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## Narrativity, temporality, and consumer-identity transformation through tourism

Nacima Ourahmoune

Department of Marketing, Kedge Business School, Domaine de Luminy, BP129, 13288 Marseille Cedex 9, France

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## ABSTRACT

Research on the self draws from structure vs. agency theoretical positions, while overlooking issues of temporality in outlining motivation and resistance toward identity transformation. The study builds on Ricoeur's and Bourdieu's specific attempts to overcome social determinism vs. existential determinism options alongside their focus on the role of temporality in identity formation to investigate consumers' narratives of identity transformation through travel. A long ethnography involving multiple interviews with repeat Western tourists in the Dominican Republic illuminates the transformative flux fostered by the tourism experience. Examining the intersection between identity and temporality as a much overlooked topic, this research contributes three theoretical insights: First, enduring, situational, and composite identity transformations as well as stasis structure consumers' narrations. The study provides and extends Ricoeur's theory outlining that *idem* and *ipse* are activated differently depending on the type of identity transformation. Second, in contrast with Bourdieu's assertion that cultural capital is the hardest one to acquire late in life, the study shows late cultural capital accumulation does not necessarily impede identity (trans)formation. Yet, Bourdieu's understanding of reflexivity as a habitual position, which bestows advantage in certain fields, applies and facilitates cultural capital conversion or successful identity motions. Third, the study acknowledges the role of the gap between habitus and new field entrance in identity transformation, yet reveals the importance of habituated practices and the necessity of entering the "new" field repeatedly to gain agency and change one's behavior over time.

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## 1. Introduction

The postmodern self is conceptualized not as a given product of a social system, but as something the person actively creates, partially through acts of consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 2006). Yet, while consumption as extended-self (Belk, 1988) and conceptualizations of consumers' lived tensions has most contributions (Ahuvia, 2005; Thompson & Haytko, 1997), consumer research increasingly points out the risk of eluding to the (macro)social constraints that weigh on consumers' identity projects (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Murray, 2002; Ourahmoune & Özçağlar-Toulouse, 2012; Shankar, Elliott, & Goulding, 2009). McNay (2000) points out that Bourdieu and Ricoeur both have interesting positions beyond the agency-structure postures from which identity (trans)formation can be understood through temporality. (See Photos 1–3.)

Bourdieu (1986) offers an interesting lens by thinking dialogically regarding the social determinism vs. existential determinism options. For instance, the habitus is inscribed in family, class, education, and history, yet is not fixed, and is subordinate to logics of practice and improvisation by consumers who can transform some key features of their identity (Bourdieu, 1984). Recent research pays attention to the structuring effect of consumers' entrance into new fields and their role in

identity transformation (Ourahmoune & Özçağlar-Toulouse, 2012; Thompson & Ustuner, forthcoming), without addressing the temporal dimension. Furthermore, temporality has an important function in capital(s) accumulation as the habitus (a central element of the theory) forms through embodied dispositions and pre-dispositions in the process of socialization (Bourdieu, 1986). Especially, the conversion of cultural capital into other types of capital requires an early acquisition to sustain identity cultivation or *bildung* (ibid, 1986)—an overlooked question in consumer research.

Similarly, Ricoeur's conception of self-identity escapes the idea that subjectivity is either fragmented or inexorably shaped by normalizing social forces (1984; McNay, 2000). Rather, Ricoeur's elaboration of a narrativized subjectivity enables the coherence of the self to be thought of as the dynamic unity of change *through time*. The human capacity to narrate is central to the creation of identities that are coherent and fluid, stable and shifting (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Increasingly in consumer research, the consumer's sense of identity is structured in terms of narrative (Ahuvia, 2005; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Escalas & Bettman, 2000; Holt & Thompson, 2004; McAdams, 2006; Thompson, 1997). Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) contend that postmodern consumers' high investment in leisure activities helps in coping with existential crises by endlessly refashioning their sense of self. Cushman (1990) offers a more pessimistic account of consumers' feeling of emptiness. Despite this, consumer researchers find few examples of consumers abandoning the desire for a coherent identity narrative

E-mail address: nacima.ourahmoune@kedgebbs.com.

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Photo 1. Christine and Jackson over the years: Punta Cana, 2009–2014.

(see Ahuvia, 2005 for a review), with people using consumption to configure a coherent identity within the context of a fragmented society (Holt & Thompson, 2004).

What Ricoeur's work raises through narratives of the self, and what has been relatively under-explored in existing studies of consumer research and individual identity, is the importance of temporality (Rojas Gaviria & Bluemelhuber, 2010; Shankar, Elliott, & Goulding, 2001; Shankar et al., 2009).

To address this gap, the study builds on narrative identity theory in the context of tourism to explicate Western consumers' identity transformations over time. As travel to long-haul destinations has meanings in terms of social-class dispositions and cultural capital accumulation that are used to construct identities (Bourdieu, 1984; Desforges, 2000), the study examines how these dimensions intersect with temporality to theorize consumers' identity transformations. A Bourdieusian lens also aligns with a consumer narrative approach (see a review in Shankar et al., 2001, 2009).



Photo 3. Claire and François with a famous Dominican singer Luis Vargas: Punta Cana, 2012.

## 2. Narrative identity theory and temporality

As researching identity transformation brings to light problems concerning the hermeneutics of the self, the study builds on a narrative approach (Thompson, 1997). Identity transformation makes salient a deep tension between the fixed self and movement of the self. This reflects Ricoeurian concepts of *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood). By using the term *ipse*, one agrees that identity changes all through life, whereas *idem* means that this part of identity is unchangeable. As *ipse* exists, the subject acquires experience, evolves, and thus self-constructs its self.

As pointed out by Shankar et al. (2001), the narrative approach in consumer research explicates how narratives work to create a sense of one's self, social processes, institutions, or representations of cultures (Ahuvia, 2005; Stern, 1995; Thompson, 1997). Using a narrative approach to identity means looking at consumer stories as plots. The consumption stories build on symbolical resources to help consumers locate themselves and their behavior in a logical sequence of meaningful action (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Ricoeur borrows the concept of plot from Aristotle's *Poetics* (Ricoeur, 1983). To summarize, the concept of plot is the art of composing intrigues or *emplotment* (Ricoeur, 1985); that is, how the narrator makes choices to recount an event. Thus, "on the course known in my life, I can draw multiple routes, weave several storylines" (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 190), which is what Ricoeur



Photo 2. Claire and François's Dominican disco in Paris: Paris, 2013.

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