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How immigrants travel with their home brands: brand relationships and acculturation

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INTRODUCTION

I don't know if I can explain properly how I feel about Skenderbeu or what it means to me. What I know is that it makes me feel at home, back in my old house, in Tirana. It reminds me of my parents, who are not alive anymore. It reminds me when I was young ... I don't know if it makes any sense to you, but I am trying to tell you how it makes me feel, even just looking at the bottle. (Iilir)

Iilir is a 49-year-old Albanian immigrant living in Germany. He left Tirana 15 years ago and has very nostalgic memories about his country. Skenderbeu, an Albanian cognac, is present in Iilir's memories of his past in Albania as well as his present time in Germany. This research seeks to understand the relationship immigrants develop with their home brands when they migrate to another country. In the case of our participants, Skenderbeu is not simply one of their home brands, but to their knowledge is the only brand produced in Albania under the former communist regime. Thus, the relationship Albanian immigrants have with this brand is unique and surprisingly understudied.

In looking at the relationships immigrants develop with Skenderbeu, this paper seeks to understand the role of home brands during immigrants' process of acculturation, examining the discourses, practices, feelings and meanings consumers develop in relation to their home brand while living in a new cultural context. It also looks at the role of such discourses, feelings and meaning in participants' acculturation process. Interpretive consumer research has looked at the roles of objects and consumption practices in the consumer acculturation process (Luedicke, 2011; Oswal, 1999; Penaloza, 1994), but surprisingly, very little has been said about the role of home brands (although see Rahman and Cherrier, 2010). Understanding how consumers relate to their home brands while living abroad is important for several reasons. Firstly, it helps in understanding the role of home brands in consumers' acculturation process. In particular it clarifies if (and if so, how) consuming home brands impacts on consumers' acculturation outcomes. Secondly, it helps in understanding how home brands travel with consumers, and if (and if so, how) consumers change their relations with such brands while living in a new cultural context.

ACCULTURATION IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

In consumer research studies acculturation is understood as a process in which people "socialized in one (minority) culture migrate and so come into continuous first-hand contact with a new (dominant) culture" (Ustuner and Holt, 2007: 41). Consumer research studies have been influenced by the seminal work of Berry (1980; 1997; 2001; 2008) highlighting how acculturation is a multimodal process combining immigrants' willingness to maintain their ethnic identity and their participation in the host culture. Following Berry, acculturation results in four different outcomes, including assimilation (immigrants do not wish to maintain their home cultural identity and seek daily interaction with the host culture), integration (immigrants wish to maintain their original culture while engaging with the host culture), separation (immigrants hold on to their original culture and interact with the host culture), and

marginalisation (immigrants have little possibility of, or interest in, cultural maintenance and little interest in having relations with the host culture).

Consumer research studies have shown how acculturation outcomes are not stable as originally conceptualised by Berry (Luedicke, 2011). Penaloza (1994) shows how Mexican immigrants in the US adopt some American consumption practices while maintaining some Mexican ones. In fact in public settings they consume American objects, including cars and clothes, to show their integration with American culture; while at home, food and media consumption remain typically Mexican, testifying to the maintenance of their ethnic identity. Oswald's work (1999) on upper-middle-class Haitians in the USA shows how acculturation outcomes are not fixed, and consumers swap between cultural identities depending on the consumption contexts. More recently Askegaard *et al.* (2005) show how immigrants move between different acculturation outcomes integrating home, host and global cultural consumption references. In short, these three studies show that immigrants consume objects brought from home in order to solve identity challenges and tensions arising in the new context. They also show how these objects gain new meanings, symbolising home and cultural continuity in a new context.

Positivist studies have shown how immigrants' willingness to consume some brands reflects their level of acculturation. In fact immigrants with a monocultural identity avoid brands that do not reflect consumers' distinct culture (Josiasen, 2011) and immigrants with a multicultural identity select brands which reflect the multi-cultures they have internalised (Luna and Peracchio, 2005). Although these studies offer useful insights into immigrants' decisions to purchase home or host brands, they do not unpack in depth the relationships consumers develop with such brands and with their home brands in particular. If positivist studies offer a limited understanding of the way immigrants consume their home brands, interpretive consumer research has been surprisingly silent about the role of these brands in the acculturation process (Rahman and Cherrier, 2010). An exception is the study by Rahman and Cherrier (2010) showing how international students living in Australia navigate between global, home and host country brands in an attempt to make sense of the new cultural context and maintain their consumption habits. However, as the paper claims to look at how "people who move to a new country react to the unfamiliar brandscape in general" (Rahman and Cherrier, 2010: 420), it does not fully unpack immigrants' relations with their home brands. Another exception is the work of Bengtsson *et al.* (2010) on American students visiting China and consuming American global brands. As this paper provides useful insights into the literature on brand meanings it will be referred to more fully in the next section.

