

**Brand New Consumers.
A social practice approach to young immigrants coping with
material culture in Italy**

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Abstract:	<p>While the role of material culture in reproducing everyday routines and representations has been widely studied, only specific social groups – mostly US or Europe based – have been studied qua ‘consumers’. This article draws on the heuristic potential of materiality for the analysis of consumption practices, and on Bourdieu’s theory of practice and notions of habitus and hysteresis, in order to explore what happens when immigrants bring their earlier dispositions to new social and material settings. In accordance with the Bourdieusian notion of hysteresis, the article investigates the extent of creative adaptations made possible by the lagging of habitus. Findings from a two-year research project are presented, focusing on both verbal and visual representations of taste of a sample of boys and girls of different national origins recently arrived in Italy. Furthermore the article discusses the potential of the photo-elicitation technique for analyzing social consumption practices and its overall contribution to the study of the wider relationship between consumption practices and ethnic identification.</p>



Introduction

Social research on consumption has so far failed to incorporate and account for the place, practices and existence of immigrants to any significant degree. While scholars have often investigated the role of material culture in reproducing everyday routines and representations (Douglas, Isherwood 1979; Bourdieu 1984; Miller 1998), only specific social groups have been studied *qua* ‘consumers’, mostly US or European citizens (Brewer, Trentmann 2006).

In fact, in the same way as Cook (2008) exposed the lack of study of children’s consumption practices, I contend that scholars have not been concerned to situate immigrants’ consumption *practices* as such: the present paper starts from such acknowledgment, that it is necessary to recognize immigrants as well as children as “vital and integral to creation and development of the varied meanings surrounding the world of goods, presently and historically” (Cook 2008: 221).

I will refer to Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1984) and mainly to his notion of *habitus*, in order to explore what happens when immigrants bring their original dispositions to a new social and material setting. Bourdieu’s notion of *hysteresis* effect (Bourdieu 2000) is particularly appropriate to operationalize the moment when a field changes abruptly and to explain how consumers with different social backgrounds make sense of their new environment based on their capacity to decipher similarities between their

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6 previous life context and the new one (Kerr and Robinson 2009; Nowicka
7 2015).

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10 Thus, the main research question concerns whether migrants' consumption
11 practices contribute to manage a split *habitus*, trying to reduce the dissonance
12 between the norms and practices acquired prior to and post migration, or
13 whether and to what extent their lagging *habitus* may call into question what
14 is normally taken for granted about consumption practices. Therefore, I
15 chose to focus not just on *moments of disorientation* that reveal the anxious
16 conditions linked to the mismatch between consumers' *habitus* and the new
17 material setting, as the mainstream literature on consumer acculturation
18 suggests (Luedicke 2011). Instead, in accordance with the Bourdieusian
19 notion of *hysteresis*, I will mostly investigate the *creative adaptations* made
20 possible by the lagging of the *habitus*.
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34 The article is organized as follows. After a brief presentation of the main
35 theoretical attempts to deal with consumption and ethnic identification, I
36 begin by discussing the issue of the transforming *habitus* and its *hysteresis*
37 effect (Bourdieu 1977; 2000) in the field of consumption, focusing
38 especially on the heuristic potential of *materiality* in analyzing consumption
39 practices (Warde 2015; XXX 2012). I then briefly discuss the
40 methodological strategies developed in my empirical research: I present the
41 specific visual ethnography (Pink 2006) that I conducted on a small sample
42 of respondents and I discuss the potential of the photo-elicitation technique
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6 (Harper 2002) for analyzing social practices. The two subsequent sections
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8 offer a discussion of the main research findings around modes of material
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10 engagement by respondents when they *encounter*, *evaluate* and *act* with
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12 objects (Rinkinen et al 2015). I conclude by reflecting on the contribution of
13
14 this paper to the study of the wider relationship between consumption
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16 practices and ethnic identification.
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21 **Consumption practices, material culture and ethnic identity**

