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Global cities and cultural experimentation: Cosmopolitan–local connections

Rojas Gaviria, Pilar and Emontspool, J., International Marketing Review

Structured Abstract:

**Purpose:** Studying the cultural dynamics of expatriate amateur theater in Brussels, this paper investigates multicultural marketplace development in global cities.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The paper performs an interpretive analysis of the expatriate amateur scene from an ethnographic perspective, combining observations of rehearsals and performances, in-depth interviews with actors, directors and audience, and secondary data.

**Findings:** The fluidity of global cities allows their inhabitants to engage in creative processes of cultural experimentation, performing a continuous back-and-forth movement between hybridization and pluralization. The former creates enough homogeneity for the expatriates to feel targeted; the latter ensures a level of cultural diversity necessary to satisfy their cosmopolitan aspirations.

**Practical implications:** The paper points to the important role of global cities for cultural experimentation. Such cities are not only an interesting market for culturally diverse products, but also experimental hubs. Managers willing to address multicultural marketplaces might target these markets with dynamic cultural offers that ensure a balance between rendering a product globally appreciated and recognizable, and maintaining a cosmopolitan appeal for consumers in search of diversity.

**Originality/value:** Drawing on global cities as markets in continuous reconstruction and subject to cultural experimentation, the paper turns the attention of the research community to the collective, reflexive, and experimental aspects of symbolic consumption. It shows how arts and cultural products represent valuable contexts for international marketing research, providing original insights into market dynamics and cultural experimentation.

**Key words:** Multicultural marketplace, cultural experimentation, global cities, cultural pluralism, cultural hybridization, cosmopolitanism, theatre, Brussels
Introduction

Every day, international flows of cultural resources in the form of objects, commodities, information, and lifestyles stimulate the imagination of the world’s inhabitants (Appadurai, 1990). In combination with human mobility, which is increasingly skewed toward particular hubs for immigration (Czaika and de Haas, 2014), these global flows advance the emergence of global cities, defined as economic, social, and cultural centers of influence, where a cosmopolitan interest in diversity predominates (Yeoh, 2005).

Global cities are unique marketplaces, of major interest for international marketers and marketing researchers alike. Indeed, consumers of various origins live in physical proximity and interact daily with a rapidly mutating multicultural environment. These multicultural consumers are in continuous search for products that enable them to negotiate diversity while maintaining familiar cultural cues (Cross and Gilly, 2014). Intensified cultural contact in global cities therefore creates unique market opportunities, allowing marketers to participate in the creation of globally recognizable products that nonetheless cater to cosmopolitan interests. These cities thus constitute laboratories, or creative hubs, where multicultural products can be tested by a diverse audience - a concentrated version of today’s global world (Craig, 2013).

Previous research has approached diversity in the marketplace by studying how brand meanings change with increased consumer mobility (Bengtsson et al., 2010), how consumers negotiate multiple cultural references and integrate foreign cultures into their identity (Askegaard et al., 2005; Demangeot and Sankaran, 2012), or how cosmopolitanism influences consumption preferences (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). However, these works give less attention to marketplace dynamics as such (Yaprak, 2008). Global cities generate a particular type of creative process (Hall, 2000), which is characterized by more fluid market development than in more homogeneous contexts. Accordingly, this study
investigates the dynamics underlying the development of multicultural marketplaces and how their interplay generates a particular type of creative market. In this market, diversity is indeed negotiated through the shifts between sameness and difference typical of global cities (Zukin, 1995), which we term ‘cultural experimentation’ in this article.

Employing different qualitative data, this article proposes an interpretive analysis of multicultural marketplaces in global cities. Specifically, the paper uses the context of expatriate amateur theater in Brussels. Studying a marketplace such as the theater scene provides valuable insights into the creative processes involved in cultural negotiation, as the arts constitute an ideal field for advancing understanding of symbolic consumption (d’Astous et al., 2008). Individuals perpetuate cultural values, norms, and beliefs through the consumption of cultural productions (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006). International marketing research can thus benefit from the study of these contexts, since they are carriers of cultural meaning across the world. Historically, cities have concentrated creative talent, supported industries and outlets for distribution, and therefore proven to be fertile ground for cultural creativity (Craig, 2013). Studying the context of the arts in a global city therefore provides major insights into cultural dynamics in multi-cultural marketplace.

In Brussels, expatriate amateur theater has emerged from consumers’ desire for innovative, internationally accessible entertainment. Therefore, this context perfectly illustrates cultural diversity in global cities through its creative expressions in the marketplace. Contrary to the more formalized, relatively labor- and cost-intensive artistic industry in global cities (Craig, 2013), the amateur scene allows all citizens of the city to become involved in the marketplace, and to jointly construct the global city (Yeoh, 2005).

