

Tensions of Consumer Individualism

Norwegian Identity in the Context of Globalization

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Abstract

Globalizing poses particular challenges to *likhet* – Norwegian conceptualizations of likeness – and with it the Norwegian conceptualization of individualism, because globalizing advances a different conceptualization of equality than the one on which *likhet* is based. The present essay explores cultural identity negotiations within Norwegian globalized consumer culture and addresses culturally expressed aspects of globalization as they emerge in negotiations of local identities in cultural texts. TV commercials are analyzed via a critical cultural theoretical framework. Specifically, three patterns that speak to *likhet* as a site of tension in a globalized context are discussed: exoticization, utilization, and juxtaposition.

Keywords: globalization, identity, equality, Norway, cultural studies

Introduction

Globalization has been credited with creating a smaller world and promoting democracy worldwide (Cairncross 2001, Rantanen 2005, Rudra 2005), thus enriching people's lives through the diversity of cultural products available and providing great opportunities for better communication across the globe (Gartzke & Li 2003, Lull 2002). Problems of globalization have also been thoroughly scrutinized. One key aspect that has been central to much of the criticism is the development of a world in which models of market economy without any state regulations are typical (De Woot 2003). Cultural developments are tightly connected to this economic aspect of globalizing flows, and research focusing on issues related to cultural globalization often address imbalances in cultural flows, emphasizing how globalization is likely to reinforce global cultural power imbalances rather than having positive effects (Grainge 2001, Morley 2004, Mulcacky 2002, Salwen 1991, Tomlinson 1991).

A specific area of debate related to this concern about cultural globalization centers around globalization's influence on cultural identity. Much globalization theory starts from the assumption that local identity is eroded by globalizing patterns and practices. It is claimed that nations experience identity "crises" as part of global reorganizations (Wiley 2004) and that local diversity is replaced by a uniform Western-imposed and commodity-driven homogenized world culture (Croucher 2004, Gerbner et al. 1996). Much of the existing research, which claims that national identity is undermined as a result of global reorganizations, generally deals with non-Western cultures. Northern European countries, for example, are seldom differentiated from the U.S. This estab-

lishes a false dichotomy wherein tensions connected to globalization are seen as relevant only to non-Western cultures.

It is important to note that *power* is a prominent topic of conversation and debate in the globalization literature. It is key to the present essay as well, but my assumption is that a view of static notions of global “oppressors versus oppressed” is limiting and undermines a more complex understanding of the processes of globalization. The purpose of my essay is therefore to explore cultural identity negotiations within globalized consumer culture. Specifically, examining globalization as relevant to a “privileged” Western nation can illuminate globalizing patterns and practices more broadly and clarify sites of tension relevant to reconciling globalization to local cultural identity.

I situate my analysis in Norway; I am interested in textual patterns of resolution visible in the Norwegian advertising discourse because they can provide an understanding of *how* tensions between globalized orientations and local cultural identity are negotiated more broadly. My analysis, then, speaks to broader tensions associated with globalization.

Because the cultural ideal of equality and likeness – *likhet* – speaks to the core of the diffuse notion of identity in the Norwegian context, it is an especially rich site for contestation in relation to a Norwegian cultural identity.¹ The term, which refers to a certain sense of nonhierarchical equality and a very specific view of likeness, feeds into ideas of one’s roles, rights, and responsibilities in society and emphasizes similar outcomes (Gullestad 1991). It is a form of idealized egalitarian individualism and includes the idea of not seeing oneself as more important than anyone else. The conceptualization of *likhet*, then, is different from a more individually focused equality (seen for example in the U.S.), where everyone is believed to have the same imagined starting point (Hall 2002).

Via a critical cultural theoretical framework, I conduct rhetorical and semiotic analyses of TV commercials presented in Norway, examining values, themes, and characteristics articulated in these texts in relation to the theme of *likhet*. Examining specifically *how* these speak to identity – specifically, local Norwegian identity as implicitly or explicitly negotiated in relation to globalization forces. I find and discuss three rhetorical patterns in relation to *how* representations of *likhet* are dealt with: exoticization, utilization, and juxtaposition. Finally, I address how the relationship between “local” cultural identities and “global” cultural trends is negotiated in these consumer texts.

