Approaching non-western consumer cultures from a historical perspective: The case of early modern Ottoman consumer culture

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Abstract
A very common but futile practice in scientific research investigating non-western consumer cultures and markets is the imposition of concepts that are derived from a single historical trajectory of western modernization. This paper aims to show that there are alternative historical trajectories in the early modern period which have formed today’s multiple modern consumer cultures. The particularities of the Ottoman context, which shaped the development of an alternative early modern consumer culture, are examined as an example. Islamic ethics, fluid social structure, wakf institutions, the negotiability of market institutions, and a public sphere formed by aesthetic, emotional, and playful communicative action are among the particularities discussed in this study.

Keywords
consumer culture, history, modernity, multiple modernities, non-west

Recent developments such as globalization, the dissolution of the eastern bloc, and shifts in the global economic map towards developing countries have increased the significance of non-western markets and consumer cultures (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Dicken, 2007; Ger and Belk, 1996). Yet marketing research predominantly examines the west and often directly applies conceptual categories which were developed for the west – such as the neoliberal American world view – in understanding non-western contexts (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006; Dholakia et al., 1983; Douglas and Craig, 2006; Hackley, 2009; Venkatesh, 1995; Witkowski,
This type of approach creates an ethnocentric myopia (Tadajewski, 2008) which has to be prevented by understanding institutional and cultural particularities of non-western contexts that deviate from the assumptions of theories developed for the western world.

Research on global consumer culture demonstrates that differentiated forms of modernities and their consumer cultures are emerging as a synthesis of both local and global cultures (e.g. Belk et al., 2003; Dong and Tian, 2009; Ger and Belk, 1996, 1999; Joy, 2001; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Miller, 1997; Sandikci and Ger, 2002, 2010; Üstüner and Holt, 2007, 2010; Wong, 2007; Zhao and Belk, 2008). While these multiple modern consumer cultures are forming, the key source of the difference lies in the historical conditions specific to culture (Miller, 1995; Venkatesh, 1995; Wittrock, 1998). As numerous international marketing and consumer researchers have pointed out, there is the need for contextually and historically grounded work to advance the understanding of non-western consumer cultures (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006; Cayla and Arnould, 2008; Douglas and Craig, 2006; Venkatesh, 1995).

However, in understanding non-western consumer cultures, their historical foundations have often been neglected because of an implicit assumption that consumer culture formed in the west and subsequently spread throughout the world. In other words, the premise is that pre-modern factors in non-western societies would fade away in the long run and converge in cultural, institutional, structural, and psychological terms (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998). There has also been a belief that consumer culture could not be expected to emerge from stagnant non-western societies that were characterized by oriental despotic regimes and traditional (e.g. Islamic or Confucian) ethics and by the absence of a bourgeois class, a subject who is rational and free to shape his/her personal world, Protestant ethics, a public sphere, democracy, and the capitalist development of markets (Slater 1997; Weber, 1978). This essentialist mindset prevents researchers from even asking the question of whether or not there exist alternative historical trajectories for the development of consumer culture, how consumption operates in these alternative contexts, and what type of contextual specificities create which type of consumer cultures.

This paper argues that existence of multiple modern consumer cultures suggests that there is no single, uniform modernization process, but rather multiple trajectories of diverse modernization processes. The rest of the article discusses first, the use of historical research in understanding multiple modern consumer cultures and the significance of early modern consumer cultures in the formation of contemporary multiple modernities. Next, particularities of Ottoman context are presented in order to exemplify an alternative early modern context in which a consumer culture was formed.

**The use of the historical approach in understanding multiple modernities**

Venkatesh (1995) introduces historical research as a significant level of analysis in his *ethno-consumerism* approach, which aims to study non-western contexts by generating conceptual categories specific to the context. This approach recommends the study of individuals, institutions, and their practices, social and communal relations, symbolic systems, and ideologies from the point of view of the specific culture. In addition to the ‘field view’ level of analysis, which is the descriptive account of the current practices and discourses under study, ethno-consumerism also contains a ‘text view’ level. This latter level involves analysis of texts, archives and local histories in order to identify the historical–sociocultural themes of the culture. In other words, Venkatesh (1995) recommends utilization of historically constituted meaning systems in interpreting and theorizing contemporary behaviour.
In consumer research, such a text view is used to define and explain contextual categories, but in a relatively limited manner. To cite a few examples, Dong and Tian (2009) study how the Chinese historical context constructed the meaning of western brands in such a way that brand choice became a political action in this context. Joy (2001) and Mehta and Belk (1991) modify self-concept which is subject to the collective will in China and India respectively, and Üstün and Holt (2010) redefine the global trickle-down theory through a historical study of the western lifestyle myth in Turkey. Rather than delving into the text and archives and gaining a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the historical context, researchers generally rely on existing literature on the historical context to interpret their data. In this paper, following Venkatesh (1995), I argue that a more comprehensive historical research approach is needed for understanding consumer cultures, including individual, group, and institutional practices, social structures, meaning systems operating within the culture, and also continuities and changes in them.

