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Pursuing upward transformation: The construction of a progressing self among dominated consumers[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Research on identity projects shows how consumers increase status through identity work. However, even though change and transformation are latent constructs in this literature, researchers seldom frame studies in such way. Studies on dominated consumers, by their turn, tend to represent reproduction and continuity, rather than change. We address these theoretical oversights through the analysis of the transformational character of identity work among dominated consumers. To do so, we conducted a qualitative study of two cohorts of lower-class students enrolled in a Distance Learning higher education program in Brazil. Drawing on the notion of possible selves, we found that, more than paving the grounds toward a desired outcome, students' identity work produce an internally persuasive process of moral transformation. Through an increased agency over their future, students reinvent themselves as progressing individuals, effectively breaking up with social determinations and paving the grounds to objective social mobility.

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1. Introduction

Upward transformation is what individuals do to (and for) themselves to change their social standing. They cultivate exteriors (e.g., clothing, speech, and deportment), interiors (e.g., thought, emotion, and outlook) and possessions (e.g., belongings, large, and small). When these cultivations are internally and externally persuasive, individuals become [...] creatures of another kind, or at least another degree. They move upward in the social scheme of things. Upward transformation has a double character, it is all the little changes undertaken in the creation of a larger change. (McCracken, 2008: p. 55, emphasis added)

In the course of their lives, individuals seek to create and maintain a sense of self as part of their being-in-the-world. Identity work involves consumers' daily investments, practices, and discourses to approach or to avoid desirable or undesirable focal points of identity, determined by sociocultural categories such as age (Barnhart & Peñaloza, 2013),

class (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013), gender (Holt & Thompson, 2004), or nationality (Bardhi, Eckhardt, & Arnould, 2012) or by cultural narratives such as the hipster myth (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), the American exceptionalist myth (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010), or the biological (equals normal) parent macro discourse (Fischer, Otnes, & Tuncay, 2007). Extant research on consumer identity projects emphasizes that the marketplace provides mythic and symbolic resources that consumers will deploy to build personal or collective narratives of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Thompson, 2013). In this process, consumers continually change their status and transform themselves. However, with few exceptions (Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Schau, Gilly, & Wolfenbarger, 2009; Schouten, 1991), consumer researchers tend to emphasize identity work itself, leaving unquestioned the processes and the nature of transformations that consumers experience in the construction of such narratives.

Such absence of transformation and change is even more prominent in research on dominated consumers. In this stream, studies demonstrate the many ways in which structural forces of society reproduce status advantages of dominant groups and constrain upward mobility. Such structures systematically shape consumer tastes (Üstüner & Holt, 2010), restrict consumer choices (Allen, 2002; Bone, Christensen, & Williams, 2014), and undermine consumers' self-perceptions (Henry, 2005). These consumers' identity work often meet existing structural barriers, producing shattered identity projects among them (Üstüner & Holt, 2010), diminishing their self-esteem, and framing their self-conceptions in subordinate ways (Bone et al., 2014). The consumer agency is, thus, limited to adaptation and coping.

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But, can dominated consumers overcome such powerful structural burden? How does their daily identity work yield transformation of the self? Finally, what is the nature of such transformation?

This paper addresses these questions through the study of two cohorts of lower-class female students enrolled in different Distance Learning (DL) undergraduate programs in Brazil. Recent changes on income structure and the popularization of the higher education private programs increased lower-classes access to this market for the first time in the history of the country. Due to lower price and schedule flexibility, DL programs are among the most popular choices for this group of consumers, who enroll in higher education seeking to enhance their social standing (Sanchez, 2008). By analyzing the engagement with a college program as part of a broader identity project of upward mobility, this study aims to understand how these students enact an identity project through the multiple forms of daily identity work. Drawing on the notion of possible selves (Erikson, 2007; Markus & Nurius, 1986), we analyze the contextual factors that drive negative and positive focal points of identity. We further demonstrate how student's daily investments, practices, and discourses provide self-legitimacy and self-efficacy to their identity projects. As in Pleasantville – the movie that provides the emotional foundation for this special issue – identity work produces effective micro changes that little by little color consumers' lives with the ability to be agents of their own future.

