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## Oneself for another: The construction of intimacy in a world of strangers

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on the stories of 12 migrants from Latin America who live in Belgium, and following a poetic methodological approach, this paper focuses on the extraordinary and magical moments of family vacation times in places where the family has biographical linkages. The work illustrates how traveling to these *mystical* places and immersing oneself back there temporarily on a typical day-to-day routine, supports the family in the process of re-imagining a past that was previously unknown for some family members and barely perceived in Belgium. The paper draws the reader's attention to how certain experiences of consumption, which occur in special micro-places, during exceptional times, play an essential role in the processes of shaping a unique family history in a world of strangers.

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Everything returns to the void, including our words and gestures. But before disappearing, certain words, and gestures, by anticipating their demise, are able to exercise a seduction that the others will never know. Seduction's secret lies in this evocation and revocation of the other, with a slowness and suspense that are poetic, like the slow motion film of a fall or an explosion, because something had the time, prior to its completion, to makes its absence felt. (Baudrillard, 2001: p. 84)

## 1. Introduction

Every family has a collective tale that keeps on changing and being interpreted as the family evolves. As life advances, new challenges arise. Some of them can be transformed into extraordinary opportunities to further leverage on some biographical linkages that can be contextualized in meaningful places. Drafting a history for the family when migration has occurred for at least one of its members, constitutes one of these extraordinary opportunities. In such cases, the door can be opened in the direction of a distinct and unique past road. Looking back at those places of the past and revisiting them as a family, with all one's senses, searching for a meaningful and collective interpretation, can become a transformational life experience.

Revisiting meaningful places in the life of some family members is an exercise in autobiographical consumption that is not necessarily linked to political notions of macro-places in the context of the Nation-State. The biographical traveling experiences captured by the participants' narratives included here, are instead connected to micro-places where contextual knowledge gives the consumption experience a situated meaning. This meaning is perceived as less present during classic consumption engagements that the migrants and their families undertake in day-to-day life, sometimes displaying their "ethnicity" to persons external to the family, who are keen to know more. These consumption experiences do not necessarily relate to distant geographical micro-places where other kinds of autobiographical consumption can occur. Such decontextualized consumption engagements are documented extensively in the literature on consumer acculturation, describing how the migrant is able to recreate, by means of consumption, a self that can seem disconnected and "outdated" (Luedicke, 2011). By taking the less visited path of contextualized consumption experiences during travel, the paper illustrates how consumption experiences support family members in the process of negotiating their history as a family. It shows how, by sharing knowledge and sentiments through consumption experiences, the family negotiates its tensions and nourishes a collective "secret", a "hidden treasure" that contributes to the construction of intimacy in a world of strangers.

From a methodological perspective, the paper follows both a phenomenological and a poetic path, drawing on the stories of 12 Latin American migrants living in Belgium together with their "new" families. After exploring the literature and detailing the methodology, the paper presents the findings in the form of a meditation. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research.

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## 2. Literature review

The definition of “family” includes the construction of “a significant history” (Epp & Price, 2008), quoting the definition proposed by Galvin, Bylund, and Brommel (2004) that ties members of the family together and differentiates them from other families. Becoming a family therefore implies “co-authoring” this collective history and populating it with the multiple common experiences involved in the endless process of building a shared identity.

The history of a family usually involves various generations, and entails multiple occasions and occurrences until a genealogical tree is created that can go back in history including various generations of ancestors. The historical learning, originating from stories of other family members, constitutes invaluable symbolic resources that can be activated or contested later in life by new generations. In this sense, a family history can go beyond the here and now to explore the family heritage. A family past can indeed constitute a fundamental depository of valuable information. For instance, from a health perspective, members of a family connected by blood ties, can have access to important information regarding their clinical history. This information can explain, prevent the occurrence of and accelerate the treatment of certain health conditions or predispositions.

Family historical connections go beyond the functional and are usually re-enacted symbolically in a powerful collective exercise of faith and imagination. Families are, in this sense, repositories of a multiplicity of meanings and biographical trajectories that could eventually be reformulated and developed further during the process of constructing a history for the family. While consumer researchers have shown how personal history shapes consumer identity goals and actions (Ahuvia, 2005; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Rojas & Bluemelhuber, 2010; Schau, Gilly, & Wolfenbarger, 2009; Thompson, 1996), less is known about how consumption experiences shape the history of the family when individual biographical trajectories, conflict, intersect and differ. This paper contributes to redressing this gap by illustrating how consumption experiences support the family in the process of negotiating and displaying biographical resources that originate from the migration experiences of one of its members.

