

ARTICLE

# The Meaning of Holiday Consumption

Construction of self among mature couples

ANETTE THERKELSEN AND MALENE GRAM

Aalborg University, Denmark

### *Abstract*

Consumption objects are consumed not only for what they do but also for what they communicate and mean to oneself and one's surroundings, and hence they become part of consumers' identity formation processes. This article sets out to explore the meaning production and the identity construction taking place among mature tourists in connection with their holiday consumption. Identity construction is particularly interesting to study in the context of holidays as the physical crossing of borders also marks a mental crossing of borders, away from routines, obligations and scheduled time towards pleasure, free time and 'the good life', and hence holidays are an obvious means of expressing 'who I am'. Mature couples, who are in a phase of transition from full nester to empty nester and from employed individual to retired individual, are the focus. It is investigated in what way mature tourists use holidays as a vehicle of identity construction in their new life situation. In the existing literature, a strong focus is on individual consumers in relation to their creation of identity, and less on the role of identity creation in the gap between individual identity and the larger social groups with which people identify or from which they distinguish themselves. This article examines the locus of identity creation between I and 'they': the 'we'. The study is explorative in its approach.

The study shows that mature people use holidays for expressing who they are and, often just as importantly, who they are not. The couple is the central identifying unit and in the process of understanding their couple identity, the mature tourists use other couples and larger sociocultural entities to differentiate themselves from and affiliate with. Individual interests are also identified, but they are often staged as being in the interest of the couple and not just of the individual. Hence, the study

Copyright © 2008 SAGE Publications

(London, Los Angeles, New Delhi and Singapore)

Vol 8(2): 269-292 1469-5405 [DOI: 10.1177/1469540508090214]

<http://joc.sagepub.com>

demonstrates that the couple is a salient identifying unit in relation to holiday consumption among mature tourists.

*Key words*

identity • qualitative methods • tourism • transition phases

## INTRODUCTION

Physical products, services, cultural offers, attractions and places alike are consumed in a variety of ways and become part of the identity formation processes in which consumers engage. This is a salient argument of interpretive consumer research (i.e. Hirschmann and Holbrook, 1981; Holt, 1995; Ostergaard and Jantzen, 2000) that has gained more and more influence within recent years. Hence, objects are consumed not only for what they do but also for what they communicate to oneself and one's surroundings (Levy, 1959). This article aims to explore the meaning production and the identity construction taking place among mature tourists, as individuals and as couples, in connection with their holiday consumption.

In the research literature, a strong focus is centred on the individual consumer as well as sociocultural forces that shape his/her consumption patterns, and less on identity creation taking place in the gap between individual identity and larger social circles. In this article, the focus is the locus of identity creation between 'I' and 'they': the 'we', and hence how couples create a common identity through joint consumption practises is scrutinized.

The zones of identity creation between the 'I', 'we' and 'they' are examined through a case study on holiday consumption among mature consumers. Holidays are an interesting case study to undertake in relation to mature consumers because first, this is a consumption situation that is supposed to be the highlight of life, a break away from everyday life and thus a representation of 'the good life' that is closely linked to consumer identity and an obvious means of expressing 'who I am'. Second, holidays and travelling often play an important role for consumers in later stages of life, where the financial situation is often better, more time is at hand and travelling can substitute other identity-creating activities such as being a parent or being active in the labour market.

Literature documents (e.g. Noble and Walker, 1997; Schouten, 1991) that consumption in connection with transition phases may take on a new meaning and significance as products are integrated in new settings and used for defining new life roles. For this reason, it has been deemed relevant

to study mature consumers who are in the midst or at the verge of a transition phase from full nester to empty nester and grandparenthood, and from employment to retirement, as these phases will help to clarify consumption-related identity construction.

In identifying the focus of this research, a previous study done on the holiday consumption of families with children has been useful (Gram and Therkelsen, 2003; Gram, 2004). In this study, a central ideal for the good holiday was, on the one hand, to engage in activities together as a family, and, on the other hand, also to do things individually — seeing one's children well occupied alone or together with other children was considered bliss by parents because it made it possible for them to pursue their own interests. Being 'together, apart' encapsulates a central ideal of families on holiday. In contrast to this, the data for the present study revealed quite different holiday ideals in that mature couples were focused on carrying out basically all activities together and no significant need for individual activities appeared. The term 'the two of us, alone' covers a central holiday ideal for the mature couples in the study and indicates that studying couple identity would be central in this research.

