Cultural Pluralism as a Consumption Behaviour

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Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of cultural pluralism, defined as a pattern of consumption acts consisting in the adoption of products or consumption practices from several cultures. Initial findings from a qualitative study suggest that while the initial trial of products or practices from different cultures can result from exposure to cultural influences, personal tendencies or life trajectories, their longer-term appropriation is facilitated by resonance between contextual factors and personal dispositions. A spectrum of cultural pluralism is developed, and three markers identified: *cultural purists* maintain their own culture(s)' boundaries, rarely venturing beyond; *cultural incrementalists* appropriate products from different cultures slowly yet enduringly, when they can blend easily with their own culture; *cultural experimentalists* try many products or practices for their novelty.

Keywords: cultural pluralism, multi-cultural consumer behaviour, consumption, globalisation, international marketing, qualitative study

Cultural Pluralism as a Consumption Behaviour

With globalisation, people worldwide are exposed to more ideas, media, people, products or practices of different cultural origins than ever before (Appadurai, 1990). Yet, in spite of the constant interpenetration of cultures, individual cultures are not coalescing towards a common global culture. As globalisation intensifies, cultural identities become stronger, thus pointing towards the emergence of a 'globally plural' world. As they interact with other cultures while remaining fiercely conscious of their own identity, people are becoming culturally plural – perhaps in the same manner that one becomes multi-lingual. Considering 21st century consumers' growing exposure to different cultures, their consumption behaviour may also become more culturally plural. As consumers juggle in daily life with concurrent exposure to a number of cultures, it is necessary to re-think the manner in which marketers view multi-cultural consumption behaviour (Craig and Douglas, 2006; Yaprak, 2008).

This study investigates the phenomenon of cultural pluralism, which is defined as a pattern of emergent consumption acts, consisting in the adoption of products or consumption practices emanating from several cultures, whether one identifies with these cultures or not. For example, a French consumer who visits a North-African restaurant to eat couscous is culturally plural. Equally, a consumer of dual origin (Mexican and US) who listens to rap music, Hispanic music and jazz is culturally plural. Cultural pluralism is different from cosmopolitanism, in that it is a *behaviour* rather than a world view. The study aims to understand how, over time, culturally plural behaviours develop during daily consumption. Specifically, the investigation aims to understand how contextual and personal factors interplay to give rise to emergent culturally plural behaviours. The main research questions are as follows: 1. How do culturally plural behaviours emerge in the first place? 2. How do they turn into regular behaviours?

Conceptual Background

It is becoming increasing difficult to study consumption behaviour based on a country's dominant culture, since culture is becoming increasingly deterritorialized and penetrated by elements from other cultures (Craig and Douglas, 2005). Culture is changing faster and more easily that commonly believed (Nakata and Sivakumar, 1996). Hence, it is important to study consumption as emergent adaptations to different cultural contexts (Craig and Douglas, 2006; Leung et al., 2005; Yaprak, 2008). Such an approach views culture as a set of changing beliefs, conventions and meanings that keep evolving with cultural interpenetration. Correspondingly it invites marketers to identify new behaviours arising from interpenetration.

An emergent field of enquiry studies people's dispositions towards cultures (their own or those of others), and their impact on consumption behaviours. Several such dispositions have been identified: cosmopolitanism (Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999), world mindedness (Beckmann et al., 2001), ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma, 1987), xenocentrism (Mueller, Broderick and Kipnis, 2009), cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003). While these explain differences in consumption behaviour between individuals, the question remains of how people may develop these dispositions in the first place. As stated by Riefler and Diamantopoulos, one is not born, but rather becomes cosmopolitan. Although the theory of acculturation (Berry, 1980; Berry, 1997; Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2009) deals with transition and the dynamics of being confronted to other cultures, it focuses on attitudes rather than behaviours and therefore, may not capture emergent behavioural phenomena.

The cultural theory approach studies culture in terms of the meanings which people give to consumption objects. In this sense, culture explains the manner in which people use products in different ways (e.g. Ger and Belk, 1996; Holt, 1994; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). This approach situates consumption in a specific environment: the locale in which consumption happens defines the meaning which people give to consumption objects. Several studies show how people "appropriate" the meaning and use specific products (Ger and Belk, 1996; Holt, 1994; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). Here, the cultural group is the unit of analysis, with static assumptions of human behaviour predicated on groups sharing a static culture. Our study is a departure from both the disposition and the cultural theory approaches, and subscribes to the 'emergent adaptation' approach.

Methodology

A qualitative approach suits an initial, exploratory stage towards understanding the dynamic nature of culturally plural behaviours (Thompson, 1997). Data was elicited through ten depth interviews of between 45 and 70 minutes, which took place in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with UAE residents. The UAE provides extensive evidence of culturally plural behaviours for several reasons: there is a wide mix of nationalities and religious beliefs; at least 85% of the population is foreign with no one dominant culture; its residents live there by choice or out of necessity (if they no longer feel safe in their country of origin for political or religious reasons, or if they are deprived of economic opportunities); yet residents cannot become citizens. Therefore, the context is extremely multi-cultural albeit not a 'melting pot'.

