Chapter 17

Culture and Authenticity
Denominations in Bengali–Themed Restaurants

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ABSTRACT

With contemporary consumer sampling diverse fragmented artefacts, mediating authenticity to such multifaceted and paradoxical identity is a growing challenge for the market. Focusing on Bengali-Themed Restaurants (BTRs), an exploratory study attempts to elicit the different versions in which cultural authenticity is crafted and refined by the market to cater the fluidity in modern identity. Based on purposive sampling, fifteen Bengali themed restaurants were shortlisted in the Indian metropolitan city Kolkata where occasion based visits were made across a period of two years (2012-14). A combination of participant observation and in-depth interview was employed in the study. The study gave rise to the concept of ‘market mediated authenticity’ which describes the role market is able to influence objective or pseudo forms of authenticity. The study identified the emergence of BTRs with conservative consumption context by endorsing core traditional values and freezing the employed cultural practices; staged culture as a socially constructed and negotiable phenomenon by loading local culinary with new representations of time and place and existential authenticity depicting an extensive commercialized foothold in defining culinary culture. Market plays an intervening role in characterizing authenticity and procreating its multiple forms. Authenticity can be interpreted in terms of the market negotiation between multiple global and local cultural forces.

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INTRODUCTION

As the significance of the service sector has continued to grow globally, contemporary consumers have increasingly sought consumption experiences. For today’s ‘millennial consumer’, experiential consumption forms a central component in ordering, constructing and validating reality (Firat et al., 2013). There are a number of perspectives through which experience can be viewed, with sociologists and psychologists, for example, viewing experience as a subjective and cognitive activity (Miller, 1998; Ritzer, 1999); whereas anthropologists and ethnologists believe individuals to be making a conscious effort to live their own culture (Bruner, 1986). It can, however, be recognised that whether taken from a marketing (Schmitt, 1999), economics (Gupta & Vajic, 2000; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) or consumer research (Vézina, 1999) perspective, experiential consumption forms a central component in constructing and validating reality for today’s ‘millennial consumer’ (Holbrook, 2000, Barton et al., 2014).

Related to the experiential characteristic of consumption are its symbolic aspects (Witt, 2010). Consumers collect past meanings, assemblage the present and negotiate with the future meanings of these cultural constructs (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). Aesthetics is associated with this meaning-making and experiences encompass aesthetic components (Penaloza, 1999; Sherry 1998) through multisensory and visual forms (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985; Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002). These aesthetics are in turn associated with identity construction, which consumers use to interpret and make sense of their cultural world (i.e. cultural production) and shape their own persona. However, this search for identity formation is ongoing as it depends on an interaction with a cultural world that constantly evolves. This gives rise to an intrinsic connection between experience and aesthetic form (Dewey, 1934); as consumers use aesthetics in their personalized consumption experience, to construct and communicate their identity. Through immersion or absorption of values, meanings and signs stemming from both local in-group as well as foreign out-group cultural objects, these distinctive trajectories constantly (re)arrange and (re)shape the identity of today’s consumer (Luisa, 2008). The cultural meaning assigned by individuals to a specific product differs from that ascribed by others due to varied socially constructed associations, shared collective imaginations and acquired personal meanings (Ritson et al., 1996). If one considers a consumption pattern ranging from contemporary capitalism to traditional combinations, consumers construct, maintain and express themselves in multifaceted forms. This construction of multiple and contradictory identities by individuals forms the basis of this exploratory study.

The context for this study is cosmopolitan India, where testimonials of consumers traversing opposing cultural worlds are evident in everyday consumption objects. As an example mainstream media regularly evidences articles related to sexuality; explicitly positioned alongside those discussing religious values and rituals (Srivastava, 2007). The interweaving of multifaceted identities within India is so complex that simple central-peripheral distinction falls short in explaining the unevenness in the degree of modernization that has taken place (Savage, 2000). Globalization may seem to have blurred the local-global boundary, yet both are independent; enabling trends of homogenization and heterogenization to coexist in the same modern space (Wilk, 1999; Firouzeh, 2004). The success of western icons, such as MTV (Askegaard & Kjeldgaard, 2007) and McDonald’s (Eckhardt & Houston, 2002), are symbolic repertoires testifying intercultural influences being selectively processed and consumed based on one’s need, taste and social structures. Indian sari designs rejecting western styles in traditional settings while contemplating the same in more modern milieu (Joy and Wallendorf, 1996) exemplifies consumers gliding between closed and open consumption contexts, based on the level of cultural binding attached to the particular consumption experience. Cosmopolitan India compartmentalizes identity, instilling different meanings