



# Postmodern paradoxes in Thai-Asian consumer identity

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## ABSTRACT

Much research on consumption and identity is framed by a Western perspective, and cast in terms of the decoupling of identity from class within a fluid postmodern consumer culture. Little of this work engages with the subjective Asian experience in a cross-cultural context. We explore this theme through an inter-subjective, introspective analysis based on the jointly reconstructed experiences of the first author, a Thai national living and working in the UK for 8 years, and her UK born-husband and co-researcher. The study feeds into research areas focusing on identity dilemmas faced by immigrants to the West, and on Asian culture and religion in relation to Western modes of consumption. Our analysis shows that consumption acts as a site for exposing both cross- and intra-cultural dilemmas of identity, and also for resolving them.

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## 1. Introduction

They cannot represent themselves: they must be represented. – Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brunaire of Louis Bonaparte* Opening quote in *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978).

“Being in the UK for almost 8 years, I cannot help but wonder how it could affect my ‘self’. I might admit that I am confused especially when it comes to my identity, my actual self. Yes, I am Thai and I grew up in Bangkok, the capital city. Like other developing countries, Thailand is still a hierarchical society. Thais judge each other by their appearance, language and skin colour. Yes, you hear me correctly. We are not all the same. We all speak Thai but there are several levels of Thai language which can tell you which class we are in, about our family, educational background, so on and so forth. Also, we are not all ‘yellow’ (aka olive skin). If we are white, we will be perceived to be high-class, rich and have more privilege than Thais who have darker skin colour (that is why whitening skincare products are very popular in Thailand). Clothes, handbags, mobile phones, branded products are also very important to Thai people since they link to their social status, success, and wealth” (Tiwsakul, 2008, p.298).

The comment above, taken from Amy's PhD thesis, reflects on the conflicts of identity she has often felt as an Asian in a Western country

in which many citizens have little understanding of Asian countries and cultures. As Amy says, Thais are not all the same, yet racial and gender stereotypes can frame social and service encounters for Asian immigrants to the UK, often in negative ways. But Amy's identity conflict is not solely the result of her presence in the West. As we will describe below, it already had its origins in her background as a member of the privileged urban elite in rapidly developing Thailand. Her experience exposes some of the internal contradictions Western modes of consumption raise for Asian cultures, in addition to the contradictions arising from her emigration to the West.

We jointly reconstruct and explore Amy's experiences with the aim of articulating a subjective Thai-Asian perspective to feed into to three main areas of previous research. Firstly, we seek to contribute to work which locates consumption as a major site of identity construction for immigrants (e.g. Penaloza, 1989; Askegaard et al., 2005), especially from a female perspective (Monk and Hanson, 2008). Secondly, we see this study feeding into work which explores Asian religious and cultural perspectives on Western-style marketing and consumption (Gould, 1992; Belk, 1994). Thirdly, we adapt the subjective, personal introspective method in marketing and consumer research (Gould, 1991; Holbrook, 1995, 2005). Our variation on this contrasts to work in which two authors each reflect separately on their experiences (e.g. Gould and Stinerock, 1992) because we jointly reconstruct and comment on the experiences of the first author, interjecting the narrative with passages of Amy's direct speech. On a stylistic point, we will alternate between a joint voice and the third person, used when we are discussing individual perspectives. We feel that the use of ‘we’ and ‘Chris’ or ‘Amy’ is less cumbersome than alternating ‘we’ with ‘I’ throughout the text. The exception will be where we include direct quotes from Amy's writing and reflections.

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We recognise that there are potential methodological and ideological contradictions in the approach we have chosen. Among these is the risk that the Western voice will drown out the Asian voice, representing it in Western terms and unwittingly reproducing an Orientalist asymmetry of power (Said, 1978). We see this paper in terms of an articulation of a personal and subjective Asian voice and, as such, a counterpoint to Western-framed consumer cultural knowledge about the Oriental experience. The subjective voice, though, is a product of the Western Enlightenment. Individualism in Asia remains highly constrained by conventions of communication and behaviour surrounding relative social class, family relationships, wealth, ethnicity, skin colour, age, and gender. Critical self-reflexivity is a problematic notion for Asians, even where it is expressed with respect and balance as a personal view. It carries a high risk of disapproval, and we hope that the joint perspective will partly ameliorate the sensitive nature of the topics discussed.

Our joint perspective also reflects the fact that Amy's discovery of her voice has been a gradual journey jointly undertaken with Chris. What is more, the study reflects a degree of mutual ethno-consumerism (Venkatesh, 1995) and mutual cross-cultural self-fashioning (Gould and Stinerock, 1992) in the sense that both Chris and Amy have each consumed aspects of the other's culture and assimilated them into evolving senses of identity, including the acquisition of much cross-cultural knowledge. Each has learned to reflect on and question the cultural grammar that underlies their taken-for-granted behaviours, thinking and world-views. Consequently, while we acknowledge the risks of an imbalance in perspective, we also feel that the joint, or, as we call it, the inter-subjective approach of this paper will bring insights to our engagement with this topic.