On this basis, the present exploratory study scrutinizes the meaning of holidays to mature couples who are in the midst, or on the verge, of a phase of transition from one life role to another: from full nester to empty nester and from employed individual to retired individual. The purpose is to find out in what way these tourists use holidays as vehicles of identity construction in their new life situation, as individuals, couples and social beings.

In order to get an in-depth understanding of the mature consumers and their uses of holidays, general theory on consumption and identity construction, and theory on transition phases will be applied. The study builds on qualitative data: personal interviews with married couples and focus group interviews. The data were collected in the city of Aalborg, Denmark in Spring 2005.

#### **IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH TOURISM CONSUMPTION**

Since it is concerned with identity formation through consumption practices, what Belk (1988) called 'the extended self', this article is placed within the interpretive consumer research tradition (Hirschmann and Holbrook, 1981; Ostergaard and Jantzen, 2000), which views the consumer as not just a rational but very much an emotional and social being who engages in the acquisition, consumption and disposal of products in order to construct a meaningful life. Thus the functional purpose of consumption is relegated to a secondary position within this tradition, leaving the emotional and

symbolic purposes of consumption at the centre. Both individual and social forces shape consumption practices, and hence negotiations, and often tensions, are ongoing between the consumer's individual project and his or her need to be part of a social group and adhere to social prescription, and so the agency of the individual is limited by certain cultural boundaries (Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

This division between individual and social forces also means that private experiential and common culturally institutionalized meanings of products coexist in various configurations (Holt, 1995; Sorensen and Thomsen, 2005). Hence, consumption-based identity formation is characterized by internal and external processes that help the individual to understand him- or her-self as well as signal to the world who the person is (Belk, 1988; Holbrook and Hirschmann, 1981; Askegaard and Firat, 1996; Warde, 1994).

To exemplify, a person organizing a city break with his/her partner characterized by visits to cultural attractions and gourmet restaurants may use this holiday as a means to strengthen his/her self-understanding as a dedicated and loving partner who contributes to a valuable relationship by arranging common experiences. Simultaneously, social conformity may also enter the picture, as the individual may be influenced by what is prescribed in his or her social group, and so self-organized city breaks with a culturally enlightening content may be a preferred holiday activity in his or her particular group. Hence on a collective level, time spent on cultural attractions becomes a reflection of social prescription that signals cultivation and curiosity about the world, and on a private level visiting cultural attractions provides the consumer with the necessary common experiences to fulfil his or her personal goal of adding new life to a valued partnership. Affiliation with certain social groups simultaneously means differentiation from other social groups, and so this particular consumer may also construct his/her identity in opposition to consumers who go on all-inclusive weekend breaks where food, drinks and entertainment are included in the package and who do not — in the opinion of the consumer — leave any individual mark on their own holiday. Hence, non-consumption of certain products may also add to the consumer's identity (Kleine et al., 1995).

Identity has long been perceived by researchers as a static core, completely developed after adolescence (e.g. Erikson, 1968). In newer work, identity is, however, not perceived as a finished product but rather as an ongoing process, which is constantly negotiated even if it has stable traits and is not completely arbitrary (e.g. Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Fjord Jensen, 2002). Obviously, individuals gain more and more experience and

knowledge as they grow older, which must mean that it is a different kind of continuous identity creation process that characterizes 60 year olds compared to 17 year olds. Furthermore, most researchers refrain from operating with one identity but consider an individual as having a number of identities, the significance of which vary according to different contexts. Hence, in some consumption contexts, life phase plays a significant role (e.g. Moisió et al., 2004) and in other consumption contexts, ethnicity (e.g. Lament and Molnar, 2001), gender (e.g. Jantzen et al., 2006) or nationality (e.g. Djursaa and Kragh, 1998) appears to be the most significant identifying unit, just as combinations of different identities happen to influence and be influenced by consumption practice.