A Critical Cultural Approach

My approach to globalization is informed by both cultural studies and critical rhetorical conceptualizations of power. Cultural studies generally focuses on examining the media’s cultural ideological influence, and thus represents a valuable foundation for understanding processes of globalization (which are highly dependent on mass media). A critical rhetorical perspective complements this foundation insofar as it attends to the ways in which power is culturally produced and circulated; it allows for an examination of how rhetoric (as the mobilization of discourses) not only responds to material exigencies, but also materializes ideas as well as fosters material practices of globalization, which actually play a central role in driving globalization. Importantly, then, my focus is not on the producer(s) of the texts, but on the context in which the texts circulate.

Cultural studies theorists' conceptualizations of *articulation* and *identity* are particularly helpful for understanding negotiations of identities in the context of global consumer culture. The concept of articulation allows for an understanding of the context's role in "naturalizing" certain ideologies and underscores the fluidity of meanings, as well as letting (or requiring) critics to make visible the arbitrariness as well as the strategic organization of such connections. Utilizing this concept enables me to assess ads with an eye toward how notions of Norwegianness are apparently presumptive and, in addition, adjusted/recalibrated in light of the demands of globalization.

A cultural studies framework is also fruitful for understanding identity formation, because this approach emphasizes how consumers use everyday media texts to organize experiences and define individual and social identities (Hall 1996, Zhang & Harwood 2004).² Building on Foucault (2003), identities are underscored as context-specific constructions; discourses shape knowing, thus informing identity positions and agency. Hall (1996) says, identities are seen as the results of successful articulations of subjects *into* the flow of the discourse and constitute the point of suture between the discourses and practices that attempt to "interpellate", speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, on the one hand, and the processes that produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects that can be "spoken," on the other (5-6). That is, not only are subjects "hailed" to subject positions, they also make investments in these (and/or other) positions. As the ads I analyze were aired in a Norwegian context, I take this perspective in assessing how the ads construct Norwegian subjects, and more specifically Norwegian identity. This does not mean that I claim there *is* one essentialist Norwegian local identity, but rather that there is an ongoing discursive construction of an *imagined* Norwegian identity.

Globalization and Identity

Drawing on Hjarvard (1999), I see globalization as a development that reduces geographical constraints on social and cultural structures, increases social and cultural interconnectivity across time and space, and creates higher consciousness about the minimized constraints of geography on social and cultural interactions. Globalization is often discussed in relation to three interconnected and intertwined areas: economy, politics, and culture. Particularly interesting for the present essay is *cultural* globalization: the "emergence of a kind of 'global culture', an increasing number of references to which people in all the world's countries relate" (Jørgensen 2002: 1). From a critical perspective, discussions of globalization must explicitly address issues of power. Because globalization reduces geographically related social and cultural constraints, the context in which discursive struggles over power and ideological dominance take place is expanded; such struggles occur on a larger geographical scale than before, implicating more stakeholders than before. From this perspective, questions related to ideological power struggles become increasingly central in the context of globalization.

The media factor powerfully into globalization, as they are relevant to the economy, politics, and culture. Appadurai claims that the media are so central to globalization because they provide a different set of tools for the work of the imagination in a world where the media themselves create a new form of problem, but also provide new solutions to identity, predictability, and self-understanding (as cited in Rantanen 2006).

Although the claim that global media industries have a significant influence on global consumer culture is not contested, the nature and extent of that influence *is* widely debated. Several researchers have tried to explain globalization and its consequences in relation to culture (i.e., Hitchcock 2003, Morley & Robins 1995, Polan 1996, Sparks 2005, Tinic 2006).³ Addressing concerns related to cultural homogenization, scholars concerned with corporate control over media productions have often employed a cultural imperialist thesis to indicate how the use of political and economic power promotes different cultures' values and habits at the expense of local culture (Tomlinson 1991). Such criticism is based on the assumption that cultural influence is mainly a one-way process, which goes from powerful conglomerates to passive receivers. Influencing and dominating "other" cultures can then be seen as even easier during globalization, due to the increased opportunities of the media. Global media flow imbalances are not only seen as providing economic support for global media conglomerates, but also as furthering specific cultural and ideological positions, intertwined with power and global influence.⁴ This view, however, implies a relatively simplistic understanding of how power functions, and following a Foucault-inspired development toward a more complex understanding of how power works in the field of communication, more recent cultural critics now understand global power (thus also cultural influence) as being more multifaceted. Despite this, critical communication scholars remain concerned about the disproportionate flows of values and ideologies that result from global media flow imbalances.

