

The role of social networks in the development of skills, knowledge, and competencies during the consumer multiculturalisation process

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Short Abstract

This research examines consumer multiculturalisation as a social phenomenon. It argues for the need to shift the focus away from individual consumers *per se*, to analyse the role of social networks in the development of Mexican consumers' food related knowledge, skills, and competencies as they adapt to living in the UK multicultural marketplace. Qualitative research methods are employed, and practice theory is adopted as the conceptual lens informing data analysis. The study contributes to the theoretical development of the concept of consumer multiculturalisation by illuminating the social aspects of the multiculturalisation process, involving both immigrant and domestic consumers.

Extended Abstract

1 Motivation

Over the last 20 years, we have seen an increasing movement of people between different countries in the world, with India, Mexico and Russia being the countries of origin of most immigrants (International Organization for Migration, 2021). As a result of such migration, consumers must adapt to marketplaces that are becoming increasingly multicultural (Demangeot et al., 2015).

This has inspired marketing and consumer researchers to shift the focus of their analyses from consumer acculturation to consumer multiculturalisation. However, research in this area continues in the tendency to adopt an individualistic approach, which focuses primarily on

consumers' cognitions and emotions (Askegaard et al., 2005; Galalae et al., 2020; Oswald, 1999). Those studies that have investigated the social aspects of the consumer acculturation and multiculturalisation process, (e.g. Cappellini & Yen, 2013; Cruz et al., 2018; Cruz & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015) do not focus on the role of knowledge, skills and competencies, thus leaving the role of social relations relatively under-developed within consumer multiculturalisation theory.

The present study seeks to address this theoretical imbalance by adopting practice theory as a conceptual lens, to shift the analytical focus away from the individual consumer so as to *also* consider a variety of other elements that are implicated in the process of consumer multiculturalisation. It does so by examining the experiences of Mexican immigrant consumers as they adapt to the multicultural marketplace present in the UK, focusing on their food consumption practices. In so doing the study is able to shine a light on the role that social networks play in the development of the food related skills, knowledge, and competencies of these Mexican immigrant consumers in the process of their consumer multiculturalisation to the UK multicultural marketplace.

2 Conceptualisation

From the perspective of practice theory, practices are defined as 'doings', that is to say, the activities that individuals (not just consumers) carry out (Schatzki et al., 2001; Shove et al., 2012). It is these practices or doings that are taken as the unit of analysis, rather than the people involved in the practices *per se*. Shove et al. (2012) conceptualise practices as conjunctions of elements that are linked dynamically each time they are performed. For ease of analysis, these various elements are grouped into three broad categories namely, materials, meanings, and competencies. Materials are the things involved, meanings are the 'symbolic significances', and competencies are the skills, knowledge and competencies needed to perform the practice.

Modes of circulation refer to the processes through which the elements - materials, competencies, and meanings - move between individuals and/or between societies, either through being part of the same social practice or by becoming part of new social practices

(Shove et al., 2012). Thus, a way to understand how different practices ‘travel’ from population to population (or also from practitioner to practitioner) implies understanding how each of the three elements of the practice (materials, meanings, and competencies) can be communicated to or understood by another population (or practitioner). In the case of competencies, the typical way in which knowledge spreads is when masters teach novice practitioners (Nicolini, 2013; Shove et al., 2012). The concept of modes of circulation provides a means to examine how knowledge, skills, and competencies are developed, learned and shared, during the process of consumers’ adaptation to multicultural marketplaces.

This study applies Shove et al.’s (2012) practice theory framework to analyse the food consumption practices of Mexican immigrants adapting to the multicultural marketplaces characterising the UK. In so doing our analysis brings to the fore the role of knowledge, skills, and competencies in the process of consumer multiculturalisation.

3 Methodology

Data relating to the food consumption practices and experiences of Mexican immigrant consumers were elicited via a combination of semi-structured interviews and netnographic research (Kozinets, 2002) conducted via Facebook groups comprising Mexican immigrants to the UK. Twenty participants took part in the semi-structured interviews. These participants were recruited via messages posted in the aforementioned Facebook groups. Each participant took part in an initial in-depth interview followed by at least one shorter, follow-up interview designed to understand their process of adaptation to the UK, inquiring into their past, current, and sometimes future food consumption practices.

In order to build a rapport with participants and to capture the symbolic meanings involved in these activities more fully, data collection was undertaken in Spanish. The profile of the participants is presented in Table 3.1 below.

Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure the anonymity of participants. Interview transcriptions and Facebook posts were translated from Spanish to English and captured in Nvivo software. Data analysis was conducted, applying a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Spiggle, 1994), following abductive logical reasoning (Bajc, 2012; Scott & Garner, 2013).