The intended contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it complements existing accountings of the processual construction of identity by bringing to light the transformative power of identity work. Second, it extends the literature on dominated consumers by providing a concrete stance of consumer agency and transformation of the self through identity work. Third, it problematizes the notion of consumer transition as a liminal state in long-termed self-transformations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Possible selves

The conceptualization of possible selves first appeared in the realm of cognitive studies of self-concept. Original studies focused in the relation between motivation and social cognition (Erikson, 2007). “Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves that we could become, and the selves that we are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The notion of possible selves is future-oriented. Possible selves are the cognitive manifestation of goals and aspirations, fears, and threats (ibid). Possible selves can be as specific and concrete as the self-visualization of oneself wearing a new pair of shoes and as general and abstract as envisioning becoming a good parent (Erikson, 2007).

Markus and Nurius (1986) recognize that possible selves are distinctively social. As such, both negative and positive possible selves result from social comparisons between the individuals' state and the social constructions and cultural categories that are valid and valued in a given society at a given time. On the authors' words, “the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context” (p. 954).

Possible selves function as roadmaps to the future and guide present actions (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). As selves to avoid or to approach, they incentive behavior and provide an evaluative and interpretive ground for the current view of the self. In this sense, “development can be seen as a process of acquiring and then achieving or resisting certain possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). As such, agency must be at the core of the notion of possible selves (Erikson, 2007) as much as individuals are active producers of their development (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Research has found that the balance between negative and positive possible selves improve self-regulation. Studies on education show that such balance positively relate to school persistence (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995), school achievement (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry,

2006; Oyserman et al., 2004), and career development (Packard & Nguyen, 2003). In other areas, the self-regulatory feature of possible selves helps to explain delinquency avoidance among vulnerable young people (Oyserman & Markus, 1990) and the increasing of healthy behaviors among middle age adults (Hooker & Kaus, 1994). Altogether, this body of research suggests that compelling possible selves provide the necessary motivation to the individual agentic pursue or avoidance of a desired or dreaded end state.

2.2. Identity projects and the transformation of the self in consumer research

The concept of possible selves is not explicit in the CCT-oriented consumer research (see Morgan, 1993 for an attempt of integration). However, extant research on consumer identity projects often highlights the deliberate efforts that individuals undertake to achieve goals of distinction and social integration. This endeavor can be collectively (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) or individually (e.g. Cherrier & Murray, 2007) pursued. In such cases, consumers usually mobilize marketplace resources to reach or avoid focal points of identity (possible selves) provided by cultural categories, discourses, and myths (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

For instance, Holt and Thompson (2004) show how white Americans rely on sports and creative activities to solve the tension between two contradictory cultural models of masculinity—the breadwinner and the rebel. Fischer et al. (2007) demonstrate how middle-class couples strive against infertility through assisted reproductive technologies, to keep up with the expectations of the macro discourse that equalizes biological parenthood with normalcy. Luedicke et al. (2010) discuss how a group of suburban American middle-class consumers draws on the myth of American exceptionalism to morally justify the consumption of a notoriously fuel-consuming vehicle against ecologically correct competing discourses against consumerism. Although change and transformation are latent constructs in this stream of the literature, researchers seldom frame it as such. Holt and Thompson (2004) and Luedicke et al. (2010) focus on the discourses and practices consumers undertake to protect their identity investments from contradictory myths, not accounting for how selves change in the process. Fischer et al. (2007) stress the different discourses that frame persistence in pursuing natural parenthood for years, not taking into consideration the potential transformations in self and family as consumers persist in achieving their goals over time.

Even when transformation is more salient, such as in cases of consumer acculturation (see Luedicke, 2011) or when consumers shift socially ascribed roles (cf. Coskuner-Bali and Thompson, 2013), researchers usually do not focus on processes of selves becoming something different than before. Rather, they emphasize the nature of consumers' identity work in the present condition of being in a new place or consumption field.

Three exceptions are, however, noteworthy. First, Schau et al. (2009) analyze the identity work of retired consumers during a major life transition. They showed how consumers articulate “identity renaissance” in a complex interplay between past (e.g. past selves), present (e.g. physical decline), and future orientations (e.g. consumption inspirations) and how consumption enactments play a key role in the production of vibrant identity projects among retirees. Second, Schouten (1991) analyzed consumers who underwent plastic surgery as part of a bigger identity transition. They showed that the balance between positive and negative possible selves played an important role in consumers' decision to undertake surgery. Plastic surgery was particularly important in processes of identity reconstruction, as means to reintegrate the self to recently adopted social roles (e.g. augmented breast to symbolize a complete passage to womanhood) or as a catalyst for further changes in life (e.g. rhinoplasty to enhance self-esteem to overcome a period of marital disharmony). Last, Cherrier and Murray (2007) developed an emerging processual theory of identity. Through the study of consumers engaged in processes of dispossession and downshifting, the authors

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