BRAND MEANINGS IN INTERPRETIVE CONSUMER RESEARCH

Managerial marketing literature assumes that brand meanings are established by the brand management side and then simply transferred to the consumer side (Keller, 2003). Adopting a cultural branding approach (Cayla and Arnould, 2008), interpretive consumer research challenged this assumption, showing that the "experiential categories that consumers create for brands are not necessarily the same as the categories imposed by the marketers in charge of brand management" (Fournier, 1998: 367). In looking at how consumers relate to their brands Fournier shows that they develop relationships with anthropomorphic traits. In fact consumers establish relationships resembling arranged marriages, casual friendship, committed partnerships, enmities and secret affairs. Others highlight how, in establishing relationships with brands, consumers "uncover and activate their own brand meanings", by reshaping meanings existing in the marketplace and creating new ones (Brown *et al.*, 2003: 29).

Interpretive research has been particularly interested in understanding how consumers attribute meanings to global brands in their local consumption contexts. Dong and Tian (2009) show

how global brands in China attract enthusiastic and critical responses, since they are perceived as liberators, instruments of democracy and economic progress but also as oppressors and instruments of Western domination over China. Bengtsson *et al.* (2010) look at consumers' relations with global brands while travelling across national borders. Their findings show how American students travelling to China attribute different meanings to global brands previously consumed at home. If in the US these brands were regarded as symbols of American imperialism and cultural homogenisation, in China the perceived brand consistency makes them synonymous with "comfort, predictability, safety, as well as national pride for home-country consumers" (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010: 533). From these studies we understand how global brands have different meanings in relation to the context of consumption. We also understand how they are very important for travelling consumers since they symbolise safety and home in a challenging new context. What we do not know is how consumers travel with their home, non-global brands and the role of such brands in making sense of the new cultural context.

RESEARCH METHODS

Given the exploratory nature of the study, semi-structured interview were used to reveal participants' experiences, feelings and understandings of their brands in a new country. Participants were recruited through a non-probability sampling combining purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Silverman, 2006). They consist of 14 Albanians living abroad and 3 Albanians who after a long period of living abroad have now returned to their home country (see Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Albanian by the first author during summer 2012. With participants' permission interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their participation was entirely voluntary. They could withdraw at any time during the interview. In order to guarantee participants' anonymity pseudonyms are used in this paper. Interviews covered themes such as the reasons for leaving Albania and the challenges of living abroad. Participants were asked to describe their everyday routine in the new cultural context, including their consumption patterns and their consumption of Skenderbeu. Interviewees were encouraged to share their memories, ideas and feelings related to Skenderbeu. Interview transcriptions were analysed thematically following the guidelines of interpretive consumer research (Silverman, 2006; Spiggle, 1994). The final interpretation of the data results from a continuous back and forth between authors' interpretations and a continuous back and forth between the literature and the data analysis (Thompson *et al.*, 1994).

FINDINGS

Participants' narratives reveal how Skenderbeu is embedded in the ordinary and extraordinary events of people's lives. Indeed this brand is embedded in intimate routines as well as annual family gatherings and parties with Albanian and non-Albanian guests. In looking at these consumption occasions, we identified three different types of brand relations, each with a distinct brand meaning. These have also implications for participants' acculturation outcomes. Findings described below are summarised in the following table.

[INSERT TABLE 2]

1. Skenderbeu: an old friend from home

Most of our participants remember the hardship of settling in a new country. Common are anecdotes illustrating feelings of conflict, stress and misunderstanding in approaching a new culture. As Nevila says:

In Hungary everything was different. People were different, they looked so cold ... which in fact they weren't. They seemed cold to us because they were minding their own business mostly, rather than dealing with other's life, like we do in Albania. But it was not only about people, it was also about food, family relationships ... I don't know ... It was a totally different culture where I thought I don't fit in, and never would fit in.