Intensification of global flows has established new connections, patterns of association, and modes of identification.⁵ More specifically, globalization transforms people's apprehension of the world by encouraging new experiences of orientation and disorientation, new senses of places and placeless identity (Morley & Robins 1995), which "challenge the fixed idea of traditional harmonic national and regional identities" (Paasi 2002: 35-36).

This contemporary, mobile world's fluid landscape of cultural identity has been addressed in terms of local-global tensions. Specifically, binary oppositions between the local and the global no longer seem useful (Lipsitz 2001), as there are myriad ways in which the local and the global interact (Polan 1996). Importantly, although identity is conceptualized as fluid and multiple in a critical cultural framework, this does not negate the role of power and ideological struggles, as identity production is always dependent on cultural contexts. With increased global flows comes the opportunity for ordinary lives all over the globe to be powered by the possibilities media suggest are available; new images, ideas, and opportunities are moved around by the vehicles of global mass media, promoting new connections and modes of identification (Appadurai 1996).

Along with a complex notion of power, many scholars have noted identity as a site of contestation, and the idea of resistance against discursive constructions of cultural identity has been the topic of considerable discussion. In an era of globalization and cultural domination, the local opposition – the "speaking back" to the flow of cultural products – becomes important as a means of empowering the local. Wilson and Dis-sanayake (1996) state that local spaces of contested identification and belonging can still generate "resources of hope" within contexts of transnationalization. The globalization discourse, then, is marked not only by global dominations, but also by "Lilliput strategies" of tying down and impeding transnational flows and globally dispersed work

chains by lining ‘local struggles with global support’ and connecting ‘local problems to global solutions’ (Wilson & Dissanayake 1996: 3). Following this line of reasoning, domination and resistance, hegemony and counter-hegemony, can be said to have a dynamic relationship with regard to identities. Cultural identity becomes a concept that entails considerable struggle; it depends on ideologically laden contexts, but also embodies resistive strategies.

Globalization, then, presents both challenges to and opportunities for construction and negotiation of cultural identities (Belay 1996), and it becomes useful to understanding the processes related to globalization both in terms of domination and resistance. Specifically, cultural critics should recognize how, within a power bloc, there can be multiple possible resistive “strategies” in place, even regarding the most hegemonic constructions. These tensions and negotiations, being relevant to the local and the global, are central to the analyses that follow.

Methodological Approach

Contemporary cultural texts provide a rich source for the type of examinations I am interested in, especially advertising, as they constitute a primary way in which forms and practices are conveyed in a culture. Ads are especially germane to a discussion of the cultural impact of globalization, as advertising occurs in a global context – goods/services that are themselves either increasingly global or defined in relation to a global context. Thus, advertising is a primary site in which identity is engaged/contested against the backdrop of globalization forces. For the purpose of this project, I specifically focus on commercials that have appeared on the Norwegian television network TV2.⁶

In order to provide a commentary on local cultural identity in a global context, I use a methodological approach in line with critical rhetorical scholarship.⁷ In this approach, context plays a role in making texts meaningful. In fact, particular histories and political geographies *must* be considered in understanding how cultural texts work. In line with my theoretical approach, I am interested in a text in a certain context and I am less concerned with who produced it, how this happened, or with what intentions it was produced. Importantly, I focus on what stands out in light of historical, social, cultural, and economic contexts relevant to *Norway* (and the Norwegian advertising discourse). The relevant aspects I point out *must not* be understood as intentional (on part of the producer) or constant, but rather be seen as dynamic aspects of texts, which intersect with, and are foregrounded *because of*, *contextual* factors.⁸ This is not to say that producers’ choices regarding aspects such as language use (for instance, not dubbing), settings, or spokespeople presented in an ad are irrelevant, rather that they are relevant in light of the Norwegian context, as opposed to being relevant in light of the producers’ intentions.

A critical rhetoric perspective allows us to use multiple methods and features thereof for textual analysis (McKerrow 1989), and semiotics is also of particular relevance given the prominence of visual elements in the texts I analyze. Following the analytical conventions of rhetorical criticism and semiotics as informed by a critical rhetorical lens, I code the commercials with regard to themes, values, patterns, and narrative elements, with an eye toward how cultural identity(ies) is/are engaged, either explicitly or implicitly, in the Norwegian context.