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23 The main theoretical framework with the explicit aim of investigating the
24
25 relationship between consumption and migration is the so-called ‘consumer
26
27 acculturation theory’. This approach tries to keep together attention to low
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29 income – typical of segmented assimilation theory¹ – with a focus on
30
31 transnationalism and the multidimensional trajectories of identification in
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33 migration (O’Guinn et al., 1986; Beck and Sznaider 2006, Hofmeister and
34
35 Breitenstein 2008). This stream of literature started in the 1980s by exploring
36
37 the complexities of migrants’ adaptation to Western consumer cultures. The
38
39 field of ‘consumer acculturation research’ has since then been established
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41 by assessing the levels of assimilation through differences in consumption
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43 choices particularly vis-à-vis American mainstream consumers. Recently
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45 there have been significant adjustments and reviews of that theory, paying
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47 more attention to intra-ethnic differentiations (Ogden *et al* 2004; Wakiuru
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49 *et al* 2007) and power relations (Üstüner and Holt 2007; Askegaard *et al.*
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6 2005). A sort of ‘post-assimilationist’ view is adopted, even though
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8 assimilation perspectives are lingering on (Luedicke 2011).
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11 However, my point is that there is a need to go beyond this kind of
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13 approach based on declared attitudes of consumers and begin to understand
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15 consumption as a *social praxis* embedded in complex structures of power
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17 relations (Lamont 1992; Lizardo 2008; Bennett et al. 2009). Sociological
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19 engagement with ‘the practice turn’ has been promising in this respect
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21 (Schatzki et al. 2001). Although it is not easy to specify what the exponents
22
23 and implementers of practice theories have in common, most claim that
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25 explanation should rely on routine, shared understanding, the embodied and,
26
27 above all, the material (Reckwitz 2002a,b; Shove et al. 2012)
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30 All in all, practice theories seem appealing for the study of consumption
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32 because they promise an alternative to models of individual choice and
33
34 uncover phenomena normally concealed in the cultural analysis of
35
36 consumption. As Warde neatly clarified:
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39 Against the model of the sovereign consumer, practice theories emphasize routine over
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41 actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts, *dispositions over decisions*, and practical
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43 consciousness over deliberation. In reaction to the cultural turn, emphasis is placed
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45 upon doing over thinking, *the material over the symbolic*, and embodied practical
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47 competence over expressive virtuosity in the fashioned presentation of self. (2014: 286)

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49 Accordingly, the practice turn in consumption studies has drawn on the
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51 idea that consumption is mostly a mundane process of appropriation and
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53 appreciation of goods and services, and not merely acquisition through
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55 market exchange and communicative display. Moreover, early works in this
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6 vein (Shove et al. 2012) paid particular tribute to the decisive role of
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8 equipment of practice – objects, tools, material artefacts and infrastructures
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10 – drawing mostly on anthropological studies of consumption and the notion
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12 of appropriation (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Miller, 1987).
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14 This material orientation of theories of social practice (Shove et al.
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16 2012), is well suited to the analysis of the embodied dispositions of young
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18 children of immigrants and their consumption practices as opposed to those
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20 of more or less acculturated individuals.
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23 24 25 **The social practice approach and the hysteresis effect** 26

