Globalization, Reterritorialization, and Marketing

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Abstract

Accelerated globalization has dramatically altered the ways in which people consume, work, gather information, play and define their identity. Most extant discourse on globalization, particularly in the business discipline, ignores the impact of globalization on the identity of those affected. One of the key characteristics of globalization is deterritorialization; the severance of social, political, and cultural practices from their native places. Deterritorialization potentially destabilizes people’s identity. In response, individuals will undertake activities and behaviors which help them “reterritorialize” and restore their sense of identity. This phenomenon has interesting implications for researchers as well as practitioners.

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Few topics invoke as much passion amongst social scientists as the issue of globalization. Variously viewed as internationalization, universalization, liberalization, westernization, and deterritorialization (Scholte, 2000), the on-going discourse and debate on globalization shows no signs of abating. Deterritorialization signifies the severance of control, order, and cultural practices away from a land or place (territory) that is already established. Potentially, the “deterritorialization” perspective should be of profound interest to scholars of international marketing and consumer behavior as it directly impacts consumption processes the world over. Yet, discussion on the deterritorialization phenomenon and its impact on consumers’ mindset and behaviors has been largely absent from the marketing literature except for a few notable exceptions (see Arnould & Price, 2000; Kale, 2004).

Scholars contend that forces of globalization have brought about profound changes in the way consumers view their identity (see Castells, 1997; Howes, 1996). It has been argued that prior to the massive onslaught of globalization that started around two decades ago, most social and cultural practices were fully embedded in an identifiable physical territory. The territory or place provided its inhabitants with a sense of stability and location and acted as a key self-descriptor. One of the main consequences of this recent wave of globalization is that people are increasingly deprived of their place-bound isolation and territorial cohesion. This creates a void in cultural and topical grounding, promoting many to seek deliberate alternative measures to restore their identity. One approach to identity restoration is through selective consumption. Indeed, evidence continues to accumulate suggesting that the frequency of purchase and use of products providing the utility of reterritorialization are on the rise the world over (Arnould & Price, 2000; Kale, 2004).

Such culturally oriented consumption runs counter to the uniformity hypothesis prophesized by scholars such as Ted Levitt (1983) and, more recently, Thomas Friedman (2006).
With the convergence of technology and income, these commentators had argued, the preferences of consumers the world over will become irrevocably homogenized. The evidence available thus far does not support their position. In the few locations where conversion of technology and narrowing of income differences have recently occurred, differences in consumer preferences have not lessened. If anything, the convergence of income has contributed to a higher manifestation of value differences (de Mooij, 2000; de Mooij & Hofstede 2002).

This article integrates literature from a diversity of disciplines – psychology, economics, sociology, and marketing, to arrive at a better understanding of consumer behavior in the contemporary global environment. We shall discuss the impact of on-going globalization on individual identity and proceed to explain how the urge to reterritorialize manifests into product preferences and use. Managerial and research implications of this perspective are then discussed.

**Conceptual Underpinnings**

One of the key premises of modern consumer behavior is that people often buy products not for what they do, but for what they mean (Solomon, 2004). Basically, we employ consumption not only to create and sustain the self, but also to locate us in society (Elliott, 1994). Meaning associated with products and brands is very often grounded in culture and lifestyle. In the face of deterritorialization, consumers are choosing goods and services where the perceived meaning of choice and the act of consumption fosters their sense of identity. We base this article on the premise that accelerated globalization results in increased deterritorialization, which, in turn, leads to feelings of insecure identity among consumers. Deprived somewhat of their identity, people strive to restore their sense of self by engaging in identity-enhancing consumption practices. We shall now proceed to elaborate on the foundations of our premise.
Deterritorialization

Deterritorialization causes the tearing apart of previously stable social structures, relationships, settings, and cultural representations. It constitutes the disembedding of humans and cultural symbols from their place of origin or belonging. The *Globalization Website* (n.d.) defines deterritorialization as, “Expansion of interaction and relationships not tied to or dependent on particular localities; reduced attachment to place or decreased identification with neighborhood or country resulting there from.” Scholte (2000) views globalization as the spread of supraterриториality and a reconfiguration of geography. According to him, globalization tends to obliterate the link between social space and physical territory, thus rendering physical distances and territorial borders largely irrelevant.