The Challenge of Individualism

A key contextual aspect for my analyses is tied to the concept of *likhet* in a Norwegian cultural context. Here, *likhet* refers to a certain sense of nonhierarchical equality and a specific view of alikeness and sameness, which plays into ideas of roles, rights, and responsibilities in society and emphasizes similar results. The idea of not seeing oneself as more important than anyone else is key. This may be better understood in light of a set of unwritten rules most Norwegians are influenced by: the Jante Law.⁹ The relationship between *likhet* and this law seems to be that while *likhet* is the principle, the Jante Law guides people in their everyday practices.

With increased globalization and the pressure to adopt a consumer-oriented worldview, Norway's cultural ideal of *likhet* has faced challenges via concepts of capitalism and individualism (largely ushered in by international market forces). The logic of the market does not provide the type of "similar results" that the concept of *likhet* has been predicated on in Norway. Consumerism per se arguably puts stress on the concept, but in combination with globalization, it presents an even stronger, more sustained challenge, insofar as very different cultural values now pervade Norwegian culture. Norwegians are becoming more materialistic and pleasure-seeking, and the gap between the poor and the privileged is widening. Contemporary trends and pressures are forcing a dichotomy, where the individualism promoted in contemporary market, advertising, and consumptive practices is drawn seemingly dialectically against the ideal of *likhet*. The tension between egalitarian-based *likhet* and global capitalism with an individualism predicated on distinctiveness and self-interest is particularly pressing as Norway positions itself in a global marketplace while trying to retain some measure of cultural integrity and identity. Many citizens and government officials decry these trends, mourning the loss of Norwegian cultural identity and values, chief among them *likhet*. Clearly, the concept of *likhet* is still extremely central to Norwegian cultural identity and must be rearticulated culturally within this traditional-global tension.

Exoticization: Foreign Self-Centeredness

One interesting way *likhet* is dealt with in ads presented in contemporary Norway is via a rhetorical pattern of exoticization, which basically means that the tension between *likhet* and self-promoting consumption is *not* acknowledged and that the threat to *likhet* is *dismissed*. Egotistic individualism is framed as a foreign element – still something to long for, but, importantly, something different from "real Norwegian values" such as *likhet*. Consumption is – via the pattern of exoticization – so far removed from *likhet* that it does not pose a threat to it. This means that it is a sort of "virtual" self or alter ego that is engaged in this pattern and not the "real" Norwegian communal self.

In the advertising discourse, this includes the use of bodies, language, and settings that represent something foreign, glamorous and exotic. It reinforces the imagined separation of cultural values (such as *likhet*) and consumptive behavior, promoted by global consumer culture. The exoticization pattern is especially relevant in connection with ads for beauty enhancing products. These ads generally present a specific body in order to promote specific products, typically a so-called slim and White "global" body.¹⁰ Most frequently, the bodies of U.S. celebrity women¹¹ are used to endorse products, which are rendered exotic in different ways. The exoticization ads employ global bodies and

follow what could be referred to as a traditional advertising formula, where images of smiling, slim, well-dressed, White, upper-middle class people promising happiness, the envy of others, and the good life serve as key aspects of product promotion (Berger 1972, Sturken & Cartwright 2001). The bodies in exoticization ads are exotic and foreign – something to admire from below and to strive to attain or resemble.

A “Lôreal” commercial is an example; it uses the body of Scarlett Johansson to promote a self-tanning lotion. The camera (thus also viewers) focus on her shimmery, spotless skin, which she claims is “beautiful all year long”. Through lighting, camera angles, and movement, as well as in the dream-like setting with diamond-like snowflakes and sparkly spring flowers falling from above, Johansson’s physical body seems magical, luxurious, and unreal.

The ad settings presented as part of the exoticization pattern are modern and entail symbols of wealth and privilege, which enhance the exotic quality of the bodies presented in these texts. The settings of these ads are often generic and not marked as a specific/known place. For example, another ad for “Lôreal” presents viewers with what appears to be a fashion show set in space. A bright runway reaches out from a science fiction-like black and white background. The space shuttle-ish runway is elevated from the ground floor, and viewers literally look up to the slim female body (later introduced as singer Natalie Imbruglia) wearing an all-black outfit moving toward the camera. As flashing lights go off, her outfit snaps from black to white and back to black again. In this setting, it becomes clear that Imbruglia (and the mascara she is promoting) is to be looked up to and admired.