27 When an approach based on theories of practice is adopted (Shove et al.
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29 2012), the focus shifts to human / non-human interaction. In fact, “the social
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31 significance of material objects lies in the ways in which they are “handled”,
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33 in how they are mobilized in practice and how they combine in practice-
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35 arrangement nexuses.” (Rinkinen et al. 2015: 871). Accordingly, the social
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37 practice approach investigates the *distributed agency* between humans and
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39 things (Sahakian and Wihilite 2014): it looks at *both humans and things as*
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41 *elements of a particular social practice* in order to empirically grasp and
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43 eventually reconstruct their specific practical co-dependency (Preda 1999).
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45 This approach makes it possible to understand how knowledge embodied by
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47 human agents and knowledge incorporated by materials *empirically*
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6 converge into one social practice. This means focusing on the practical
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8 encounters between specific embodied dispositions and particular materials.
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10 The notion of *hysteresis* (Bourdieu 2000) has already been employed in
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12 migration studies (Nowicka 2015) in order to understand specific processes
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14 developing in the context of resettlement and demands on migrants for the
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16 “transformation of [their] embodied capacities, and the formation of a new
17
18 set of bodily capacities” (Noble 2013: 343)
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21 When a field changes abruptly, habitus might be lagging behind this change, it
22
23 might misfit the field. Bourdieu uses the term ‘hysteresis’ for this situation which
24
25 he borrowed from scientific experimentation context and which means a mismatch
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27 between two elements which were previously coordinated, (...). If the field
28
29 changes abruptly, for example due to some external intervention that offers new
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31 opportunities, the participants of the field might not be equipped with the attitudes
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33 and practices that are needed to recognize, grasp and occupy these new field
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35 positions. (Nowicka 2015: 13)
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39 However, it is important not to confuse the *hysteresis* effect with the
40
41 Bourdieusian notion of *inertia* of the *habitus*. In fact, following Wacquant,
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43 *hysteresis* “is a constitutive property of every *habitus* referring to the built-
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45 in lag between the time it is forged and the moment it is activated (a
46
47 *temporal* gap between cause and effect rooted in remanent embodiment)”
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49 (2014: 9). This is quite different from the misalignment between *habitus* and
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51 *doxa* that makes the agent feel out of place and out of sync. In other words,
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53 according to Bourdieu’s theory of practice (2000) it is possible to find
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55 *hysteresis* without any necessary or complete realignment with the “rules of
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57 the game” – that is, between *habitus* and *doxa* – which would in fact amount
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59 to once again turning to the consumer acculturation thesis. In other words,
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6 the peculiarity of the notion of *hysteresis* is its heuristic capacity to explain
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8 how *open and dynamic* structures react late to the tensions applied in a
9
10 previous time. In fact, it is such a lag that generates the possibility for both
11
12 disorientation *and* creativity in dealing with objects, artifacts and material
13
14 settings.
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17 In spite of many criticisms of Bourdieu's "reproduction theory" (Sewell
18
19 1992; King 2000) and the rigidity of the notion of *habitus* that cannot "be
20
21 regarded as a source of creativity" (Crossley 2014: 108), such creative
22
23 potentialities of *habitus* are clearly activated in unfamiliar fields, such as
24
25 those experienced by children of immigrants. In fact, according to
26
27 Wacquant "habitus can be a source of creativity whenever it is composed of
28
29 disparate dispositions in tension or contradiction with one another;
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31 *whenever it encounters settings that challenge its active proclivities*"
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33 (Wacquant 2014: 5)
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37 There are three main competing approaches to the relationship between
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39 consumption and social stratification mediated by the mechanism of *class*
40
41 *habitus* (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007): the homology thesis (Holt 1998;
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43 Ollivier 2004; Brisson and Bianchi 2017); the individualization argument
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45 (Giddens 1991, Bauman 2007), and the omnivore-univore argument
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47 (Peterson and Simkus 1993; Bennett et al. 2009; Lizardo and Skiles 2012).
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49 Despite their differences (Lizardo 2008), what is at the stake in all these
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51 attempts is dealing with the issue of power in the field of consumption,
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6 especially questioning the reproductive and conservative effect of *class*
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8 *habitus* within different social structures. There are many classic examples
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10 in this regard, in many countries, like Australia (Bennett et al. 1999), USA
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12 (Lamont 1992), France (Coulangeon and Lemel 2009) and Germany
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14 (Blasius and Friederichs 2008), to name but a few.
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17 Nevertheless, insofar as one is concerned with the role of *habitus* in
18
19 orienting tastes, when we draw on Bourdieu's theory of practice "it is on
20
21 consumption *as a form of social action* that attention must focus" (Chan and
22
23 Goldthorpe 2007: 3). In other words, as recent studies indicate, it is
24
25 necessary to move from tastes to activities (Coulangeon and Lemel 2009),
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27 from the 'what' to the 'how' of cultural consumption (Daenekindt and Rose
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29 2017.
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32 Instead of focusing on group entities reproduced by the mechanism of
33
34 *habitus*, therefore, we may examine how particular consumption practices
35
36 are carried out by social agents, and finally how symbolic violence
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38 (Bourdieu 2000) operates *via habitus* when exposure to "objective
39
40 conditions" leads to actions "pre-adapted to objective demands" despite
41
42 agents' aspirations and ambitions (Bourdieu 1990: 63). Bourdieu's theory of
43
44 practice is important for studying the consumption practices of immigrant
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46 children especially because of its contrast between the notion of hysteresis
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48 and the notion of complicit action brought about by symbolic violence.
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50 According to Strand and Lizardo, in fact, "Hysteresis refers to
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6 asynchronicity (...) and a lack of institutional scaffolding, as the space of
7 possibilities mismatches the actor with available possibilities. (...)
8 Reflexiveness instead of complicity emerges as the dispositional trait
9 associated with this tangled, asynchronous relationship..” (Strand and Lizardo
10 2017: 23)

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17 When a hysteresis mismatch occurs, modalities of reflexiveness can
18 emerge between the slower temporality of practice and the faster
19 temporalities of environments. Then agents are in the position to follow
20 novel or unexpected lines of action, “violating regularities that (to
21 observers) appear as normal conduct” (Strand and Lizardo 2017: 11).

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28 Finally, in the space between the constraints of symbolic violence and the
29 openness of reflexiveness created by the hysteresis effect, there is room for
30 empirically investigating consumption practices without relying on any
31 theories of consumer acculturation or on a deterministic reproduction of
32 social groups. Therefore, instead of assuming a linear system of integration
33 into a group, a society or a culture – that is, basically the adjustment of
34 *habitus* and *doxa* – the notion of *hysteresis* effect, especially when it is
35 mobilised within theories of practice, makes it possible to conceive of the
36 interaction between immigrant *habitus* and the material setting as open and
37 dynamic, and as a space in which the social agent begins to ‘play’.