In this paper, we first provide an overview of the literature relating to cultural dynamics in global cities, addressing both the global city as a particular social field and the cultural dynamics specific to
the artistic marketplace. We then present our context, the amateur theater scene in Brussels, and describe our methodology. Subsequently, we develop in our findings the interplay between hybridization and pluralization, which co-exist in multicultural marketplaces. Finally, we introduce and discuss the notion of cultural experimentation, emphasizing theoretical and practical contributions and avenues for further international marketing research.

**Cultural dynamics in global cities**

Global cities perpetually transform, since they are at the center of international economic and cultural exchange (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982). The day-to-day interactions of their highly diverse populations create specific multicultural spaces, which illustrates living together in difference (Ang, 2003). Researchers therefore increasingly approach global cities as independent social and cultural fields.

**Global cities as independent social and cultural fields**

Global cities constitute social environments that are very different from other spaces in a country: they are segregated economic entities with their own dynamics and creative processes. Through a concentration of multinationals and service industry actors, they bring social groups of culturally diverse origins and socio-economic backgrounds into close geographical proximity (Sassen, 2001). Rather than having a “unified” or pre-defined identity, these cities therefore constantly renegotiate their identity, building on the collective capacity of their inhabitants to not only tolerate each other’s existences, but to actively appropriate the city as a creative space (Zukin, 1995; Yeoh, 2005). In that way, they enable individuals to redefine the difference of their selves within a common project (sameness).

The outcome of combining sameness and difference in this manner is a change of habitus among global city inhabitants. This process relies more strongly on constant self- reflection and identity-
experimentation than in other populations (Friedmann, 2002). Global cities encourage individuals to continuously re-negotiate the symbolic capital necessary to navigate a changing social field (Friedmann, 2002). Indeed, social fields represent the spheres in which individuals develop their identity, creating status or symbolic capital by displaying their economic, cultural, and social capital such that it distinguishes them from others in the same fields (Bourdieu, 1979). Consequently, marketers and consumer researchers alike must understand how symbolic consumption practices develop the multicultural marketplaces characteristic of global cities.

As the global city is distinct from other social fields, symbolic capital evolves in a particular way. All new arrivals to urban environments must re-negotiate their inherited and acquired cultural capital in relation to the capital of others (Erel, 2010). Cosmopolitanism therefore develops as an important qualification, supported by both educational institutions and global urban contexts (Igarashi and Saito, 2014). Global cities serve as marketplaces for this quest for cosmopolitanism by offering a multiplicity of cultural influences (Zukin, 1995; Friedman, 2002). Locals and migrants, as much as expatriates, express their cosmopolitanism through the adoption of consumption discourses and practices that highlight their interest and openness to other people, a sign of high cultural capital in global contexts (Holt, 1998; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). The following section thus considers the development of global cities as creative markets particularly for individuals of high cultural capital, for whom the arts are a crucial consumption resource.

_Cultural dynamics and the marketplace for the arts_

Global cities provide room for innovation and a setting in which cultural flexibility is common. The arts play a vital role in this setting, since the close connection between cultural industries and the cultural dynamism of global urban contexts provides the city’s inhabitants with diverse cultural
resources (Yeoh, 2005). The more diverse a population becomes, the larger a city’s artistic offering tends to be, as inhabitants from various cultural backgrounds request more presence in artistic performances (Zukin, 1995).

As multicultural marketplaces, cities offer fertile ground for intercultural artistic innovation. In extension, urban spaces represent key examples of cultural negotiation among a multiplicity of interacting origins in terms of art, consumption patterns, and material culture (Clammer, 2003). Although previous research has provided valuable insights into the development of intercultural contact and multicultural groups in global cities (Gow, 2005), most of these studies describe the diversity embedded in global cities. Less is known about how cultural dynamics organize the city. From a marketing perspective, a much more detailed understanding of the dynamics underlying intercultural contact in global cities’ market processes is therefore required.

To illustrate the multiplicity of flows interacting in such global environments, our study builds on the three components of culture defined by Sojka and Tansuhaj (1995) and reconceptualized by Craig and Douglas (2006): values and belief systems, language and communication systems, and material culture and artefacts. Five cultural dynamics underlie cultural change: cultural interpenetration, deterritorialization, contamination, pluralism, and hybridization (Craig and Douglas, 2006). Of these, cultural pluralism and cultural hybridization play a major role in our analysis. Cultural pluralism accents the maintenance and exhibition of cultural difference, whereas cultural hybridization focuses on the fusion of cultures, leading to more sameness (Zukin, 1995).