The field of marketing largely benefited from the historical research which conceptualizes the development of western consumer culture (Brewer and Porter, 1993; Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988; McKendrick, 1982; Mukerji, 1983; Roche, 2000; Schama, 1987; Slater, 1997). Western consumer culture is seen as a product of a specific trajectory of modernization which is identified by a series of early modern developments such as population increase, urbanization, the emergence of middle classes among the aristocracy and peasantry, the formation of liberal and romantic ethics, mass production, the establishment of capitalist markets, the formation of a reflexive enlightenment subject, and increasing mobility among class structures (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Slater, 1997). Similarly, marketing research can benefit from the study of alternative historical trajectories in conceptualizing the development of non-western consumer cultures.

Research on multiple modernities indicates the importance of understanding alternative trajectories of modernization processes (see Eisenstadt, 2000; Islamoğlu and Perdue, 2001). Eisenstadt (2000: 1–2) explains the formation of multiple modernities as follows:

While a general trend toward structural differentiation developed across a wide range of institutions in most of these [non-western] societies – in family life, economic and political structures, urbanization, modern education, mass communication and individualistic orientations – the ways in which these arenas were defined and organized varied greatly, in different periods of their development, giving rise to multiple institutional and ideological patterns … Such patterns were distinctively modern, though greatly influenced by specific cultural premises, traditions, and historical experiences.

Research in world history also points to the importance of studying the early modern period, especially the period before the nineteenth century, in investigating alternative trajectories of modernization (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998; İslamoğlu and Purdue, 2009; Wittrock, 1998). İslamoğlu and Purdue (2009) draw attention to the particular necessity of studying the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. They assert that:

The developmental trajectories within this world historical context refer to highly complex processes with earlier institutional configurations … say of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Interacting with later ones in the nineteenth century, whereby the old recast in terms of the new and the new carries the imprint of confrontations with the old. In this sense modern transformation does not merely indicate the institutional configurations of the nineteenth century but incorporates their early history in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. (Islamoğlu and Purdue (2009: 5)
That is, in order to better understand today’s multiple modern consumer cultures, their particular early modern histories have to be studied (Wittrock, 1998).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many early modern Eurasian contexts experienced demographic, economic, and social changes, such as population growth, dynamism and mobility in society, the growth of regional cities and towns, the rise of the urban commercial classes, religious revival, and rural unrest (Braudel, 1992; Burke, 1993; Fletcher, Jr, 1985; Goldstone, 1988; Islamoğlu and Purdue, 2001; Wittrock, 1998). However, each context developed its own specific cultural foundations and institutions during this period of transformation. Therefore, in order to understand today’s multiple modernities, it is necessary to study their early modern histories in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Following Islamoğlu and Purdue (2009), in the rest of this paper I demonstrate that the fluid social structure, Islamic ethics, the public sphere, and negotiating institutions were particularities of the Ottoman context during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that exemplify an alternative early modern context in which a consumer culture was formed.

The shaping of Ottoman consumer culture

Current research has identified various particularities of Ottoman consumer culture which began to develop by the mid-sixteenth century (Grehan, 2007; Karababa, 2012; Karababa and Ger, 2011). Luxury and fashion goods such as silk clothing, accessories, and home furnishings became widely available – even to relatively lower ranks in the main cities. While leisure activities such as going to coffeehouses and bathhouses were popularized and commercialized, foreign goods and styles diffused to the society as a result of interactions between eastern and western consumer cultures (Grehan, 2007; Karababa, 2006, 2012; Karababa and Ger, 2011). One of the particularities is that the diffusion of goods in this society did not just occur through a trickle-down process – as was the case in western societies (McCracken, 1988) – but through trickle-up, -down and -across processes (Karababa, 2006). In addition, Ottoman consumers were resistant to legislation and religious norms, established alliances with market actors to gain the right to consume, and also negotiated with institutions in order to be able to consume restricted goods and services (Karababa and Ger, 2011). The consumption of coffeehouses and ‘cream shops’ in the mid-sixteenth century and the consumption of women’s fashion in the eighteenth century are just a couple of examples for these resistances (Altınay, 1988; Evren and Girgin, 1997; Karababa and Ger, 2011). Also, historical research highlights evidence that the Ottoman consumer constituted his self-ethics through consumption practices (Karababa and Ger, 2011). In this article, rather than delineating consumer culture itself, the focus is on the cultural foundations and institutional formations of the Ottoman society in which early modern Ottoman consumer culture was developed.