### **Free agents and 'the real me'**

Despite the fact that social prescription and culturally institutionalized meanings of objects are influential in consumption, consumers have a tendency to perceive themselves as free agents. As Thompson and Haytko state: 'they [consumers] see themselves as active creators of a personally unique style, rather than as a passive trend-following consumer' (1997: 35). Though coined in relation to consumption of fashion, this self-perception is likely to be characteristic of consumption situations in general, and Thompson and Haytko explain this by reference to the ethos of modernity, which stresses the control of the individual over one's body, image and life course (1997: 35). The idea of free agency is closely affiliated with Giles and Middleton's reflections on the authentic personhood, as they argue that people want to believe that there is a 'real me' (1999: 31) that exists independently of biological, social and cultural forces. Social roles and cultural conventions try to suppress this individual authenticity so the individual must labour to express and protect his/her uniqueness (1999). In a study of lingerie, Jantzen et al. write: 'This working on identity by purchasing and wearing lingerie may fulfil or generate longings, thus potentially leading to intensified experiences, feelings and sensations of "who I really am"' (2006: 179). Consumption is thus a means of living out (perceived) choice and of expressing one's (perceived) unique inner core.

The ideas of individual autonomy and personal choice are also detectable in data collected for the present study, for instance when resistance was voiced in one focus group against an advertisement for a senior package offer at a camping site consisting of activities, facilities and discounts arranged specifically for seniors. In the context of conscious reflection and presence of peers, which characterize focus group interviews, these consumers resisted this perceived pressure of conformity (and

most likely the unfavourable connotations of 'senior') to be part of a consumer group, but this does not automatically imply that this type of offer would not be chosen in a 'real-life' consumption situation where the level of consciousness would naturally be lower and cultural conventions would influence the consumers' sub-consciousness.

The discussion above does not suggest that individual choice is the only thing that consumers strive for, affiliating with desirable social groups is also central to consumer's identification project. Varying degrees of harmony and disharmony may exist between the individual's life project and the consumer culture he or she is part of, which will lead to either confirmation of or an attempt to escape the given consumer culture. It is a basic argument of Holt (1995) that reinventing oneself in order to take on desired roles is central to consumption. So the example above of the rejection of the senior package, and with that the senior consumer culture, may also be an attempt on the part of the focus group participants to escape an undesirable consumer culture and strive towards a more desirable one.

As it appears from the above, identity formation through consumption is not something that is settled once and for all — despite the fact that consumers themselves tend to believe in a 'real me' — it is a continual process that is characterized by searching for and testing out one's identity. Moreover, the discussions on desired group affiliation and differentiation suggest that the purpose of consumption is much more than a simple end in itself:

Consuming is never just an experience, a disinterested end in itself. Consumer actions directed towards consumption objects have many faces: they are lived experiences that enlighten, bore, entertain, or raise our ire, but they are also means that we use to draw ourselves closer to valued objects and resources that we use to engage others — to impress, to befriend, or simply to play. (Holt, 1995: 15).

Hence, consumption can be an end in itself but it can also be a means to achieve an identity and/or a relationship with others. Central to the purpose of this article is to understand consumption as a means of identity construction not just at an individual and larger collective level, as Holt suggests, but also at the meso-level of two individuals living together as a couple.

As de la Ville et al. (forthcoming) illustrate in Figure 1, consumption is by definition shared with others. According to de la Ville et al. and in accordance with the above-mentioned literature on consumption and

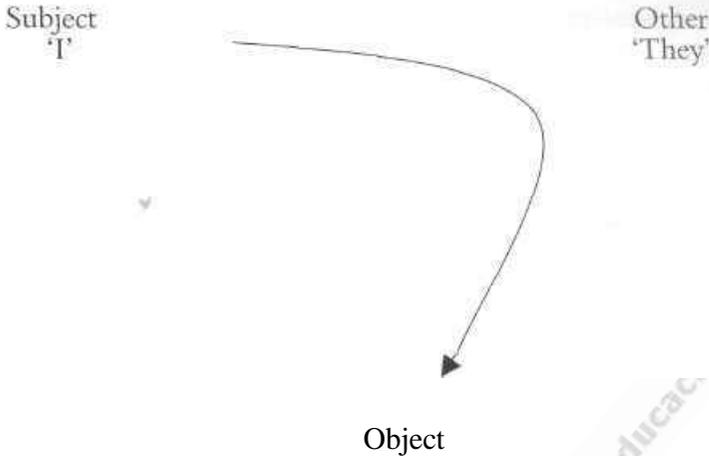


Figure 1: Consumption as subject—other—object relation (inspired by de la Ville et al., forthcoming)

identity, consumption always happens through mediation of others, and through this interaction and negotiation with others meaning construction and identity creation take place. Hence, individuals use consumption objects to negotiate their own identity through processes of affiliating themselves with and differentiating themselves from other consumers, and the resulting meaning creation becomes a product both of institutionalized worlds of consumption and of family and peer group consumption styles. Even though de la Ville et al. seem to indicate a meso-level between individual and larger-scale collective identity formation, this is not made explicit in their model, which is anchored in the context of child consumption. In the context of consumption among mature couples, a change in the model seems necessary, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Transition phases, mature consumers and identity construction**

To study identity formation through consumption, it seems particularly relevant to focus on transition phases in the lives of consumers, in that the status of products in identity construction would tend to stand out more clearly in times of change. Hence the present data include consumers who are at the verge or in the midst of a transition phase from one life role to another.

