**Figuring Home: the role of commodities in the transnational experience**

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This article proposes to investigate the role played by material goods in the transnational experience. Previous research has shown that the movement of people across the world comes with a corollary of cultural flows which find their expression in multiple ways. This article looks more specifically at the kind of commodities that international students bring from home when living in the UK. Informed by interdisciplinary research, it reports on a quantitative study with some qualitative elements investigating the motivation for bringing specific goods, and the nature of those goods. It also looks at the issue of authenticity of provision for the sample by interrogating the importance of the locating process.

Keywords: commodities; identity; transnational experience

# Introduction

Cross-cultural studies focus largely on social interactions and interpersonal communication between individuals. Monceri (2009: 50) argues that “identity can and does change trans-culturally and inter-culturally, being the outcome of the concrete interactions taking place between concrete individuals who are situated in different cultural contexts”. This article proposes to take the investigation of the ‘concrete’ further by looking at another paradigm, namely the non-verbal information mediated through people’s relationship to goods when they are in transit between cultures. As such it is not the study of a form of deliberate communication but rather the documenting of relationships between people and inanimate objects which provides an emic perspective on cultural flows. The diegetic approach is through consideration of relevant writing with a cross-disciplinary perspective and description and discussion of empirical research.

As this study brings together human attachment in relation to tangible goods against a background of transnational displacement and emplacement, the research literature which informs it lies at the intersection of a number of fields: in particular, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, human geography, studies in intercultural communication, marketing and consumer behaviour have relevant contributions to make to our understanding of what people select to take with them when they leave their usual surroundings to move to a different country. The focus of the literature considered is on the cross-fertilisation between social sciences and business-orientated studies both in terms of content and research methodologies, with an emphasis on psychological and socio-cultural investigations undertaken for a better understanding of the market place.

The paper will first provide an overview of three key themes salient in relevant cross-disciplinary literature: one, crisscrossed by consumer research, sociology and intercultural communication revolves around concepts of identity in relation to consumption and possession; a second body of literature focuses on the conative perception of goods, on a blend of knowledge and affect explored in consumer research and psychology; the third area, dominated by human geography, examines the globalisation and localised patterns of commercial cultures. The thread between these three areas is that of establishing connections between the self and material goods.

We will then move on to report on the empirical research undertaken to provide a modicum of answers to two questions: what kind of commodities do international students travelling to the UK bring from home? And, what role(s) do these commodities fulfil in the transnational experience? Findings will be discussed in relation to theoretical and pragmatic insights offered by the literature.

# Goods as informants

In the next three following sections we will consider theoretical contributions to our understanding of the relationships entertained between individuals and their material possessions. The spatial paradigm establishes a connective strand between the bodies of literature considered.

***Identity and consumption***

Insights from sociology which widely draws from the informative properties of objects to document the human take on the world are frequently sought by researchers intent on gaining a better understanding of the relationship between consumers and the material world, in particular when those inanimate objects are “stripped of commodity status” (Epp & Price 2010) and endowed with personal meaning. Thus Bourdieu’s construct of *habitus* conflates the material, spatial and social spheres whereby objects do not just provide background staging but a transactional way of experiencing the world. Regular exposure to a specific range of material goods, selection of some and exclusion of others due to socio-cultural considerations feed into and comfort the set of acquired dispositions attached to each individual. In Bourdieu’s construct, these internalised values can evolve but remain connected to existing social practices (Bourdieu 1977). *Habitus* is firmly rooted in a space-, culture- and time-related context. Likewise, space is used metaphorically in consumer research by Belk (1990: 669) who looks at the way material possessions add multi-dimensional relief to the notion of core self which in the process emerges as an extended self:

The notion of the extended self suggests that we transcend the immediate confines of our bodies by incorporating into our identities, objects from our physical environment (Belk 1988). This conception implies that the self is spatially enlarged by such extensions; that our possessions make us bigger people.