51 **Visual ethnography and photo-elicitation interviewing**

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6 What I will discuss further below are the results of a specific *case-study*
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8 (Flyvbjerg 2006), which is part of a larger research project on young
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10 children of immigrants in Italy and their relatives.² While the overall project
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12 investigated the complex category of ‘second generation’ immigrants (Crul
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14 and Vermeulen 2003), in this case I will refer to respondents as merely
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16 ‘children of immigrants’ in a sort of *emic* manner, since this is what they
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18 call themselves in their daily lives. This is because I am not interested in
19
20 studying individuals and the impact of their national origins. Instead, as
21
22 explained above, I will focus on practices and their material basis, as well as
23
24 the identities and identification processes taking shape in such practices.
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28 Drawing on some previous attempts (Massey and Sanchez 2007) to mix
29
30 verbal and visual methodology (Rose 2001; Harper 2003), I worked with a
31
32 combination of different methods, as is customary of the ‘ethnographic
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34 gaze’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). I conducted a visual ethnography
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36 (Mason 2005; Pink 2006) mixing three different techniques to produce data:
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38 classic participant observation in schools and in households during which I
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40 collected photos by myself; narrative interviews with children of immigrants
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42 and with some of their parents; ‘autodriven’ photo-elicitation interviews
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44 (Clark 1999; Harper 2002; Meo 2010). However, I will now discuss mainly
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46 the use of photo elicitation interviews (PEI).
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49 I chose autodrivn PEI (Clark 1999) as a strategic tool for two main
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51 reasons. First, a practical one: PEI makes it possible to resolve the
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6 communication impasse (Harper 2002), since most of my young
7 respondents were used to talking and trading with images in their daily
8 lives. This is, of course, a significant issue when interviewing young boys
9 and girls from different linguistic communities. Second, in the case of
10 migrant narratives, PEI is proven to be particularly suited to reducing power
11 imbalances between researcher and participants (Ortega-Alcazar, Dyck
12 2011), since it enables participants to establish or add themes to the research
13 questions. Also, it was significant especially in order to test the relevance of
14 things and materials without me directing the focus to them.
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25 During my field research, I started by interviewing a specific section (14
26 boys and 24 girls, aged from 17 to 23) extracted from the broad sample of
27 73 participants in the overall research project, which provided me with the
28 first stream of information about their social trajectories and their
29 relationship with objects and materials. The reason why I selected such a
30 particular group was because all the interviewees had arrived in Italy in the
31 recent past (from 1 to 5 years). Consequently, I could capture the particular
32 empirical situation of a *mismatch* between *habitus* acquired in the country of
33 origin and the new material setting of the host country.
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44 Moreover, the research took place in various “distressed neighborhoods”
45 (Blasius and Friederichs 2008) of Milan and my respondents comprised
46 boys and girls attending different kinds of high school situated in those
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6 areas. Also, as regards their parents' occupations and income, they all
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8 shared a condition similar to that of the lower classes.
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10 In this way, while most authors who adopt Bourdieu's approach
11 concentrate on upper and middle classes (Lamont 2002; Bennett et. al 2009;
12
13 Coulangeon and Lemel 2009), I focused on *a particular fraction of the*
14
15 *lower classes*. My purpose was then to test if and to what extent the
16
17 hysteresis effect illustrated above could at least partially change the "taste of
18
19 necessity" usually associated with such class fractions (Bourdieu 1984;
20
21 Blasius and Friederichs 2008). In fact, *habitus* is related to agents' social
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23 location – and hysteresis is about change in social locations. This includes
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25 geographical mobility, of course, but also mobility within (and among)
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27 social structures, which is exactly what migrants generally experience.³
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31 I followed the classic strategy of autodriven PEI (Clark-Ibanez 2004;
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33 Meo 2010), and asked all participants to take some photographs around the
34
35 city of Milan. I invited them for individual follow-up interviews in order to
36
37 discuss their photographs. Yet, contrary to other researching using such a
38
39 tool, I provided each respondent with *two* disposable cameras: one for
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41 his/her likes and the other for his/her dislikes. Accordingly, each of them
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43 was asked to take pictures of anything that they might find 'cool' or 'un-
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45 cool' in their daily lives, every day for a two-week period. This cool/uncool
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47 request was only a pretext in order to let them be as free as possible without
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49 addressing their attention to anything in particular.
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6 From the 14 boys and 24 girls to whom I assigned the task, I eventually
7 collected 24 'photo diaries' of 10 boys (from 17 to 20 years old) and 14 girls
8 (from 18 to 21 years old), with a resulting set of 251 'cool' images and 169
9 'un-cool' images. A second round of interviews was then conducted with
10 the group of 10 boys and 14 girls that had completed the task. This second
11 interview was focused on the photos that they had produced, allowing them
12 to elaborate on the specific meanings of their images as they interpreted
13 them.
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23 Finally, I conducted detailed observations both in their schools and
24 homes, sharing and discussing several daily moments with them, in order to
25 gain a more in-depth understanding of the social world that they inhabit.
26 This took place after coding their answers to the first and second rounds of
27 interviews.
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34 The following section presents results, specifically bearing on how the
35 participants coped with the everyday world of things, beyond their verbal
36 accounts *about* the material culture, in order to grasp their possibly new
37 ways *of looking at* materiality (Hurdley 2007; Datta 2012). As will be seen,
38 the social narratives generated are quite different from those found in the
39 conventional analysis of spoken representations, for two reasons.
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47 First, this is due in my view to the "collaborative categorization" process
48 made possible by such method (Harper 2002): in fact, PEI enables
49 respondents to contribute to generating hypotheses (2002). At the beginning
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6 of each interview, the entire set of pictures was displayed on a table and
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8 each participant was asked to group the photos into categories as they saw
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10 fit. They were then invited to talk about the pictures that they had selected.
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12 Thus, during the PEI, questions were not determined a priori but arose in
13
14 response to the images they took.
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17 Second, the technology of the camera is itself an integral part of this
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19 process (Ortega-Alcazar, Dyck 2011): in taking photos, participants produce
20
21 *their* aesthetic, ethical and political choices about how they want to
22
23 represent their cultural practices, instead of relying on academic categories
24
25 like ethnicity or nationality. In doing so, they “destabilize the gaze of the
26
27 disembodied and distanced observer and replace it with that of the mobile
28
29 migrant subject.” (Datta 2012: 1728).
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34 **Living in a (new) material world: acting and evaluating objects**

