



Consumption compromises: Negotiation and unification within contemporary families [☆]



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ABSTRACT

When cultures interact within the family, consumption decisions take on meaning beyond simply who is the decision maker. The usual compromises all spouses face are amplified when one spouse is displaced from another country. Interviews and observation are used to examine the lived-world of bi-national (where spouses are from different countries of origin) and mono-national families. Key themes emphasize how members of families insert their cultures in navigating consumption decisions and reconciling preferences. Using food consumption as context, findings reveal the extent to which individual partners relinquish part of their personal cultural identities to gain a synergistic collective identity at the family level. In discussing strategies of acknowledgment, negotiation, accommodation and unification, implications are drawn for family decision-making, family identity and consumer–brand relationship theory.

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1. Introduction

When couples marry, each spouse brings a different set of experiences to the household. Even when one marries the girl/boy next door, there are differences in role expectations, shopping behavior and brand preferences. When spouses have different cultural backgrounds, differences can be profound. Household decision-making research has focused on major purchases; yet it is the seemingly mundane everyday consumption practices that can reveal fundamental family dynamics.

This research examines everyday food choices in culturally diverse homes. Household decision-making regarding food choices is surprisingly complex, given that childhood traditions exert strong influence on later food choices (Patojoki & Tuomi-Gröhn, 2001), and food has been found to be central to identity (Fischler, 1988). While all couples exhibit different consumption preferences, when spouses are from different countries, these differences are likely to be dramatic and obvious, revealing aspects of household decision-making that may otherwise be subtle. Thus, we chose the context of bi-national households to gain theoretical insights (Arnould, Price, & Moisio, 2006) into household decision-making regarding food.

We study the impact of these cultural differences in the household using a pantry study and interviews. The following research questions

are asked: 1) How are everyday food consumption decisions made in bi-national and mono-national families? 2) What symbolic role do products and brands play in the maintenance of individual and family identities? 3) How do bi-national spouses use consumption to form family identity?

We find that, in bi-national families, individual partners relinquish part of their personal cultural identities to gain a synergistic cultural identity at the family level. Our findings also suggest that everyday food decisions in families can be indicators of relative influence, negotiation and both individual and collective identity maintenance in the household. Thus, through the portrayal of food consumption behavior in contemporary bi-national families, this research adds an important cultural dimension to the rich literature on family decision-making. Our research adds to our growing knowledge of family identity and consumer–brand relationships by considering the influence of culture.

2. Family, consumption and culture

The family decision-making literature's focus on big-ticket expenses such as the house, furniture, or automobiles (Qualls, 1987; Spiro, 1983), has been a limitation. Major purchases may seem to be of greater importance given the perceived larger investment in time, dollar value and commitment. However, Epp and Price (2008) show that analysis of seemingly mundane consumption, such as food, may be more revealing of family dynamics, given the daily relevance of these types of decisions. Culture's influence on cuisine is well documented, as people mark cultural membership by what they eat (Fischler, 1988).

As early as 1975, Olson and Cromwell noted that a key limitation facing studies on family power was the focus on the bases of power and power outcomes (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues,

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1975) with little emphasis on power processes (Davis & Rigaux, 1974). Almost thirty years later, Commuri and Gentry (2000) echo these assertions and point out that the family decision-making literature has focused on a narrow set of issues, with an emphasis on decision outcomes and “who” (Belch & Willis, 2002; Qualls, 1982), rather than decision processes and “how” (Davis & Rigaux, 1974; Qualls, 1987). Our research addresses both the “who” and the “how.”

A few studies in the marriage and family literature have considered newlyweds' process of adjustment to sharing a household. Kemmer, Anderson, and Marshall (1998) studied couples before and after co-habitation/marriage to learn about changes in eating habits. Couples reported that adjustments to the other's food preferences were easy, perhaps because all participants were from a single geographic area.

For the few couples with differing food preferences, researchers found that, rather than continue these differences, couples would eat the same things. For example, when there was a conflict (e.g., he wants whole milk, she wants skimmed), couples would both consume the same food. Marshall and Anderson (2002) appear to use the Kemmer et al. (1998) data and find that couples displayed a willingness to accommodate their spouse's preferences and acknowledged the need for compromise. As well, they find that eating together represents an important event that is “part of the process of ‘normalization,’ as the couple, as opposed to their family or friends, becomes the new communal unit” (p. 204).