Deterritorialization entails detachment of social and cultural practices from specific places, thereby blurring the age-old natural relationship between culture and geographic territories. A ‘territory’ is understood as the environment of a group (e.g., pack of wolves, a tribe, or a herd of elephants). It is constituted by the patterns of interaction through which the collective secures a certain stability and location (Kale, 2004). The environment of a single person (the social environment, personal living space, and lifestyle) can also be seen as a territory in the psychological sense, from which the person acts and returns to. In times of modernity, territorialization involved a superior power (typically the state) excluding or including people within geographic boundaries and controlling transboundary access and exchange. Such territorialization, though restricting trade and hampering internationalization, provided many citizens of the state with stability and a feeling of being centered. Territorialization through the auspices of a nation state has by no means been universally successful. As one reviewer pointed out, “Unfortunately, there are territories that were established by superpowers, with artificially defined borders that ignored pre-existing ethnic and regional turfs.” In these ill-fated
circumstances, identity was often vested not in the country, but in one’s tribe or ethnic community. Regardless, the move away from modernity and toward contemporary globalization has, for millions, weakened the salience of the nation state, tribe, or ethnic heritage, and in so doing, has undermined the territorialization mechanism physically and psychically.

Globalization threatens the heretofore robust and culturally sustaining connections between geographical place and cultural experience. Globalization, thanks to transnational flows, also deprives people of their isolation and territorial cohesion, thus causing many to question their identity or sense of being. The massive flow of people, capital, media, and commodities in and out of previously sovereign territories means that the long-standing relationships between culture and place are getting increasingly disconnected (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1989). Consequently, many people sense a deep void in cultural and topical grounding. The ensuing rootlessness, for many, creates a crisis of identity and an urgent, often frantic urge to reterritorialize. Attempts to reterritorialize in contemporary postmodern times are often symbolic with people wanting to hold on to whatever they feel most defines their identity.

Deterritorialization prompts changes in attitudes as well as behaviours, resulting in a culturescape that may be global and cosmopolitan in some aspects, but deeply tribal and territorial in others. For, as globalization intensifies, it manifests deterritorialization, which in turn, evokes identity preserving responses through attempts at reterritorialization. Buchanan (2004, p. 17) captures this phenomenon cogently when he writes, “…although most of us embrace the opportunities globalization affords us, we nonetheless continue to sense and long for a past none of us has actually known when the connections were local not global, when the food on our plate was the result of our own toil in the garden. This is the world, as imaginary as it obviously is, that we have been evicted from by our own success in transforming our habitat. The longing underpinning this feeling of exile manifests itself in the form of disorientation, we
can’t seem to get our bearings in this brave new world without borders. Disorientation brought about by the disembedding process requires in turn a compensating process of reembedding to accommodate us to the alienatingly ‘faceless’ world of modernity.”

**Impact on Consumers**

New communication technology such as telephony and the Internet, massive migration, and the dissolution of the iron curtain have drastically increased the pace of globalization, accompanied by massive deterritorialization and a resulting urge to reterritorialize. Appadurai (1996) was among the first to explore the cultural dimensions of globalization. In explaining how present-day globalization is different from earlier global movements, he observes that contemporary globalization has shrunk the distance between elites, shifted the dynamics of exchange between producers and consumers, broken many links between labor and family life, and most importantly, obscured the lines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments.

As mentioned earlier, deterritorialization applies not only to transnational corporations, money markets, and technology, but also to ethnic groups, sectarian movements, political formations, and individual identities. Deterritorialization has resulted in enormous fragmentation in the constitution of people’s demographics, tastes, preferences, and self-concept in any given geographic unit (city block, town, state or nation). Firat (1997, p.78) observes, “Fragmentation is reflected in the simultaneous presence of different and essentially incompatible patterns and modes of life represented by a variety of products, lifestyles, and experiences that do not fit with each other, instead representing different cultural identities and histories.”