As a family evolves through migration, love encounters, the arrival of babies, adoption of children, separation, illness, and death, there is a diverse set of biographical trajectories that come together, intersect and sometimes conflict. These biographical trajectories are not equally familiar to all members of the family. In the case of mixed families, in which at least one of its members has gone through direct migration experience, there are indeed “biographical boundaries” to overcome, “the different direct experience of immigration that first and second generations may or may not share” (Regany, Visconti, & Fosse-Gomez, 2012: p. 202). Second generations can, for instance, feel a connection with their parents’ origin that can be described as less powerful, less vivid or “second-hand” (Regany et al., 2012: p. 202).

In this sense, migrants become special repositories of foreign-origin stories and perceptions of the world that may inspire or generate existential tensions for family members and their identity. These inspirations or existential tensions find direct expression in the marketplace, where all generations deal with their culturally complex identities and negotiate their biographical boundaries (Jamal & Shukor, 2014; Lindridge, Hogg, & Shah, 2004; Sekhon & Szmigin, 2011). At the same time, mixed families adapt to the needs of first generation migrants, negotiating day-to-day consumption, including for instance, special brands or products charged with nostalgic value in the context of food consumption and meal preparation (Cross & Gilly, 2014). The family can also display its own “ethnicity” in contexts where multiculturalism applies more and more, contributing in this way to enlarging the symbolic resources available for the consumption of culturally curious consumers (Jamal, 2003; Kim & Park, 2009).

Consumer research illustrates, in this context, how the marketplace transforms and is itself transformed by the presence of migrants. The

local marketplace becomes modified through offering goods and services desired by or required for migrants and their families, in seeking to maintain previous cultural affiliations, while negotiating new cultural references (Peñaloza, 1994). Migrants in this sense navigate their multiple cultural affiliations, oscillating and swapping between local(s) and global cultural references (Askegaard, Arnould, & Kjeldgaard, 2005; Oswald, 1999). The local marketplace also enlarges its multicultural offer in this manner, allowing consumers in a more general sense to endorse and express their multicultural appetite (Grier, Brumbaugh, & Thornton, 2006). These consumption opportunities provide support in the day-to-day process of navigating between a multiplicity of cultures that consumers experience progressively more over time, especially when living in global cities (Rojas & Emontspool, 2015).

Although this research on consumption is fundamental to our understanding of migrant consumer processes of dealing with displacement and family construction, a large part of the consumption practices considered so far is oriented toward understanding the migrant’s family life in his or her receiving country. Most studies undertaken in consumer acculturation and home maintenance have emphasized, for instance, the idea of a referential self in which consumption is undertaken to recreate or maintain a personal cultural tie, mediated by the market. In this context, the migrant is able to replicate, through consumption practices, a self that can seem disconnected and “outdated” (Luedicke, 2011) from relationships with “distant others”. These “distant others” are paradoxically intended to be in an intimate relationship with the meaning of those “exotic” products.

Drawing on family biographical boundaries, this paper takes a less visited path, extending beyond the everyday self and looking more closely at the transformative and extraordinary experiences offered by vacation time. During this time, consumption display is used as a strategy to share with the family the knowledge and sentiments connected to particular biographical trajectories of one of the family members. Following the definition of Finch (2007: p. 67), “display is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute ‘doing family things’ and thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships.” The process entails selecting, displaying, and preserving biographical relationships that otherwise would be at risk of loss, within the family history. This displaying exercise, achieved through consumption, establishes that those social relationships are actually “family-like”. Thus, in addition to the normal routine of “doing family” (Morgan, 1996) – “that refers to the practicalities and activities that a family undertakes as a means of building and strengthening their intimate familial social world.” (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014: p. 1591) – families also display their consumption experiences so as to claim historical connections.

In this context, during vacation time, these consumption experiences can be transformed into life epiphanies capable of significantly changing individual and collective trajectories (Woodside and Megehee, 2010). Such epiphanies awaken the imagination of the family and create a life experience, similar to a revelation, within a unique and sacred history. During these exceptional occasions, the here and now of day-to-day lives in the receiving country becomes transcendent (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989). If these simple, but extraordinary experiences, manage to seduce new generations, an irresistible desire to further recreate symbolic meanings, inspired by these remote places and memories, may have an impact on them for the rest of their lives.

In a nutshell, the study illustrates how the family legacy is negotiated and temporarily solidified through the means of consumption. In addition, it shows that this temporary solidification comes from quotidian and unspectacular consumption experiences that are used to share both the knowledge and the sentiments enclosed in the biographical patrimony of some of its members.

In this latter sense, the study also contributes to research on family heirlooms within the broader field of consumer research. Consumer researchers have indeed studied family heirlooms from the point of

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