These ads are predicated on a very specific set of assumptions regarding the desirability of self-interest, where egotistic individualism is presented as something to dream about. Presented in remote and aloof settings, and framed as untouchable via expressions, renderings, and body movements, products are presented in the context of idealized beauty and happiness and consumers are asked to associate commodities with global perfection.

An “Elvital” ad even spells this out to viewers as the spokeswoman (in this case, Laetitia Casta) looks into a mirror and says, “Mirror, mirror on the wall ...” As she begins to speak the well-known words from the fairy tale about Snow White, viewers are asked to complete not only the sentence she has begun, but also the scene. The idea that she is the “fairest of all” hangs in the air and the connection between Whiteness and beauty associated with global beauty is quite clear. The spokeswoman, looking at herself, is passionate about her own looks, something the ad celebrates, but perhaps it is the catch phrase uttered by every “Lôreal” model at the end of these ads that says it the best; the women always look straight into the camera and say “You’re worth it!” Viewers are thus told that it is good to be self-centered and egotistically focused, because they are “worth it”.

These ads are generally for products targeted toward consumers all over the world, and they typically use non-Norwegian celebrities, addressing viewers in English. That is, few, if any, adjustments are made to “adapt” to a *Norwegian* setting, and it is precisely this that makes them interesting in terms of the concept of *likhet*. The techniques available in these ads, when aired in the Norwegian context, implicitly characterize *likhet* as irrelevant to consumption – that is, consumption is about the exotic other, perhaps as the ultimate imaginary self. Just because the ads do not explicitly involve *likhet* does not

mean that the notion is not invoked when presented in the Norwegian context. In fact, the silence around it in these ads is deafening, and speaks volumes about *likhet*, if only in terms of its irrelevance. This pattern makes it possible for ads that do not explicitly address *likhet* to still play a role in how the concept is rearticulated.

Utilization: Obtaining *Likhet* thorough Consumption

Exoticization entails the lack of acknowledgment of *likhet*, but more common are patterns that somehow acknowledge the value of *likhet* and actively (if implicitly) attempt to reconcile it with globalization and capitalization. One such textual pattern is utilization, in which *likhet* is articulated as something that could be *upheld* or *improved* via consumption.¹²

In line with the first point, upholding *likhet* through consumption, ads present viewers with the opportunity to be equal to advertised communities via certain purchases. For instance, a viewer is presented with the idea that wearing certain clothes may allow you to be “in” such a group of cool people. The consumer is hailed as a potential member of these communities, and while the presented communities may not be marked as *Norwegian*, these ads promote a *community* focus that is easily aligned with traditional Norwegian ideals of *likhet*. The key aspect is that viewers are asked to use consumption as a means to strive for *likhet* with/belonging to these groups, even if the foundations of that belonging may be homogenized and uninterrogated.

Some of the communities represented in the contemporary Norwegian advertising discourse are dominated by “less-than-perfect” bodies, and in these texts the “global” body is completely absent. These imaginaries seem to be a type of imagined community more in line with “oddness.”¹³ Such groups of odd people foreground *the community* – the group and how they are just as valuable as others (Kvidal 2008).¹⁴

An ad for “Gilde” taps into these positive associations connected to odd looking people and, by extension, the group/community these odd bodies represent. The commercial shows a group of scruffy men barbecuing at the beach. The unpolished men symbolize an authentic and natural oddness, and the “Gilde” commercial presents an appealing situation of a group of friends doing something fun *together*. This becomes quite clear when five sexy women walk by, trying to get the men’s attention. Loyalty to the group (and perhaps also enjoying the suggested superb “Gilde” products) trumps hanging out with the women, who fail to get the guys’ attention. The women in the ad seemingly expect the odd men to be more than willing to interact with them, these self-defined sex bombs; that is, the women see the men as less valuable than themselves, and thus are over-confident, a less-than-undesirable quality in a Norwegian Jante Law-driven setting. As the men remain community focused, the ad foregrounds the community of the group, but, importantly, the group is also presented as having a genuine sense of *likhet*, in that the women are not perceived as more valuable and interesting owing to their looks. The main point is that the community of “authentic” others is promoted over (presumed more valuable than) exotic, perfect others, thus evening out the score; it is *not* about “getting the girls”, but about social justice!