Contemporary consumption is increasingly undertaken to rediscover, preserve, or even create one’s identity. Several scholars have discussed the relationship between various facets of globalization and identity. Baumeister (1996) explains how detraditionalization increases choice
and, in so doing, problematizes identity formation. McDonald (1999) has argued that many young people feel marginalized by globalization as their identities can no longer be constructed within the imagery and culture created by producers and employers. Touraine (1997) relates fragmentation and loss of identity to demodernization, and, likewise, Kayatekin and Riccio (1998) relate the loss of self to globalization.

According to Erikson (1959), identity basically implies perception of one’s continuity and coherence in time and it comprises of genetic and cultural components. Identity crisis is one of the most severe conflicts that humans encounter. In underscoring the role of identity, Erikson remarks, “In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (quoted in Gergen, 1991, p. 38).

It is not just genetic evolution that finds expression in identity. The evolution of memes or transferable ideas is also incorporated in a person’s sense of self. These ideas involve cultural values and practices, most notably religion and language. Until recently, culture and religion were largely territory-specific. The forces of technology, media, and migration have served to dislocate these ideas from their geographic origin and often times defiled their core, thus creating an identity crisis in many of the world’s inhabitants. Castells (1997, p.3) explains,

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. This is not a new trend since identity, and particularly religious and ethnic identity, have been at the roots of meaning since the dawn of human society. Yet identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only source of meaning in a historical period characterized by widespread destructuring of organizations, delegitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions. People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of who they are.

Arnauld and Price (2003) have observed that under globalization, key reference points for identity like community, nation, and people become fluid and contentious, thus rendering global culture “contextless” (Smith, 1990). Similarly, Featherstone (1991) has argued that we are
increasingly moving to a global society in which adoption of previously fixed and territory bound lifestyles for specific groups has been surpassed.

The beseeching quest for identity in the throes of deterritorialization finds significance in consumer behavior. Increasingly, the act of consumption becomes an important vehicle with which to shape one’s self-image and define one’s identity. Arnould and Price (2003) explain that contemporary consumers, in the midst of multiple identities that globalization affords, and lacking authority and continuity formerly provided by tradition, actively hunger for a sense of continuity and integration. Consumers, through creative consumption, seek to create a foundation whereby their authentic selves and connection to community could be reclaimed. In doing so, individuals strive to combat the tyranny of deterritorialization by engaging in reterritorialization to guard their identity. Appadurai (1996, p. 4) cites media consumption patterns to illustrate reterritorialization by diasporas, “As Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats, as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, we see moving images meet deterritorialized viewers.”

Reterritorialization motives are not simply confined to the consumption and media habits of diasporas. As Arnould and Price (2003) and Kale (2004) have discussed, consumers everywhere are aspiring to reterritorialize; reclaiming markers of identity wherever they could be found – in tribalism, nationalism, ancestry or religion. Consumption as reterritorialization helps explain the resurgent demand for local products among residents from the former East Germany. Dornberg (1995/1996) reports that East German brands for wine, spirits, beer, cosmetics and detergents have all made a comeback thanks to renewed patronage from consumers in the East. Referring to the unification of Germany and the subsequent nostalgia (called ‘Ostalgie’ in
Germany), Alexander Mackat, an ad agency executive catering to Eastern consumers explains, “We were told our biography is horrible and has no meaning. We had to cocoon ourselves for self protection, and this was the beginning of ostalgie” (Fitzgerald, 2003). This nostalgic feeling is not confined to those who actually grew up in the former German Democratic Republic. Amazingly, it is also shared by their children, most of whom have only a vague memory, if any recollection at all, of the GDR.