Sameness and difference in combination constitute structures of common difference in the marketplace (Wilk, 1995), where social and market practices contain both globalizing and localizing elements, respectively relating to the form (structure) and content of those practices (Merz et al., 2008).
The co-existence of global and local processes must therefore be addressed in terms of the symbolic capital they mobilize (Urry, 1995).

Marketplaces focused on “high art” (d’Astous et al., 2008), in particular theater, constitute an ideal setting for such a study. Indeed, by nature, theater and other high arts reflect high cultural capital, a crucial symbolic resource for consumers wanting to express distinction (Bourdieu, 1979). Cultural representations such as theater and opera, despite their intrinsic differences in terms of the required cultural capital, both illustrate individuals’ high cultural capital owing to the necessary acquisition of taste (Holt, 1998). For international marketing in particular, they provide valuable contexts. For instance, while the arts have a global character, at the local level, national origins and interpretations play a major role, and investigators have called for further research into artistic productions with multiple national origins (D’Astous et al., 2008)—a call we answer in this article.

Rather than concentrating on individuals’ appropriations of foreign cultural capital, this paper focuses on the cultural dynamics structuring multicultural marketplaces, following Craig and Douglas’ contribution on cultural dynamics, and the nature of global cities as independent social and cultural fields. By studying migrants as key representatives of multi-cultural interactions in urban environments (Erel, 2010), we examine the creative practices individuals employ to construct and mobilize transnational forms of cultural capital.

**International amateur theater in Brussels**

Amateur theater in Brussels constitutes an ideal context for the study of cultural dynamics in global cities for two reasons. First, the highly mobile and culturally diverse population of the city makes Brussels a fertile terrain for cultural exchange. Second, Brussels’ cultural manifestations illustrate the cultural flexibility and creative attitude of global cities.
**Highly mobile and culturally diverse population**

Brussels is officially bicultural, combining the two majoritarian Belgian cultures, French and Flemish. Nevertheless, its contemporary cultural reality has surpassed this institutional duality, as large parts of the population are of foreign origin.

Indeed, Brussels welcomes a significant immigrant population from within and outside Europe, bringing diverse values and beliefs to a new home. Moreover, Brussels hosts the headquarters of international organizations such as NATO and the European Union institutions, leading to continuous in- and outgoing flows of interns, politicians, lobbyists, and others. In addition to being global, creative, and the capital of Europe, Brussels has the potential to establish itself as a hub for “aesthetic cosmopolitans” - individuals open to divergent aesthetic experiences from foreign cultures (Urry, 1995).

**Brussels’ cultural flexibility and creative attitude**

“In everyday life, Brussels is often perceived as complex, opaque, and incomprehensible. It is experienced as a place where one struggles to get the simplest things done, and is repeatedly caught in “catch 22” situations. Brussels is, therefore, often depicted as “Italy of the North,” “Kafkaesque,” or “surreal” (Doucet, 2012, p. 106).

Brussels lacks a strong homogeneous culture. The city is for instance known to have a less defined identity than other global cities such as London, Paris, or New York. This ambiguity is precisely what makes it an easy space to re-appropriate (Corijn et al., 2009). It thereby fits the description of creative cities as “uncomfortable” and “kicking over the traces” (Hall, 2000, p. 646).

The inhabitants of Brussels intermingle with visitors from multiple cultures and life trajectories, wherefore their exchanges account for a considerable part of the city’s creative attitude (Hall, 2000). It offers an appropriate environment for cultural creativity by attracting young artists spanning from hip-hop to classical music (Corijn, 2014). The city hosts an average of 1.4 performance venues per square
kilometer and more than 2000 residents work as actors, dancers, choreographs, technicians, or in other professions associated with performance arts, not counting administrative staff (Minne and Pickels, 2003). Brussels’ cultural flexibility and creative attitude, together with its highly mobile and diverse population, therefore offers a fruitful environment for cultural innovation.

This study focuses on the amateur theater scene, which was developed by and for the expatriate population, present in large numbers in Brussels. Estimates suggest that more than 100,000 expatriates live in Brussels, representing more than 10% of the population (Gatti, 2009). A survey performed among expatriates in 2012 indicates that 56.4% like to attend a dance or theatre performance at least once a year (Europe-Brussels Liaison Office, 2013). Access to such events is however very dependent on knowledge of local languages and cultures, which hinders participation in the cultural life of the city over the first years of residency. In consequence, expatriates take an active role in constructing a dynamic international environment welcoming newcomers - for example through amateur theater.

In total, more than 10 distinct amateur groups work in Brussels. They differ on various characteristics, such as time in the market (ranging from 5 to 100 years), level of professionalism, cultural origins, and multilingualism. The best known groups are The English Comedy Club, The American Theatre Company, The Brussels Shakespeare Society, The Brussels Light Opera Company, The Irish Theatre Group and the European Theatre Club ETCetera. Through these theater groups, expatriates in Brussels create a common venture that includes the diversity of their cultural trajectories, joining foreign places on the scene (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986).

