
Vulnerable Desires: Impoverished Migrant Consumers in Turkey

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As a vulnerable consumer segment, economically deprived consumers have received scholarly attention (e.g. Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg, 2005; Hill and Stamey, 1990; Lee, Ozanne, and Hill 1999). Realizing differences in the consumption behaviors of economically better-off and impoverished consumers, some researchers explored how poor consumers cope with economic restrictions in a world of abundance. Lewis (1970), for example, argued that poor consumers did not behave according to the dictates of higher-income people, while others claimed that consumption values were the same regardless of consumer's level of income (e.g. Irelan and Besner 1966; Leeds 1971). On the one hand, poor consumers were seen as lacking the adequate level of income to provide themselves with proper consumption (e.g. Holloway and Cardozo 1969); on the other hand, they were perceived to be capable of finding their own ways to optimize their purchases in terms of assortments of products (e.g. Andreasen 1975). Overall, the expectation is that "necessities of survival" have to be met first; thus, most studies focus on understanding what constitutes the "basic needs" of the poor consumers (e.g. Hill 2002a; Richards 1966).

We aim to contribute to the existing literature by studying how poor, immigrant consumers talk about their needs, desires, and hopes and how their interpretations are structured by various institutional and cultural discourses and norms. The context of our study is rural-to-urban migrants in Turkey. In many developing countries, including Turkey, worsening living conditions in rural areas, such as decrease in employment opportunities, increased threats of natural disasters, limited access to health and education facilities lead to large scale rural-to-urban migration (Hemmasi and Prorok 2002). These migrants move into the peripheries of big cities, build shantytown communities, and live in conditions of poverty. Poor, migrant consumers present a different case than homeless or urban poor consumers that are typically studied in the consumer behavior literature. The migrant consumers go through a process of acculturation (e.g. Oswald 1999; Penalozza 1989, 1994; Sandikci et al 2006; Ustuner and Holt 2007) which involve negotiation of rural and urban values and norms. During their adjustment to the new environment, their needs, desires, and hopes are likely to change. However, as Belk et al (2003) note, how consumer desires are negotiated among people who have not grown up in an urban, marketizing society remains an understudied area. Before we discuss the insights our research offers into poor consumers, we briefly review relevant literature.

Economic Deprivation and Consumption

Proposed by Lewis (1959, 1970), the term 'culture of poverty' refers to the culture of people with a lack of material abundance and with negative beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The negativity stems from the inequity and alienation they feel, as well as poor mental and physical health (Hill 2002b). According to statistics, there are more than fifty countries in the world where more than 30% of the population lives under the poverty line (World Bank 2006).

Although there seems to be no consensus on poor consumers' consumption patterns, the common belief is that they actively attempt to exert control in their consumer world (Holloway and Cardozo 1969, Hill 2002c). Hill (2002b) discusses different strategies that poor consumers, including those with meager materials and with significantly low standards of living, utilize. He argues that, over time, it is possible for poor consumers to "establish a baseline standard of living against which they measure their relative affluence", which creates a benchmark against "media portrayals of material life" (Hill 2002b, p. 283). In terms of how homeless people acquire and consume items, Hill and Stamey (1990) reports that they need the same basic items as average middle-class consumers. In another study, poor consumers are found to be paying more for the same items because they do not know what, where, and how much to buy, making them vulnerable to merchants' easy credit terms and making their purchases "irrational" (Caplovitz 1963).

Most of these studies attempt to understand poor consumers' basic needs (e.g. Hill 2002a, Richards 1966). In many of these studies, respondents themselves use the terms 'need' and 'necessity' for all of their purchases (e.g. Lehtonen 1999). Although the term "for the other" has been used to reflect the desire of the "less affluent world" (c.f. Ger and Belk 1996) towards a world of abundance (Arnould and Wilk 1984), the term can be used for poor consumers, expanding the notion of poor nations, by potentially cutting across nations and cultures. Poor consumers can be conceptualized to desire a transformation on different grounds, especially towards a modern and urban lifestyle (Belk et al. 2003). For example, Hill (2002b) argues that these consumers focus their minds on fantasies of better consumer opportunities in the future in order to alter their negative emotional states. As Ger (1997) points out, consumption has the potential to make people happier but only if the "imagined consumption is within the realm of possibility" (p. 111). Therefore, hope should be included in a discussion of needs and desires, especially when the context involves poor consumers.