Religion and Global Business

Scholars such as Levitt (1983) considered globalization a mechanism of standardization that would transcend regional culture, religious practices, and tradition. This scenario has been described in several clichéd terms such as McWorld, McDonaldization, Disnification, and Coca-colonization. A corollary to the homogenizing influences of globalization is secularization. Sociologists in the 1970s, then looking ahead to the year 2000, regarded secularization as the most relevant religious scenario for the end of the century (Introigne, 2004). Statistically, a large body of empirical research has now conclusively established that religion is more prevalent in the 2000s than it was in 1970s (Stark & Finke, 2000). The number of persons calling themselves “religious” has increased in almost all countries in the world (Introigne, 2004).

The renewed and reinvigorated appeal of religion over the past three decades could be attributed to deterritorialization (Kale, 2004). For millennia, both religion and nationhood had been deeply rooted in geography. The loss of national ethos, a direct consequence of globalization, may be the reason why billions of people are now looking at religion as an alternative marker of identity.

Of the over 150 major conflicts that occurred from 1990-2000, only two could be considered truly international. Over thirty such conflicts precipitated major wars which claimed the lives of over 40 million people and dislocated 45 million more. Religious and ethnic
differences fuelled an overwhelming majority of these conflicts (Kale, 2004). In tracing the roots of several recent ethnic and religious conflicts to deterritorialization, Appadurai (1998, p. 919) concludes, “To put it in a sanitized manner, the most horrible forms of ethnocidal violence are mechanisms for producing persons out of what are otherwise diffuse, large-scale labels that have effects but no locations.” In other words, the macabre ethnic killings, to many, serve as a means to reterritorialize. Appadurai (1998, p. 920) goes on to explain, “… as large populations occupy central social spaces and as primary cultural features (clothing, speech style, residential patterns) are recognized to be poor indicators of ethnicity, there tends to be a steady growth in the search for ‘inner’ or ‘concealed’ signs of a person’s ‘real’ identity. The maiming and mutilation of ethnicized bodies is a desperate attempt to restore the validity of somatic markers…” It is often in terms of the “other” that individual identity can be recognized, and causing harm to this “other” can sometimes be viewed as a pathway to reclaiming one’s identity.

As ethnic and religious conflicts multiply, global firms are likely to face unprecedented instability in the various markets they operate. Such hostility is normally imagined within the context of remote and ‘backward’ areas of the world, which only serves to undermine the seriousness of the issue. Cultural pride was at the roots when French men and women attacked a McDonald’s restaurant for its assumed assault on French culinary culture. Liberalization and tearing down of trade barriers continues to open more and more markets for global companies, but the rising identity crisis could render many of these markets politically unstable and physically unsafe.

The reterritorialization movement demands that global companies exercise greater sensitivity to ethnic preferences in product design--particularly in relation to food, clothing, and recreation. Not doing so could produce a hostile and often violent backlash. Catering to the needs of deterritorialized customers is a tricky proposition. If identity-affirming consumer
innovations (or revisitations) in dress, food, or lifestyle are re-packaged and mass-produced, these acts may be perceived as further evidence of cooptation of ethnic symbols for profiteering. On the other hand, not doing so may be attributed to cultural insensitivity and to the imperialistic orientation of global firms.

Global firms will increasingly have to contend with not only reterritorializing consumers but a reterritorializing workforce as well. The phenomenal increase in books and seminars on spirituality in the workplace is but one manifestation of this. Arnould and Price (2003), on the basis of qualitative interviews with people from several countries, have demonstrated increased incidence of “authenticating acts” and “authoritative performances” to restore a sense of community, tradition, and self. Religion and spirituality can encompass both authenticating acts as well as authoritative performances. Today, many people are demanding that such acts be practiced in public places, including the workplace.

