Experiencing the Past during Transformations in Life

P. Rojas and C. Bluemelhuber

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Our empirical work suggests that consumption during life transformations may facilitate actualizing one’s past to match with new life context. In this article, (i) we provide the resulting framework for characterizing this past actualization process; (ii) we induct from the data three mechanisms in which consumption experience facilitates past actualization: “Bricolage”, “Teddy bear” and ”Past Flight". Four in-depth case studies enlighten this agenda; their interpretation results from an iterative process leveraged on participants and on literature dealing with the subjects of personal narratives and changes in life. It is our intention to motivate further research on the role of consumption regarding the past during transformations in life.

Keywords: life transformation; past actualization; personal narrative; “bricolage”; “teddy bear”; “past flight”

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Experiencing the Past during Transformations in Life

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When choosing the words that best describe developed contemporary societies, specialists seem to agree on a kind of “disruptive” vocabulary: Liquid, fluid, movement, coexistence of meanings, fragmentation, fragility, ambiguity and acceleration (e.g. Lyotard 1978; Marquard 1991; Bauman 2000; Lipovetsky and Charles 2004). These descriptors of an accelerated world enhance the continual transition that modern or post-modern \(^1\) citizens experience from familiar contexts:

“(…) the tempo of alteration in conditions of life (the dismantling of familiar things and the production of strange ones) advances;

\(^1\) If current times are qualified of modern or postmodern and its implications is not the purpose of this paper.
everything is in flux, and at greater and greater speeds.” (Marquard 1991, p. 56)

The constant acceleration of contemporary world implies that consumers are more likely to engage in new beginnings and new endings (Bauman 2000), implying increasingly occurring transformations in life. People in transition - that voluntarily or involuntarily face major changes in life - may decide to accompany those changes with different consumption experiences.

Traditionally, consumer researchers have focused on consumers’ transformations from a perspective of a future self, as a way of experiencing the future (McCracken 1990; Davis and Gary 2003; Schouten 1991), while paying less attention to the potentiality of experiences of the past.

However, our empirical analysis on four in-depth case studies shows that consumption during transformations in life is linked to both the past and the future. Human beings – storied beings (McAdams 1993) – constantly redefine their personal story, not only by projecting themselves into the future, but also by connecting to their past. In that context, turning moments are perfect opportunities for engaging in redesigning our self narratives. They confront us with a key question regarding the continuity of our story: Should I keep my current storyline or do I need to modify it by reorganizing some of the episodes through an actualization of my past experiences?

The theoretical section of this article explains in detail this actualization process that may take place while redesigning our personal narrative.

This theory should be considered as part of our findings as it is the outcome of a process that started with data and only after get documented with literature. The rest of the results are included into the findings section, in which we introduce the idea of consumption experiences as facilitators of the actualization process. We thereby illustrate three mechanisms for actualizing the past through consumption – inducted from the data: “bricolage”, “teddy bear” and “past flight”.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theoretical Assumption: The Narrative Identity

This paper draws on the assumption that one of the main features of identity construction is the necessity of creating our own personal narrative. A personal narrative is the sense we give to isolated events in our life while incorporating them in our personal story. This story – that is not only self-told but also shared – acts as a guarantee for the coherence and the continuity of our self (McIntyre 1984; Taylor 1989).

The construction of an identity through life telling exercise is an assumption that has been largely highlighted and adopted in the philosophical, psychological and sociological literature, for e.g. Ricoeur (1988), McAdams (1993); and Denzin and Lincon (1994).

Consumer research has also engaged in multiple studies of significant importance that have been carried out using the interpretation of life stories while analyzing consumer behavior. We can, among others, mention Fournier (1998), Thompson and Tambyah (1999), Escalas and Bettman (2000), and Belk (2006).

Narrative Identity and the Actualization Process

As we mentioned, there is behind each human being a life story, a narrative of his self that is constantly “re-written”, revised and shared. In order for this story to succeed, the subject needs to connect to the different experiences from the past.

