



The transition of the self through the Arab Spring in Egypt and Libya



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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on Belk's notions of the extended, social, family and dialogic selves in an attempt to explore the transformation of the self during the Arab Spring phenomena. From the perspective of the respondents in Egypt and Libya, this paper provides a reading of how images of self are related to artifacts of consumption, rituals, and symbols and how consumer values are navigated through this difficult landscape. The paper uses a three phase history, happening, and hopes narratives to show that the self in a liminal period of flux is referent to history and hopes and proposes a notion of a *transitional self* that incorporates this observation of reference to past and future. In particular, the findings suggest that consumption, especially Western consumption can be transcendental during a liminal period of flux and that such revelatory incidents offer an opportunity to access the candid thoughts of consumers.

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1. Introduction

This paper offers a challenge to the underlying assumptions of much of the discourse surrounding consumption whose foundations seem to lie in conditions of societal stability. Instead, the authors seek to provide a reading of images of self and consumption practices in conditions of flux, or revolution. Consumption choices are often based on the utility of products, symbolic meanings, and rituals, while artifacts are also important for creating and sustaining a sense of self and locating one's place in society (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Hence, images of self and consumption practices can be considered to be intrinsically related. The choice of a particular consumption object(s) can signify how we choose to present ourselves, how we ground ourselves in a community, and how we make a "positive contribution to our identities" (Belk, 1988: p. 160). The inter-relationship between the self and the extended self is complex and carries a multiplicity of images of how people feel about themselves and how they are perceived by others (Arnould, Price, & Zinkham, 2004). This study asks, what can be learned about the self by studying consumption practices in flux?

In periods of extraordinary change and indeed revolution, such changes to images of self can be dramatic and rapid. In order to make meaning and create a bounded place in which to locate oneself in society, citizens can revert to primary identities grounded in such

factors as ethnicity, nationality, territory and religion (Castells, 1996). Established notions of self can be forced into transition in which that which is sacred and that which is profane may become blurred. In naive terms, the sacred refers to how the self views religious beliefs, places of worship, rites, duties or anything that are socially constructed and are valued as sacrosanct. In more postmodern terms, ideas of what are considered sacred can be symbols, rituals and artifacts embedded within consumption practices. A conflict arises when profane symbols, rituals and artifacts are perceived to contaminate the sacred. It is this dichotomy/clash between the two that contributes to dialogue within the self.

In exploring ideas of the sacred and profane, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) discuss the importance of *revelatory incidents*, and indeed the focus of this paper is on one such revelatory incident, the so-called Arab Spring. The Arab Spring is a metaphor that has been used to depict the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The 'spring' season represents the start of the new season which heralds the new and the arrival of something better. But also hidden in the early media reports of the Arab Spring phenomena as it occurred were expressions of hope as to what a summer might bring, and it is this observation that inspired this investigation. The authors ask in this paper, to what extent consumer culture is interwoven within these hopes?

Consumption practices, as a means of projecting and extending the self (Belk, 1988) may be perceived as less important during a revolution, due for instance, to rapidly changing priorities such as keeping safe and sourcing basic consumer goods. However, many citizens immersed in the events of spring seemed to speak of their hopes for a better summer in terms of consumption. That which was sacred and that which was profane therefore seemed to be in flux and the sense of self of those experiencing spring, subject to significant challenge.

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In this paper, rather than simply attempting an incremental contribution based on a traditional gap-spotting approach a problematization strategy is utilized to create scientific usefulness (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). In the consumer research literature, significant attention has been paid to concepts of the self (Rindfleisch, 2005), extended self (e.g. Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1989, 2014a; Noble & Walker, 1997) and the links between the self and identity (e.g. Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011; Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009), but this work tends to focus on contemporary western societies. Literature has not to date addressed transitional societies such as the Middle East to any great extent (Huang & Balakrishnan, 2013). In a similar vein, the underlying causes that spark negotiations between the different selves (extended, domestic and social) have received scant attention. Therefore, this paper offers an incremental contribution to address these gaps in the literature. However, to date, there is little research that explains how radical changes to community affect the conception of the self and the extended self. To address this weakness requires a challenge to the underlying assumptions of societal stability inherent in the current body of work examining the self. Little is understood as to how images of self transform following a revolution and in particular, little insight is available about how the self is reconstructed through the lens of revolution and by the influx of new ideas, consumption opportunities – and indeed new constraints. It would seem of great value to understand how possessions and market driven artifacts help to change the sense of self and the extended self during a period of uncertainty. Building on Belk's (1988) work, the purpose of this paper is to firstly explore the dialogic self during the Arab Spring. With these contributions in mind, the objectives for the paper are as follows:

1. To offer insight into how different aspects of transformations of the self (the dialogic self) were manifest during the early phase of the revolution in Egypt and Libya.
2. To provide a temporal and emergent reading of how images of self navigated through this extraordinary, revolutionary landscape.
3. To expose the dialogic tension between what is sacred and what is profane and attempt to identify what consumption practices helped make meaning and reconfigure images of self.