If the importance of material objects in the life of individuals is not debatable, the notion of ‘core’ self which is at the root of Belk’s concept of the ‘extended self’ is seen as more problematic by Ahuvia (2005) as it posits stability and universality. The latter explores further the metaphor used by Belk and through a series of empirical studies comes to the conclusion that in the course of their lives people look for consumption ‘solutions’ for identity conflicts (for example when torn between an attachment to the past and a predilection for modernity). They opt in particular for demarcating and compromising solutions which allow them to preserve some kind of coherence in their consuming experience. For Ahuvia, this view is pitched against the concept of a postmodern fragmented self which envisions identity as a black hole fed by an endless stream of non-unified and dispirited consumption episodes, such as construed by the American psychologist Cushman (1990). In consumer research Rojas Gaviria and Bluemelhuber (2010) go very much along the same lines as Ahuvia. Turning to the explanatory powers of philosophy and neuro-biology to shed light on the symbolic aspects of consumption, they see the past-future timeline as a continuum, and place the search for coherence, which they term ‘autobiographical concern’, at the heart of the human experience. They base this search for coherence on the philosophical concept of ‘desire assemblage’ developed by Deleuze who sought to stress the connection between desire for an object with a particular context. Consumption is therefore interpreted as a form of compensation which enables people to carry parts of their past. In the process this allows for elements of stability in times of life role transitions while ‘autobiographical concern’ allows for multiple interconnections between self, memories and objects.

The commodities and other material possessions that ‘translocated’ individuals (Appadurai 1996 as cited by Conradson & McKay 2007: 168) select to take with them are part of their biographies. As such they correspond to the notion of ‘cultural marker’ identified by Holliday (2010: 176) as “an artefact which signifies a cultural reality”. We shall now look in more detail at marketing-led literature on the link between goods endowed with personal value and the locating process of this reification.

## Perception of significant material goods

A number of studies investigating human relationships with cherished possessions and more generally with objects and goods selected for consumption adopt or refer to a semiotic approach to interpret the active construction of that aspect of social reality (Grayson & Shulman 2000, Davies & Fitchett 2004, Kessous & Roux 2008, Schembri, Merrilees & Kristiansen 2010). Out of the three modes of relationship between the sign and the signified in the triadic model of the sign in Peircean semiotics – symbolic, iconic and indexical – the indexical mode seems the most potent for an investigation of the link between object, subject and origin as a direct connection or co-occurrence is entailed to release meaning as “an indexical sign is ‘like a fragment torn away from the object’” (Pierce as cited by Chandler 2002:42).

As illustrated in Diagram 1 below, powerful relational strands to objects and commodities are fed from the Peircean notion of indexical anchoring as several bodies of research into attachment, nostalgia and the search for product authenticity commonly hark back to a locating process. Thus for Grayson and Schulman (2000) the reasons why people value particular objects and see some of those are irreplaceable stem partly from the fact that irreplaceable possessions are indices: beyond their intrinsic qualities, such as functionality or aesthetic value, “they have a factual, spatial connection with the special events and people they represent” (*ibid*: 19). These authors also see ‘contamination’ between inanimate objects whereby ‘possessions may gain value via spatial proximity’ (*ibid:* 19). Although the prosody of the term ‘contamination’ is arguably generally not positive (as akin to ‘corruption’), it is to be interpreted here as a process of partial identification with a context which allows the sought release of memories. The empirical data from the above-quoted study enabled its authors to establish that there is a strong correlation between a personal evaluation of irreplaceability and corporal or temporal indexicality with variations with age and gender. They also established from their study that corporal indexing (i.e. association with particular individuals) tends to become more prominent over time. This body of research is situated within the context of loss of authenticity in society, a fact used by marketers to promote pseudo-authentic products, and described as ‘hyper reality’ by Baudrillard (1981). Although most of the objects mentioned in this study were mass-produced, the authors come to the conclusion that “consumers can use commodities to indexically anchor their experiences to the real world” (*ibid*: 28). Further exploration of this aspect is provided by Schembri, Merrilees and Kristiansen (2010) who investigate how brand consumption contributes to the construction of the self. Highlighting the fact that “while an iconic interrelationship is described as aspirational, an indexical interrelationship is considered historical in nature, linked to past consumption experiences” (*ibid*: 633). This has implications for the marketplace and in particular for the marketing of brands which can tap successfully into “the experiential meaning that brands have for consumers in constructing the self” (*ibid*: 633).