This connection consists in reorganization experiences from his past, in order for them to be compatible with his current perception of the world and with his current behaviors. This is what we call actualization process.

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Further details on this process are included in the methodology.
This process of past experiences’ actualization compensates for the constant evolution in our life, it responds to the necessity of bringing coherence to our personal stories in order to maintain the sentiment of continuity. In this sense, we can picture our life as a working paper, in which past experiences get actualized several times and from different perspectives – our past can provide us with a multiplicity of readings (Conninck and Godard 1989, p. 25).

Actualization is not purely mental, it is also a practical process. Our current actions are the motors of the actualizations we decide to engage in. The actualization process, as such, represents the interpretation process we put in place in order to integrate, through our current actions and at different intensity levels, the experiences we have known in our past history.

The Dutch Philosopher Peijnenburg (2006) contributed to this idea in her study of retro-causality by introducing the concept of group of actions. She believes that while it is of common acceptance that our future is open for intervention, our past is traditionally perceived as closed and only revisited for idealization of what we experienced or yearning for the “old times”. She challenged this common acceptance by introducing the proposal of looking at human actions as belonging to a group of actions. This group is built on both past and future actions that make sense together – what she calls tendency. Her proposal is that by acting in the present we complete actions from the past and at the same time strengthen the tendencies we want to develop further. This capacity of our present actions to complete sense on previous and incomplete ones is what she called the possibility of “shaping” own past.

We believe that Peijnenburg’s philosophical analysis is compatible with our assumption of a narrative identity in the framework of consumer research theory. By assuming the theory of a storied construction of the self, we open the door to the past for actualization. We experience the past differently, from the current perspective of our personal story. It is by acting in the present in a specific way that we continue or strengthen our past:

“…what we do when we review our past actions is look for patterns that form networks of different dispositions. Since these networks are open and incomplete, we can, by acting in a particular way, continue and strengthen the one rather than the other pattern.” (Peijnenburg 2006, P. 251)

When we believe, as we do, that current actions can effectively actualize actions from the past, we exercise a kind of creative memory of the past: past facts are recognized from different levels at diverse intensities (Alia Al-Saji 2004) according to new contexts in life.

However, this usage of creativity and imagination in the way we make sense of past experiences does not prevent our story to be “real”. Our tendencies are grounded in facts, there are a limited number of stories we are able to tell (McAdams 2005).

There are then, three main elements in the life story actualization process: (1) Past facts in life – that have a date and a specific description – (2) new perspectives in life – through which we look into our personal past stock of facts (3) current actions that complete past ones to strengthen or not a selected tendency.

**Actualization Process during Transformations in Life and Consumer Research Studies**

The results of our empirical study – that include the theoretical framework presented in the previous subtitle and the findings section – focus on the actualization of the past during transformations in life.

That is because impacting events in our life, such as important transformations we are undergoing,
are typical moments that bring us to change the perspective from which we appraise our story line. Divorce, expatriation, marriage, motherhood, retirement, social mobility, are typical events where such transformation occurs.

These alternative appraisals – perspectives – we make of our personal past stock of facts, motivate the occurrence of an actualization as they bring us to ask: Do I want to continue with the current version of my personal narrative or do I want to strengthen other tendencies in my life?

The results from our empirical study show that people in transition leverage on contemporary consumption experiences for actualizing their past – according to our four in-depth cases that are presented in the findings section. For this reason, we considered necessary to conclude our theoretical section by including the two main studies that have analyzed behaviors of consumers in transition in relation to their past.

Two of the most renowned scholars in this field of Consumer research, Russell W. Belk and James H. McAlexander, have investigated the link between former material possessions and the past. Russell Belk (1992), for instance, inquired into the study of the importance of Mormons’ attachment to their material possessions while being in the perspective of their migration period (1847-1869). Belk (1990) also introduced in consumer research literature the link between the concepts of the “imagined past” and “nostalgic memories”. The idea behind these concepts is that certain memories of the past, for example, those linked to nostalgic emotions, are “imaginary” rather than “real”.