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36 In order to show how the *hysteresis* effect works as a dynamic and open
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38 system of interaction between immigrant *habitus* and the material setting, I
39
40 draw on the work of Rininen et al. (2015), and their discussion of three co-
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42 existing modes of material engagement: *encountering* the material world,
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44 *acting* in a material constituted world, *evaluating* the material world.
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47 Yet, as I worked with photos collected on the basis of the explicit request
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49 to evaluate the coolness/uncoolness of objects, I attuned the above typology
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51 on the basis of my research. Thus, on the one hand, encountering and
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6 evaluating were combined in the practice of photographing objects and it
7 provided a first cluster of evidence. On the other hand, acting in a materially
8 constituted world furnished a second, less expected, set of evidence.
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15 *Encountering and evaluating objects: new elements of practices*

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17 According to the definition of consumption adopted here, that finds its
18 logic not in the selection of items but in how people accomplish the tasks
19 and practices that compose their daily lives (Warde 2014), it is worth
20 starting with a very mundane practice such as “walking the city”, as a way
21 of “fabricating the city” (de Certeau 1984).
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28 Within the field of ‘cool’ images collected by participants in their
29 walking around the city, the most recurrent themes were food (Pic 1) and
30 fashion (Pic 2). Both the homemade ice cream and the pairs of shoes
31 portrayed below were photographed from behind shop windows. These
32 pictures make clear the importance of the lived material space of the city
33 (Datta 2012): that is, the mundane, ordinary and relevant space that these
34 youngsters encountered as they walked around the city (de Certeau 1984).
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45 Picture 1 here

Picture 2 here

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49 The subjects’ point of view also indicates some ease and comfort with
50 such a particular display of commercial culture. Together with these images,
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6 in fact, many others considered to be ‘cool’ referred to shops, showcases or
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8 malls. Yet, on the other hand, the very same commercial culture was quite
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10 often selected in order to question its un-cool side. Some respondents took
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12 pictures that strongly represented the negative side of their everyday lives in
13
14 a specific urban periphery, which they illustrated through a picture of
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16 *graffiti* on a wall (Pic 3); while on other occasions they explicitly
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18 condemned the commodity system for its dangerous potential effects,
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20 portraying, for example, a fur coats shop sign (Pic 4) as a stigmatized
21
22 counterpart of commercial culture.
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26 Picture 3 here

27 Picture 4 here

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30 When the author of Picture 3 saw her photo during the photo-elicitation
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32 interview, she recalled her first arrival in Italy, when she encountered a
33
34 similar wall. Starting from this practical encounter, she became able to
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36 account, once again, for the difference of walking the city in Italy and in her
37
38 home country. In fact, she could *learn what difference means by*
39
40 *encountering and staring at this wall.*
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44 (...) I don't know... in our country? it simply doesn't happen... I mean... you don't
45 see stuff like that... really, you don't... the first time I came here in Italy, I took the train
46 from Malpensa [the airport]... and the very first thing I noticed was such writings on the
47 walls... (L., girl, 19 yrs old, born in China, in Italy for 3 yrs, note to pic 3)
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50 Materials work here as *significant elements of practices* in daily life
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52 entangled in webs of moral judgments. When a new element shows up it
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6 may activate judgments coming from dispositions built in the past, in a
7
8 different environment, according to the *hysteresis* effect discussed above. In
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10 this way, even a mundane practice like walking the city sustains and
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12 reproduces specific understandings of what is cool or uncool, and how
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14 things should be done.
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17 In fact, a close reading of the data shows how numerous contrasting
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19 meanings coming from different private and public spheres seem to affect
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21 material culture.
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25 *Acting with objects: mobilizing and combining new elements*
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28 In regard to consumption practices, a particular mode of material
29
30 engagement emerges in accounts of practical, ongoing and responsive
31
32 problem-solving (Warde 2015). In the cases of young children of
33
34 immigrants, indeed, materials appear to be very significant tools for the
35
36 enactment of specific practices. Participants in the PEI suggested how
37
38 objects are instruments that can be handled in variously effective ways.
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40
41 For example, a set of participants pointed to the potential power of things
42
43 as sorts of ‘cultural bridges’ (Douglas, Isherwood 1979) in the sense that
44
45 objects support everyday practices without removing either their everyday
46
47 Italian lives or their parents’ home past.
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50 It is worth focusing a little more on this idea of ‘cultural bridges’ in order
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52 to understand *its being generated by practices*. This is, in fact, the case of
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6 many objects photographed inside the respondents' homes in Italy: these
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8 objects, coming from specific cultural biographies (Appadurai 1986),
9
10 eventually acquired a sort of double meaning or, more precisely, a 'hybrid'
11
12 one (Canclini 1995; Tomlinson 1999).
13