Theoretical sampling was used to select participants displaying high variance on characteristics which were deemed, a priori, to potentially influence culturally plural behaviour: number of years in the UAE, family's country of origin, number of countries lived in, socio-economic level, age, size of immediate family in the UAE. Additionally we obtained variance on reasons for living in the UAE, many participants living here for economic reasons, some for adventure, some because they were born in the UAE, and some to start a new life away from the political difficulties in their own countries.

All interviews took place in the branch of a well-known café chain. We followed a loose interview guide, searching for concrete instances of culturally plural behaviour so as to trace their origins to contextual factors, past life experience or behaviour, and to understand the reasons for their reinforcement or not. Since the study concerns cultural pluralism as a behaviour rather than an attitude, questions about values, cultural identity and attitudes towards different cultures were only asked at the end of the interview, so as not to taint earlier answers about emergent behaviours and situations. We suggested possible product categories (food, restaurant and cuisines, TV programs, music, films, books, clothes, jewellery items, health treatments and cultural activities). These cover the main categories of goods and services consumed regularly, for which there is a range of culturally differentiated options available in UAE. Interestingly, the categories chosen for discussion by the participants were predominantly food and cuisines, although other categories such as books, clothes, smoking (which emerged during one interview) were also explored.

Following grounded theory protocols (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we used an iterative process which included analysis at the level of individual cases and emerging cross-case themes. Since we conceptualise cultural pluralism as a pattern of emergent actions, the study focuses on how these actions emerge from consumers' interactions with their environment. Hence, we used Ehrenberg and Goodhardt's (1979) 'Awareness, Trial, Repeat' model, to consider

the factors involved in the initial trial and the adoption of consumption from several cultures, acknowledging the fact that while curiosity may lead to trial, other factors are required for the behaviour to become permanent. Once behaviours and their contextual basis were established, they were linked to data regarding cultural identification and dispositions.

Findings

Ehrenberg and Goodhardt (1979) suggest that consumption behaviour requires a progress through awareness, trial and repeat buying. We found that several factors create the first two aspects of awareness and trial. In fact awareness and trial go hand in hand. The participants' multi-cultural behaviour develops as a result of not just one exposure, but rather the *confluence of repeated cultural encounters* that creates both awareness and opportunities for trials. For instance, Participant 1, a Canadian, described how her decision to undertake a two-week Ayurvedic treatment in India was preceded by several coincidental encounters with ayurveda that included attending a workshop on the topic, being offered a book on the subject, hearing from a friend about her successful ayurveda treatment and the search for alternative therapies due to recent illness in the family. It often takes repeated flavour of a culture for the first trial to take place. Repeated exposure primes the mind to become more accepting of alien products or practices. For instance, Participant 2, an Australian, refers to a series of "waves" of interest towards the Indian and then the Arab cultures, which led her to try multiple products and practices from these cultures. By constantly prompting new exposures, cultural encounters may also turn a trial into a permanent behaviour.

Individual life trajectories have an impact on the cultural plurality of consumption. The consumers who have lived in several countries or have multi-cultural ancestry choose from a wider initial palette of cultural practices or goods. *Friends and others who share much time* with people can act as catalysts by introducing them to the products or practices of their cultures, although participants rarely feel influenced by them other than when they receive gifts from them or are invited to eat their food. While the influence of friends is felt mostly at the initial trial stage, it can also happen later, during the habituation process. "My consumption depends on the kind of company I keep" says Participant 3, from Pakistan, when mentioning the evenings he spends smoking the shisha with his Arab friends. Personal tendencies such as *openness towards other cultures* and *exploratory behaviour tendencies* facilitate many trials. These dispositions only seem to have an impact at the initial trial time: additional factors need to be present for trial to turn into permanent consumption.

The transition from trial to repeat behaviour is mostly facilitated by *resonance between stimuli and personal dispositions*, and by perceptions of functionality. Typically, the transition from trial to long-term culturally plural consumption results from consumers appropriating a cultural product or practice. In a sense, the product or practice becomes 'theirs', instead of being perceived as alien and different, and consumers venture further into the cultural behaviour which progressively becomes less alien.

Several participants explained that the realisation that the product or practice they had tried was similar to some of their culture's products or practices naturally led them to adopt that product or practice: the resemblance made the adoption easier. Thus, the perceived familiarity helps add the product to the palette of products consumed regularly. For instance, Participant 4, an Iranian, started eating Turkish cuisine regularly after realising that it is quite similar to Iranian cuisine.

It sometimes occurs to participants, after having consumed it, that the product or habit resonates with an interest or belief of theirs. For example, Participant 5 who identifies herself as being of Pakistani, Iranian, Western and Arabic cultures, explains how, having been given a Japanese film by her son and a tape of Japanese flute by a performer, she realized the link between these two forms of art and the zen approach to life, which appeals to her.

Repeat behaviour usually also requires the cultural product or practice to be appreciated for its *functionality*. Otherwise the novelty effect will go away, and the behaviour will not be repeated. The mother of Participant 6, an Indian, made her children try many different foods, but the habit of eating corn flakes instead of traditional Indian breakfast items "stuck" because corn flakes were found to be light, healthy, quick to prepare and easy to take or buy on trips. It is important to note that in all these cases the initial behaviour influenced the disposition and attitude that eventually gave rise to repeated consumption.