Though developed to explain rituals of pre-modern societies, rites of passage theory (van Gennep, 1960[1909]) may help explain what goes on

when people use products as vehicles for constructing a new identity. It has been argued (Schouten, 1991) that modern people, who are deprived of institutionalized rites, use products as their personal rites of passage to support them in their search for a new identity. In a few words, rites of passage are characterized by a three-stage process: separation, i.e. disposing of a previous life role; transition, i.e. creating and adapting to a new life role, in this case by means of consumption practices; and incorporation, i.e. internalizing the new life role. In the case of a couple who have recently acquired empty nester status, this could mean that in the process of disposing of the previous full nester identity, the couple may stop holidaying at typical sea, sun and sand destinations and start experimenting with different holiday forms to (re)discover their personal interests. These consumption practices will support the couple in creating and adjusting to a new life situation that will eventually become internalized and thereby natural to the consumer.

Entering into a new life role may be marked by purchase of new products and activities and disposing of old possessions (Noble and Walker, 1997) to communicate to oneself and others that one chapter has ended and another one begun. This can for instance be seen in a tourism context when newly retired people go on an extended holiday outside the normal season of holidays to mark and perhaps celebrate their new life situation and perhaps newly found freedom. The more extreme version of this is when retired couples dispose of their house and buy a camper to tour around the country. Such consumption-related transitional activities, or rites of passage (Schouten, 1991), will facilitate a disposal of a previous life role, creating and adapting to a new life role and eventually internalizing this. Trying out new products would also suggest experimentation with new categories of meaning, and so people in transition phases are more likely than other consumers to fantasize about possible selves and engage in 'identity plays' in which consumers imagine what their lives will be like when and if they consume specific types of products (see also Sorensen and Thompson, 2005). Also at the entrance to a transition phase, for instance approaching retirement or grandparenthood, fantasizing about future possible selves may be a favoured activity and in connection with such imaginary identity work, holidays may become a salient vehicle. In the tourism literature, the theoretical framework on rites of passage has been used for explaining the consumption patterns of backpackers (Sorensen, 1999), whereas its application in relation to mature tourists seems to have been overlooked.

Apart from sharing the trait of entering in and out of one or two phases of transition during their mature lives as well as belonging to more or less

the same age group, mature tourists can, of course, not be considered a homogeneous consumer group (e.g. Szmigin and Carrigan, 1999, 2000; Guiot, 2001). Hence, other criteria such as gender, personal background, income, education, employment, health, interests, lifestyle and values (Treas and Longino, 1997; Bradley and Longino, 2001; Morgan and Levy, 2002; Röpke, 2004) play a significant role in shaping the consumption patterns of mature tourists. Whereas the present article acknowledges the importance of a nuanced understanding of mature consumers, focus will centre on the life phase-related features of their consumption.

### **Couple identity and consumption**

The literature on consumption-based identity formation appears to be preoccupied with the individual consumer as well as sociocultural forces that shape his/her consumption patterns. Limited attention is, however, devoted to consumption situations where two or more consumers are involved. Since the consumption of complex consumer units such as families is characterized by negotiations and compromises, this will invariably influence the individual's consumption-based identity formation. And in relation to family-based consumption, in this case mature couples on holidays, it is not just relevant to consider the identify formation and the negotiations of product meaning of the individual, but also that of the couple.

In the couple, two individuals are at the same time dealing with an individual identity and a 'we' identity, where the partner is at the same time a significant Other, different from 'me' and part of 'me', in relation to the outside world. The couples who are informants for this research have been married for a long time and fixed images of what kind of a couple they perceive themselves to be are evident, and play a role for their consumption of holidays. Two people have and are creating a shared identity and are seeking to manage a shared image towards the outside world and towards each other, staging themselves as a certain type of couple, and at the same time dealing with their inter-couple relationship.

