

Cosmopolitan Transcultures

Bernardo Figueiredo, University of New South Wales, bernardo@unsw.edu.au

Julien Cayla, University of New South Wales, julienc@agsm.edu.au

Abstract

This paper identifies cosmopolitan transcultures as an emerging phenomenon that must have a place in marketing scholars' reflections on the major changes occurring in the global sociocultural structure. As the world becomes more mobile and interconnected through new communication networks, multiple information exchanges and capital flows, the expansion of international corporations, and tourism, cosmopolitan groupings are shifting from being simple collectivities to becoming a nascent transculture. These groups are ceasing to be mere collectives of individuals who have been socialized under similar conditions, and are instead becoming a transcultural groups, with shared symbolic cultural meanings, a homogeneous ethos based on core values and expressions, and a commitment to a well-understood ideology of consumption. This paper also addresses possible implications of this development for consumer research.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan, Transculture, Consumer cosmopolitanism

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Introduction

Cosmopolitans have existed since before the time of Homer's *Odyssey*. Greek and Roman explorers, who travelled around the known world and came back full of stories from distant places, were masters of making skillful use of the cultural knowledge that they had acquired during their trips. Thus, cosmopolitanism, a phenomenon which implies a change in perspective and the skillful management of diverse cultural elements (Hannerz, 1990; Holt, 1998; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999), is far from a new thing. However, major shifts in the socio-economic sphere, including processes of globalization have made the cosmopolitans of today a very different genre of people, not only in terms of their increased power and autonomy, but also in terms of their development of a nascent culture of their own, fostering their socio-cultural influence (Bardhi, 2004; Nowicka, 2006). These new cosmopolitans could potentially have a major impact on global markets through their particular ways of consumption and, for that reason, represent a phenomenon worth consumer researchers' attention and study.

Globalization is not only creating more cosmopolitan consumers, but is connecting them in ways that enable them to act more as members of a culture than as individual consumers. First, as mobility increases around the world, more and more people have firsthand access to the cultural norms and practices present in different places and cultures (Robertson, 1995). Secondly, new forms of media, and the Internet in particular, provide a wider group of people with information, images, sounds, and overall access to cultural elements, allowing them to discuss and relate to cultures that they have never personally encountered. Third, technological advances, especially in telecommunications and transportation, have allowed cosmopolitans to keep in touch with their peers from around the world. The exchange of information and the existence of shared norms and practices are crucial to these processes (Roudometof, 2005).

In order to understand the reasons for the proliferation of transnational cosmopolitan groups and their impact on consumption, we must identify and examine the practices that connect cosmopolitan consumers and the value that these consumers extract from being connected. By understanding the particularities of cosmopolitan cultures, we will be able to move a step further towards understanding cosmopolitan consumption (McCracken, 1986). The first step towards exploring cosmopolitan culture is to define the phenomenon. More specifically, in examining cosmopolitan groups, we must determine whether we are looking at collectivities (Holt, 1997), with their loosely-bounded cultural associations, subcultures, such as punks (Thornton, 1997) or ravers (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, and Canniford, 2009), or postmodern tribes, as described by Mafesolli (1996), with their ephemeral collective identifications.

In this paper, we argue that, while all of these concepts have much to contribute to an understanding of what cosmopolitan groups are becoming, none of them fully capture the nature of the cosmopolitan community phenomenon. Because of this, we instead propose the use of the term “transculture,” which best describes the types of dynamic processes and structures underlying cosmopolitan culture. To introduce the concept of transculture, it is important to first explain the differences between collectivities, tribes, and subcultures, and to discuss why these concepts are lacking as descriptions of the new cosmopolitan phenomenon.

Collectivities

In the sociology of consumption, a core research issue is the symbolic expression, reproduction, and potential transformation of social collectivities through consumption. According to Holt (1997, p. 326) “collectivities are groups of people who have been socialized in similar conditions..., are embedded in similar social relations, and so tend to have similar cultural understandings. Collectivities, then, are a particular type of group that is more macroscopic than groups such as families, organizations, or peer groups that are based on sustained interaction. Collectivities are not formally organized, and the common characteristics that unite a collectivity are often widely dispersed across space. One important characteristic of collectivities, then, is that membership is not necessarily a conscious phenomenon (i.e., collectivities can operate separate from members' self-understanding). Another important characteristic of collectivities is that they are constituted and sustained through social processes- they are socially constructed.” Holt’s definition highlights the fact that collectivities tend to have similar cultural understandings that are a consequence of similar genealogies, or common processes of development of people and society through history. Holt underscores the fact that collectivities are not formally organized and that membership is not conscious. It is therefore an etic definition created by researchers to identify commonalities among individuals. This concept fits well with definitions of cosmopolitanism as a social construct that is derived from similar processes of socialization. Historically, cosmopolitans have not been formally organized and the characteristics that unite them are widely dispersed across space.