Method

To explore cultural dynamics in the making and better grasp cross-cultural interactions among the theater amateurs in global cities, we chose an interpretive approach enabling theory development
Previous research examining expatriate consumers in Brussels established the existence of the scene observed in this study (Emontspool, 2012). We therefore first engaged in depth with one specific amateur group, with the purpose of better understanding the collective artistic project from a more ethnographic perspective (Quinn, 1999). From that starting point, we enlarged the spectrum of the data with additional companies and interviews to obtain a broader view of the phenomenon. In total, the study uses three different types of data.

We first observed in depth one amateur theatre group. The members of this group are mostly members of the European institutions, NATO, or associated organizations (lobbying companies, journalist centers, international schools). They differ from other migrants on a range of factors, such as opportunities for social mobility, educational background, income level, professional status, or the initially temporary character of their stay in Brussels, which relieves them from the integration pressures other migrants experience. They are therefore free to develop their own cultural taste propositions, an aspect that renders this context extremely interesting for understanding intercultural capital, contrasting belief systems, and different language systems in multicultural marketplace encounters.

The group has five years of experience in the amateur scene, with some fluctuations in team composition depending on performance needs. This experience places the group at a beginner level compared to other international amateur groups in the market. The group is not devoted to one specific theatrical style, but experiments with multiple possibilities to maximize experiences for the team and satisfy the demand from a highly diversified audience.

The practical purpose of our interactions with this group was to collect first-hand information about both rehearsals and final performances to better grasp interactions between participants of different origins in their “natural” environment. One of the authors attended one full night of rehearsals
(a few days before the premiere) and both authors jointly attended two performances (including the opening night), interacting with the actors especially before the second performance. These observations resulted in separate notes by the authors, as well as debriefings of the observations before, during, and after the performances. Particular themes such as cross-cultural interactions, challenges, and conflicts and their resolution through group negotiation were the focus of the observations notes. Language use was also taken into account when documenting the observation. Beyond this a priori observation, the researchers remained open to capture other meaningful material related to the scope of the study.

We also used the observations as an entry point for in-depth interviews with members of the theater group. Six members of the group agreed to participate. To explore the phenomenon from a broader perspective, we secured five more interviewees from other amateur groups and members of the audience. The motivation for selecting this second group of participants included enriching our knowledge in terms of exposure to and experience with the amateur scene in Brussels by incorporating not only actors but also members of the audience, volunteers, or directors (for details, please see Table 1). We also included informants from older, more established expatriate theater groups in addition to the one observed. One Belgian was included because of his extensive experience. Participants in this second wave came from previous research projects in Brussels, as well as through posts on relevant social media. Participants were added to the point of theoretical saturation (Bryman and Bell, 2003).

The interview guide emerged from an extensive literature review and the previous research projects. It focused on the respondents’ perception of the local scene and the way they perceived its development. During the interviews, we also discussed participants’ experience of working with people from different cultural backgrounds. The interviews took 50 minutes on average and were conducted in private or public settings at the convenience of participants. Most interviews were conducted in
English, except for two that were in Spanish, the mother tongue of those interviewees and the interviewer. All interviews were recorded with the respondents’ consent, with anonymity ensured through blurring of personal details and the use of pseudonyms.

This study also relies on quantitative and qualitative secondary data from various governmental and non-governmental reports concerning both amateur and professional theater in Brussels. Although these data were not formally included in the analysis, they defined the context and revealed structures beyond our observations and interviewing experiences (Araujo et al., 2008).

The collected data were analyzed in an interpretive fashion, moving back and forth hermeneutically between data and theory to develop a full understanding of the studied context and the respondents’ experience (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997). The researchers first analyzed the collected data individually and then jointly discussed their conclusions, to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and to support the interpretative debate with shared well-grounded theoretical arguments (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Among those arguments and theoretical perspectives, Craig and Douglas’ (2006) theoretical framework emerged as a useful structure for understanding the cultural dynamics at play in the context of this research. Also, it allowed us to situate our findings in current international marketing research. We therefore structure the findings accordingly and provide further insights into the cultural dynamics of multicultural marketplaces.

**Findings**

Our findings point to two seemingly contradictory cultural processes in global cities. On the one hand, the cultural offering is less adapted to the local setting than in other places, as one of our respondents indicates when comparing Brussels to her native Vienna. She and others highlight the
decontextualizing dynamics of multicultural marketplaces—the *hybridization of cultural influences*. The resulting global common ground unites the citizens through an undifferentiated mix of components from various cultures.