In Figure 2, de la Ville et al.'s (forthcoming) model is developed to illustrate that in a family setting, particularly in consumption decisions between mature spouses, the subjects need to be considered a different category that neither the individual subject nor the general other category covers, but rather as belonging to a field of negotiation in which a shared couple identity ('we') stands out as more significant than the individual T.

All in all, though consumers typically consider identity to consist of a stable inner core, identity is, in fact, defined and redefined in an ongoing

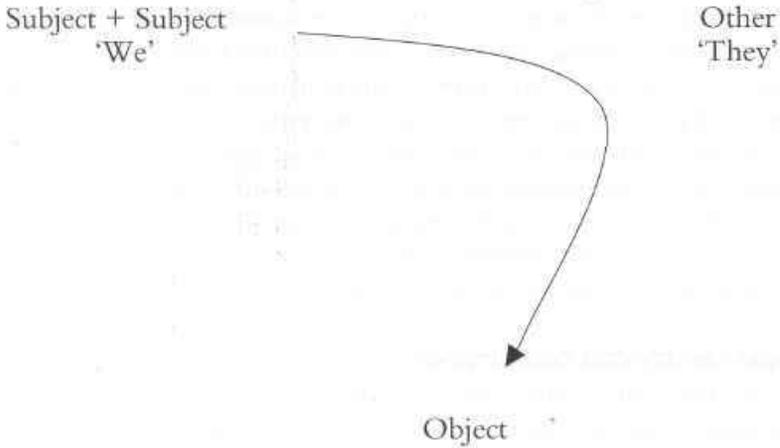


Figure 2: Couple identity and consumption (inspired by de la Ville et al., forthcoming)

process, and consumption objects are a means of operationalizing and negotiating it. Even though identities are fluid and changing, they are not totally arbitrary but confined by certain socially prescribed boundaries. Moreover, transition phases are considered particularly active identity creation phases, during which consumption is used as an important means, both at an individual and a collective level, to express who I am or 'we' are in opposition to 'them'.

#### METHODOLOGY

This article is based on an empirical study among Danish mature consumers, a group that goes through a number of transitions known to be particularly active identity creation phases: from being couples with children to being couples on their own, from being active in the labour market to living a life in retirement, from being parents to becoming grandparents.

As a first step, five qualitative interviews with mature couples were carried out in Aalborg, Denmark. Later, two focus groups were carried out in Aalborg, with one group of 51–60 year olds, 'the empty nester group' and one group of 61–75 year olds, 'the senior group', who were all undertaking holidays on a regular basis. The participants were recruited by a market research institute and focus group interviews were carried out by the authors. The present article draws mainly on three of the qualitative

interviews, representing three different scenarios of interest of the three couples, and the other interviews and roundtable discussions serve to support the findings in these three interviews. To generate talk about holiday and identity, a number of themes were brought up by means of an interview guide and participants were invited to talk about holiday habits, experiences of 'the good holiday' and the decision-making process just as they were to reflect upon changes in their travel behaviour in comparison with earlier holidays with children and to consider future possible changes.

The analysis is built up thematically and the literature review functions as a conceptual framework. The data has been analyzed with an openness towards patterns and tendencies, which offers knowledge about the participants' ways of using holidays in their identity construction, with a special emphasis on inter-couple negotiations.

The sample consists of mature people who live as couples. These consumers consume holidays and travel together and they construct the meanings of holidays together in the context of social meanings in which they are embedded. Singles are thus not represented even though this without any doubt could have been interesting, just as couples who have just met or divorcees could also have provided interesting input. Still, the data represent testimonies from a broad group in Aalborg, Denmark, from couples with teenage children who have just left home but are still followed closely by their parents, to couples who have grandchildren who are already grown-up, and couples with extensive or limited cultural and/or economic capital with very different views of what 'the good holiday' is like.

These couples have been together for several decades and larger conflicts have been overcome or avoided. They may very well be a product of their time, representing a certain view of the couple that emphasizes spending all their time together, whereas younger couples typically leading a more individualized life, would possibly be more open to spending more time apart. The study is obviously not generalizable to the larger Danish or western world population as it stands, but it reveals basic ways of thinking and reflecting within couples that might very well be typical for larger groups.