The family decision-making literature considers culture; however, the focus has been on cultural differences *between* families, not cultural differences *within* families. For example, Green et al. (1983) conducted a five-nation family decision-making study where differences between countries could be explained by cultural differences regarding patriarchy vs. egalitarianism. Some research has considered wedding decisions for bi-national couples, suggesting that cultural compromises occur (Fernandez, Veer, & Lastovicka, 2011; Nelson & Otnes, 2005).

Lindridge and Hogg (2006) consider food “a significant carrier of cultural meaning” (p. 994) in their study of diasporic Indian families, with Indian parents exercising power over their acculturated children through the emphasis on Indian cuisine. The shared Indian background of these families living in Britain produced conflict between the home and the outside culture. Lindridge, Hogg, and Shah (2004) also found food relevant in their study of South Asian women in Britain, with culturally relevant food consumed in the home with family and more British food items consumed with friends. We extend these studies of culture/consumption negotiations by considering cultural diversity *within* the home.

The family decision-making literature also emphasizes family member characteristics and relative influence within the household, rather than the characteristics of the household as an entity itself (Commuri & Gentry, 2000). Epp and Price (2008) argue that family identity is “mutually constructed,” stemming from inherited notions of family, and dependent upon “shared interactions among relational bundles within the family.” They assert that family identity is not a construct in the mind, but “co-constructed in action” (p. 52), and is thus a continuous process. In the current study, we find family identity to be a process that is shared and evolving through spouses' interactions with each other, their cultures and their children.

Thus, key gaps in the literature include lack of attention to 1) everyday consumption decisions, 2) the role of culture in family decision-making, and 3) the role of consumption in formation of family identity. Our emphasis is on acquiring deep insights into bi-national families, their brand relationships, and the processes by which these households create a collective family identity.

3. Method

Data were gathered via depth interviews, observation and photographic elicitation in participants' homes over a one year period.

Interviews with 22 spouses in 11 households lasted 60 to 90 min. Spouses were interviewed separately, but consecutively. The study used a purposive sample, posting fliers on campus requesting eligible participants, relying on acquaintances, or acquaintances of friends, for participants. Seven bi-national families and four mono-national families resulted. In four of the bi-national households, wives were immigrants and husbands were immigrants in the remaining three bi-national households. Non-immigrant spouses were at least 3rd generation Americans who were identified as White or Caucasian. Data collected from mono-national families allowed comparisons of compromises and consumption. Of the eight mono-national spouses interviewed, seven were currently living in a region of the U.S. other than the one in which they were born and raised. (See Table 1 for interview participant profiles. Pseudonyms are used.)

Our focus on food required examination of participants' food storage areas. This methodology has not been used extensively by consumer researchers (Coupland, 2005; Fournier, 1998), although poking around in people's cupboards and refrigerators to understand consumption is not a new concept for practitioners (Rohwedder, 2007). One interviewee in each home was actively involved in an on-going dialog while touring food storage areas. During the interactive observation, the researcher and participant discussed everyday food consumption choices of the household, the contents of food storage areas and food purchases with respect to layout, brands, products, cuisine choices and sources or markets. Photographs of food storage areas taken by participants and emailed to the researchers prior to the interviews were also used as elicitation tools to stimulate discussion during interviews with the other spouse. We collected approximately 600 pages of interview data, including recorded observation discussions.

Data were analyzed using NVivo Version 8, chosen for its ability to assist in the analysis and storage of large bodies of textual, graphical, audio and video data. Analysis was based on the grounded theory approach (Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), using differing levels of coding and an iterative back and forth process between the emerging categories (e.g., acquisition, preferences, identity) and the literature to make sense of the data and develop themes (e.g., acknowledging sacrifice, accommodating preferences, building identity). The ultimate aim is to generate theory about culture's influence on family decision-making and consumption.

4. Analysis and discussion of themes

Three key themes emerged from the data, addressing the research questions outlined earlier. These themes are: 1) negotiating compromise and acknowledging sacrifice; 2) asserting and accommodating preferences; and 3) building a family identity.

4.1. Negotiating compromise and acknowledging sacrifice

In bi-national families, one spouse has access to familiar foods; for the immigrant, preferred foods are less available. One spouse considers the U.S. home; the other usually has strong ties to at least two different countries and cultures. This duality within the home is always salient to both spouses and is a latent struggle. Mono-national families with one or both spouses transplanted to new regions may experience this duality as well. The displaced person in both contexts misses certain foods, certain experiences that can never be fully replicated. In bi-national families, however, the native spouse is constantly aware of this and realizes that the needs of the immigrant spouse have to be met, for the immigrant spouse, after all, has made the greater sacrifice.

When asked the reason for choosing to live in the U.S., practical reasons such as employment, politics or being close to family are

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