On the other hand, our respondents point to the continuous need to adapt to a multiplicity of cultures in all activities. A *pluralization of cultural differences* diversifies the marketplace, combining cultural components of different origins while maintaining their differences. This differentiation echoes the characterization of global cities as simultaneously promoting sameness and difference (Zukin, 1995), with hybridization and pluralization dynamics respectively generating the former and the latter.

Both dynamics influence the three components of culture (Craig and Douglas, 2006): values and belief systems, language and communication systems, and material culture and artefacts. The following discussion describes the components of each dynamic.

While values and belief systems and language and communication systems are self-explanatory in the context of the performing arts, material culture and artefacts need further elucidation for intangible products such as the arts. Craig and Douglas (2006) describe this cultural component in terms of meaning(s) associated to particular goods or possessions and the rituals associated with their consumption. To allow for the predominance of immaterial elements in theater consumption, we extend this third cultural component to include differences among symbolic consumption practices in cultural environments. In the context of theater, the symbolism inherent to those consumption practices mainly serves to “demarcate life-styles and social class” (Craig and Douglas, 2006, p. 327) through the display of cultural capital. The hybridization and pluralization of the third component of culture will consequently concentrate on how multicultural marketplaces integrate cultural capital of various origins.
Hybridization

Our respondents defined Brussels as hybridized: an emerging sense of community re-creates sameness in difference through all its cultural components by establishing shared values and skills, a common ground that allows people to interact with each other.

Values and belief systems. A hybridization of values and belief systems intelligible to all members of the marketplace requires a common set of value understandings, specific to global environments. Indeed, as much as the audiences, the participants in a performance need to interpret foreign plays and re-appropriate them to render them accessible to all. As Britta indicates, the multicultural environment in which she works requires her to find the essence of the play, the system of values and beliefs underlying the performance that enables performers and audience alike to engage with it.

“I directed a Swedish play, but in English. Two of the actors were English, and two were Spanish. To find the essence of the play, what it means for me, that we’re able to serve it to an audience who does not have that Swedish background, and find the connections, and to have the Spanish guy play Strindberg, and find his personality to work with Strindberg, and find the synergies that you have there, that’s very satisfactory” (Britta).

Some groups avoided this balancing act by focusing on specific types of performances, such as English-speaking stand-up comedy centered on every day and household scenes. The performers explicitly circumvented localized knowledge, which they judged the multicultural audience would find difficult to follow. They referred to a lowest common denominator for cultural understanding, relying for instance on stereotyped, culturally hybrid gender discourses dissociated from specific cultures.

This performance of hybrid values and belief systems leads to a feeling of sameness through a focus on commonalities between individuals. The reliance on common structures is reminiscent of the general humanistic ideal of tolerance among cosmopolitans. Indeed, while interest in other cultures
underlies many definitions of cosmopolitanism, the ethic acknowledgement of belonging to one humanity pervades cosmopolitan thought and is accentuated in global cities (Appiah, 2007).

*Language and communication systems.* Over the years, English has become the working language in multicultural marketplaces and especially in Brussels, since many expatriates do not know Belgium’s official languages (Gatti, 2009). During an on-site observation of a multicultural play, the authors witnessed a Greek bartender’s arrival at his new job in a Flemish theater rented by the expatriate troupe. Although he lacked national language skills, his knowledge of English was sufficient for integrating into the collective transnational project. English thus remains the *lingua franca* for most communication in the marketplace.

However, constructing a linguistic common ground is far more complex than simply using English to communicate. Rather than British or American versions of the language, a hybrid form of English prevails in Brussels, termed Euro-English in newspapers and blogs (Hannan, 2007). Our respondents participate in creating a new hybrid language, specific to the community in which they move, with its own expressions and concepts. As in other cultures where people “who share a common language share the inheritance of an intellectual and literary tradition which is necessarily and constantly revalued with every shift in experience” (Williams, 1960, p. 340), our respondents use Euro-English to create a new, cosmopolitan cultural background and a common cultural heritage. In contrast to relying on relatively homogenous intellectual and literary traditions (Williams, 1960), global cities accent heterogeneity and the myth of the cosmopolitan as a traveler who builds on a market-mediated structuration of difference (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). From the linguistic perspective, this structuration rests on the development of decontextualized transnational competences (Koehn and Rosenau, 2002) embedded in English as a global language.
Although indicating a general tendency in our findings, this linguistic development contrasts with practices in some amateur theater groups, which seemingly aim for cultural purism (Demangeot and Sankaran, 2012) by requiring actors (of different origins) to perform defined accents, such as a perfect Boston accent in *Twelve Angry Men*. To remain true to the cultural origins of their plays, certain groups hence attempt to achieve cultural “authenticity” by mainly hiring actors from the play’s culture of origin. However, this finding does not seem to apply specifically to global cities, thereby not disrupting the hybridization logic of language and communication.