Moreover, despite the women’s inappropriately high thoughts of themselves, the men do not consider themselves better than the women. Through consumption of Gilde products, which is symbolically associated with such attitudes and values, viewers can

also align themselves with this view. Consumption is framed as something that could allow viewers to be in the group, and thus *likhet* is articulated as something that could be upheld through consumption.

Another manifestation of the utilitarian strategy is apparent in ads suggesting that community can be *improved* via consumption. That is, consumption is represented as an act that not only encourages, but actually promotes *likhet*. Consumptive practices, as seen in this aspect of the utilization strategy, are presented as helping the community – if done right – and thus actually constitute an egalitarian act inspired by the ideal of *likhet*, and not an act of self-promotion. The social justice hinted at above, then, is very prominent here, explicitly promoted as something that can be achieved via consumption *as an act of conscience*.

Several ads provide examples of how the community spirit is played out and a central point is how individuals put the community ahead of potential individual well-being, or when individuals work hard to improve the community. The groups that are engaged here are generally odd and awkward or in other ways unglamorous – thus more “authentic”. Everyone is equal in the community, and success is not defined by individuals standing out from the crowd, but by individuals pulling together with the whole community.

A particularly rich example of how this is played out can be seen in a “Lotto” commercial, which presents the story of a shabby man from a rural area (troubled by decreasing resident numbers), who forfeits becoming a millionaire for the sake of his community. Instead of cashing a winning lottery ticket, he pretends it has been lost and watches with joy as hundreds of people move to his hometown in search of the ticket. The main character puts the well-being of his rural community before his own individual and personal enjoyment of the millions of kroner he has won. In light of the Norwegian Jante Law-saturated context, this self-sacrifice for the good of the community is viewed as highly positive. It is possible, even crucial, to be a consumer without focusing on oneself, the ad suggests.

The main character’s choice to maintain the rural community is telling; viewers are asked to associate with him, and his choice to not cash his winning ticket sends a message about the importance of small communities that parallels the Norwegian government’s explicit policies to support rural areas. More broadly, the ad presents a textual negotiation of the ideal of *likhet* and community loyalty in relation to globally driven consumer desires. Consumption is not necessarily a selfish act, but rather something to do good with and, perhaps more than that, an act of sacrifice, kindness, and generosity.

Utilization is a pattern in which consumption becomes aligned with *likhet* in different ways, from a means to the end of belonging to a community, to a means of salvaging/bettering the community that is specifically rendered as “authentically” Norwegian. Consumers can combine the materialist, and seemingly selfish act of consumption, with a belief in *likhet* and loyalty to the community, and consumption can potentially take on the value of a politically progressive act.

Juxtaposition: Ridiculing the Narcissistic Individual

Finally, the pattern of juxtaposition negotiates the tension between *likhet* and consumption by crafting an implicit or explicit distinction between appropriate consumption (compatible with *likhet*) and inappropriate consumption (which violates the very foun-

dations of *likhet*). To make this textual argument, inappropriate (consumer) behavior is symbolically penalized, and arrogant, narcissistic, self-absorbed personality types are ridiculed in the ads. The unspoken statement is that there are better, more authentic, and/or implicitly more “Norwegian” ways to consume. That is, it is not what they are doing that is in contention; it is how they are doing it that is the measure of the worth of consumption. Discreet consumption is fine; drawing attention to it/oneself via consumption is not. It is also highly inappropriate to consume at the expense of others. These ads then provide *guidelines* for how consumers can negotiate participating in a consumer-based culture in such a way that the ideal of *likhet* remains intact. The parallelism to the underlying cultural Jante Law seems clear; the Jante Law provides explicit guidelines for how to live in order to keep the value of *likhet* intact; these ads provide “performed” guidelines for how to live in a consumer society in order to keep the value of *likhet* intact. This is a pattern that is mainly associated with a Norwegian setting, or a product marked as Norwegian.

An example that speaks to this pattern of resolution is an ad for the Norwegian grocery store chain “Rema 1000”. This ad paints an unpleasant picture of a selfish man who tries to put his own success before that of others. The ad depicts him trying to outrun an elderly woman in order to take advantage of a limited special on steak. The elderly woman (unaware of the competition over the steak) ends up getting the last piece of steak. While the ad clearly promotes a grocery store chain that claims not to tempt customers with limited product discounts, it also sends the message that egotistic individualism is not good. The consumption of steak per se is not criticized – the elderly woman, a model of timidity, containment and (it appears) practicality, is not ridiculed or put in place for her plan to buy this product, but the man’s consuming intentions, practices, and *desire* are presented as unacceptable. In short, it is not the consumption itself that is a problem; it is the way it is performed.