Research on attachment to goods has also turned its attention to the intensity of feeling experienced and the development of a dialectical relationship between consumers and the consumed. Thus Ahuvia (2005) makes the reflection that the word ‘love’ is used as much in relation to objects and activities as with people. In a subsequent article, Carrol & Ahuvia (2006) point out that ‘brand love’ is conceptually different from brand liking as it is embedded in the consumers’ self-identity. It is not just a more intense form of liking as it bears no graduation (i.e. there is either love or no love) and the intensity of feeling is concomitant with the potential of a brand for a form of self-expression.

Past consumption experiences and their bearing on subsequent material encounters are also core to an investigation of nostalgia as a motivational force. In that interpretative stance, the experiential meaning of goods is linked to a turn to the past and compensation for a form of loss (Holbrook & Schindler 2003). Nostalgic value placed on particular products hinges on the role of temporal distance but spatial and/or social referents can also play an important part. In a semiotic analysis of nostalgia in relation to products and brands, Kessoux and Roux (2008) established distinction between products which evoke continuity, everyday past (through a layering process, also termed ‘long-standing nostalgia’), tradition (through mediation) and those more specifically connected to disruption and a more specific set of circumstances (dissociated from a layering process). They allocated in turn different product types susceptible to be associated to the above categories: in particular, food brands in relation to continuous exposure which is habit-inducing, perfume as a marker of transition and expression of self-concept, jewellery for its associations with an event of unique importance. Their empirical study is located in a particular spatial and cultural frame (French respondents in 2005/2006) but it posits four non-essentialist propositions which link personal traits to a propensity to reach for differentiated triggers of nostalgic feelings. In particular, the authors propose that an attachment to food brands may be commensurate to attachment to the everyday past whereas the symbolic aspect of objects is brought to the fore when individuals see them as material markers of significant life events.

Indexical anchoring is equally very much in the background of studies on the search for authenticity in consumption. In particular, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) build their research on the premise that “there is widespread agreement that authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation of the essence of what is observed than properties inherent in an object” (*ibid*: 839) and bring out three salient themes in the accounts of authenticity drawn from a series of interviews. While two of those themes (‘feeling in control’ and ‘feeling virtuous’) revolve around the self, the third, ‘feeling connected to people and community’, firmly places the locus of perception on situated relationships. The search for authenticity is thereby associated with the attainment of self-projecting gaols which “involves taking personal ownership of experiences, thus giving objects, brands and/or events an indexical character’ (*ibid*: 854). This statement on authenticity very much echoes above quoted citations on perception of the irreplaceable and brand love, which suggests that these notions are intimately interwoven through personal contextual reference.