Ottoman social structure

Social structure is understood as a factor defining the formation of consumer culture in the west (McKendrick, 1982; Mukerji, 1983). The breakdown of the feudal regime in the west (Everitt, 1966) resulted in the emergence of middle classes between the aristocracy and peasantry, and in upward social mobility. Emulation, as a process of diffusion of goods from the aristocracy to the newly rich middle classes, and to society in general, was an important characteristic of western consumer culture.

However, Ottoman society experienced neither a feudal regime (see İnalcık, 1997, for a detailed analysis) nor the emergence of a capital accumulating class (İnalçık, 1969). Sixteenth-
seventeenth-century Ottoman documents refer to two main social groups: *askeri* and *reaya* (İnalçık, 1997). The *askeri* group was comprised of people who were in the sultan’s service, such as administrators, troops, and professors of theology. They represented the sultan’s authority. Meanwhile, the *reaya* consisted of three subgroups – merchants, artisans, and peasants – with the first two groups being taxpayers who lived in urban areas (İnalçık, 1997). The *askeri* group had higher social status than the *reaya*.

A fluid social structure formed in Ottoman cities due to social and geographical mobility. In Ottoman society, upward mobility from the lower echelons to the *askeri* group was possible because entrance to the Ottoman *askeri* group was not determined by family lineage. For example, many high-level bureaucrats were originally children of the Christian rural population in the Balkans who were gathered, educated, and hired for positions appropriate to their level of capability (Goffman, 2004; Thevenot, 1978). To give another example, by the seventeenth century, part of the rural population, after being educated in Muslim theological schools, moved to the cities to find jobs with the government (İnalçık, 1988). Intergenerational downward mobility was also possible for the descendants of the *askeri* because they could not completely inherit the wealth and status of their forefathers. These downwardly mobile descendants of the *askeri* group members should have carried their elite tastes, lifestyles, and consumption patterns to the lower echelons. In addition, boundaries between the *askeri* and the *reaya* were blurred. For instance members of the *askeri* group entered the field of trade and used their political muscle to compete with the guilds on terms unfavourable to the latter (Kunt, 1983).

Ottoman social structure was obviously more flexible than that of its western counterparts, and thus various individual trajectories were possible, due to the penetrability of boundaries of the *askeri* group, upward and downward social mobility, and the blurring of class boundaries between the merchants and the elite. Thus, Ottoman people with different lifetime trajectories should have had different consumption patterns.

Recent research on Ottoman probate inventories has also put forward the premise that, as mentioned earlier, the diffusion of fashion items in Ottoman society did not just occur through a trickle-down process; trickle-across and trickle-up processes were also possible (Karababa, 2006). The existence of multiple trickling processes can partially be attributed to this fluid class structure, which allowed interactions among people of different ranks and thus enabled the transfer of tastes. Coffeehouse consumption as a fashionable leisure activity is another example of the trickle-across process; the European traveller Thevenot (1978) and the famous Ottoman scholar Pecève (Baykal, 1981) have noted that people from different parts of society enjoyed spending their leisure time in coffeehouses. The modernist project of the west situates the middle classes and their emulative behaviour at the heart of the development of consumer culture. However, in this alternative early modern context, different diffusion mechanisms operated.

*The role of Islamic ethics in shaping Ottoman consumption*

Akin to the role of Protestant, humanist, romantic, and liberal ethics in the west (Campbell, 1987; Mukerji, 1983; Schama, 1987; Weber, 2001), Islamic ethics was influential in shaping consumer culture in the Ottoman Empire. Market operations, production, cultural norms about how to consume, and the consumer subject were all shaped by various ethics in different western contexts. In Ottoman society, there were two main interpretations of Islamic ethics: orthodox and heterodox. Orthodox Islam (or the Sunni interpretation of Islam) in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ottoman society aimed to establish a dialectical relation between worldly activities and the
activities related to the divine (Ülgener, 1981). Sunni interpretation was accepted as the formal religious ethics (Ocak, 1994) governing economic principles, the practices of some of the market actors such as money wakfs, the regulatory system and norms about consumption. On the other hand, to Ülgener (1981) heterodox Islam, which is a fusion of Islam and mystic values originating from different religious discourses, eliminated the dialectic relationship between worldly affinities and activities related to the divine that exists in orthodox ethics (Ülgener, 1981). Numerous heterodox orders were diffused throughout society, affecting the everyday life of the people (Öcalan, 2000). Heterodox Islam was influential in shaping some of the market actors, such as guilds and consumption practices.