Another ad that features juxtaposition, if in less explicit ways, is a “Solo smoothie” commercial. It makes fun of different people auditioning for the role of “Solo smoothie” spokesperson, who, despite their obvious lack of acting talent, all seem over-confident. The contenders are presented as arrogant and shallow, unable or unwilling to take directions in order to improve their own unconvincing performances. A young woman seems extremely uninspired, assuming an air of bored aloofness as she holds up the “Solo smoothie” product and delivers the punch line: “Solo smoothie, 100 % natural.” When asked to be more natural, she looks annoyed and offended before informing everyone that she is quite experienced when it comes to doing auditions.

The product itself is established as natural, via a container decorated with images of juicy oranges, with which “Solo smoothie” is to be associated, and the artificial people in the ad embody the opposite of what the product is supposed to be – natural, authentic. The ad indirectly suggests that the product and consuming it are fine, but that inauthentic, affected motives and desires (on the part of the arrogant audition-goers) are not, and likewise the consumption emerging from them. People who think they are better than others – and violate the principle of *likhet* and the Law of Jante, like the over-confident self-promoters – are symbolically put in their place.

Via the pattern of juxtaposition, the ads provide viewers with guidelines for how to consume and act in the consumer culture. They allow consumption to be re-imagined in ways that bring it into alignment with the ideal of *likhet* as it is distinguished explicitly

from “bad” consumptive practices/ behaviors. Arrogant and self-absorbed behaviors are marked as unwanted, and qualities of humility, privacy, and authenticity are given primacy. Similar to the Jante Law’s role in suggesting ways to live in line with (and reinforce) the value of *likhet*, these ads present guidelines for how to live/consume in ways that will also keep the value of *likhet* intact (and reinforce it).

Conclusions

Consumerism poses challenges to the ideal of *likhet* because it advances a different conceptualization of equality. The market-driven logic that undergirds the consumer culture promoted by ads is one very distant from traditional Norwegian notions of community and *likhet*. The rhetorical patterns discussed in the present essay are tied to a re-positioning and re-defining of *likhet* in a globalized consumer Norway, sometimes in quite distinct ways, but nonetheless through a complementary dynamic in the sense that they all work to encourage consumers to re-imagine the relationship between *likhet* and Norwegianness. What we are witnessing here is the positioning of local consumers for global markets by tapping into core cultural values and practices.

Here, I show how *likhet* – a concept of profound significance to Norwegian cultural identity – is negotiated in ads that engage this tension in various ways, both implicitly and more explicitly. Collectively, these patterns reveal the message that *likhet* could and should be maintained. The ads help preserve and even reinforce the idea of *likhet*. That is, while people living in a more globalized, market-driven Norway are further removed from “actual” and material *likhet*, the *idea* of *likhet* is reinforced and endowed with arguably more powerful discursive and symbolic properties.

The analyses make visible how the discourse does not predominantly and only advance a global market logic (and the ideologies that go along with it); it is also capable of providing elements for a strong and unique local identity. Key tensions in Norwegian advertising discourse are symbolically resolved by providing consumption as a means through which aspects of Norwegian uniqueness are reinforced, and thus the uniquely Norwegian is brought to the fore, rather than homogenizing and “place-less” global consumer identities. Aspects of globalization may well be hegemonic, *and* foster a powerful sense of local identity – local identity can be *prompted* and crystallized by globalizing discourses.

While the analyses are anchored in a Norwegian context, and findings must be seen in light of this, what may be of interest to other contexts is the global-local dynamic, in which rhetorical patterns play an important role. The analyses expose very interesting paradoxes and tensions in the rhetorical configuration of local identity. The present essay shows the contours of a complex, and interesting, dynamic in which globalization *is* threatening the local, but in which the local is *responding*, and in which a strong local cultural identity does in fact emerge as a consequence, not necessarily resistively, and arguably even hegemonically, but nonetheless organized around a strong sense of cultural identity.