Nevila's description reminds of the experiential tension characterising immigrants' cultural shock in experiencing a new environment wherein they cannot relate to their home culture norms and conventions (Rahman and Cherrier, 2010; Winkelman, 1994). The acculturation process that Nevila and the other participants experienced is often described as 'hard work', characterised by the "emotional work involved in establishing new social networks, the stresses of learning how to be a consumer in the new locale, and small pleasures of established routines as well as familiar surroundings and products" (Thompson and Thambyah, 1999: 221). In such a transitional phase familiar objects brought from home become memory in motion (Miller 2001: 69), since they help consumers deal with the sense of displacement experienced in the new and alien context.

During the intense work of making sense of a new culture, participants describe Skenderbeu as a friend from home. For example, in describing her father's relationship with the brand, Besa points out that "Every time I see my father drinking it I tell him: So, you are with your friend again". Similarly, Anila describes the intimate relationship she and her husband developed with the brand:

Well, sometimes we find ourselves remembering our youth, our friends ... especially when the kids are not at home [referring to their two children]. France is a beautiful country of course and I am not trying to say that Albania is better, however sometimes you just miss home for the memories you have there you know. Albania reminds us that we were young once So every time we drink Skenderbeu we think of home and vice versa. When we feel nostalgic about home and the years spent there we turn to Skenderbeu. At times maybe we are over-nostalgic.

From Anila's words we understand that Skenderbeu is seen as a friend from Albania with whom nostalgic moments and intimate life can be shared. As with the American students in Bengtsson *et al.* (2010), our participants see in this familiar brand a link with their life left behind. However, for Anila and her husband, Skenderbeu has nostalgic connotations since it allows them to reconnect with their home country and their youth. This process of special and temporal reconnection is activated through the consumption of Skenderbeu, a brand they "turn to" as though a friend (Fournier, 1998) with whom they might share nostalgic moments. The brand is associated with memories of a longed-for past (Davis, 1979) from which any negative elements have been removed (Goulding, 1999). Interestingly, the nostalgic consumption of the brand is not orchestrated by brand management, but rather it is activated by immigrants' individual nostalgic memories (Davis, 1979) and a longing for their personal past (Wildschut *et al.*, 2006).

I remember Skenderbeu was always present in our festive tables. When I say festive, you have to think of occasions that are important for us Albanians of course, such as ... New Year's Eve ... birthdays and so on. For example ... in occasions of New Year's Eves the dining table was full of family members and relatives whom we only met occasionally throughout the year. I remember my aunt and her family always spent the New Year's Eve at our house. For me it was something extraordinary, as I loved her children, but unfortunately I could only meet them rarely; they lived in Shkoder. So ... yes, Skenderbeu brings beautiful memories to me as in days like these bottles of it were always on the table. (Aida)

As this quotation shows, the brand is commonly associated with a Utopian individual past characterised by extraordinary family occasions. Interestingly, the collective (and maybe not so joyful) experiences of the collapse of the Communist regime in the early nineties and the subsequent mass migration have never been mentioned by participants. In reconnecting participants to such a selective, Utopian and individual past, the brand also disconnects them from their present (and challenging) time in their host context. Therefore their nostalgic consumption of Skenderbeu allows participants not simply to reconnect with their past and their home country but also to disconnect from their present in the host country.

2. Skenderbeu: an authentic Albanian family member

Skenderbeu is not simply a brand with nostalgic meanings able to disconnect participants from the present time in their host country. It is in fact a brand participants associate with collective consumption experiences wherein their family identity and their Albanian identity are celebrated. Such collective consumption experience takes the form of family gatherings where Albanian food is prepared and shared with the extended family.

We celebrate traditional Albanian holidays in family, like we used to do back in Albania ... New Year's Eve for example. For these occasions I cook traditional [Albanian] food which my mother used to cook for us, and like we used to do in those years, we always start the evening with some Skenderbeu, which the others drink while I'm preparing the table. I would want this tradition to continue even in my children's families. It is a good way to remind you who you are, where you come from and what your traditions are. (Tana)

For my sons' birthdays, Christmas or similar occasions I always invite my parents and sister's family over. I was grown up with this tradition of uniting the whole family for special occasions and now I don't want to part from it. I like to cook Albanian food and we always have some Raki¹ or Skenderbeu. Actually, the drinks are the only authentic ingredient, because I cannot find any other Albanian food in the market. So yes, I like to think that I am keeping the family tradition alive ... thank God my husband doesn't mind it. He actually likes our [Albanian] food and our traditional drinks as well (Eva)

