

Where consumer culture doesn't quite reach

May 10 2007

In the June issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, a important study by Tuba Üstüner (City University, London) and Douglas B. Holt (University of Oxford) explores how consumer culture is enacted in ramshackle neighborhoods on the peripheries of global cities. More than one billion people—about 1/6 of the world's total population—live in these often illegal squatter neighborhoods on the outskirts of mega-cities in the developing world.

"We want to explore how consumer acculturation is impacted when migrants do not have sufficient capital to participate meaningfully," the researchers write. "We find very different identity projects than prior studies, which we attribute to the distinctive structures that pervade our case context."

While prior studies have focused on the "postmodern acculturation model" among middle-class migrants – that is, how consumption is used to synthesize two disparate, often conflicting cultures – Üstüner and Holt focused instead on those at the bottom of the class hierarchy and found little evidence of cultural synthesis.

Rather, in an ethnographic study of poor migrant women living in a Turkish squatter outside Ankara, they observed two discrete reactions to the increasing prevalence of Western consumer culture. According to the researchers, squatter women either created a myopic environment intended to mimic village life, or else they completely committed themselves to the Western model and made a concerted effort through shopping, fashion and beauty, and social outings to transform

themselves.

The researchers write: "The nine daughters . . . revered virtually everything associated with the city, and wanted to spend as much time there as possible. While the mothers found the city to be an unintelligible and alienating place, the daughters were compelled by its sounds and congestion."

In a follow-up study five years later, the researchers found that many of the second-generation women who aspired to join the Western lifestyle had become demoralized: "They lived what we term a shattered identity project: they continued to live in the squatters but without any dreams, disconnected from both their village culture and Western consumer culture."

Source: University of Chicago

Citation: Where consumer culture doesn't quite reach (2007, May 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-05-consumer-culture-doesnt.html>

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