*Symbolic consumption and cultural capital.* On the level of symbolic consumption practices, the marketplace needs to provide a sufficiently globalized basis to which individuals of various origins can relate. For instance, our data points to a decontextualization of the props used in performances focusing on sameness. The costumes in a modern interpretation of *Hamlet* by the European Theatre Club were black, inconspicuous, without references to either the British origins of the play or to the Danish setting of the play. Similarly, the stage setting was simple - held in black - with only a white screen for the projection of subtitles. Multicultural marketplaces thus support “decontextualized cultural capital”, skills and competences that enable cosmopolitans to communicate in foreign environments by using cultural references dissociated from particular cultural environments (Hannerz, 1990).

Multicultural theater also achieves decontextualization through reference to internationally known performances. Shakespearean plays constitute a decontextualized form of cultural capital owing to their global appropriation, rendering a play’s British origin less relevant for appreciating the performances. Miriam used her knowledge of this type of theater as a key to consumption of a representation in an unknown setting.

“I went to one Italian performance. I do not understand a word of Italian besides pizza and lasagna. But, it was Shakespeare, it was Twelfth Night. I know the play already, so I was able to
follow. It is good actually, I was really interested to see how they [did it]. Because again it very set in time, it is a very specific kind of performance, Shakespearean.” (Miriam)

Similarly, non-textual cultural keys are useful for understanding other representations. For instance, our respondent Vikas mentioned how his knowledge of Rosas danst Rosas, a contemporary ballet by Anna De Keersmaker, helped his understanding of other performances. Although of Belgian origin, the so-called chair scene has an undeniably global character. Indeed, the singer Beyoncé used it in her music video “Countdown”. Those types of scenes thus offer entry points into other performances, which are globally recognized by specialized audiences.

Pluralism

Multicultural marketplaces deal with the day-to-day adventure of re-creating a common ground in terms of values and belief systems, language and communication systems, and symbolic consumption and cultural capital. However, meaningful encounters between global citizens are possible only when sameness, the common ground, is combined with difference, the maintenance of cultural elements of different origins. In this sense, cosmopolitan tastes require not only hybridity but also pluralism in cultural components.

Value and belief systems. In contrast to the blurring of cultural differences through hybridization, the global values and belief systems can also reflect distinctness, cultural plurality. For example, one can experience the feeling of being part of a culturally fragmented city during comedy nights in Brussels, where the audience and performers regularly engage in the intercultural self-mockery typical of global cities:

“I have the feeling that when you go to these international English speaking comedy nights, a big part of the jokes is based on international behavior and exchanges. Because the people who are in the audience experience it on a daily basis as well, especially here in Brussels, interacting with many different cultures” (Claudia)
In appropriate cosmopolitan openness to other cultures (Hannerz, 1990), our respondents point to interest and tolerance for different values and belief systems. This reinforces social ties within the international community by allowing for humorous comparisons.

Conversely, rather than pluralizing cultural influences, certain troupes establish themselves as cultural experts for particular genres or cultural origins, similar to the limits on hybridization of language. However, we interpret this maintenance of cultural tradition as not specific to global cities, but rather as illustrative of a general fragmentation of markets by co-existence of traditions (Firat, 1997).

**Language and communication systems.**

In multicultural marketplaces, English language is not always predominant. The *Hamlet* performance mentioned earlier by the European Theatre Club provides a particularly telling example of linguistic pluralism. It combines four actors alternatively playing Hamlet and his (muted) co-characters, with each actor adopting a different language (German, French, Swedish, Spanish, and English) and subtitles in the other languages. Illustrating the important link between language and the global city, the performance of *Our Town* is similarly introduced in a multilingual fashion:

“...When performing Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* in Brussels, the cast was deliberately “multilingual,” as at the start of the play, every single actor welcomed the audience with a short phrase in their own native tongue (French, German, Dutch, Polish, Italian, Hungarian, Swedish, Turkish) – thereby saying something about *Our Town*” (Pieter)

Multicultural marketplaces enable this type of performance because different languages are part of the respondents’ daily routines. The inclusion of other languages in a play is indeed less of an issue, as Britta suggested: “Multilingual plays; you can only do that in Brussels, because here people are so used to it. Everyone is multilingual, and you hear those languages, people aren’t scared of it.”
Other amateur companies pluralize the linguistic environment using English as the official performing language and other European languages behind the scenes. The switch makes feedback to other actors more vivid and intelligible, and expresses closeness to other colleagues by adopting the other’s language. Additionally, it eases language learning, as backstage is a space where one can practice:

“Where the multilingualism/multiculturalism was most prominent was back-stage – I guess, an easy entrance for someone not yet confident enough to perform in English, but gradually acclimatized to it” (Pieter).