While we agree with Belk on the fact that “imaginary” memories contribute to the nostalgic emotional process, we would go further and assign them an additional functionality: they are facilitators in the actualization process we put in place at those turning moments, when a narrative shaping is needed.

James H. McAlexander (1991), on his side, made an interesting study on the specific scope of material possessions disposal following a divorce. He found that ex-spouses had different approaches when they had to decide whether to dispose or not of the material possessions relating to their common life. He classified the scenarios he observed into two categories: “Disposition to break free” and “disposition to hold on”.

The first category leads to a construction of a new self that would intent to let go old material possessions as a way of moving away from the previous relationship. The second one results more in a willingness to keep as much possible possessions as a way of expressing resistance to let the marriage go or at least as a strategy for delaying the end of the story.

While our study shares with McAlexander the idea that consumers engage in different consumption behaviors because of change in their life perspective, we tend to go even further in the analysis: the two categories of reactions he identified represent two different ways of actualizing former common life experiences. Our findings suggest as well, that this kind of actualization process not only includes former material possessions but also current consumption experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

The purpose of this empirical study is exploratory and its unique ambition is to generate for the consumer research literature new insights in the way consumers face turning points in their lives. It does not aim at drawing generalization or validating hypotheses.

Although the methodology does not follow strictly all the requirements of the Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1990), it is highly inspired by its idea of a bottom-up approach – starting with the data and building the theory based on it.

Data collection
Our analysis focuses on the stories of four people who encountered important transformations in their life. They shared with us their transformation story at four different occasions; the stories’ transcripts were drafted in a document of 60 pages on average for each of them. We conducted the data collection based on the following path:

At first a biographical written exercise, through which participants were required to identify the transformations that had deeply impacted their life. They had therefore to provide the time frame in which those changes had occurred and detail the strategies they had put in place to face them.

Then, as a second exercise, the participants were recorded in an interview where they were asked to go into the details of these transformations in life. Each of these personal telling exercises lasted between one and three hours. During these, we made it a rule to interfere as less as possible in their narration.

The two first phases enabled us to identify a certain number of topics common to all participants that could be interesting in the framework of consumer research. The following exercise, the third one, consisted in a second round of interviews with the specific objective of focusing on these particular topics. We completed our analysis with a final exercise in which we invited participants to provide an individual feedback on the preliminary conclusions we had drawn. Participants therefore modified some of the interpretations we had made and completed the information with personal experiences they thought would be useful for the analysis.

The entire process of data collection lasted six months.

Interpretation

Through this study we engaged ourselves in a dialogue experience (Thompson, 1989) with our four participants. We started analyzing the transcripts with the purpose of identifying major patterns, at first on an individual basis and then cross-cases.

We then looked into the existing literature for theories that could shed some light on those patterns and orient our further research. Our scope of investigation covered a large array of disciplines: philosophy, psychology, sociology, and consumer research. While evolving in the analysis of the data collected, we refined and redirected our exploration based on additional insights from participants. Our theoretical framework was only finalized when we reached the last step in our data collection process.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the specific interpretation we have made, together with the participants, regarding their transformations in life.

The first part introduces each of the participants together with the transformation they have experienced and the new perspectives that followed.

The second part, illustrates three mechanisms for actualizing the past that elicited from the data, with examples from participants. For each, we identified the consumption experiences that facilitated those specific actualization processes.

Choosing the most appropriate illustration for each of the three mechanisms has been a difficult process, seen the richness and the quality of collected data.

Participant’s Transformations in Life and New Perspectives

Participant 1: Mike

In 2006, after finishing his Engineer Doctorate (ED), Mike decided to move from academic life to industry. In order to join his new employer, he had to move from the UK to Belgium.
He identifies as a major new perspective in his new life the importance of having liked-minded friends close to him: He has been missing his friends from university much more that he would have expected. After two years in Belgium, building a local social circle remained a challenge.