Table 3.1. Profile of participants

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Marital status	Nationality of spouse	Time living in the UK at time of first interview	State and Region of Mexico where participant was raised
1	Dolores	Female	34	Married	British	6 months	Mexico City, Central
2	Linda	Female	65	Married	British	7 years	Unknown
3	Mara	Female	33	Married	Mexican	2 weeks	Mexico City, Central
4	Lena	Female	36	Married	British	11 months	Puebla, Central
5	Daisy	Female	29	Married	British	2 years	Michoacan, Central
6	Hannah	Female	46	Married	British	6 years	Mexico City, Central
7	Summer	Female	41	Single	N/A	4 months	Nuevo Leon, North
8	Gracie	Female	30	Married	British	3 years, 6 m.	Mexico City, Central
9	Delilah	Female	34	Married	British	10 months	Guanajuato, North-Central
10	Calista	Female	34	Married	British	2 years	Mexico City, Central
11	Isabella	Female	54	Married	German	5 years	State of Mexico, Central
12	Jacey	Female	31	Married	Venezuelan	8 Years	Morelos, Central
13	Macy	Female	33	Married	Dominican Republic	4 years	State of Mexico, Central
14	Naira	Female	38	Married	Spain	1 year, 6 m.	State of Mexico, Central
15	Margaret	Female	30	Married	British	1 year	Nuevo Leon, North
16	Parisa	Female	49	Married	British	25 years	Jalisco, West-Central
17	Layla	Female	37	Married	British	3 years	Mexico City, Central
18	Teresa	Female	42	Married	Mexican	17 years	Veracruz, East-Central
19	Caleb	Male	29	Single	N/A	4 years	Mexico City, Central
20	Ryan	Male	42	Married	Mexican	6 months	Mexico City, Central

4 Major Findings

Data analysis indicates that Mexican immigrant consumers share knowledge through social networks regarding where to find various Mexican food items and regarding what to do in the absence of these products.

Mexican food is rarely available in mainstream supermarkets in the UK. Therefore, Mexican immigrants to the UK who have learned through experience, i.e. ‘master’ practitioners (Nicolini, 2013; Shove et al., 2012) will often share their knowledge of where to acquire certain food items with more ‘novice’ Mexican immigrant practitioners. For example, Mexican yams (*jicamas* in Spanish) can be acquired in Chinese and Turkish food stores. As suggested this knowledge is developed through experience and one of the ways in which it subsequently ‘circulates’ is when it is shared through the aforementioned Facebook groups, as can be appreciated in Figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1 A Mexican immigrant shares where she found 'jicama' [Mexican yam]



Participant 1: 'Jicama' [Mexican yam] loving girls, in China Town (London) you can find it for only £7.99 per kilo, they are tasty [emojis of faces licking their lips]. I bought it yesterday and I keep them in the fridge, so they last me longer.

Participant 2: What do they call it? It is a delight

Participant 1: It is 'Yam bean'

Participant 3: Here in Scotland, I can't find it in any market or Chinese store [emoji of a sad face]

Participant 5: Look for it in the Turkish shop ones, they sell it as well!

Participant 6: How cheap! Where exactly?

Participant 1: Wait, I put the address in my wall

We can appreciate how the knowledge involved in this food consumption practice (acquiring Mexican food items in ethnic food stores associated with Chinese and Turkish cultures) 'circulates' (Shove et al., 2012) when it is shared through Facebook posts. This knowledge, now becoming embedded into the food acquisition practices of more novice Mexican immigrant consumers who were previously ignorant of this possibility.

Interestingly, Mexican immigrant consumers do not only rely on knowledge relating to retailers of ethnic foods to acquire Mexican food items. In addition, they have developed the requisite skills and know how to be able to ‘smuggle’ certain food items into the UK in their suitcases when they return from visiting Mexico. Once again knowledge is shared by those with more experience, i.e. masters (Nicolini, 2013; Shove et al., 2012); this time regarding how to package and transport food items so they are not confiscated at customs, as can be appreciated in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 A Mexican immigrant shares with others food that she has carried from Mexico to the UK, showing off the results.

Participant 1: Good British days [greeting] Mexicans!! I'm back at home after six months of enjoying my beloved Chihuahua [State in Mexico]. And because there isn't a date to go back, I have had to stock up as well as possible!!

Participant 2: Welcome [emoji smiling] – Wow, very well assorted, it looks like a shop, what are you going to sell? Haha! When do we meet?

Participant 3: I want everything!! How tasty!!

Participant 4: Welcome 'paisana'!!! [Referring to a compatriot, and adds a 'minion' figure raising hands]

Participant 5: Enough to survive!

Participant 6: Wowwww, well, rather, healthy envy, haha!

Participant 7: Wow! A fully stocked pantry. Enjoy and welcome!

Participant 8: Great! Welcome! You're the same as me, literally, you carry even the 'molcajete' [meaning she carries everything, molcajete is a Mexican mortar] and the essential 'Vitacilina' [brand of a Mexican ointment]

Participant 9: Hey! How many kilos is that? With the big tin and everything! I love it!

Participant 10: Very tasty! Now you can keep enjoying the Mexican food, welcome and greetings

Participant 11: 'Vitacilina' what a good medicine! [Repeating the jingle of a Mexican advertisement]

Participant 12: How exciting! Thank you for asking if I needed something but I understand that when you go, you come back full! I'm happy that you enjoyed our beautiful Chihuahua! And your mother as well, welcome and to keep living with the hope of coming back soon!