Pieter’s testimony of the backstage experience echoes Goffman (1959), who dissociates front- and back stage. In the protected sphere of the back stage, flexibility and freedom of expression are allowed. The predominance of English as the *lingua franca* is consciously challenged, setting up a contrast with the performance in the front region, where certain standards of English are maintained to allow for a globally accessible theater experience.

*Symbolic consumption and cultural capital.* For plural coexistence of symbolic consumption practices, multicultural marketplaces combine cultural capital of different origins, expecting the consumers of the performance to be familiar with the cultural capital of varied origins. In contrast with the decontextualized symbolic staging of *Hamlet* described earlier, one performance attributes clearly recognizable, though culturally different, references to the costumes and the stage:

“When we played *Taming of the Shrew*, we used costumes that were reminiscent of the French *Asterix & Obelix* type to give it some non-Shakespearean continental comedy flavor I guess – especially as it was performed in a Francophone “Château” (Pieter).

Despite cosmopolitan openness to various cultural influences in global cities, a need for adaptation however remains. One of the troupes observed in this study had to switch from a sophisticated play by Tolstoy to a more accessible comedy, perceived as “lighter” and therefore more easily understood by a larger audience. Negotiation about the level of the employed cultural capital in
multicultural marketplaces may therefore hinder the extent to which a fully pluralistic dynamic emerges in the market in terms of cultural capital. Cosmopolitan mastery of all cultures in the world would exceed a person’s lifetime (Hannerz, 1990). Similarly, perfect cultural pluralization may be utopian, although multicultural marketplaces may nevertheless strive for it.

Discussion

Table 2 summarizes our findings and points to the co-existence of hybridization and pluralist dynamics in multicultural marketplaces, expressed in three cultural components (Craig and Douglas, 2006).

[Insert Table 2 here]

This coexistence is a specific outcome of the transient and fluid character of global cities. Consecutive waves of expatriate migration to Brussels lead to an alternation between the innovativeness of new arrivals and consolidation efforts of more settled expatriates, whose expertise provides steadiness in the fluid environment that is the international community in Brussels.

“There are always new people arriving, bringing their energy, there is a constant renewal. Simultaneously, those who stay make the energy and the associations that sprung up stay, they consolidate them. That makes me see the scene as a living organism, where there are different flows of matter and energy that are constantly renewed and fixed” (Britta)

As Britta indicates, new arrivals and more permanent expatriates constantly renegotiate and renew the cultural offer of global cities. The multicultural marketplace emerges from this continuous and collective experimentation with a variety of cultural influences in an attempt to integrate new arrivals without losing the influences from longer-term residents. Both expatriate groups thus contribute to the multicultural marketplace - their respective contributions being valuable because of their complementarity.
This process of cultural experimentation draws on the ideals of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. The participants are curious to learn about variations on classics; are open to enjoying non-traditional artistic representations; and are willing to take risks by participating in foreign performances. Contrary to aesthetic cosmopolitanism, which has a focus on elements of difference only, cultural experimentation provides sufficient familiarity for cosmopolitans to feel at home in the city. Cultural experimentation then creates enough homogeneity for all to feel targeted, while satisfying cosmopolitan aspirations for diversity.

Multicultural marketplaces hence constitute important settings for cultural experimentalism, the “continuous search for the products, practices, and experiences of other cultures” (Demangeot and Sankaran, 2012, p. 760). In contrast to cultural experimentalism however, cultural experimentation reflects a collective market-building effort rather than an individual activity, as the necessary back-and-forth movement between new influences and consolidation, but also between hybridization and pluralization indicates.

From a broader perspective, experimentation is crucial to cultures’ development (Arnold, 1909). Indeed, the true value of culture emerges from individuals’ ability to continuously re-invent themselves, adding one element to another (Arnold, 1909). Cultural experimentation in global cities then embeds itself in the general processes of cultural learning. Its difference from the original form of experimentation lies in a heightened reflexivity and sense of purpose, which generate those types of dynamics in global cities.

While previous research pointed to the considerable importance of cultural reflexivity in consumption practices (Emontspool and Kjeldgaard 2012; Rojas and Bluemelhuber, 2010), the present study investigates the dynamics involved in this reflexive process. Our respondents display a great awareness of these processes, and combine elements of hybridization and pluralization in the joint
construction of the multicultural marketplace. This behavior results from continuous contact with a multiplicity of cultural influences typical of global cities, which strongly encourages individuals to experiment with cultural elements outside of their original habitus (Friedmann, 2002). In summary, cultural experimentation thus refers to a reflexive, collective back-and-forth movement between hybridization and pluralist dynamics, which creates multicultural marketplaces through its repeated character. It offers a balance between familiar and unfamiliar elements, reflecting the sameness and difference so attractive to aesthetic cosmopolitans.