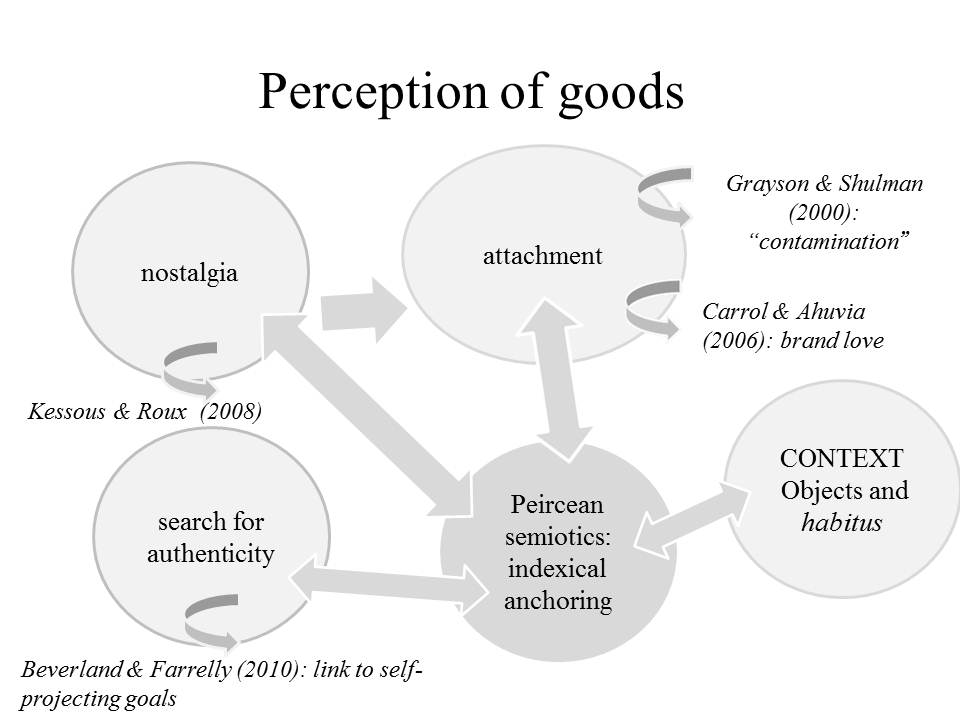


Diagram 1: perception of goods

***Commodity culture and the transnational experience***

Human geographers have pointed to the informative properties of “traffic in things” (Crang, Dwyer & Jackson 2003:446) to document increasingly complex patterns of migrations and forms of settlement, and the cultural interconnections which stretch across the world. Commodity is therefore a “particular powerful lens through which to see the many dimensions of transnationality” (*ibid*: 451), one which can reflect and distinguish between a great variety of experiences, ranging from impoverished migrant populations to more affluent and privileged groups. This lens does not take heed of national boundaries just as “cultural identities are no longer clearly wedded to particular nation states” (*ibid:* 439). And in the same way, looking at conceptions of identity in relation to place, Conradson and McKay (2007) describe “the multiply-located senses of self among those who inhabit transnational social fields” (*ibid*: 168) and remark that the affiliations and the maintenance of these may be materially and emotionally intensive. This reflection points to the potential of goods and personal possessions to provide both a sense of emplacement and connection to the place of origin. Davies and Fitchett (2004) point out in turn that in the global market place there are places which are less culturally differentiated from others (for instance, airport malls and shopping piazzas) but argue that, from evidence, in “contemporary consumer societies simultaneously retain transnational, national and regional cultural characteristics, as do their consumers” (*ibid:* 316). However, there is no homogeneity to be found in either the cultural place at the point of departure or at the point of arrival. Therefore consumption patterns are also highly heterogeneous among populations in transition with experiential patterns of acculturation mapping out onto “forms of symbolic, emotional and functional fracture” (*ibid*: 328). These differentiated adaptive orientations manifest themselves in turn in the type and number of personal possessions that visitors take along with them.

**The study**

## Research design

The empirical material collected for the purpose of this study originated from a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data to develop complementarity between the lines of enquiry (Davies and Fitchett 2002). A quantitative survey was undertaken in 2010 among non-British undergraduates attending a UK university. Approval from the University Research Ethics Committee was sought and obtained and the anonymity of the respondents guaranteed.

A total of 108 semi-quantitative questionnaires were collected. Beyond general demographic information, initial questions probing general behaviour attracted dichotomous yes/no answers (on whether the respondents brought goods back from home, missed particular brands, felt they could generally source equivalent products from home in the UK, or had noticed any change in their practices). Each of these were followed by questions with response categories allowing multiple answers (e.g. investigating reasons for bringing goods back from home, types of goods brought back, and the locating processes in the search for equivalents) and questions prompting worded responses (comments on favourite items and changing patterns in locating process). All qualitative answers were coded in order to allow for the identification of emergent themes. This data collection was complemented by semi-structured interviews with volunteers which probed some of the issues arising from the survey.

## Basic profiling information

## Among the initial questions collecting basic demographic data, the respondents were asked to indicate which part of the world they considered their place of origin. This elicited the mention of 24 origins which for the statistical analysis were profiled into four macro geographical groupings: Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. In terms of gender, 30% of the respondents were males, 70% females. Most of them (89.2%) had been in the UK for less than 3 years, 63.7% under a year and 5.59% between 1 and 3 years. Most of the respondents who volunteered their age (100 out of 108) were in the 20-30 age groups (88%) while 8.4% were less than 20 and 2.8 between 30 and 40 years of age.