Participant 13: Amazing! I think that the suitcase was heavy! Now it's time to cook Mexican food!

Finally, when Mexican immigrant consumers are unable to acquire specific ingredients, they develop new skills and competencies so as to be able to cook Mexican dishes using ingredients associated with a diversity of other cultures. That is to say, practitioners develop ‘creolising’ cooking skills, which they then also share with others, as can be appreciated in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 A Mexican immigrant suggests how to cook Mexican ‘tostadas’ creolising ingredients associated with other cultures

August 18, 2018 · 🌐

Se pueden hacer tostadas calentando entre 2-3 mins. en el microondas, éstas tortillas y saben muy ricas y éste queso tiene el sabor del queso blanco de México 🍌

53 ❤️👍🙌 24 Comments

Like Comment

De new es ese queso??
Like Reply · 1y

Hola... es Polaco lowicki. Curd cheese en asda 🇬🇧

<https://groceries.asda.com/.../lowicz-half.../910000275064>

Online Food Shopping - ASDA Groceries
GROCERIESASDA.COM
Online Food Shopping - ASDA Groceries

Like Reply · 2y

Write a reply...

Graacias, que buenos tips!!
Like Reply · 2y

Por nada Que paisana!
Like Reply · 2y

También es parecido el queso Lancashire (el crumbly).
Like Reply · 2y

Oh voy a probar ese también gracias Mariela 🍌
Like Reply · 2y

Write a reply...

Gracias x el tip
Like Reply · 2y Edited

← **Participant 1:** You can make ‘tostadas’ [Mexican toast] heating these tortillas 2-3 minutes in the microwave oven, and they are tasty, and this cheese has the flavour of Mexican white cheese.

← **Participant 2:** Where did you find this cheese?

← **Participant 1:** Hi...It is Lowicki Polish curd cheese, from Asda

← **Participant 1:** [shares a link to the supermarket webpage]

← **Participant 3:** Thank you, this is a good tip!!

← **Participant 1:** You’re welcome ‘paisana’ [fellow countrywoman]

← **Participant 4:** Lancashire cheese is similar as well (the ‘crumbly’ one)

← **Participant 1:** Oh, I’m going to try that as well, thank you [tagging Participant 4]

← **Participant 5:** Thank you for the tip

Participant 1 is ‘circulating’ (Shove et al., 2012) the competencies involved in this ‘creolisation’ cooking practice, and we can appreciate how, during the process of sharing, that other Mexican immigrants also contribute by sharing related knowledge; for example, participant 4 suggesting that other UK cheese (Lancashire) can be used to cook Mexican ‘tostadas’.

The ‘circulation’ of competencies also involves domestic consumers, as can be appreciated in the extract from an interview with Isabella shown in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Extract of interview

Participant (pseudonym)	Extract	Evidence of
Isabella	<i>“...I told them: [the party guests] ‘put some beans and then you add either picadillo [mincemeat cooked Mexican style] or tinga [chicken cooked Mexican style], but not both [she laughed]; then you can add what you want, as side dish, lettuce, sour cream, cheese, whatever, and sauce... they gobbled it up! ... Since then, they can’t stop talking about the Mexican night.</i>	Sharing of the knowledge of how to eat <i>tacos</i> with members of other cultures.

Isabella is recalling how she shared how to eat Mexican Tacos ‘correctly’ with party guests. Thus, knowledge about Mexican food consumption practices is also ‘circulating’ (Shove et al., 2012), among domestic consumers.

5 Conclusions

Previous research on consumer acculturation and multiculturalisation has adopted mainly an individualistic approach (Askegaard et al., 2005; Galalae et al., 2020; Peñaloza,

1994). Those researchers that have analysed the social side of the consumer acculturation and multiculturalisation processes (Cappellini & Yen, 2013; Cruz et al., 2018; Cruz & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015), have not explored the role that skills, knowledge and competencies play in these processes.

This research has evidenced how immigrant consumers develop knowledge, skills, and competencies through social networks, thus showing not just the importance but also the reach of social influences in the processes of consumer multiculturalisation. This study therefore adds to previous studies that have analysed the social influences on consumer multiculturalisation (Cruz et al., 2018) by showing how the development of skills, knowledge and competencies are shared and acquired through social networks that extend beyond local and personal acquaintances and connections. This indicates a more complex picture of the consumer adaptation process than the translation and adaptation of skills outlined in previous studies of consumer acculturation (e.g. Peñaloza, 1994). It also suggests that multiculturalisation processes increase the complexity of the cultural forces present within multicultural marketplaces (Ibarra-Cantu & Cheetham, 2021).

In summary, we argue that (1) it is important to acknowledge the relevance of knowledge, skills, and competencies in the process of consumer multiculturalisation; and (2) instead of conceptualising consumer multiculturalisation from the perspective of individual immigrant consumers, we should recognise its embeddedness in the social and material contexts in which different agents - consumers and institutions for example - dynamically, shape phenomena.

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