Conclusion
Multicultural marketplaces emerge from collective cultural experimentation, where members of the marketplace combine the cultural dynamics of hybridization and pluralization (Craig and Douglas, 2006). These insights provide contributions and avenues for future research on various levels.

First, this study contributes to international marketing research by focusing on cultural transformation in the context of the arts scene, where cultural experimentation results in negotiation of multicultural references and diversification of cultural offers in the marketplace. This context provides major insights for international marketing research through the cultural meanings it carries (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006). Combining symbols and physical products in artistic productions, such a context proves particularly useful for the study of cultural dynamics. Indeed, it extends previous research beyond material artefacts as cultural components, by detailing hybridization and pluralization for all three aspects of culture (Craig and Douglas, 2006). The full usefulness of the proposed framework in multicultural marketplaces depends hence on consideration of not only the material side of marketplaces, but also the less material, intangible parts, whether in the service industry or in artistic marketplaces. By differentiating between cultural components and highlighting the interplay between
cultural dynamics, this investigation consequently responds to the call to develop deeper understandings of cultural processes (Craig and Douglas, 2006).

Second, recent consumer research has investigated different forms of consumer-driven market emergence (Martin and Schouten, 2014), examining the collective character of marketplace development by consumers. This paper provides an opportunity for further research to investigate the role of cultural consumers and productions in multicultural artistic marketplaces, thereby merging insights about prosumption and consumer-driven market emergence. Indeed, prosumption is of interest especially in the contexts of the arts (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Nakajima, 2012). This study shows that in developing a marketplace, our respondents work together as both consumers and producers, a collaboration that future research should address. More specifically, the role of cultural intermediaries (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006) generating further understanding between cultural contexts deserves attention.

Third, we contribute to research about global cities and cosmopolitanism by showcasing how those marketplaces serve as creative laboratories for cultural interaction. Managers willing to address multicultural marketplaces are encouraged to ensure a balance between hybridization, which renders a globally appreciable and recognizable product, and pluralism, which maintains a cosmopolitan appeal (Merz et al., 2008).

One limitation of this study lies in Brussels’ unique features. Indeed, compared to cities such as Tokyo, New York, Mumbai, or Paris, which have more than 10 million inhabitants, Brussels is an atypical global city, having only one million inhabitants. While Brussels’ characterization as a global city is nonetheless appropriate due to its diversity and its international political and economic importance, future research should investigate cultural experimentation in other global cities.
Differences between Brussels and other global cities can thereby provide new perspectives on the concept of cultural experimentation.

More specifically, many expatriates in Brussels come from other European countries into a city with a long history of immigration. Future research should hence study the role of cosmopolitan lifestyles for cultural experimentation in non-European contexts, with more diverse populations, and other migration histories, such as Dubai or Singapore. Cosmopolitan openness to cultural difference could, for instance, be expressed differently in various locations across the world. In certain contexts, the local dominant culture does not welcome other influences, denying them legitimacy (Üstüner and Holt, 2007). Although many global cities are very different from the surrounding countryside, their settings in more conservative, national environments may nonetheless lead to different interpretations of cosmopolitanism, and involve different hybridization and pluralism dynamics.

Fourth and finally, this study shows how cultural capital is activated in multicultural marketplaces. It thereby provides insights into the relationship between high cultural capital and multicultural marketplaces. Although expatriates often possess abundant cultural capital owing to their education, multicultural performances remain a continual challenge, requiring cultural experimentation, an internalization of alternative visions of art and life, other ways of relating to the audience, and options for interacting with each other.

This research project included governmental employees and EU officials as well as students and unemployed migrants. Despite the resulting diversity in economic capital, all respondents possess high cultural capital typical for the performing arts scene, which is frequently associated with higher educational backgrounds and greater financial resources (Holt, 1998). This profile of respondents constitutes an additional limitation to our study, as culture and thus cultural experimentation emerge from various population groups, not exclusively from the elite (Williams, 1960). While high cultural
capital enables the reflexive construction of a cosmopolitan marketplace, we need to consider the cross-
class character of theater, which although often attributed to the upper social classes, in fact emerges
from the collaboration of all population groups. Further research should therefore study the extent of
democratization of cultural experimentation, to understand how individuals of lower cultural capital
participate in the creation of multicultural marketplaces in global cities. Indeed, the special character of
global cities may prevail over cultural and economic capital, especially since cosmopolitanism is no
longer exclusive to higher societal classes (Werbner, 1999).
References