In the view of orthodox Islam, the ideal Muslim had to work hard to earn a living and accumulate a certain level of wealth, which however should not dominate his inner world (Ülgener, 1981). Wealth earned should be consumed in appropriate ways, such as meeting the demands of Islam; meeting personal and family needs; gift giving; making charitable donations to obtain people’s blessings; and supporting poets (Öztürk, 1991). Orthodox Islam condemns miserliness that would risk one’s social status; consumption to satify desires which religion prohibits (e.g. drinking wine); wasteful and conspicuous consumption; and philanthropic consumption undertaken for the purposes of self-promotion and showing off (Öztürk, 1991; Şeker, 1997).

Heterodox ethics emphasizes the divine, espousing the idea of effortlessly trusting God in every matter in life. It does not favour interest in the material aspects of life, which would include conspicuous consumption, display, and luxury, but rather calls on individuals to spend time in religious practices in order to reach God (Ülgener, 1981). Although both orthodox and heterodox ethics resulted in the development of norms about consumption, their interplay sometimes created new marketplace cultures. For example in the mid-sixteenth century, the proliferation of coffeehouses – whose pleasures went against the work ethic of orthodox Islam and the state’s prohibitions – was due to its justification through heterodox Islam (Hattox, 1996; Karababa and Ger, 2011).

**Ottoman economic perspective and legislative framework**

The Ottoman state’s economic policies emphasized the importance of the well-being of the community in an economy of plenty. The policies also focused on accumulating as much bullion as possible in the treasury to finance military campaigns (İnalcık, 1997). In that sense, Ottoman economic policy was in contradiction with the mercantilist balance-of-trade principle, of which Ottoman administrators were aware (Kafadar, 1986), but had never applied as a policy because the aim of the state was not only to increase state revenues but also to promote human welfare (through the availability of goods to the community) (İnalcık, 1997). As İnalcık (1997) asserts, to be able to attain the lowest possible means of living for everyone, the system strictly controlled standards for the production and pricing of necessities such as bread. The abundance of necessities was the primary concern of the Ottoman state, and thus the state encouraged imports and discouraged exports (İnalcık, 1997). The Ottoman state’s negative attitude towards the balance-of-trade principle might have provided a positive condition for the emergence of consumer culture, because it allowed for the availability of consumer goods in the market.

Although sumptuary laws were issued to eliminate waste, prevent religiously forbidden conduct, and maintain social order by distinguishing social status, gender, and religion (Altinay, 1988; Zilfi, 2004), as in the western case, Ottomans frequently circumvented sumptuary laws (Zilfi, 2004). In a society of multiplicity, there were many reasons to thwart sumptuary laws, such
as the peasantry emulating the elite (Abou-El-Haj, 2005); Christians imitating Muslims (Altinay, 1988); and consumers in the pursuit of pleasure (Altinay, 1988; Hattox, 1996). Although the thwarting of sumptuary laws is a common process observed both in the west and Ottoman society, numerous reasons and motivations underlying the circumvention of these laws defines an alternative trajectory.

Ottoman trades markets and the wakf institution

Islamic ethics is identified as one of the reasons for the stagnation and decline of the Ottoman economy (Islamoglu and Purdue, 2001; Weber, 1978; Wong, 2007). Nevertheless, contemporary historical research challenges this assumption by demonstrating an active economy and trades during the period. Faroqhi (1997) argues that there was active and balanced trade between the west and the Ottoman Empire, so that Ottoman economy was not governed by the European world economy. Both early modern European and Ottoman contexts experienced an increase in the number of instruments of exchange, such as markets and bazaars, fairs and peddlers (Braudel, 1992; Faroqhi, 2000) providing accessibility to goods. In addition, a commercial transaction technique known as commenda (mudaraba), of which Islamic law also approves, was very common (İnalçık, 1997). Although the charging of interest and usury in market operations was forbidden under Islamic law, it was still practised but was concealed as a type of loan in financial documents (İnalçık, 1997). These similar commercial developments in both Ottoman and western societies challenge the premise of dynamic western and stagnant eastern economies in the seventeenth century (Islamoglu and Purdue, 2001). Also, this alternative early modern market has its own particular institutions such as wakfs and capital wakfs.

