
Merging traditional with modern: the role of possessions in liminal transitions

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Key Words

Indigenous, Liminal Transition, Self-Identity

Abstract

A liminal transition is a period of time in which a person feels caught between two identities: who they are and who they want to become (Kevina 2012). Fighting the tension between purchasing in line with current self-identity (how a person perceives himself or herself now) and purchasing in line with aspirational identity (who a person longs to become), self-identity becomes internally conflicting, and consumers are unsure how to purchase products.

This research specifically investigates liminal transitions among indigenous people who are faced with choosing between the traditional and the modern. By indigenous individuals, I refer to those who are a native member or are ancestrally native of an ethnic community having participated in traditional ways of dress, cultural practices, etc. This research has two purposes. The first is to further understand liminal transitions and the role of products in liminal transitions. The second purpose is to examine how businesses can play a role in creating a sense of balance between the traditional and the modern. The first purpose was met through a literature review of liminal transitions, and the second purpose was met through analyzing case studies of artists and businesses who have successfully been able to bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern.

My contribution to this area of research is the connection of liminal transitions to business strategy and economic development. It is known that products and possessions play a role in easing the transition between liminal states. However, what many businesses do not recognize is that this creates a product need and a new market that have yet to be fully taken advantage of. Using liminal transitions as a source of strategy can allow businesses to produce products that bring empowerment to consumers and economic development to the community.

I. Introduction

A liminal transition is a period of time in which a person feels caught between two identities: who they are and who they want to become (Kevina 2012). For members of indigenous communities, this transition involves shifting from a highly traditional lifestyle to a contemporary one. It creates uncertainty for them as they are unsure how to fully express their self-identities. For businesses and entrepreneurs, this opens the door to a new market: creating products that merge the traditional with the modern to create balance and allow indigenous community members to express both who they are and who they want to become at the same time, which reduces the feeling of internal conflict during a liminal state.

II. A Literature Review on Liminal Transitions

As people begin to enter into a liminal stage, they undergo what is considered to be an "identity crisis" due to the imbalance of managing two identities (Szabo & Ward 2015); they exist as a social anomaly (Kevina 2012). Separated from their prior role and not yet having attained the attributes of their future state (Noble & Walker 1997), individuals will play out various roles until their identity becomes consistent with what they imagined (McCracken 1986). In the case of those

who are raised in a highly ethnic environment, they can be made to feel as if they are under suspicion of being too ethnic or not ethnic enough (Zukin & Maguire 2004).

In the liminal state, consumers are unsure whether to purchase in line with their current self-identity (who a person perceives himself or herself to be currently) or their aspirational identity (who a person desires to become). It is as if they are straddling two separate worlds, not truly belonging to either (Kevina 2012). The objects in our lives that we possess are an extended part of the self and play a role in not only communicating self-identity but also in the development of the self (Belk 1988). As people undergo liminal transitions, possessions play two essential roles: preservation of the past and construction of the new, helping to facilitate the liminal transition (Noble & Walker 1997). For example, when entering into motherhood, certain consumption rituals, such as having baby showers and preparing a nursery room, can gradually transform the “mother-to-be” into a “mother” (Afflerback, Anthony, Carter, & Grauerholz 2014). The liminal state is proof of the need for a new market for individuals in these transitional stages. Products, such as clothing, should combine both the past, traditional aspects of dress mixed with the modern style in order to meet the needs of consumers undergoing this transition (Khare, Mishra, & Parveen 2012).

Liminal transitions are commonly thought to be developmental changes such as growing from a child into a teenager, but they can also be situational, such as moving to college or moving to an modern, contemporary community after living in a rural, traditional community (Szabo & Ward 2015). As that person begins to consider who they need to become in order to do well in this new community, the vision of future self conflicts with a person’s current self-identity, as they don’t want to let go of their past and previous cultural traditions while assimilating to this new environment.

This paper is specifically viewing indigenous individuals, who have moved from a traditional community into a modern, contemporary community and are working to find a balance in this liminal state. There are certain values and beliefs that people hold onto for their entire lives, but as we grow, change, and enter into different life stages, our self-identity evolves.