Research Context and Methodology

Similar to other emerging markets, rural-to-urban migration is prominent in Turkey. Migrants typically settle in shantytowns, in the periphery areas of the big cities. A recent survey (Uzuncarsili and Ersun 2004) reports that squatter houses comprise 35% of all dwellings in Turkey. Squatter settlements date back to the late 1940s; at that time they were perceived as a temporary solution to the housing shortage experienced in big cities due to rapid urbanization. By the end of the 1960s, squatter settlements had not only expanded but become permanent features of all the major cities. The first migrants to cities were young men seeking jobs; later, the most migrants started moving to the city as family groups (Ozbay 1985), predominantly nuclear families (Kandiyoti 1982). The proportion of migrant women who are formally employed is low, although many work informally as cleaning ladies in the homes of the better-off urbanites (Kandiyoti 1982).

Ethnographic data collection method was chosen in order to understand an 'unfamiliar world' and bring the lived experience of consumers living in shanty towns (van Maanen 1988). Researchers spent hours in each of the respondent's house, engaged in formal and non-formal conversations with them, participated in various social gatherings, and met their families and friends. Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted in two different regions of shantytowns in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. Both areas have running electricity and water and are characterized by one-storey dwellings which are often built using bricks and cement. Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling. Following the discovery

oriented aims of grounded theory, our analysis sought to identify conceptual categories and themes. Interview transcripts and field notes were read by all the authors several times to gain an understanding of informants' interpretations of needs, hopes, and desires. Once categories were identified and agreement among the authors was attained, we sought to relate the emergent themes to underlying theoretical constructs. Below, we offer an abbreviated and preliminary analysis of our findings.

Findings

All of our informants' daily lives are characterized by close relationships with each other. They form small groups within the squatter area and spend time together eating, chatting, and praying. Almost all informants stated that their life in the city is much more comfortable because they do not have to work at the field for farming-related activities. They reside in squatter houses rather than apartment buildings, because they cannot afford the rent. But they also think that living in the apartments is not desirable. They believe that they cannot live freely in the apartments because they have to respect many rules they are not accustomed to, such as not making too much noise. They define themselves as different from city people since they strongly believe in God and, besides their jobs and other daily activities, they spend a major part of their time praying and reading religious books. These are the main reasons why they want to live together with relatives, acquaintances, or with people who are also immigrants. It is a close-knit environment in which they can share their own experiences and live somewhat isolated from the city culture.

Still however, some of them think they are poorer in the city than they were in the village because now they have to spend more. Many of them express their desire to buy more things simply because they see more things around. They find more sources of consumption, more items to consume, and new ways of consuming products. Many told us how they like to make window shopping even though they do not have enough money to spend. Window shopping is a new kind of pleasure for them as they have not seen any stores, malls, or supermarkets in the village. It is very common for a family from the squatter area to visit a big supermarket during the weekend, have a look at the diverse range of items, try a few samples if provided, and make a full day out of it with children.

What I'll Have is What I Want

As discussed above, many migrants move to the city as a family and they usually meet their relatives or friends in the squatter area. Contrary to Lyon (1999) who argues that migrant people who moved to a developing city break their ties with families and communities, we found strong support for the opposite; that they still continue to live with their families and friends. What became problematic for our informants was the move itself. They left their houses behind for a totally new house in a totally different environment, not only in terms of the surroundings or buildings, but also in terms of culture. They started to work in a job totally different from farming or breeding. The movement of their bodies and minds from the village constituted the basis for their needs and wants. Most of the migrants did not bring anything from the village because they thought they were going to need different things. Feride, for example, has put all her belongings she brought from the village in boxes and she does not even remember what is in those boxes.