During these occasions where Albanian identity is celebrated in a new context Skenderbeu helps consumers to re-establish and perpetuate norms and conventions (i.e. festivities, but also meal conventions). Given that the local marketplaces do not provide consumers with opportunities to acquire Albanian products, Skenderbeu seems to be the only Albanian product present in these family celebrations. Skenderbeu is considered an authentic Albanian brand not simply for its clear geographical origins, but for the personal memories participants have of its consumption in Albania (see Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Consuming such an authentic brand in the new environment allows participants to re-establish a sense of continuity with their home country maintaining a link with their own family traditions and conventions. Skenderbeu serves to maintain a collective and commonly shared Albanian identity as well as to reinforce personal bonds and a sense of family. In establishing this link with participants' previous life in Albania, Skenderbeu allows them to keep their ethnic and family identity alive as well as to communicate them to other family members who are non-Albanian (Eva's husband) and to the younger generation who have never lived in Albania (Eva's children).

3. Skenderbeu: an ambassador from home

Skenderbeu is not simply a presence in Albanian celebrations and family gatherings. It is also an ambassador of Albanian culture to other consumers in the host country. For example, Sokol

¹ An alcoholic drink popular in Turkey, Greece, and in the Balkan countries

explains how Skenderbeu helps him to interact with Hungarians and overcome the feeling of isolation during his first months in Hungary:

We started having Hungarian friends obviously as we were living there and one of them knew about Skenderbeu cognac. Actually that was the only thing he knew about Albania, the cognac. During communism we used to export it, that's why he knew of course. For us it was something extraordinary to know that there was one thing after all that they knew about us, about Albania ... and what is more important they even liked it. So the first time my brother came to visit us, after almost one year that we were living there, he brought Skenderbeu with him. I think something like 3–4 bottles. I only kept one for us and I gave the remaining bottles to my friend. He was delighted I can still remember.

Similarly Nevila remembers taking Skenderbeu as a present when invited to some parties and offering it to guests invited for dinner. Identified as a product of Albanian culture appreciated outside their country, participants use it as a way to introduce themselves and their culture to their fellow consumers and hosts. Andi, for example, remembers using Skenderbeu as an 'ambassador' of Albanian culture. He still remembers the sense of pride in bringing to a party an Albanian product that could be appreciated by other international students. As he says:

It was a good feeling to bring something authentic Albanian. It makes you feel good, like you belong somewhere. Like your country is not just a spot on the big world map, you understand? It gave me a sense of pride. (Andi)

From Andi and Sokol we understand that Skenderbeu was used – during the first months of adaptation in a new socio-cultural (and geographic) environment – as a representative of their country, identity and culture. Becoming a consumption experience commonly shared amongst Albanians and non-Albanians, Skenderbeu was a bridge between the two (or more than two) cultures. It represents a medium through which the 'other' could be encountered, and a starting point for interacting with the host environment. Interestingly Nevila, Sokol and Andi have now returned to Albania and none of them consumes Skenderbeu anymore. This supports the literature which suggests that brands acquire different meanings when consumers cross national borders (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010). During the time the interviewees lived abroad, Skenderbeu was a way of reminding themselves and people around them of their ethnic identity. Once returned to Albania they did not feel the need to make visible their ethnic identity through the assiduous consumption of Albanian brands. This is an interesting point, reminding us that often immigrants become 'hyper-immigrants', adhering to 'home' practices with more enthusiasm than non-immigrants at 'home' (Askegaard *et al.*, 2005).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper sought to understand immigrants' relations with their home brands in a new cultural context. It contributes to the acculturation literature and the branding literature in the following ways.

In looking at the relationship consumers establish with their home brands it emerges that they establish more than one. If previous research highlights how consumers consider brands a living entity with which to establish relationships (Fournier, 1998; Shroeder and Salzer-Morling, 2006), this study confirms and extends the literature, showing how such relationships change depending on the context of consumption. Findings show that relations are not monolithic and stable, but change significantly depending on when, with whom, and how the brand is consumed. In fact, Skenderbeu is considered a friend with whom to share intimate and nostalgic memories of past times in Albania. It becomes an important guest at family celebrations and is considered a tool for authenticating family gatherings as truly Albanian. It is also important for perpetuating Albanian collective (national) and family traditions outside Albania, particularly for the younger generation who have never experienced the country

directly. The brand becomes an ambassador for Albanian culture beyond the family setting. Consumed with non-Albanians the brand becomes a common terrain of interaction between immigrants and host-country consumers.