## Statistical analysis

For the statistical analysis a Chi-square test was used to establish whether there was a significant difference between expected and actual frequency in the pairing of answers of one type of questions with answers provided in another set 1. This type of statistical analysis allowed going beyond classification of information under simple paradigms such as geographical origin as it allowed the exploration of relationships between specific types of behaviour. It therefore offered more insight into the experiential side of consumption among students in cultural transition. Qualitative data was elicited from the 25 participants who had volunteered to be contacted in follow-up research from the questionnaires. This is used in the following sections to illuminate some aspects of the findings brought out from the survey.

**Findings and discussion**

## Reasons invoked for bringing back items from home

Among the 108 respondents, only six individuals indicated that they did not bring goods from home. This limited negative response was correlated to a mix of explanations: while three invoked the homogeneity of provision between home and the UK, two asserted the importance of experiencing some goods in their home setting (one respondent through the tautological parallelism “Scotland is Scotland, Germany is Germany”). Another two invoked pragmatic constraints but subsequently mentioned missing particular items.

The vast majority however (94%) indicated that they did indeed travel to the UK with a selection of goods from home. They invoked the following non-mutually exclusive reasons for doing so: no proper equivalent (54%), value for money (40%), memories from home (39%), perception of quality (29%) and problems of comprehension (6%). These point to a mix of pragmatic and emotive rationales.

It can be argued that there is a degree of overlap between two of these categories, ‘memories from home’ and ‘no proper equivalents’, as both use origin of provision and earlier consuming experiences as a benchmark in the host environment (in fact 22% of the respondents ticked both answers). It seems reasonable to assume that the verdict ‘no equivalent’ is in some cases attributable to very pragmatic reasons. However, there can also be an implicit reference to familiarity of use and authenticity with an emphasis on conformity to perceptions of the genuine. This insight is corroborated by the list of items cited as examples in the questionnaire, impromptu comments to elaborate on the distinctiveness of these items from a personal viewpoint (e.g. “I am used to these products so it’s hard to live daily without them”; “to feel home anywhere”) and from comments elicited from the unstructured interviews. For instance, when specifically asked to comment on the distinctiveness of the two aforementioned categories, one of the interviewees initially commented that ‘no equivalents’ was in her mind related to quality and brands rather than to memories. However, subsequent elaboration on this point brought out remarks about the importance of association with familiar places in her home culture:

Well it has personal value because I feel more confident eating something that I am bringing from home and that I have been consuming all my life than just buying in a random supermarket here and … it gives me that sense of security that… what I am going to be consuming is going to be … you know… as it has always been.

This can be related to the previously cited study from Beverland and Farrell (2010) which predicates the search for authenticity to three personal goals, one being the need to establish connections to people and community. The above quotation clearly establishes that connection. The expression of emotional attachment is also patent. Ahuvia (2005) puts forward the argument that life narratives are built upon conflict and resolution of identity conflicts and that relationships with objects enter in these composites. He points out that in everyday transactions, compromises are rife. However, this is more rarely the case for objects of love as “loved items feel right; they are not common compromises that satisfice” (*ibid*: 181). The dismissal of ‘proper equivalents’ can therefore be seen as a refusal to compromise with less than wholeness.

## Types of items brought back

The four categories most commonly mentioned in the sample were, in decreasing order: food (62%), technology (48%), literature (books, magazines, newspapers: 42%), music (37%) and toiletries (37%). The other categories listed in the questionnaire (drinks, music, clothes, housekeeping products, furnishings and others) elicited much lower levels of responses but under ‘others’ medicines and tobacco featured a few times.

### Food

It comes as no surprise that food should feature among the most readily listed items given their potential for a high cultural imprint, often associated with regional and national cultures. It is strongly connected to *habitus* and the social construction of taste. As Askegaard and Madsen (1998: 564) comment, food cultures run deep and “the globalizing tendencies may be considered surface ripples in more deeply rooted cultural patterns”. In the field of consumer behaviour De Mooij (2010: 8) makes the same point on the connective strand between food, culture and time:

Generally speaking, the older the product category, the stronger the influence of culture. This explains why consumption of food products is persistently culture bound.

Food brands have also been found to be often associated with nostalgia, with rooting in the past (Kessous & Roux 2008).