Notes

1. To emphasize the culture-specific Norwegian conceptualization of equality/alikeness, I use the Norwegian spelling of the concept throughout this essay.
2. Media and cultural texts are especially central to identity production; readers use these actively to organize experiences and define individual and social identities (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel 2002, Marselis 2003, Ott & Walter 2000, Skretting 1995) and *media* texts in particular play an important role in providing images for people's desires and ideas of what they would like to be.
3. Some scholars claim that technological developments ensure global audiences' limitless access and choices in relation to media programming and products (Cairncross 2001), while some argue that globalization undermines democracy worldwide because of the capitalist mindset it spreads (Scholte 1997). Others say that instead of voice variety, struggles for maximum audience numbers lead to considerable standardization (Gerbner et al. 1996).
4. For work on global media dominance, see Chan 2005, De Bens & de Smaele 2001, Herman & McChesney 1997, Ihlebæk 2004, Kroes 1999, McChesney 1999, Morley & Robins 1995, Sparks 2005, Toynebee 2000.
5. Consumer culture encourages imaginary identifications, and intensified globalization processes bring about mixed or ambiguous identifications (Featherstone 2001).
6. Following Haavind (2000), I conducted extensive literature research to develop an understanding of the knowledge situation related to Norwegian cultural identity on which I was writing. This provided me with an understanding of key aspects of Norwegian cultural identity as it has been conceptualized by previous scholars (see Bryn 1993, Gullestad 1989 1992, Hallan 1991, Hylland Eriksen 1993 2005, Myklebust & Myrvang 2001, Wiborg 2003). In short, key aspects of an imagined Norwegian identity that are pointed out are notions of egalitarian equality and morality, intertwined with down-to-earth, quiet rural settings. With this in mind, I examined TV commercials presented on the Norwegian television channel TV2. I taped 1300 commercials between May 18 and August 18, 2006. I excluded ads that had been recorded several times, as well as very short ads, e.g., a special on garden furniture. Next, I surveyed the commercials with an eye toward whether they appeared to strongly feature elements that tied into cultural identity, that in different ways spoke to a social imaginary identity (keeping in mind previously conducted identity work in Norway). I was interested in the texts as they were presented to Norwegian viewers, that is, I did not distinguish ads produced primarily for a Norwegian audience from ads produced for an international audience, for example, as such distinctions are not made to the viewer. I was interested in analyzing ads *presented* to Norwegian consumers, regardless of the producers' intentions. Based on this, I narrowed it down to 129 commercials, which I examined in greater depth.
7. Critical rhetoric has been applied to analysis of mediated texts in a variety of contexts. Critics have assessed the ways in which, variously, gender, race, class, and sexuality are articulated in problematic ways (Dow 2001, 2004, Kellner 1995, Sandeen 1997, Shugart 2003) as well as how these articulations may be resisted or negotiated (Calafell & Delgado 2004, Harold 2004, Shugart 2001). Critics have taken a rhetorical approach to advertising, attending to gender identification (Hope 2004, Kellner 1995) and advertising's use of ideological metaphors (McQuarrie & Mick 1999).
8. I do not suggest that the same patterns and dynamics apply in all contexts and situations and cultures.
9. The word *Janteloven* was coined by Sandemose (1933) in *En flyktning krysser sitt spor* as a set of rules named after the town of Jante. The law refers to the idea that one should not excel over others (Hall 2002) and denotes a tendency to conform (Avant & Knutsen 1993).
10. A global consumer culture promotes a specific view of the slim White body as beautiful (Kvidal 2008).
11. Women who have become famous via, or as part of, the U.S. entertainment industry.
12. These patterns are typical for ads that present products and/or settings that are/could be Norwegian, although this is not always the case, as some ads promote products targeted toward consumers in all of Scandinavia and some European countries as well. In terms of the improvement of community, however, it is more often settings/people marked as Norwegian.
13. "Odd characters" are cultural stereotypes of "ordinary" Norwegian character types/people and visualized identities who are characterized by a marked lack of glamour. They can also be described as "underdogs" or "anti-heroes" (Skretting 2004).
14. Symbolically aligning oneself with "the odd" is not dissimilar from the notion of championing the underdog, a recurrent theme in the U.S., but still it is a bit different in Norway, because the U.S. version is more about winning/achievement (usually material) for the underdog, while in the Norwegian version, the actual achievement/winning is beside the point; it is social justice and celebrating the *community* that matter.

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