This study confirms the previous literature showing how consumers attach different meanings to brands depending on the context of consumption (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010 Ger and Belk, 1996; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010). In fact it shows how Skenderbeu has different meanings according to the context of consumption including a nostalgic individual past, family identity and traditions, and a collective ethnic identity. It also extends the literature, showing how brand meanings change over time. Although this is not a longitudinal study, and hence we cannot claim to have found a pattern showing how brand meanings evolve over time, it shows that some meanings seem to be more prominent in the initial stage of the acculturation process and others seem to be constant over time. As participants point out, Skenderbeu becomes synonymous with national and ethnic pride and thus is proudly used in interacting with non-Albanians. Also, in an unfamiliar and challenging new cultural context, home brands become synonymous with home and comfort, with strong nostalgic overtones. Over the years it becomes synonymous with family traditions and 'authentic' ethnic identity to be maintained and perpetuated amongst family members and future generations.

Finally, this study contributes to the acculturation debate by demonstrating the central role played by home brands in consumers' acculturation process. In looking at the relationship immigrants develop with their home brand, and the meanings they impute to it, this study confirms how acculturation is a fluid process and how its outcomes are not unchanging and stable (Askegaard *et al.*, 2005). It also extends existing knowledge on acculturation, showing how Skenderbeu's polysemic brand meanings help consumers to navigate amongst different acculturation outcomes. Indeed the brand helps consumers to isolate themselves from the alienating and challenging present, and hence to disconnect from the host culture. Also, the brand allows consumers to maintain their ethnic identity by perpetuating family traditions in the host environment. Finally the brand helps consumers in integrating themselves with the new cultural context. In showing how the brand allows consumers to navigate amongst the various acculturation outcomes (maintaining their identity, integrating themselves into the new environment but at the same time disconnecting themselves from it), this study does not support positivist works claiming that consumers selection of home or host brands simply echoes stable acculturation outcomes (Luna and Peracchio, 2005). Indeed it shows how the polysemic nature of brand meanings and brand relations allows immigrants to consume a home brand for different purposes and to navigate amongst different acculturation outcomes.

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Table 1. Participants' profile

Name	Gender	Age	Family composition	Current Occupation	Country of Residence (abroad)	Years Residing Abroad
Adela	F	29	Single	Logistics specialist	Switzerland	1998-Present
Agim	M	63	Married to Albanian	Unemployed	Switzerland	1998-Present
Agron	M	56	Married to Albanian	Builder	France	2001-Present
Aida	F	59	Married to Albanian	Shop assistant	U.S.A	2001-Present
Andi	M	28	Single	Auditing	Italy	2003-2008
Anila	F	47	Married to Albanian	Receptionist	France	2001-Present
Besa	F	25	Single	Assistant Brand manager	Canada	1999-Present
Besnik	M	53	Married to Albanian	Self-employed	Greece	1993-Present
Eva	F	34	Married to American	Event Manager	U.S.A	2004-Present
Genta	F	29	Married to Italian	Account Manager	Italy	2001-Present

Ilir	M	49	Divorced	Construction worker	Germany	1998-Present
Mirela	F	50	Married to Albanian	Office manager	Canada	2002-Present
Mona	F	49	Married to Albanian	Unemployed	Greece	1994-Present
Nevila	F	51	Married to Albanian	Entrepreneur	Hungary	1991-1994
Sokol	M	55	Married to Albanian	Entrepreneur	Hungary	1991-1994
Tana	F	57	Married to Albanian	Shop assistant	Switzerland	1998-Present
Zana	F	60	Married to Albanian	Unemployed	Italy	1993-Present

Table 2: Findings

Brand relationships	Brand meanings	Context of consumption	Acculturation outcomes
Friend form home	-Utopian past -Nostalgic memories of youth and family life -Individual memories	- Intimate home consumption with nuclear family members -Ordinary and everyday domestic consumption	Separation from the host culture
Family member	-Authenticity -Collective family memories -Domestic traditions	-Consumption with extended family -Extraordinary consumption occasions and celebrations	Maintenance of home culture
Ambassador of home culture	-Authenticity -National identity	-Gatherings with host fellow consumers and international consumers	Integration between home and host culture