Wakfs were institutions specific to Islamic societies and had their basis in Islamic ethics. They were a source of income for religious and charitable foundations, but they also helped set up commercial facilities such as shops and bazaars (İnalçık, 1997). For example, a private shop owner could donate his shop to a wakf so that the revenue generated from the shop rental could be used for charity purposes, such as the maintenance of a small mosque in the neighbourhood, establishing soup kitchens, or building fountains (Çifçi, 2004). Wakfs established caravanserais for travelling merchants and covered bazaars in which shops sold expensive goods (such as silk fabrics, velvet, blankets, jewellery, gold, silver, slaves, and imports) and provided storage places for the safe keeping of money and commodities (Faroqhi, 2000). The wakf system also functioned as a market institution, indirectly promoting market activity and consumption by channelling the capital and profits generated by the wealthy to develop the market and establish the infrastructure needed by the locality. Before the seventeenth century, wakfs were mainly founded by military men and their relatives, but participation in this activity later spread to other social groups such as local merchants, other capital owners, and provincial elites (Akgündüz and Öztürk, 1999).

Capital wakfs were specific to the Ottoman context; they functioned as financial institutions and supported consumption. Capital wakfs started operating at the beginning of the early fifteenth century and had spread across Anatolia by the late sixteenth century (Çizakça, 1999). In the case of a capital wakf, it is money rather than property that is donated for philanthropic purposes. The money donated is then lent to other people; generally, trustees of wakfs, small artisans, and consumers borrowed money from capital wakfs. When repaying the loan, the borrower pays an extra amount, similar to interest, and this extra amount is then used for philanthropic purposes. Capital wakfs were set up generally for the benefit of consumers, who needed cash in order to consume
Thus, capital wakfs supported consumption by providing credit to consumers.

The legitimacy of capital wakfs was an issue that was much debated among Muslim authorities, because Islamic law forbids usury and interest. However, a sixteenth-century religious authority justified the legitimacy of capital wakfs by arguing that the interest charged on loans was utilized for the benefit of Muslim society and not to exploit people for self-interested gain (Çizaca, 1999). This is evidence that the religious institution in the Ottoman context had the ability to negotiate rather than just strictly applying rules. Although the wakf institution has its basis in Islamic tradition, it constituted a public arena, a place for civil activity, independent of political authority (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998). This feature of wakfs points to the existence of a public sphere, a feature of western modernization, through an institution particular to this alternative early modern context.

Coffeehouses as public sphere

Coffeehouses originating in the Middle East during the sixteenth century diffused to the west. An early modern western coffeehouse is conceptualized as one of the contexts where bourgeois public sphere, a particularity of western modernization, emerged (Habermas, 1992). Habermas’s (1992) bourgeois public sphere is a discursive sphere where people of different ranks can discuss issues of mutual interest, develop public opinion, and influence authority. It is sometimes suggested that a prerequisite for the formation of a public sphere in the eighteenth century was the western enlightenment, which constructed a rational reflexive bourgeois subject. Although the early modern Ottoman coffeehouse consumer was not such a subject, Ottoman coffeehouses did function as a site for critical discussion. For example, storytelling performances and plays formed critical public discussions because they often contained satires of everyday life and socio-political and economic conditions (And, 1975; Öztürk, 2005). However, critical debate among the Ottoman subjects was not in the form of rational debate but communicated through aesthetic, emotional, and playful means (Komeçoğlu, 2005; Tucker, 1993). Ottoman coffeehouses, which exemplified the commercialization and democratization of leisure pursuits, also constituted the site of a public sphere that contained characteristics particular to the Ottoman context. Both wakfs and coffeehouses exemplify forms of public sphere particular to the Ottoman context, pointing to alternative early modern processes.