III. Results

From this literature review, it is clear that consumption and possessions do play a large role in liminal transitions. They allow people to develop and communicate their sense of identity as a public expression. They preserve the past version of self as well as construct a new version of self. In order for indigenous community members to find a sense of balance during the transition from a traditional to a contemporary society, products must also merge the traditional with the modern.

IV. Market Implications

The sense of conflict that exists between traditional and modern identities proves that there is a niche market that is yet to be fully taken advantage of. Those belonging to indigenous communities are choosing between products that are traditional and products that are modern. Because they are faced with this choice, they currently exist as an anomaly searching for a market that meets the needs of being traditional and modern simultaneously. Currently, there aren’t many products that blend the two, and few have taken advantage of this market opportunity.

A. Case Study: Virgil Ortiz

Virgil Ortiz, of Pueblo descent, has built onto his family’s traditional occupation as potters by combining art, fashion, and film, modernizing the traditional Pueblo American patterns and designs. Rather than forsake the traditional pottery with techniques passed down for generations, he has added a contemporary spin that embraces his identity as a modern member of the Pueblo community. The Pueblo Revolt in 1680, when the Pueblo people fought to overthrow Spanish rule, has been a major source of inspiration for Ortiz in his designs. Creating apparel designs, sculptures, pottery, and murals, Ortiz has launched the past into the future by creating a replication of the revolt while incorporating futuristic people, designs, and technology, calling this collection “Revolt 1680/2180.” Ortiz has not only managed to master balancing traditional with modern, but has also

blended in the future by merging it with his own storytelling of science fiction. He continues to incorporate the patterns and figures of Pueblo culture into all of his products including his pottery, videography, photography, accessories, and apparel. His work has been exhibited around the world at various museums, including the Albuquerque Museum where I learned of his work, bringing awareness and appreciation to the history and art of Pueblo Americans.

B. Case Study: Sadakalo

Sadakalo is a retail company in Bangladesh whose intent is to market traditional clothing in a modern fashion industry. Historically, there have been two very distinct markets: one for traditional dress and one for modern apparel. The fashion market for women in Bangladesh is largely traditional in style, with 80 percent wearing traditional clothes and 20 percent wearing modern clothing. For men, the fashion market is the opposite, with 85 percent wearing modern clothing and 15 percent wearing traditional clothing. With citizens of Bangladesh being increasingly attracted to ready-to-wear clothing, Sadakalo took advantage of this new niche market by creating a product that blends traditional with modern to maximize the reach with both men and women. Sadakalo's vision revolves around creating clothing that is unique and different from other brands. At the time that the company began, most companies were focused on creating products full of vibrant color. Sadakalo's decision to produce all products in only black and white was a risky maneuver, but it has paid off well. Since first launching, the company continues to see success, opening a new outlet every year. It also partners with leading craftsmen and women of the region to keep the originality alive and incorporate the spirit of the artisans into the designs. This helps to preserve the handloom industry in Bangladesh, which provides livelihood for 1.5 million people in the country. Sadakalo's approach not only works to build the economy through a new, thriving business, it also works to preserve the country's heritage and the jobs of the handloom industry.

(Ahmed, Chowdhury, Uddin, & Ferdouset 2014)

C. Case Study: Bogolan

The ancient, Malian tradition of creating bogolan cloth (mudcloth) has turned modern, transforming the outdated art practice into an income-generating variety of products. Bogolan was once a labor-intensive and time-consuming practice where weavers would build fabric strips from cotton thread and hand-sew them together, dye the cloth, and then hand paint patterns in the negative space of the design. This cloth became an iconic symbol of Malian culture, one that tourists started to demand. Innovation of the production process was necessary in order to keep up with this growing demand, so the manufacturers started using sewing machines instead of stitching by hand and used stencils to paint the patterns to increase speed of production. This change pushed the limits of the cloth's authenticity, through efforts to speed up production while still preserving the bogolan's character and history. But for the tourist market, consumers looked for the aesthetic appeal. Bogolan didn't need to be an exact reproduction of the original process to sell, it only needed to be close enough to be associated with the original cloth that was its inspiration.

