

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores, from an identity perspective, how cultural tension is experienced by individual consumers due to the contradictory values of the consumer culture and traditional culture. It addresses a gap in literature by theoretically explaining how tensions are experienced by individual consumers and how this tension takes different forms and intensities. In relation to this main research problem, first addressing the lack of theoretical knowledge on how the conflicting traditional and consumerist values simultaneously contribute to constructing the individual identity, the first research question explores, using the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism, how identity is formed by the internalization of traditional and consumerist values. The second research question of how tensions are experienced is examined next using the self discrepancy theory. In addition, based on the results of a preliminary study, the third research question examines how dependent children in concurrent traditional and consumerist contexts shape their parents' identity, resulting in parents experiencing tensions due to their desires/expectations for the child. The concept of possessions and extended self is used here, to demonstrate how the child becomes an extended identity of the parent. An interpretive study was conducted to address the three research questions. For this purpose, Sinhalese Buddhist consumers in two middle class consumer groups - TMC 2 and NUMC – having different levels of exposure to and involvements with the values of traditional and consumerist cultures in Sri Lanka were selected. The dependent children of both TMC 2 and NUMC groups were used to address the third research question of parent-child dynamics. In order to find suitable participants, a purposive sampling strategy was used with a combination of intensity sampling and snowballing, which helped obtain rich examples as well as approach difficult to access participants. In the field, 45 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, which were transcribed verbatim and analysed based on the thematic analysis guidelines recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013). The findings show that individual consumers experience a cultural tension when they simultaneously internalize the conflicting values of traditional and consumerist values in the formation of their identity. This internalization of values take place through the influence of individual and/or group based social interactions. Further complexities and nuances are found across different consumer groups, where the form and intensity of tensions respectively vary, xiii based on, first, their involvement with and exposure to traditional and consumerist cultures that lead to discrepant self-states, and second, contingent upon various situational factors. When considering discrepant self-states, there are interplays between the ideal self-guide which represents consumerist values, the ought self-guide which represent traditional values and actual self that represent different combinations of these two values for different consumer categories. In addition, situational factors such as being close to retirement, already achieved materialistic goals, having dependent children, still progressing in career and family/social commitments help activate discrepant value sets and shape their intensity further. Added to this complexity, traditionally rooted parents appeared to consider their dependent children as an extension of their identity and thus experienced greater, more intense tensions due to the consumerist aspirations and traditional obligations they have regarding the child. Finally, this study further demonstrates that although the Sri Lankan consumer who still has historical links connecting him/her to deep rooted traditions, experiences tensions when these tradition conflict with externally introduced values of the dynamic consumer culture, the current market place appears to be in a transition. The consumers appear to be gradually replacing traditional values with consumerist values, moving towards a future that is on par with the rest of the world. Consequently, with the gradual erosion of traditional values, there may be no conflict of

values for the future Sri Lankan consumer who might whole heartedly embrace values of the consumer culture, thus suggesting a future state where cultural tension is not experienced anymore.