14 We may consider one of them, observing what happens in the specific
15
16 practice of 'giving and receiving a present':
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21 Picture 5 here
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26 The author of this photo described her experience as follows:
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28 (...) well... this is my doll... it's a present my boyfriend gave to me... you know...
29
30 because he lives in Sri-Lanka now ... but he gave me some presents when I go there... so, I
31
32 took a picture of this doll because I always take her with me as a talisman in difficult
33
34 situations.. you know.. in this way... *It's like taking him and my birth-place with me...*(D.,
35
36 girl, 22 yrs old, born in Sri-Lanka, in Italy for 2 yrs, note to pic 5)
37

38 Objects like this have been removed by respondents from the global
39
40 circuit of commodities and then re-contextualized in order to evoke
41
42 memories of their parents' home country and people still living there, or
43
44 maybe very particular episodes of their past lives. What is interesting,
45
46 however, is that such de-commodification (Kopytoff 1986) is *a practical*
47
48 *work* itself that is possible only by repeatedly mobilizing the object during
49
50 specific 'difficult' moments of disorientation until it becomes 'a talisman'.
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6 In challenging conditions like this, the object is specifically mobilised in
7
8 order to serve as a ‘bridge’ – for this young girl, this means taking her home
9
10 country relationships with her.

11
12 In such a particular interaction between embodied dispositions and
13
14 material meanings the object becomes an *active agent* able to connect the
15
16 past and the future, well exemplifying the *hysteresis* effect at work.

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19 Another example supports this argument, from another point of view, in
20
21 the case of the practice of ‘shopping for a cake’:
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26 Picture 6 here.
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30
31 Material elements convey and preserve specific skills and practical forms
32
33 of competence (Rinkinen et al. 2015). The case of the baked cake in the
34
35 previous image supports this idea. The girl who took the picture explained
36
37 her photo shoot as follows:

38
39 (...) it was at the end of my Italian course at school... there was a party... (...) and
40
41 everybody was supposed to cook something Italian, you know... and initially... well... I
42
43 didn’t know what to do... I don’t know Italian cuisine... so, I made this cake... I searched
44
45 for and used Italian ingredients... but, well... actually... it’s a recipe from my country!...
46
47 (L., girl, 18 ys old, born in China, in Italy for 5 yrs note to Pic 6)
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51 Once again, there is a practical task to solve on the basis of material
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53 equipment. While an object serves as a support to carry out a practice, the
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6 thing is re-framed as a potential ‘bridge’ between two different social
7
8 worlds through the practical co-dependency between embodied dispositions
9
10 and the material apparatus available. The idea of objects as ‘cultural
11
12 bridges’ is thus the outcome of a specific material engagement in the social
13
14 practice.
15

16
17 Once again, the presence of different material elements (“I don’t know
18
19 Italian cuisine”) inhibits the practical anticipation of the *habitus* (Bourdieu
20
21 1997) and, conversely, the consequent lag (“initially... I didn’t know what
22
23 to do...”) makes room for creativity by mobilizing new elements (“a recipe
24
25 from my country”) without eliminating disorientation.
26

27
28 Thus, a shift in the material base of the mundane practice of shopping in
29
30 order to bake a cake, allows a different reaction thanks to the lagging
31
32 *habitus*. Finally, *the specific affordances of material elements intensify the*
33
34 *hysteresis effect*, so that past and present dispositions conflate and may
35
36 eventually generate a different practice.
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41 **Learning to be (different) consumers: how to use a tool**