One of his other important transitions in life is the pre-arranged wedding he finally accepted, after 8 years of hesitation. He qualifies this experience as being one of the most difficult he has ever had. His perspective on this situation is linked to his concern about losing independency in life. He realizes how important it is for him to be able to take his own decisions and to have enough information to do it.

Participant 2: Anne

Anne is a South African business manager in her 40’s, mother of two kids. She identifies the two divorces she experienced and her departure from South Africa in 2005 as her transformations life. Regarding her perspective about the divorces, she recently qualified them as failures because they did not match her ideal conception of what a life-partner had to be. She believes on the idea that you must have a partner, only one, that is able to recognize you as your witness in life.

Regarding her expatriation in Belgium, she adopted the perspective of an adventure in which you jump without much preparation, ready to learn and take opportunities and risks.

Participant 3: Caroline

Caroline is 28 years-old and recently got married. She works as a police agent in Belgium. Four years ago, she lost a brother in a motor bike accident. Her brother had himself lost his girlfriend in a car accident while driving. Only a few months before dying he had been able to recover his sentimental life by engaging himself in a new relationship with a single mother.

Caroline adopted a totally different perspective in life since he passed away, she pays much more attention to all what is family-related and considers the rest less essential. One symptom of this new perspective is for instance, her total recovery from anorexia as she saw this action as a way of protecting her parents from losing another child.

Participant 4: Bruna

Bruna is 32 years old, working in Belgium for an international organization. She is Italian, or in her own words: 100% Italian. Although, her initial project was to come to Belgium for a short period of time in order to obtain some international experience and improve her language skills, she has been living in this country for six years.

Among the new perspectives that this change brought to her life, there is the awareness that adapting to a new context implies less usage or attention to the former context. She therefore identifies living overseas as a risk of losing her Italian identity. She for instance notices that her Italian is less fluent, that she totally lost track on Italian shops, that she does not know the “new” words of usage among young Italians as she does not watch local TV anymore.

Three Mechanisms for Actualizing the Past during Transformations in life

Based on the new perspectives in life those transformations brought into our participant’s narratives, we have identified three different mechanisms of actualization – “Bricolage”, “teddy bear” and “past flight”.

If these three mechanisms aim for an actualization of the past, they differ in their specific actualization goal: while the “bricolage” aims for an actualization that “transforms” the past; the “teddy bear” is an actualization that “protects” the past; and the “past flight” is an actualization for the future, it is a reminder for actualizing a certain past when the opportunity arises.

“Bricolage”

The “bricolage” actualization process implies using our available experiences of the past by putting them together in such a way we change
the sense they used to have for us. After succeeding in a “bricolage” actualization, we are free to engage ourselves into new experiences without hurting the continuity of our story-line.

We have selected three examples of “bricolage” actualization from our participant’s narratives – which we called: extended-family, single man story (extended) and an ex-husband relationship’s transformation– and highlighted the different consumption experiences that acted as facilitators of those actualizations.

The extended-family

When Caroline told the story of her brother’s death and the impact it had had on her life, she spontaneously spoke of her brother’s girlfriend and her daughter: Although that relationship between her brother and his girlfriend was quite new, Caroline built with them, following the death of her brother, strong relations and eventually considered them as extended family members:

“(...) Mais par contre, ce qu’il y a, c’est qu’il avait une compagne quand il est décédé. Mais bon, cela ne faisait que, quoi, six mois qu’il la connaissait, je pense, leur relation était donc encore assez récente. Mais maintenant, je la connais bien plus et beaucoup mieux, depuis le décès de mon frère et maintenant, j’entretiens de très bonnes relations avec elle et avec sa fille à elle, maintenant, quoi! On se téléphone, elle vient manger un bout ici (chez moi), je vais manger un bout chez elle, on est beaucoup plus confidentes et c’est quelque chose (...) qui me tiens à cœur c’est que je la considère comme ma belle sœur. Alors qu’elle n’a jamais été mariée à mon frère (...) »

Caroline has also engaged in a series of consumption routines and activities: special gifts for the little girl at Christmas, birthdays, Saint-Nicolas and Eastern. Besides, Caroline and her relatives always invite them to all family members’ birthday celebrations and they are always together for Christmas.