The problem of conceptualizing cosmopolitans solely as a collectivity is that this definition does not account for the recent transformations in cosmopolitan social structures. As geographical mobility becomes easier (Klugman, 2009) and as means of connection, such as social media platforms and the Internet, increasingly facilitate the formation of groups with similar interests, virtual groups are sprouting up which identify themselves as cosmopolitans or citizens of the world (see www.internations.org or www.asmallworld.net for examples). The “raison d’etre” of these communities is the acknowledgement of their cosmopolitan nature. If the conscience of kind did not exist among cosmopolitans in the past, it has become apparent through the decisions of individuals to join these self-defined cosmopolitan organizations. Therefore, although the

concept of collectivity helps define what cosmopolitans are, the term cannot explain new “conscious” cosmopolitan identities, as it lacks the essential aspects of group dynamics and self-identification.

Subcultures

The concept of subcultures has at different times taken on a variety of connotations. According to Irvin (1997,p.67), “subculture, rather than the subset of behavior patterns of a segment, or the patterns of a small group, is often thought as a social world, a shared perspective, which is not attached firmly to any definite group or segment...People today are becoming more aware of the existence of subcultures, variant life styles or social worlds, and are more often structuring their own behavior, making decisions and planning future courses of action according to their concept of these explicitly subculture entities.” Subcultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their parent culture. According to Clarke et al. (1997,p. 100) “they must be focused on certain activities, values, certain uses of material artifacts, [and] territorial spaces which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture.”

The concept of subculture, although helpful for understanding the shared perspectives of new cosmopolitans, has the problem of making use of the prefix “sub-” which attributes a lower rank to subcultures, implying that social groups termed subcultures are subordinate to a greater national culture (Thornton, 1997). This idea of a counter-culture, resistant culture, or minority group is often present in literature on subcultures. A good example can be found in Hebdige’s (1979) analysis of punk culture. Thornton (1997) also discusses subcultures’ commonly negative relationship with work, which in some ways, ascribes an aspect of illegitimacy and deviancy from a central culture to subcultures. Subcultures’ position as subordinate cultures has been further emphasized through consumer research into the concept of subcultures of consumption, as shown in (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) seminal study on the Harley Davidson subculture. In the literature on consumer culture, subcultures of consumption have been defined as exhibiting a homogenous ethos of core values and expressions, displaying a hierarchical social structure based on authenticity, and having a commitment to a well understood ideology of consumption. Although cosmopolitanism as a phenomenon is not restricted to methods of consumption, these symbolic boundaries can be helpful in defining a cosmopolitan culture in formation, guiding the scholar to look for the presence of a homogenous ethos, a hierarchical social structure and an identifiable ideology of consumption. The concept of subcultural capital is also quite useful here, as it refers to the cultural knowledge and commodities acquired by members of a subculture, through which they raise their status and help differentiate themselves from members of other groups (Kates, 2002; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Thornton, 1997). However, as a whole, the concept of subculture is inappropriate for defining what cosmopolitan groups are becoming, since cosmopolitanism is rarely contained by a national culture and is not commonly seen as illegitimate or counter-cultural. On the contrary, cosmopolitanism is

frequently regarded to be a phenomenon affecting the elite classes and bourgeoisie of a variety of diverse cultures (Harvey, 2009).