Authenticating acts denote self-referential behaviors that are deemed to reveal or produce the “true” self. These acts are conducted in search of true identity and involve transcending the superficial roles played by individuals (e.g. while at work). Authoritative performances tend to be collective in nature and often involve cultural displays such as festivals and rituals, designed to create a communally shared experience. Authoritative performances represent the quintessential search for unity between self and society (Cohen, 1988). Both authenticating acts and authoritative performances serve to create a sense of “being centered” in today’s deterritorialized society. As spiritual and religious practices typically involve authenticating acts as well as authoritative performances, employees are increasingly expressing the need for their employers to accommodate such activities (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). The challenge for global companies, therefore, is to create a unifying global culture, while simultaneously catering to the diverse identity needs of the workforce.
When viewed against the backdrop of deterritorialization, recent practices of outsourcing customer contact centers to places such as India seem particularly perverse. Call center employees are often asked to assume a persona totally foreign to them, an alien name, an artificial accent, a fabricated life story. Economic pressure often causes many employees to acquiesce to such demands. But Erikson (1959) and Castells (1997) caution us that continued and deliberate (even if forced) negation of one’s true identity produces pathological consequences and dysfunctional behaviors. Unlike their employers living in gated suburban communities in the same city or thousands of miles away, call center agents – between inhumanely scheduled shifts – have to return to their run-down *chawls*, discard their Western persona, and make sense of their local territory. Not unlike uniforms of the industrial era, present day call center employees don at work a new guise prescribed by their employers, playing the part of a local for callers stationed thousands of miles away. Unfortunately, while a uniform touches but the outermost reaches of one’s being, the masked identity of contact center agents cuts to the very core. Their job is undoubtedly an act, but unlike a play or a movie, audiences – the callers – are unaware of it being an act. This double deception, deception of the employee’s own identity, and deception of the callers, will sooner or later, spark a schizoid personality and pathological behaviors. When the causes of these behaviors are widely understood, global companies would most likely become targets of widespread hostility.

**Implications for Scholars**

Researchers in business have thus far ignored the impact of globalization and deterritorialization on people’s identities. Yet, as Virilio pointed out twenty-five years ago, identity is *the* major question for this century (Virilio & Lotringer, 1983). For scholars in international management and marketing, superficially studying the phenomena of localization
vis-à-vis globalization is not enough. The motives toward the localization movement need to be better understood. This is desirable from a social welfare as well as from a business perspective.

It is time for management and marketing scholars to ponder on the psychic costs of globalization and make their contributions to this vital area. Issues such as identity, heritage, tradition and spirituality can no longer be ignored. In this regard, it behoves us to remember Kierkegaard’s (1989, p. 62) comment in his novel The Sickness Unto Death, “The biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. is bound to be noticed”.

Management and marketing scholars interested in global issues need to better appreciate the role “place” has played and continues to play in the lives of people. Thanks to globalization, present day identities involve more complex types of mixing and dialectics than in the most recent past (Escobar, 2001). As Escobar (2001, p. 169) warns, “The fact that a growing number of people and groups demand the right to their own cultures, ecologies, and economies as part of our modern social world can no longer be denied, nor can these demands be easily accommodated into any universalist or neo-liberal doctrine”. Not attending to issues of deterritorialization and place could thus prove to be a serious blind spot for scholars and educators.

**Conclusion**

Deterritorialization constitutes the process wherein the very basis of one’s identity, the proverbial “ground beneath our feet,” is eroded, washed away like the bank of a river accosted by floodwater (Buchanan, 2004). Globalization has endeavoured to create a blanket of conformity among consumers and individuals worldwide, thereby obfuscating age-old markers of identity. In response, consumers are engaging in acts of reterritorialization, individually and collectively. A movement has been born where individuals are exercising their right to selective consumption
by turning away from global products perceived as killers of identity. Consumers, increasingly, are embracing products, customs and traditions that signify and signal who they are and where they have come from. Although the typical Italian family, having migrated to Australia is open to a myriad of food choices from American style burgers, to Thai, to Chinese, come dinner time, the family, still prefers the familiar taste and aroma of home made pasta, a tradition that generations of this family to come, will still uphold.
References