When asked about their needs concerning their migration, they first mentioned a house. When asked about what they need to have in their houses, they provided responses

like bed, carpet, couch, and kitchen utensils. They did not mention washing machine, dishwasher, or even tables and chairs as their needs, because what they needed at first was shelter, i.e. a safe place to live in. In similar vein, migrants in bad living conditions see a major part of consumption items as waste. For example, Gumus seemed to be quite puzzled by the question “Do you decorate your house?”, which she responded: “Have you ever seen any decoration in shanties? [laughing] Do you think it’s necessary?”. When we asked about what they *would like to have*, they often mentioned things they lacked most: furniture and household items, such as a couch for the living room, a wardrobe for the child, or a dining table.

The theme that is common in all responses is the idea that their needs and wants are shaped by what other people in the squatter area already have. In other words, the objects they want are the things they see on each other. These people are mostly their relatives or friends who they knew from their village or met in the neighborhood. Similar to what Hill and Stamey (1990) have found, members of the shanty communities regularly converse and share. These people constitute comparison points. Many informants expressed their wants by referring to what their relatives or their next-door neighbors own. For example, Feride (27 F) described the household items she wants by actually describing what her friends had in their houses.

Another factor that influences respondents’ needs and wants is the decision-making power of husbands, fathers, and father-in-laws. Turkish society is characterized by male dominance, which is especially prevalent in villages (Erman 2001). We observe that patriarchy has a strong effect on consumption. Informants often talked about situations where they migrated to a house with many items already purchased by their father-in-law or where they had to rely on their husbands to buy whatever is needed.

These two factors, i.e. tendency to get what is observable in nearby houses and the influence of patriarchal forces which dictate what should to be purchased, seem to shape migrated consumers’ needs and wants. Deciding what is needed seems not as an individual decision making process, but a male-dominated assessment of what is needed and affordable.

Desire for Desire is the Hope for Hope

All respondents stated their hope towards having a house which has more rooms, closets and wardrobes that they can use, a concrete ceiling that prevents rain dripping inside, and newer and nicer furniture. They want to have separate rooms for their children, serve their guests well, and cook meals in a proper kitchen. They literally state their willingness towards certain objects using the word ‘hope’ and give details about their dream houses. They also use the word ‘*inşallah*’ which means ‘by God’s will’ in Arabic. This word has everyday usage but in our case it also connotes meanings about religious beliefs that nothing can ever happen if God does not permit. Therefore, they know what they are hoping for and believe that God is aware of their hopes, and maybe someday they will be permitted to have their house of dreams.

Although the construct of hope was found to be consistent with the established literature on poor consumers’ consumption practices, reading transcriptions several times revealed that consumers in our study hope what they can achieve but desire what they cannot achieve. A vivid example of desire was demonstrated by Ayten (24 F) who wanted to look more attractive. Her object of desire is a woman with flawless skin, shiny hair, a good-looking body in perfect proportions, manicured nails, nice perfume, and appealing clothes. Other female

migrants' responses were similar to Ayten's desire. For example, Meral (24 F) was very willing to be like 'Hülya Avşar', an actress who has become an icon of 'Turkish femininity' in popular culture. In their day-time gatherings in the neighborhood, they talk about these beautiful women and their desire to be like them.

But Ayten (24 F) thinks she cannot achieve her desire for two reasons. First and foremost, she does not have the money to purchase necessary items such as skin care products including facial creams, masks, and moisturizing lotions. Similarly, the physical conditions in her house are not adequate; for example she desires to have a tread mill, but even if she could afford it, she could not find an appropriate spot to place it in the shanty house. Second, she believes that it would be sinful to look like a woman that appears on television. She believes that she should not wear revealing clothes and apply too much make-up; in fact, should be covered. Ayten struggles with and tries to negotiate the desire to be an attractive woman and properly observing religious expectations and norms. Yet, she continues to desire because 'desire for desire is the hope for hope' for her (Belk et al. 2003). In other words, although she acknowledges that she cannot achieve it, her ideal continues to remain as an unfulfilled desire. In contrast to what Belk et al. (2003) suggested, realizing that her desire will not be fulfilled at all does not result in a state of hopelessness. She does not feel depressed, disappointed, or hurt because of this realization. She has other things to hope for, such as a new house and better living conditions for her child.

Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory study was about how migrated, poor female consumers talk about their needs, desires, and hopes and how these interpretations are structured by various institutional and cultural discourses and norms. Economically impoverished people are generally assumed to be living in the city, such as the urban poor (Hill 2002a, 2002b) or homeless people (Hill and Stamey 1990); thus they are assumed to know the values and norms in the city, as well as meanings attached to products. Moreover, they have been studied in consumer behavior only in terms of their basic needs, although desires and hopes seem to be important factors influencing their consumption practices. We hope that this study sets a step toward investigating immigrants as poor consumers, who usually lack knowledge about products and consumption practices in the city, and a step toward understanding their desires and hopes, as well as their needs and wants.

In terms of migrated consumers' needs and wants, we found that they were mostly shaped by what migrated consumers observe in each other's' houses. Relatives and friends provide sources of comparison for migrated consumers. As a community, they together create their own consumption relationships, providing support for Bourdieu's (1984) observation that different ways of life involve different systems of thinking about what is 'necessary'. Migrated poor consumers' 'baseline standard' (Hill 2002b) does not depend on the dominant consumption culture prevalent in the city, but on what other poor consumers in the same squatter area have.

There was support for the idea that desires of immigrant consumers' were not achievable. As one respondent in Lehtonen's (1999) study puts it: "It's like a dream, wishing that you could have it. I mean you can imagine that you'll get it, that already brings you pleasure" (p. 256). Playing with dreams and desires in this manner was enjoyable for our respondents, too. They imagine themselves to be consuming the objects of desire, even though they consciously convinced themselves that they cannot fulfill their desires. The pleasure, creativity,

and fantasy of consumption liberate their desires (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), but since the desired object requires a dramatic transformation of the individual, as well as money, it remains unfulfilled. This dramatic transformation is achievable but totally inappropriate. In other words, achieving their desires is not desirable since it means deviation from their beliefs and values, and hence, deviation from the group.

In contrast to Belk et al.'s (2003) findings, desire is not kept alive until the object is acquired; it is kept alive as long as it brings enjoyment since the object will never be acquired. Desire is beyond hope but it still exists, yet this does not create depression. The relation between desire and hope in our case reveals a different situation where one might desire an object without necessarily hoping it. Hope is towards a goal-congruent outcome (MacInnis and de Mello 2005); and like a plan, it shapes immigrant consumers' consumption routines. But desire is not goal-congruent; to desire is to live, to hope, and to be alive (Belk et al. 2003).

The general conclusion in our study is that consumer desires and hopes can be negotiated in different ways in different contexts. This study is only a small step towards understanding immigrant consumers' consumption patterns and the concepts of desire and hope in this specific context. Our study was limited in terms of the depth of information collected. Future studies might focus on different contexts, differentiate between first- and second-generation immigrants, and include male respondents and children. Continuation of this research has the potential to extend the notion of the 'desire for the other', in ways that reveal who the other is and what that desire involves in relation to hope.

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Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Name	Age	Marital Status	Occupation
Özlem	26	Married	Sales representative
Sibel	50	Married	Cleaning lady
İnci	37	Divorced	Janitor at hospital
Ayten	24	Married	Housewife
Gul	28	Married	Housewife
Ayhan	38	Married	Janitor at university
Ebru	39	Married	Housewife
İlknur	33	Married	Cleaning lady
Meryem	62	Married	Housewife
Erdem	40	Married	Janitor at university

Henna	35	Married	Housewife
Cennet	24	Single	Unemployed
Serkan	32	Single	Janitor at hospital
Altin	46	Single	Housewife
Sevgi	30	Married	Housewife
Ozden	32	Married	Housewife
Zeliha	27	Married	Housewife
Seyhan	21	Married	Housewife
Belma	36	Married	Works at grocery shop
Dicle	17	Single	Student
Nabire	34	Married	Housewife
Ayse	28	Married	Housewife
Nihal	25	Married	Teacher
Birsen	26	Married	Housewife