Tribes

Tribes and neo-tribes have been identified by the sociologist Maffesolli (1996) as a post-modern response to the potentially alienating and isolating conditions caused by macro-forces of globalization and post-industrial transformations. In neo-tribes, consumers form ephemeral collective identifications that are grounded in common lifestyle interests and leisure pursuits. Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar (2007: 5) explain that neo-tribes differ from traditional tribes in one important way. They “belong to many little tribes and not one tribe. From this perspective the consumption of cultural resources circulated through markets (brands, leisure experiences, and so on) are not the *sine qua non* of contemporary life, rather, they facilitate meaningful social relationships.” Both tribes and neo-tribes provide linking value through social relationships (Cova, 1997), which are usually more important than brands, products, experiences, or ideas that might also be part of the tribes’ ways of behaving and consuming. The concept of tribes adds an extra dimension to the concept of collectivities, as it recognizes that people can belong to multiple tribes, deriving linking value from social relationships. The concept of tribes is therefore quite applicable to cosmopolitans, as it helps express the linking value established between cosmopolitans in their newly formed communities. However, this concept lacks the analytical power present in literature on subcultures, with its concepts of subcultural capital, homogenous ethos, and identifiable ideology of consumption. The concept of tribes partially explains the new culture of cosmopolitans, but lacks the more enduring appeal and clearer ideological boundaries of the concept of subcultures.

Transcultures

In light of the above, we argue that the shared practices and negotiated cultural boundaries of the new cosmopolitan culture are best described by use of the designation transculture. According to cultural theorist Mihail Epstein (Berry and Epstein, 1999, p.295), transculture is “a new aspect of cultural development, which transcends the borders of traditional national, racial, gender and professional cultures. Transculture implies diffusion of initial cultural identities as individuals cross the borders of different cultures and assimilate them.” While Epstein (2009) emphasizes the diffusion of initial cultural identities in transcultural formations, we stress the commonalities that the concept has with collectivities, tribes and subcultures. Like the term collectivity, the designation transculture acknowledges the genealogical character of social groups, seeing them as the result of historical processes that have led to the socialization of members under similar conditions and caused them to participate in similar social relations and cultural understandings. The concept of transculture carries notions of identifiable ideology that are similar to that of subculture, but without the implication of subordination to a hegemonic culture. In contrast with

the prefix “sub-,” “trans-” designates a state of being over and beyond. Finally, transculture shares similarities with the concept of tribe, as it recognizes the linking value of social relationships (Cova, 1997). It is precisely this linking value that is responsible for the expansion of cosmopolitan communities and the maintenance of ties between their members.

According to Epstein (2009, p. 330) “transculture is a model of cultural development, which differs from both leveling globalism and isolating pluralism. Among the many freedoms proclaimed as inalienable rights of the individual, there emerges yet another freedom which is probably the most meaningful one – the freedom from one’s own culture, in which one was born and educated. This is completely different from the political right to freely choose one’s place of living, to emigrate and to cross state borders. Too many people who leave the geographical location of their culture remain, for the rest of their lives, prisoners of its language and traditions. Other migrants, having turned their back on their past, become prisoners of a different, newly acquired culture. Perhaps, only a small number of people, when acceding to two or several cultures, are able to keep their freedom from any of them.” Through Epstein’s definition of transculture, we differentiate cosmopolitans from immigrants or homesick expatriates, because unlike the latter two, cosmopolitans have found a way to free themselves from the constraints of their own original culture without necessarily establishing deeper roots in their new locations. Mobility and freedom are paramount ideals for cosmopolitans.

Naturally, this has important implications for studies of consumption, as it raises a whole new set of questions. For example, if consumers are participating in cosmopolitan transcultures in order to gain freedom to move their consumption beyond the boundaries of national cultures, what influence do transcultural symbols and practices have on processes of consumer choice, consumer adoption of new products, brand loyalty, and other consumer behavior constructs, especially when these practices occur cross-culturally? Do shared transcultural practices reinforce or limit consumption linked to shared national identities? How do concepts of global consumer culture, materialism and ethnocentrism interact with cosmopolitan transcultures?

Thus far, the related marketing literature (Cannon and Yaprak, 2002; Cleveland, Laroche, and Papadopoulos, 2009; Ozsomer and Altaras, 2008) has insisted on dealing with cosmopolitanism as a disposition of consumers, a trait of their personality, or an acquired characteristic. The problem with these views is that they do not explain how consumers become cosmopolitans, with Thomson and Tambyah (1999) being the notable exception as they adopt a more dynamic perspective of cosmopolitanism. They also lack an explanation of how cosmopolitanism can be used to illuminate new consumption trends. Viewing cosmopolitanism as a transculture provides the appropriate perspective, language and tools for understanding the phenomenon as a social one, negotiated by and through global sociocultural processes.

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