Current consumption experiences are in this way facilitators in the construction of an extended family. As mentioned before, Caroline has adopted a new family-oriented perspective after her brother passed way. She agreed with us that after her brother died, she faced the necessity of reshaping her past through intensifying her relationship with the girlfriend of her brother, what she would have probably done if her brother had married her.

Single man story (extended)

When Mike’s parents fixed the date for the pre-arranged wedding, he found it very close and tried to postpone it, without success. Having just a couple of months in front of him before the big engagement, he decided to go and visit his future wife where she was living, in Bangkok.

“I went to Bangkok to see my fiancée…It was a useful opportunity to think about the future and without dwelling on the process by which I had got there. I went there just for the weekend; it is strange to say I went to Bangkok for a weekend but, there was not any much more I could do. I could go there for a week but, she would be working and I did not want to use my annual leave just then (..) On the Friday, we had a dinner with the family friends and the family friends organized a trip to one of the beaches in Thailand that was quite nice. On Sunday, we did some sightseeing in Bangkok and Sunday night I was back on the plane…”

Traveling overseas for a weekend, having family dinners, trips to the beaches and making sightseeing in Bangkok allowed Mike a last minute “modification” of his personal narrative. He thereby got the opportunity to put a step in his new life, being engaged and about to be married.

As we mentioned, Mike faced this situation from the perspective of being scared to lose control on his life and to make important decisions without having all information in hands. Even if Mike did not refuse the wedding, he wanted to allow himself to live at least one additional chapter in
his life as a “single” man. This chapter was of critical importance for him to appropriate the wedding decision through gathering more information.

An ex-husband relationship’s transformation

When Anne knew that her ex-husband was going to get married (10 years after their divorce), she actively engaged herself in the preparation of the celebration, together with her current boyfriend, by asking her present “mother-in-law” to make the clothing of the wedding suit and by taking care of the photography:

“That is now 9, 10 years ago, 10 years ago now that I have been divorced. In the same time, I went in to his wedding with my boyfriend, my boyfriend’s mother made his wedding suit dress; we did the photography for his wedding. It is totally weird all the family thinks it is weird (...)

Anne feels those actions were for her a mean of expression of the status that her relationship with her ex-husband had become in her life. She publicly declares him as being a close friend. She went into this wedding with the perspective that there is one man in life with whom she would like to share her entire life: her current boyfriend, the “right one”. She therefore emphasizes her relationship with her ex-husband as being just friendship. She in a way makes room for “the real one” that now makes part of her life and who recently joined her in Belgium.

“Teddy bear”

A “teddy bear” actualization tries to preserve a certain past in our personal narrative, a past that is susceptible to be forgotten. We often bring that past closer to us as a reassuring strategy when times become uncertain and challenging (Marquard 1991, p. 81)

Current consumption experiences could, instead of helping the consumer “bricolage” the past, serve as past ratifications. In this case, it is not a matter of “transformation” but of reassurance, a “teddy bear”. We have selected two examples to illustrate this type of actualization: Preserving an Italian background and investing in preserving a community of friends.

Preserving an Italian background

Bruna is 100% Italian, as she defines herself. She has been in Belgium for six years, and has started feeling she was loosing her core Italian character. As a consequence, she has engaged herself in multiple Italian-related consumption activities: buying furniture in Italy (and bringing it by car to Belgium), purchasing mainly classic Italian food at supermarkets she feels could match with her Italian cooking background, traveling back to Italy each time she needs to celebrate a professional success… A daily call to Italy makes part of her personal routines.