The cultural shifts taking place in consumption are often imperceptible, and only recognised after the shifts have happened. Consumers come to terms with the shift through an ex-post exercise. For example, each summer, when Participant 6, goes back to her home country, Canada, it takes her several days to adjust her dress, away from the more elaborate styles worn in the Middle East, to the simpler and more casual Canadian style. This is resonant with Sussman's (2000) findings that expatriates relocating home only realise that they have changed when confronted with their culture of origin on their return from expatriation.

The Spectrum of Cultural Pluralism

The findings also suggest that cultural pluralism can be viewed as a spectrum with three markers which we label as follows: cultural purists, cultural incrementalists and cultural experimentalists.

Cultural purists have a strong sense of identification with their own culture(s) and its values, which they take care to keep alive and transmit to their children. Their consumption is dictated by these values, and does not typically go beyond the products of their culture(s). Participant 7 describes himself as "from an Indian Hindu culture, and very proud of it". He only rarely strays from the food and products from his own culture. When there are deviations, they arise from purely functional compulsions. For instance, during overseas travel Participant 7, a strict vegan, had to learn to live on omelettes when there was not enough vegan food: "That was something I could compromise". The functional compulsions are obvious to cultural purists who are deliberate in their moves and are open to adopting something that has very high functional value.

Cultural incrementalists, a second group, are often slow and cautious in their adoption of the products and practices of other cultures. For them, adoption results more from the realisation that these products or practices can be appropriated by marginally moving their 'cultural boundaries' beyond their existing limits: products and practices are appropriated within the incrementalists' own cultural systems. Participant 3 has adopted Lebanese food because it is similar to some of the foods from Pakistan, his home country, and "it doesn't taste foreign".

The *cultural experimentalists*, a third group, are at the opposite end of the spectrum from cultural purists: they are open to new cultural experiences and seek the products and practices from other cultures, for the novelty which they bring to their lives. They try many products and practices; a few of those remain in their long-term consumption, although their pattern of repeat consumption may not be as much as the incrementalists. It is the diversity which

appeals to them. Participant 6 likes the "change" of trying products from different cultures, while Participant 1 "can't stand homogeneity".

One's position on the spectrum of cultural pluralism appears to be independent of one's individual life trajectories. For example, Participant 8 is a Briton of Palestinian origin who has lived in the UAE for eight years. She consumes solely within the western/Palestinian repertoire. She does not try or adopt products beyond these two cultures. In this sense, her identification is clearly multi-cultural, but she is a cultural purist by disposition. Participant 1 is a mono-cultural Canadian who, all her life, has "travel[led] to eat" and experience new dishes and foods. She is an experimentalist.

Implications, Conclusion and Future Research

The study provides initial insights into new consumer behaviours emerging as a result of evolving cultural dynamics, an area identified by Craig and Douglas (2006) and Yaprak (2008) as requiring significant development work. It identifies several factors – contextual, personal and dispositional – able to explain culturally plural consumption behaviours. It proposes a spectrum of cultural pluralism as a behaviour and identifies three distinct forms of this behaviour: cultural purists fiercely maintain their own culture(s)' boundaries and rarely venture beyond them; cultural incrementalists appropriate products from different cultures slowly, and primarily because they blend easily with their own culture; cultural experimentalists try many products or practices from different cultures, for their novelty.

These initial findings suggest that culturally plural behaviours result from interactions between contextual factors, cultural identifications and personal dispositions. Consumers may follow different 'routes' to engrave culturally plural consumption into their lives. These differences have implications for marketers and the manner in which they position products and communicate to culturally plural consumers. Experimentalists may be attracted by messages of exoticism and novelty; incrementalists may be intimidated by these same messages. Encouraging incrementalists to try products or practices which are positioned as similar to those of their culture would help them integrate these smoothly into their consumption. Loyalty may differ between the three forms of cultural pluralism. As experimentalists thrive on novelty, they may be more disposed towards constantly trying new products or practices, like 'cultural butterflies', rather than developing long-term behaviours. On the other hand, incrementalists appropriate new products or practices on the basis of their similarity with those of their own culture. They may proceed more cautiously and try fewer products and practices, but may convert them more easily into long-term behaviours and display more loyalty towards these. While multi-cultural purists may consume products from each of their cultures, they may not be inclined to try products beyond these cultures.

These are very initial results, whose generalisability is limited by the small sample size. Future research should consider the manner in which consumers' cultural identification and their dispositions interact with their culturally plural consumption. In particular, while the consumption behaviour of cultural purists and cultural experimentalists is likely strongly guided by their dispositions towards their own and other cultures, it may be that cultural incrementalists form attitudes towards the products and practices of other cultures only once they have tried them and can assess whether they can be integrated easily within their own repertoire of products. Nakata (2003) suggests that in the longer term, behaviour may drive cognition. Therefore, it is important that culturally plural behaviour is better understood independently of cognition, since cognition may only be the result of behaviour.

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