance of global forces which shape the consumption practices that take place in particular localities. Thus, this study puts forward the importance of these connections and how data collected in one locality gives illuminating insights to studying consumption in another part of the world. This research takes the global interconnectedness into consideration and studies how different socio-cultural contexts have effects on consumption practices. More specifically, we utilize multi-sited ethnography to capture the transnational aspects of a specific group of consumers.

This research sensitizes itself to an emerging transnational sociality by concretely following how consumers' identities are stretched across nation-states and cultures. In this specific research project, the transnational identity of the consumers in question is characterized by liminality and sometimes by alienation. The identities of the transmigrants studied here stand in stark contrast to the suggested cosmopolitan identities of consumers with higher degrees of various forms of capital (cf. Thompson and Tambyah 1999). The transmigrants that live in a state of liminality constitute a lumpen-version of the cosmopolitan lifestyles akin to the tourist-vagabond dichotomy evoked by Bauman (1998). Consumer research that deals with global consumer culture often looks at how a supposedly global culture influences the everyday lives of consumers living in specific localities. However, with this research, we try to investigate how consumers' culture is also "globalized". Further research is needed into other types of transnational consumer identities in order to begin to more fully grasp the globality of contemporary consumer culture.

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³The word literally means someone related to Germany as the majority of the Turkish immigrants first migrated to Germany. It has a rather pejorative connotation as it often is used for an emigrant who has newly acquired economic wealth yet not the necessary cultural resources to be a member of the upper middle class.

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