“How, I buy just something to eat from Italy: Pasta, mozzarella... This kind of things when I need them because, of course, I have an Italian cooking background. Also, for the apartment, lots of time I buy Italian stuff because it is...I find that it has a good quality, and of course maybe because it reminds me Italy. For instance, I bought sofas from Italy, Italians, yeah, and also the lightings for the living room and for the dinning room and...For everything at home, all my lightings are from Italy... Because I find that the quality was better than here in Brussels, here I could not find anything special. I went to Italy and I took them by car.”

By engaging in Italian consumption, Bruna protects herself from the threats to her Italian identity. When she describes, for instance, the story of the purchase of her apartment in Belgium, she describes the situation as “strange” as she would have thought of having her own home first in her own country:

“Ah, my dream is to buy a little apartment in Italy, so I have to put aside a lot but I have started. But, yeah this is really something really small but because of course, I bought
here that is not my country so, you know it is strange to think: Oh, I have bought in Brussels and I do not even have four square meters in my country, I think.”

Because of the current perspective she is facing while living abroad, Bruna feels, in this way, the need to further reinforce her past tendencies through consumption experiences.

Investing in preserving a community of friends

As mentioned before, Mike is realizing how important his community of friends is in his life and how he misses it here in Belgium. Mike feels specially this way in day-to-day ordinary rituals, like when he sees other people having dinner together:

“For example, if I am driving alone (...) I can see the restaurants and a bunch of people out for meal. I think yeah, I wish my mates were around so, go and have a meal the same as everybody else seems to be having at the moment so, it is that kind of trigger usually, yeah, walk through the restaurants, drive at the restaurants. I can go there on my own but going on my own is not fun. After all, I eat on my own when I am on a business trip – and I don’t want to do that in my new hometown “

Mike consciously invests himself in doing as much as he can to keep alive his former community of friends. This implies for example extensive traveling sometimes on unpaid holidays - he spent Carnival in Germany and in Spain, has not missed any of his friends’ weddings, one of which took place in Malaysia. He also spends his free hours at night calling and contacting his “buddies” over the internet and receiving whenever possible friends in Belgium.

These important investments in life have also been important investments in cash. One of the sacrifices he has made to afford them has been to accept old and ugly furniture from his landlord.

“(…) when I was in the UK, meeting with friends was something probably happening virtually every weekend, (...) it can still happen but, from my perspective it takes a trip home or it takes my friends to come and visit me here (...) It is the phone, email. I have had longer phone calls since I am here that I have never had before (...) I traveled more in 2007 than I have ever traveled before – partly business trips arising from the job, partly the desire to maintain contact with my network at home, opportunities to visit places I hadn’t been to before, an unusually large number of wedding invitations – as well as a willingness to leave work behind for a little while. As a doctorate student I was very wary of taking too much time away from work. Now of course I feel no hesitation in using up all of my annual leave (...) “

Mike’s conscious expenditures aiming at maintaining his circle of “liked-minded” friends as close as possible to him has largely compensated for the difficulty he faced in building a local network of friends.

“Past Flight”

From time to time, some of our past tendencies remain unexplored in our current personal narrative. They might get actualized later on when new perspectives are faced: a good life story is open enough to adapt to new circumstances.

Some of our souvenirs, either former material possessions or past experiences, act as reminders of these unexplored tendencies. This mechanism is what we called the “past flight”. It is in charge of keeping a full pipeline of potential actualizations for the future.

We present this idea with the following illustrations: The Italian Sea and a house in South Africa.

The Italian Sea
Bruna used to grow up and live by the seashore in Italy. This was the place she would go to each time she was experiencing a difficult or a stressful situation. Since her arrival in Belgium, she tried to find back the relief of such a situation by transposing, without success, the seashore into Brussels parks and woods.