The couples interviewed differ as to whether they are in the midst of a transition phase dealing actively with new life roles or at the verge of a transition phase speculating about new life roles in the near future:

- Couple 1: M1 and F1 are at a crossroad: M1 stopped working as a manager in a large public institution two years ago and F1 is still

working, thus limiting their holiday activities. M1 is restless and uses a lot of time to plan their holidays, which seems to have become a strong substitute for his working life identity. M1 is very active when on holiday, whereas F1 seems to comply with his wishes, at least to a certain point. M1 is clearly in a transition phase between two life roles, whereas F1 is at the brink of a new life role that has started to occupy her mind.

- Couple 2: M2 and F2 are still working but they recently made the major decision to sell both their house and holiday home and have moved into an exclusive flat instead. As M2 has had his own truck fleet company, which he has just sold, he has never really had the time for holidays, so they both feel that they are opening up to a new and free life, with no gardening and lots of travelling. F2 loves being very active in their holidays, M2 likes to relax by the pool. M2 has just taken on a job as a bus driver having realized that he cannot do without a job. This couple has been through an immense transition phase and are still trying to find their feet in their new situation.
- Couple 3: M3 and F3 are also still in the job market. Their daughters have recently left home but are still visiting very frequently. F3 and M3 would not dream of being too active in their holidays, and they prefer sun holidays in their holiday\* cottage or package holidays to southern Spain. They are in a waiting position: on the one hand defining themselves as empty nesters, with new possibilities in their holidays with only two persons to pay for, on the other longing to become grandparents and imagining what holidays will be like with grandchildren.

### EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

That holidays go beyond the functional aspects such as relaxation, gaining cultural insight or being physically active and are used as a means of identification is clear from the interviews. Holidays are important to all of the respondents — they are something they use time and energy planning, look forward to and evaluate afterwards, and it is something they use for expressing who they are, and as an integral part of this, who they are not. This is clear in the following, almost classical, differentiation from group-based package tourism, and identification with self-organized, individually oriented travelling.

If you look in a travel brochure from Star Tours [travel agency] then they always have something that is characteristic of that

country or that island, and it is that which everybody goes to visit. I never do that. We never participate in bus trips and things like that. We find it ourselves. We always buy a book about an island, if we are going on holiday on an island or an area or a region, and then we find out whether there is something exciting there that could be explored a bit. (M1)

Transition phases seem to enhance the need for identity construction through, in this case, holiday consumption and, in return, holiday consumption seems apt at expressing and constructing identities, something that is particularly necessary in transition phases where other anchor points might be evaporating. During the interviews, it becomes apparent that new life situations such as children leaving home, gearing down one's professional career, retirement, entering grandparenthood and approaching old age have significant influence on the identity formation of the respondents. And as will appear in the subsequent analysis of the mature couples' discourse on holiday ideals and practices, the new life situations of these respondents appear repeatedly when they try to come to terms with their identities.

### **Couple identity through discursive practise**

A recurrent, and with that significant, feature of the interviews with mature couples is that on holidays they by and large do everything together. Individual excursions occasionally occur but it is the common experiences that constitute the core of their holidays. Looking at their discursive practice, as for instance illustrated in the quote above, it is obvious that the collective 'we' appears repeatedly, and so when the mature couples speak about and evaluate their holiday experiences, they speak on part of the collective (the couple) and not primarily the individual. This is also apparent in the subsequent exchange on the transition from full nester to empty nester holidays:

F3: It's because we have become more comfortable [than when holidaying with children]. We go on package tours now. We are not into driving anymore. I don't even think I could handle that anymore.

Int: . . . You say that you've become more comfortable. What do you like about the package tour?

F3: It's that we are there within five hours. It's a bit tough the other way. How far was it we drove?

M3: We drove approximately 5000 km to France and then back again. That's a lot of hours to sit in a car.

After their children stopped going away on holidays with M3 and F3, they stopped camping and they do not travel long distances by car any more. Age is used as a valid explanation for changing consumption patterns, but it may as well be used as an excuse for a change in interests and possibilities. On the one hand, this mature couple is no longer obliged to cater to their children's holiday interests and can now focus on their own interests; On the other hand, the economic means to travel change significantly when the holiday unit shrinks from four to two making different types of holidays possible.