The hope is that in attempting these contributions, an insight is provided into both the ongoing perturbations in the Middle East and other societies in flux. The authors anticipate that the findings and insight into the Arab Spring phenomenon will have interest in the broader social sciences. The paper is structured as follows. First in Section 2, the scene of the Arab Spring is set with a brief look at the contextual background of Libya and Egypt. A review of the literature is then provided which discusses images of self and tentatively suggests how the largely Western discussion of the self can be contextualized to the Middle East. This section ends with a conceptual framework that brings together the elements in the three stated objectives. Details of the methodological approach are then provided. The penultimate Section (4) contains the theoretical contributions. In line with the conceptual framework, this paper provides an account of three sections which correspond to *history*, *happening* and *hopes*. The paper ends with concluding comments.

2. Theoretical and contextual background

In this section a background is provided into the focal countries in the study, a review of the literature that underpins the discussion and to conclude, a conceptual framework is depicted.

2.1. The Arab Spring, Libya and Egypt

The Middle East is an important space in the global economy which accounts for around 23% of the world's trade (El-Bassiouny, 2014) and it is the home of approximately 350 million consumers. The Middle East contains an unusually large demographic of young consumers

(Mahajan, 2013) known as the 'shabab' (youth) generation which is perhaps more attuned with global consumption than older generations. In addition, the region's significance as an important consumer segment is underpinned by a rising urban middle class population whose consumption practices reflect both tradition (e.g. shopping from 'souks' or traditional markets) and modernity (e.g. shopping from modern malls).

Although the Arab Spring swept through much of the Middle East, the focus of the research reported in this paper is grounded in Egypt (Cairo) and Libya (Tripoli). The choice of these two regions relates to the contrasting political systems and quite different authoritarian former regimes. The Libyan revolution in 1969, led by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, sought to create a *Jamahirayah* or *State of the Masses* through the elimination of a monarchy that were seen as puppets of the imperialist powers (Pargeter, 2012). The authoritarian regime that emerged post revolution was driven by the cult personality of Qaddafi with an ostensibly socialist economic policy (Vandewalle, 2008). In contrast, Egypt with its rich classical history was characterized by an economically liberal, autocratic but socially stable regime since the 1952 overthrow of King Farouk. His removal was initiated by President Nasser who embarked upon a substantial social and political project (Osman, 2013) which arguably was combined with a continued relative economic decline, lack of political rights as well as social injustice. These were contributory factors in the revolution of 2011 which led to the downfall of President Mubarak and Libya's former president Muammar Qaddafi. Both revolutions were very different. Egypt achieved a political revolution by way of mass protests and demonstrations (Kienle, 2012), while Libya experienced armed conflict (Wehrey, 2013) and a political revolution. Under Qaddafi, the impact of tight authoritarian control guided by socialism contributed to a sustained planned economy instead of a market based one (Springer & Czinkota, 1999) and this restricted the flow of consumption due to a lack of variety of consumer choices and freedoms in the marketplace. In contrast to Libya, Egypt has had a more advanced consumption environment and this is demonstrated by an established consumer culture and a multiplicity of retail outlets (Abaza, 2005).

2.2. The self and the extended self

The self refers to a sense of who and what we are, and is indicated through peoples' actions (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). Belk (1988) articulates the terms *self*, *sense of self*, and *identity* as synonyms for describing how a person subjectively recognizes who he or she is. Belk's conceptualization of the self is important because he rejects any homogenous definition that could apply to all individuals and cultures. He discusses the self as comprising of subjective assessments that change between people and over time. Furthermore, the self is not restricted to everyday activities and as Belk asserts; the self is also characterized as the *extended self* through consumption practices and affiliations with family and the social world. It is the way in which consumers wish to be seen that gives rise to an extended self and this extension gives rise to a group (social) self. It is possible therefore to visualize the self as being linked to consumption through the extended self, and as such, a study of one side of this dynamic may lead to conclusions regarding the other. However, to understand this dynamic better, notions of the domestic and social self must be turned to next.

In his seminal work, Mead (1928/1973) argues that the self is constructed through interaction with the symbolic resources within society. The self is therefore not a passive concept; rather it is subject to a dialectic and reflexive process of adaptation, determined by family and conventions within culture and society (Giddens, 1991). The domestic self is the way through which a sense of extended self is created within the family environment and the social self is the way in which the extended self is projected in the social arena (Belk, 1988). Ahuvia (2005) also notes how the combination of different perspectives of self gives rise to multiple selves and the authors of this study draw

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