The statistical analysis in our study established a significant relationship between the fact of bringing food from home and, on one hand, the thought of not being able to find any proper equivalent in this country (χ2 = 11.803, df = 1, p = 0.001) and, on the other hand, the practice of going to specialist shops to purchase goods from home (χ2= 4.525, df = 1, p = 0.033). These responses originated from students across the geographical spectrum.

Most brands listed in the questionnaire were food brands with a high preponderance of comfort food (bread, snacks and confectioneries), flavours and spices (“it’s essential for a good meal”) or brands with a strong cultural heritage (e.g. Lu biscuits, Milleret cheese, Ricard alcohol, Dr Oetker dessert preparations, Milka and Cola Cao chocolate, Jiff peanut butter, Solis tomato sauce, Heng Shun vinegar). The words ‘taste’ and ‘tasty’ were recurrently used in synoptic explanations for selecting those items.

For international students, food reminiscent of home (either brought in or purchased in the UK) is a way to anchor their cultural identity in the midst of change and derive “emotional sustenance” (Brown 2009: 47) which can raise certain items to the status of “love objects” (*ibid*: 47). Food has the ability to release memory through “located texture” (Tolia–Kelly 2004: 326), as testified by a student commenting on the reasons why she takes an ubiquitous item, lentils, from Spain to the UK:

my lentils I cook them as my mum and my grand mum do… so with the lentils here I cannot do that …so I bring them from home and prepare them in their way so it is like being at home

The same student had previously elaborated on the comforting properties of food and the ability for a specific food item – Spanish *jamón* (cured ham) – to establish metonymically a node of connections between sensorial pleasure, cultural belonging and well-being:

[student] … because it is ours… it is Spanish and for example if you are at home and … if you feel homesick, if you get like some ham and some tomato and some bread, you can make a proper ….

[researcher] *bocadillo* ?2

[student] Yes! So that it makes you feel more … more like home

Spanish *jamón* is thus in the same league of evocative conduit as Proust’s *madeleines*.

### Technology

In contrast to the food category, indication of import of technological items was not associated with any further comments in the survey, either about makes and brands or elaborations on personal significance. This may be because of a propensity to be associated with what Carrier (1990: 581) terms “anonymous and fungible commodities”, although attachment to high­-tech brands and their potential for self-expression is also well documented (Wang & Datta 2010).

Survey results indicated that if the respondents had been in the country under a year, they were more likely to have brought technology with them (χ2= 10.285, df = 4, p = 0.36). This could be due to a mix of pragmatic reasons (for instance, rapid product obsolescence, identification of sourcing in the UK) and relational issues (related for instance to financing by family) which could be investigated further.

### Literature (books and printed press)

This product group yielded two significant associations in the survey: one linking the fact of bringing literature and the European group (χ2 = 8.228, df = 3, p = 0.042); the other pointing to a strong relationship between the fact of bringing literature and memories from home (χ2 = 17.498, df = 1, p = .001). The only specific comment made was about the lack of individual magazine titles.

It is worth pointing out that ‘better of understanding of instructions’ was dismissed as a reason for importing these items, which seems to discard linguistic barriers and privileging a sense of connection with language and home culture.

### Music

The sample results yielded a significant relationship between the fact of taking music and its ability to evoke memories from home (χ2= 11.167, df = 1, p = .001). This information was not elaborated on by any further comments, but one of the students interviewed pointed out the ease of access to digital sources.

### Toiletries

Grooming products, along with clothing, are associated with cathexis, the emotional, psychosexual energy channelled onto an object or idea (Ahuvia 2005). In a study on ‘brand love’, Carrol & Ahuvia (2006) concluded that hedonic products tend to attract stronger emotional responses than utilitarian ones and that complex relationships are developed between those products and brand loyalty. In our study, toiletries were the second group of items to be mentioned by brand name. These encompassed brands of personal hygiene products, cosmetics, body creams and lotions. Parallel comments were about the inability to locate the same product, quality and price, and about differences in availability of product range (to the extent of mentioning global brands such as Nivea and OB). Results from the survey also showed that the European group was more likely to bring back toiletries (χ2 = 8.01, df = 3, p = 0.044).