Below, we will set the paper in a broader context of published work with a brief review of research in postmodern consumer culture, identity and subjective introspective methods. We will then explore Amy's evolving sense of identity, as it has emerged through a selection of significant events and experiences. These include events which Amy observed as an outsider through Western media, such as the 2004 tsunami in which she tragically lost 12 members of her extended family; the more recent political protests and violence in Thailand; and her encounters with her religious, family and cultural background as an outsider in phone calls, and on her last visit home in 2007. In addition to Amy's consumption of Thailand through Western media, we also note her impressions as an Asian consumer of Western education, clothes, food, entertainment, literature, household goods and Western, specifically British, cultural practices, and the ways these have challenged her sense of her native culture and identity. The aim overall is not to uncover general truths but to generate implications for research and practise based, in the spirit of ethnography, on an explication of subjective knowledge in a culturally constituted world (Venkatesh, 1995).

## 2. Literature review: postmodernism, consumer culture and identity

"I grew up in Thailand but I did not have the old traditional Thai way of thinking. It is a mixture between Thai and Western as I was sent to schools where some Western education was taught, including European and American history, science, and politics, modern languages and literature, alongside traditional Thai religion, music, language, literature, history and writing systems, and Thai traditions, culture, manners and customs. I left home for the first time when I was 17. I went to Sydney, Australia and the UK during the summer break. After that I came to the UK to do my Master's degree and PhD. I would say my identity is a bit mixed up. Media, environment, and experiences (mediated and lived experiences) all help me shape my own identity. I have seen the world and lived in two different cultures. I cannot really tell whether my identity is more Western or Eastern."

Amy's background as member of a privileged economic class in Thailand, her consumption in the local and then global higher education market and her subsequent journey to living to working in the UK, offers an accentuated postmodern pastiche of potential identity resources. The term 'postmodernism' may be ultimately 'meaningless' (Brown, 1995, p.59) but work under that label has been highly influential in developing interpretive research perspectives in the social sciences in general, and specifically in marketing and consumer research (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat et al., 1995; Brown, 1994, 1997, 1998). It has a resonance for this study because of the linkage between postmodernist work in consumer culture and identity. There are many postmodernist perspectives (Borgmann, 1992; Rosenau, 1992), some have been linked with notions such as, 'the loss of a sense of historical past', 'the replacement of reality by images', 'simulations', and 'unchained signifiers' (Featherstone, 1991, p.11). These hints at identity as something that has become decoupled from the historical and biographical certainties of class, culture, family, education and region of origin. One of the issues raised in this study is the question of whether this perspective maps on to cross-cultural identity issues.

This study is located broadly within the area of Consumer culture theory (CCT). CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) addresses the dynamic relationships between consumer experiences, the marketplace and cultural meanings, and emphasises the symbolic character of brand consumption. There is a focus on the experiential and socio-cultural dimensions of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and these are often investigated through qualitative methods deriving from anthropology and ethnography, since it is difficult to measure issues such as the symbolic value of products that structure self and social identities (Sherry, 1995). CCT explores the ways in which consumers transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, promotional messages or material goods to manifest their particular selves and further their identity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Holt, 2002; Ritson and Elliott, 1999). Amy and Chris have done previous joint research exploring the ways in which young Thai and UK-based consumers draw on brands in TV product placement as identity resources (Tiwsakul and Hackley, 2006, 2009). In that work, the emphasis fell on brands as a global identity resource and a site of liberatory potential (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) which seemed to transcend local culture in the sense that it was engaged in with shared enthusiasm by young consumers from deeply contrasting cultural backgrounds. In this paper we focus not on cross-cultural commonality but on cross-cultural difference as it is experienced by one individual.

Identity studies have remained at the forefront of social science research (Wetherell, 2009) for some 20 years. Identification is a precondition for social interaction – "without identity there could be no human world" (Jenkins, 2004, p.7). Jenkins (2004) goes on to say that, "...identification, consumption and display have always been connected" (p.9), locating the search for identity through consumption as a fundamental human urge which predates modern consumer culture. Gabriel and Lang (2006, p.76) suggest that consumers can be seen as identity seekers: "whether choosing goods, exploring them, buying them, displaying them, disfiguring them or giving them away, consumers are, above all, frequently presented as thirsting for identity and using commodities to quench this thirst." Giddens (1991) draws attention to dilemmas of identity faced by postmodern consumers who have a huge range of choices to make in even simple everyday purchase. These choices have implications for identity, so consumption becomes a key part of personal strategies designed to thwart the 'looming threat of personal meaningless' (Giddens, 1991, p.201). Consumers need to assemble disjointed elements of their experiences into a meaningful "narrative of self-identity" (Thompson, 1995, p.210; see also McAdams, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984). Holt (2004) suggests that some iconic brands can help to resolve dilemmas of identity by offering a widely recognised point of reference in a shifting symbolic cultural landscape.

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