42
43 As the previous examples help to show, the mismatch between a set of
44
45 past dispositions as consumers and a new material setting is not necessarily
46
47 equivalent to trouble and disorientation only. Instead, the shifting of
48
49 material elements within consumption practices may often involve some
50
51 level of creativity even alongside disorientation.
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6 In order to exemplify the potential consequences of the modes of material
7 engagement illustrated in the previous section, I now show a quite evocative
8 photograph taken in the center of Milan by an 18-year-old Chinese girl
9 within the field of her cool images⁴, as a particular case of the very common
10 practice of shopping.
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19 Picture 7 here.
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24 Later, when I went back to interview her about her photos, she described
25 her choice quite clearly:
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28 “(...) I like sales... I mean... usually I buy stuff in China... because over there it all
29 costs a lot less... so, when I decide to go back... I usually leave from here with some empty
30 bags and then I come back with about 40 kilos of stuff... mostly clothes... and... I don't
31 know... pens and stuff I may use at school, or even make-up... all the things I need,
32 basically... in China it all costs really less than here... they are not of the same high quality
33 as here but high quality usually costs too much... but when it comes to the sales... here in
34 Italy... I found that I can get high quality stuff but with very low prices... so I go there...
35 all the time” (L., girl, 18 yrs old, born in China, in Italy for 5 yrs, note to Pic 7)
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43 Both the picture and the description seem to address a positive judgment
44 about the commercial culture and its opportunities in choosing between
45 quality and quantity, especially since this feature is framed as the most
46 significant difference with the respondent's birth country. Nevertheless, at
47 the beginning, she recounted her physical encounter with the 'sales' poster;
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6 then she explained how that encounter led to a transformation of her
7
8 habitual choice between quantity and quality. Hence, acting on a new basis
9
10 of materiality led to a new chain of action, simply following the practical
11
12 accomplishment of finding stuff for daily needs. Some links with the
13
14 respondent's home country between humans and objects had been eroded,
15
16 some new others had been created (Shove et al. 2012). In short, a new
17
18 practical co-dependency was eventually established and a different
19
20 distribution of agency between humans and materials was fixed. Thus, a
21
22 potentially new consumption practice was in the making.
23
24

25
26 To take a step further in the argument, I cite the case of another
27
28 participant who photographed herself in the practice of wearing the veil. In
29
30 fact, there are situations where very particular clothes or sorts of apparel
31
32 were chosen from the material world of respondents' parents. In such
33
34 conditions, the main consumer acculturation explanation is often to interpret
35
36 such practice as an endeavor to merge signs of belonging to the parents'
37
38 culture with those taken from global youth fashion culture (Oswald 1999).
39
40 However, as well shown by the following extract taken from the interview
41
42 with an 18-year-old girl born in Egypt, there is something more involved.
43
44

45
46 I have worn my veil for a couple of years now, and it has been definitely my choice... to
47
48 me it's natural, it's part of my sense of decency... and the expression of my religion too
49
50 (...) Sometimes I think people may look askance at me, maybe they even think things like:
51
52 "poor girl"... and so on... but *I continue with my choice*... they should understand that *this*
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6 *is a choice of freedom for me, not the opposite!...* (S., 18 years old, born in Egypt, in Italy
7
8 for 3 yr).

9
10 While the respondent defends the practice of wearing a material element
11 considered to be new within the Western world of things, the emphasis is on
12 her claim to be a subject capable of *a choice of freedom* – in a word, a
13 ‘consumer’ (Trentman 2007; Sassatelli 2007). What is interesting, however,
14 is that she indicates – as did many others respondents in this regard – the
15 opportunity she found in the object to start learning to cope with an
16 unfamiliar context (“people may look askance at me”). She dealt with the
17 classic immigrant experience of disorientation and reorientation explicitly
18 through her chance to engage with the veil, according to creative as much as
19 practical modes of material engagement.
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32 She continued to emphasize this point:
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35 Many girls still don’t even know that... but I do now... I mean.. you can choose
36 between a lot of veils... *if you know how to use the tool...* there are those with solid colors,
37 those in different colors, others with flowers or embroidery. Some of them have an
38 ornament, some others have a knot on the right. You can use originality and imagination in
39 the mixing and matching... eventually... covering your hair, rather than veiling your
40 presence, it could make you feel better instead (S., 18 years old, born in Egypt, in Italy for
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45 3 yr).

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48 These narratives show that while the respondents’ parents often
49 continued to consider these clothes – like certain foodstuffs or other objects
50 – as vehicles to manifest their native origins and their distance from the
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6 Western arena of consumers, these teenagers used the selfsame objects to
7
8 explore their habits, establishing new practical co-dependencies and
9
10 eventually displaying new potential consumption practices.
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13 Thus, through their lagging *habitus* the respondents found themselves
14
15 needing to learn how to operate with such tools within the new field. At the
16
17 same time, they learned what it means to be consumers, creatively engaging
18
19 with objects, artifacts and infrastructures without eliminating, the troubles
20
21 and disorientation linked to the experience of migration, as all the cases
22
23 above have shown.
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25

26 27 28 **Conclusions** 29

30 Although the Western commercial culture forces migrants and their
31
32 children to place themselves socially within it, this never happens in a
33
34 simply passive and neutral way (Sassatelli 2007; Brewer, Trentmann 2006).
35
36 To investigate this issue, I drew on theories of social practices as they
37
38 specifically deal with materiality in the field of consumption (Warde 2015;
39
40 Shove et al. 2012), and I focused on the practical co-dependency between
41
42 *habitus* and materials, rather than on individuals or national communities
43
44 (Rinkinen et al. 2015). Thus, the analysis of the ways in which young
45
46 migrants cope with material culture through the lenses of theories of social
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48 practice aimed to investigate the extent to which post-migration re-
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50 settlement entails the transformation of the embodied capacities of migrants
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6 in the field of consumption, possibly leading to the fabrication of new
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8 abilities.