The fashion industry is what truly allowed bogolan to gain visibility and popularity, not only locally, but internationally. Bogolan was no longer used only in its traditional sense, as loose fitting garments, but started to be incorporated into a variety of consumer products: hats, scarves, jackets, miniskirts, neckties, and dresses along with household decor such as tablecloths, pillows, curtains and even made its way onto notebook covers for young children going to school. These products made bogolan a part of the consumer, a part of the extended self. "By wearing bogolan clothing, consumers make the cloth a part of themselves, a direct visual statement inseparable from their personal presence" (Rovine 2001, pg. 94). Designer Chris Seydou is credited by many for bogolan's revival in and outside of Mali as he started to design fabric prints that had subtly modulated tones to mimic the handmade imperfections in original bogolan cloth.

For artists and designers of products that use bogolan patterns, there is a tension between tradition and modernity. The artists and designers wanted to meet the demands of consumers without losing the symbolism and history of the Malian tradition. However, as Seydou has discovered, the two are not mutually exclusive; a balance can be found. (Rovine 2001).

A few additional designers and businesses have been able to find a balance in making products that combine the traditional with the modern. Mimi Plange (of African origin), Lila Downs (a Hispanic musician), and Nuuk Couture (located in Greenland) all have been able to tie history and tradition into contemporary designs.

D. Case Study Cross-Sectional Analysis

A balance between the traditional and the modern can be found in all of these case studies. They help to create a sense of appreciation for their traditional cultures and a sense of awareness among those who are unfamiliar with where these patterns and symbols come from that have been seen in contemporary communities around the world. Ortiz creates this appreciation and awareness by having his artwork displayed at various museums where anyone can visit and see his work. Sadakalo does this by providing a product that both men and women can enjoy, which allows them to connect on a new level. And bogolan has created an appreciation for Malian culture and tradition through the fashion industry as designers from around the world have incorporated its patterns into their products. Sadakalo goes one step further than these other two case studies by keeping the power in the hands of the people. This company makes sure to preserve the handloom industry by partnering with leading craftsmen and women of the area. As all of these cases sell multiple products as a business, they each contribute to economic development as well.

V. Conclusions

A. Impact on Economic Development and Sustainability

The development of products meant for those undergoing liminal transitions has the potential to bring economic development into indigenous communities throughout the world by driving business entrepreneurship, keeping power at the hands of the people, and empowering community members. As shown by the case studies, liminal transitions are a business opportunity to create products that merge the traditional with the modern, creating a bridge between the conflicting self-identities that exist within the individual. These businesses often help to put the power back in the hands of the people. As with the case of Sadakalo, local weavers are the craftsmen and women creating the products to be sold, helping to preserve the handloom industry, preserve the livelihood of these rural community members, and therefore, contribute to the sustainability of the local community's economy. Finally, these businesses and products help to empower the people of indigenous communities. They no longer have to choose between identities, they can be the fullest version of who they are, without the sacrifices they once had to make. When the modern merges with the traditional, indigenous people will be perceived as equals, and they will become empowered individuals with the confidence to fight for their rights, develop their own future, and contribute to the development of the economy.

B. Limitations

The market implications for this paper are strictly for indigenous communities. The internal conflict that occurs during liminal transitions may be different for those who are not members of the indigenous community. The case studies examined here only represent a few indigenous communities around the world. Each indigenous community holds its own values, beliefs, and customs, and therefore, the tension between the traditional and the modern may be experienced at different levels in each of these indigenous communities.

C. Further Research

An area of interest to build off of this research would be analyzing whether the theory of liminal transitions applies to those who are not indigenous in the same way that it applies to those who are indigenous, or if there different factors that non-indigenous communities are impacted by during liminal transitions. Another area of interest would be discovering how this initiative of merging the traditional with the modern into a single product could be implemented as a social business to further promote and impact economic development rather than as a for-profit business, which is the type of business that the designers and artists discussed in these case studies have created.

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