“So, I have my places! I go to the sea and I like it. Whereas here I do not have places that I am attached to, so I do not have familiar places here, I stay home. Because, going to the wood is for instance scaring for me because I am not used to the wood. I am scared to get lost you know, whereas for people from here it is normal to go to the wood.”

This longing for past experiences symbolizes an opportunity for future actualization of our personal narrative: in a way, it represents a flight into the future. We believe that this souvenir may get actualized in a further perspective in Bruna’s life-story like for instance, moving closer to the sea or engaging in vacations near the sea. However, as this is an actualization for the future we do not have any guarantee that it would actually occur.

_A house in South Africa_

Anne has left almost all her belongings behind her when she moved to Belgium. She describes that experience of giving everything to friends or strangers and going in to the plane with nothing as a “cleansing” and “refreshing” experience.

However, she still owns a house and her pension funds there, for which she keeps on paying. She also left in South Africa a small “sentimental box” with old pictures of herself, with the first gift she ever received from her father, with a collection of wooden cats from each country she visited and with all her academic achievements.

Those left-behinds that go from serious financial assets to “sentimental” attachments remain in South Africa and may be used in further actualizations. Currently, within her perspective of leaving everything behind and moving into an adventure, they do not have any importance in her current life-story but may become useful in future actualization processes.

“I got my house; still I need to be tied to that asset because I need it for my pension. So, I own my home but, I rented it out because when I retire I want it or if anything happens here and I have to go back, I have got a place to live. Really, for the security of me and my children I keep that, I got my policy still that I pay for my insurance and my retirement policy and things like that (…)”

**DISCUSSION**

While we usually are inclined to think that during transformations in life consumption is mainly motivated by the new self we want to become, our empirical study shows us that consumption is also motivated by the need of shaping past selves in our personal narrative.

As main characters, interpreters and writers of our personal narrative, we often get involved in actualizing the past to make it match with the new perspectives we have. Transformation moments are special occasions in which new ideas or lenses support us into our life story’s reconstructions. A story line, instead of being the simple addition of isolated facts, is then an opportunity for actualizing past experiences from different points of view, with new intensities.

Consumption experiences are used to make effective actualization processes by expressing consumers’ desire to “transform” – “bricolage”, to maintain – “teddy bear” –, or to put on hold – “past flight” – experiences from the past.

This consumption that actualizes the past compensates for the impossibility of building a full new story from scratch. This idea of compensation is also introduced by the German Philosopher Odo Marquard who emphasizes the fact that as a response to accelerating world change, people develop the art of carrying over:
“The fact that in modern times, less and less of what we come from will be what is to come is compensated by the art of taking more and more of what we come from along with us into what is to come…”

As the past has a compensating role during uncertain times, we believe the understanding of carrying over into new contexts of life – actualization – is indispensable for any study that would like to considerate consumer behavior during transitions in life. In addition to this, our increasingly changing world implies that consumers will be more and more confronted to new and multiple opportunities for transitions:

Net migration from outside the OECD to OECD countries averaged 2.65 million persons per year between 1990 and 2003 compared with 790.000 between 1956 and 1976 (OECD 2007).

The first cohort of baby-boomers born after World War II recently entered their 60th year and started exiting the labor market. In Europe, this phenomenon after decades of low fertility is creating a shortage of working-age population. (OECD 2007 and EC 2007)

With the number of marriages declining, the number of divorces accelerating and couples having fewer children and having them later in life the traditional family model is in a tumble:

“The traditional pattern of growing up in the parental home, finding a partner for life and raising a family and, for many women, widowhood is being replaced by a more diverse succession of situations marked by the separation and reconstitution of couples.” (EC 2007, p. 12)

In this accelerated world, where consumers develop more and more the art of carrying over – actualizing –, the study of consumption as facilitator becomes more and more relevant. In this context, we would like to finalize this paper by motivating the scientific community to engage in further research regarding the past that is carried over into the present and into the future during changing times, as well as its implications for consumption.

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