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10 The empirical evidence presented supports the idea that for the
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12 youngsters studied it is never just a matter of being enchanted by brands as
13
14 unique means of integration or, conversely, being completely untouched by
15
16 commercial culture, being confined within their ethnic group, sharing
17
18 common deprivations. As I tried to show when discussing the active role of
19
20 objects as metaphorical 'cultural bridges', there is an underestimated yet
21
22 pervasive *material* basis on which identification can count that works at
23
24 least partially irrespective of national frames (Beck, Sznaider 2006).

25
26
27 Respondents seemed to mobilise understandings and skills from their
28
29 past which enabled them to *creatively engage with materials as tools* and to
30
31 eventually discover new ways of being a 'consumer'. Becoming a
32
33 consumer, in fact, is far from being a linear process of constantly
34
35 approaching a given standard of values or a struggle to capture a new sense
36
37 of normality, as the mainstream consumer acculturation literature suggests
38
39 on the basis of a strict and partially misleading revision of the homology
40
41 thesis (Coulangeon and Lemel 2009; Brisson and Bianchi 2017). Rather, it
42
43 seems to be *a practical process of learning by doing, actively addressed by*
44
45 *materiality*, with all its contradictions and disorientation often remaining
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47 explicit (Warde 2015; Noble 2013).
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6 As Bourdieu taught us, the basic mechanism accounting for the
7 reproduction of social stratification in taste is dissociation from the
8 necessary (Bourdieu 1984). Yet, people living in conditions of scarcity act
9 according to the principle of conformity to necessity(1984). This has been
10 proved in previous research (Blasius and Friederichs 2008) and I cannot
11 reject the ‘taste of necessity’ thesis on the basis of my data. Accordingly, in
12 the particular class fraction that I studied, constituted by the children of
13 immigrants living in distressed neighborhoods in Milan, the members – due
14 to their economic and educational restrictions – were unable to use their
15 educational attainment to increase their economic capital (2008).
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28 Nevertheless, as I have tried to show, if we look at their consumption
29 practices through the lens of the theory of practice and particularly
30 searching for the hysteresis effect (Bourdieu 2000; Strand and Lizardo
31 2017), it is not only possible to grasp the disorientation and constraints
32 typical of being a consumer in a ‘new world’; it is also possible to explore
33 the creativity and the space of possibilities for such agents to construct a
34 version of their own taste.
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43 On learning to cope with new and different things, or learning to find a
44 new place for old things, young children of immigrants realize day by day
45 what it means to be a ‘consumer’ in the host country, concomitantly with
46 the shifting of material elements of practice. In the practical process of
47 becoming part of a new world of things, these ‘new’ consumers not only
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6 find a way to live in a new place, but also become more and more
7 accustomed to such a practice of aligning and dealing with mismatches
8 (Noble 2013).
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11
12 In fact, because hysteresis occurs within environments that change at a
13 rate different from the practical belief embodied in the social agent, it
14 provokes a change in the relationship between *habitus* and social location
15 (Strand and Lizardo 2017). Hence, within these particular occasions, it
16 allows the social agent, to a certain extent, to free him/herself from the
17 symbolic violence that, as a rule, operates synchronizing *habitus* and field,
18 and in so doing it creates space for various modes of reflexivity, which in
19 turn make the agent if not able to exit from the ‘taste of necessity’, at least
20 able to reframe the very definition of what ‘necessity’ means.
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32 Drawing on their ineradicable sense of disorientation, the participants in
33 my research gradually *became* consumers in their daily experience, learning
34 to engage with different materials, which in turn may become tools to
35 fabricate new consumption practices.
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For Peer Review

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Pictures



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7

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25 Notes

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29 ¹ The so-called “segmented assimilation theory” (Portes and Rumbaut 2005) is basically a
30
31 socio-economic driven perspective to measure in what point of the social scale migrants
32
33 happen to be situated in a given host country. For critiques of this theory, see Tribalat
34
35 (1995) and Bosisio *et al* (2009).
36

37 ² This is part of a broader research project titled “*Border commercial culture: familiar*
38
39 *networks and second generation young immigrants between consumption and solidarity*”
40
41 within which we collected 73 in-depth interviews conducted with 40 young children of
42
43 immigrants (15-23 years old) of different national origins and 33 members of their families.
44

45 ³ I would like to thank one of the reviewers for this observation.

46 ⁴ The Italian word “Saldi” in the picture stands for “sales”.
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