### Clothes and fashion

Clothing was not a particularly significant category in terms of allocation of ‘home goods’ but when this option was selected, it yielded a number of comments on quality, price, inability to locate similar items, style, range and aesthetic preferences. These were pitched in comparative terms (“there is no style like this”, “clothes in China is much cheaper and [more] beautiful than UK style”, “I prefer the fashion of my own country”). The ability for clothing to provide emotional comfort was explicitly expressed by a student from Nigeria:

I cannot get native clothes made here except at a very expensive price. They don’t wear it here and when I miss home, I can wear them or just seeing them gives me joy.

Culturally distinctive clothing is here for private gratification. Conversely, fashion is earmarked as an unwanted sign for cultural differentiation by another international student (from South Korea):

[I do not bring this back from home] as I am trying to suit the way that European people wear cloth

The reference in this case is one of exclusion, of leaving behind parts of one’s culture in a deliberate effort to conform and blend in with the general UK student population.

## Patterns of behaviour

The survey did not bring out particular patterns of change of behaviour but, as previously mentioned, most of the respondents had resided in the UK for a relatively short period of time. If comments were made it was generally about food, either to report stopping bringing in individual food items after locating them in local stores, or conversely identifying a lack of specific products in the UK. However, a hint that patterns of motivation for bringing in goods could be fairly complex transpires from the following comment made by an individual who had been residing in the UK for a longer period of time (over 5 years):

It depends on the season and… how I feel. Because when I first came over I did not bring much stuff and then after 6 months I just brought a lot of stuff, and by stuff I mean tobacco and food mainly… and two years ago, three years ago I got a big carton sent by my friends. But I prepared it myself and had it shipped when I am here… But I don’t know… I tend to bring something pretty much all the time, if I can, if I have enough space… because sometimes I don’t feel it’s worth to pay extra money.. just to bring something that somehow you can find over here as well…

# Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have highlighted the ability of personal goods to provide a hiatus between home and host cultures, in particular those with a connection with the senses and perception and projection of self and mapped out conceptualisations of this relationship from different bodies of research. As previously cited, human geographers Crang, Dwyer and Jackson (2003:451) see commodity as a “lens”. The term ‘collocations’ could also be borrowed as a metaphor from linguistics to refer to the informative property of goods and objects in relation to their translocated human referents, informing not only on the material company that these individuals keep but also on the distilling process which has led to their election. Our research has also identified a number of potential lines of enquiry, such as the evolution of attitudes and behaviours over time and the need to disambiguate between perceptions of non-availability and need to attribute specific locating coordinates.

**Notes**

1. A Chi-square test is a common statistical test used to establish whether there is a significant difference between an observed set of results and the expected results (the latter based on a null hypothesis, e.g. an equal ratio or a random association between two variables), in other words to investigate whether values depart from what would be expected by chance alone. In this study we were testing results obtained from one set of questions against answers provided in another set. For instance we interrogated the data to establish whether there was a link between the geographical origin of the sample and the type of comments the respondents made. The statistical information provides the following specific data: The chi-square result χ2 determines the significance of the pairing of the variables. The higher the χ2 value, the more significant (i.e. the less likely due to chance) the association between the two variables is. The df value refers to the degrees of freedom which isthe number of values that are free to vary after restriction has been placed on the data. The p-value is the [probability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Probability%20\%20Probability) of obtaining a [test statistic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Test_statistic%20\%20Test%20statistic) at least as extreme as the one that was actually observed, assuming that the [null hypothesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Null_hypothesis%20\%20Null%20hypothesis) is true (according to which there is no relationship between the two measured phenomena) The lower the p-value, the less likely the result is if the null hypothesis is true, and consequently the more "significant" the result is (i.e. the result is not likely to be due to chance). A null hypothesis is rejected if the p-value is less a chosen threshold, most commonly 0.05 (i.e. 5% probability of the results being due to chance alone).

As an example, in the first instance in the manuscript, we used this test to look for a non-random association between whether or not people brought food from home and their opinion as to whether they would be able to find any proper equivalent in this country. The test was highly significant (χ2 = 11.803, degrees of freedom = 1, probability = 0.001).

1. Sandwich in Spanish.

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