Institutional ability to negotiate

Although the state intervenes in the economy and trade in order to ensure the continuous supply of necessities, this ability to intervene was limited in the pre-modern context (Pamuk, 1998). The Ottoman state and the other actors in the market, such as guilds, consumers, and religious institutions, demonstrated the ability to negotiate rather than just strictly applying legislation or rules. This in turn made novelties and cheaper versions of luxury items such as fabrics available to consumers. For instance, the Ottoman state would intervene in the market by standardizing production and quality, determining prices, and preventing competition among producers, but it also frequently relaxed its rules to allow the availability of populus and fashion goods. One specific example among many is a new workshop that had emerged from the guild structure to produce populus textiles to meet an increase in the demand for cheaper textiles in Bursa (İnalce, 1969). These novel fabrics did not obey the quality standards of the hisba (an institution established to regulate the production and sale of products, and to enforce the sumptuary laws)
(İnalçık, 1969). The old masters of the silk manufacturing guild of Bursa tried to convince the government to take action against the new workshops, alleging that the upstarts were lowering the quality of the guild’s wares, disturbing the functioning of the market, and thus misleading consumers. Nevertheless, the new masters who had opened new workshops in the outlying quarters without the guild’s license banded together, elected a management council, and set up a new guild. In spite of opposition from the original guild, the new masters were often able to persuade the government to grant them recognition. Thus the relationship between the state and the new masters was an example of the Ottoman state negotiating with guilds, which enabled the Ottoman consumer to consume populux goods.

**Conclusion**

This paper aims to show that the development of consumer culture cannot be linked to a single western trajectory of modernization. The emergence of capitalism, the bureaucratization of social life, secularization, and the development of modern science have been assumed to have their roots in the rationalizing tendencies of Protestant ethic and have been identified as the characteristics of western modernization (Weber, 1978). In most instances, traditional institutions and Islam have been seen as the reason for the underdevelopment of capital markets and the decline of the Ottoman Empire (İnalçık, 1969, 1977). In many cases, research on the Ottoman context aims to identify its differences from the west that cause the divergence and decline of the Empire. Rather than focusing on the causal explanations of decline, this paper shows that it will be more beneficial for researchers to study the contingencies that reconfigured non-western cultures and modernities. Understanding the non-west in relation to its own cultural dynamics would highlight alternative and fragmented trajectories, which inform us about the complex nature of multiple modernizations. In other words, we should not expect a single modernization process in each culture. Different domains of life might inform us about different processes of modernization.

On the one hand, Islamic ethics had a significant role in shaping institutional structures, such as the state’s economic policies, market regulations and wakfi institutions. On the other hand, institutional practices of negotiation allowed dynamism in the markets. Although regulations seemed to be strictly defined, institutional practices allowed negotiations among the agents in the market, thus creating the availability of goods and credit for consumers. Capital wakfs and guilds provide examples of how different agents in the market negotiated with each other.

Although a strong bourgeoisie did not emerge as in western societies, the Ottoman class structure, especially among the urban population, was not a rigid one. Instead, it possessed a fluid nature, due to high levels of social mobility that facilitated the transfer of consumer tastes and goods so that consumption patterns diffused throughout different levels of society. Also, the coffeehouse institution travelled from Ottoman lands to Europe and created a public sphere in both of these societies. However, public debate was generated through two different means of communication: rational debates in the west and humour and aesthetics in the Ottoman context. Consumption itself, as in the case of coffeehouses, was an issue of public debate which shaped consumer practices (Karababa and Ger, 2011).

Akin to the western context, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many early modern Eurasian contexts such as Ming China, Mughal India, Safavid Iran, and the Ottoman Empire experienced demographic, economic, and social changes, such as population growth, dynamism and mobility in society, the growth of regional cities and towns, the rise of the urban commercial classes, religious revival, and rural unrest (Burke, 1993; Fletcher, Jr, 1985; Goldstone, 1988;
Wittrock, 1998). However, each society possessed its own cultural foundations and institutional formations, which in turn shaped different consumer cultures. These alternative modernities have to be studied to theorize the development of consumer culture in different historical conditions.

Social and cultural history approaches are beneficial in investigating institutional and cultural specificities of non-western contexts. Especially for the purpose of delineating categories specific to the culture, an interpretive or hermeneutic tradition can be a more useful approach (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999; Fırat, 1987). From this perspective, the individual is seen as an actor constituting social and cultural life rather than assumed to be a passive being shaped by macrostructures. That is, human subjectivity and contextual meaning are emphasized (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999; Fırat, 1987). Historical analysis rests in the study of how language shapes knowledge and the conception of reality of the subject. Interpretation is negotiated through the interaction between the historical text and the researcher (Jenkins, 1991). Critical discourse analysis might also be a useful technique for identifying power struggles among the countervailing discourses specific to the context, shaping the individual and institutional practices (Foucault, 1980; Kendall and Wickham, 2003). This type of approach analyses mechanisms of power specific to culture which highlights alternative processes of formation of consumer cultures.

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