Expressing common ideals for the holiday and speaking on the part of the couple is, furthermore, underscored by one of the respondents who repeatedly uses the phrase: 'the two of us, alone' (F2), a phrase that appears in several interviews, and that literally speaking is a contradiction in terms but that illustrates the melting together of two into one unit. Also the fact that no quarrels or real discussions took place between the spouses during the interviews show that they possess an in-depth understanding of each other's wishes and peculiarities based on many years of living together (20—40 years), which adds to the one unit characteristic. As these couples know each other very well, it is perceived as relaxing and preferable to be away on holiday just as a couple, particularly if longer holidays are involved. Mutual respect and well-established compromises assure that no tough negotiations need to be dealt with whereas being with other couples might entail the risk of being forced into doing something one would not like to do.

Another strategy used by the respondents to understand their couple identity, is to distinguish themselves from other couples, and whereas this is not a strategy unique to mature couples, the differentiation process highlights the significance of the collective 'we' as an identifying unit:

[What we seek during the holiday is] [s]un, sun, sun. When we go on holiday with our friends we sometimes get to a place where there is something to see. Then they are all excited: 'What did you see? . . . then we say we didn't see anything. They have been out seeing old volcanos and something else and so on. They are tired when they get home whereas we are well-rested. We have been doing nothing but bathing, going to the pool or the beach and going out for a meal in the evening. (M3)

Clearly, this couple's choice of a relaxing holiday stands out as the right choice in M3's discourse, as opposed to their friends' choice, as recharging one's batteries for everyday "workdays appears to be the essential purpose of holidays. Though the previous quote by M1 demonstrates contrasting ideals for the good holiday, which is in itself a testimony to the fact that mature tourists are a highly diversified consumer group, the strategy of differentiation from an undesirable out-group is the same. But whereas M3 uses close significant Others, friends, to contrast themselves with, M1 differentiates himself and his wife from larger sociocultural, and with that less well-defined groups of Others. This is also the case in the following exchange:

M1: I don't go anywhere because there are many of those weekend stays where the point is simply, to be honest, to get drunk and then the food is irrelevant. It is not because I feel better than everybody else, but if I go away for the weekend with F1, then it is because she is going to have some good food with me. And then we'll find out what we want to drink. It is not the other way around. That is why we are careful about where we are going. . . . If you take a look in the newspaper, then it never tells you what the emphasis is on. It is just weekend stays: so many types of herring, so much of this and that. It says nothing. But they [the particular hotel stay] say that they choose to put the emphasis on some fine exquisite food and that you could come along down to the wine cellar and that you could take part in choosing the wine you would like.

F1: Yes, wine tasting . . . and then you could choose by yourself.

M1: This is just exactly me . . . Yes, and we got a chat and the hosts were there in the wine cellar. It was very individual. It was really good. It is a huge success for them.

Int: Yes, and you see this as a big plus?

F1: Yes, yes, it ...

M1: Instead of that which is more — what can you say — conveyer belt like.

F1: Yes, we could taste those wines and then we could choose the one we would like best for our dinner, right.

M1: Because we also went to a place, where — to tell you the truth — the food was nothing to write home about, and furthermore, the glasses were filled in advance and it was . . . you

could not yourself . . . if you did not like red wine, there was nothing to do about it, because red wine was what was served. We don't go to places like that. Then rather pay.

Differentiation from people who favour excessive drinking at the expense of a culinary experience is clear from this quote, and by means of this comparison, the respondent portrays himself and his wife as people who cherish quality food, individual service and a certain level of stylishness about the whole arrangement. Standardized, low-quality package concepts are not for them — epitomized by the term 'conveyer belt' and the example of the pre-served, non-replaceable red wine. That the male respondent has certain qualms about criticizing other people's consumption patterns appears from the expression 'it is not because I feel better than everybody else' but nevertheless he puts up a clear mark of differentiation between his and his wife's holiday-related identity and that of others.

Another interesting feature of the quote above is the fact that the husband tries to position himself as the caring partner as illustrated in the phrase 'if I go away for the weekend with F1, then it is because she is going to have some good food with me'. The husband seems to act as the sensible voice, setting the morally correct standards for the holiday for the not so well-informed wife. Conversely, this apparently solicitous behaviour may cover up for his own individual interests, which, however, take the form of choices made for the sake of the other. In fact, in the beginning of this quote a repeated use of T appears that could indicate either an unequal balance of power in relation to holiday decisions between the spouses or more identity work being put into holidays by one partner rather than the other.

Similarly, F2 does not accept her husband's wish just to lay at the pool when they are on holiday. She argues that he profits too little from the holiday and thus she takes on the role as the sensible parent. F2 portrays herself as a caring partner who acts in the educational interest of her, in her opinion, too hedonistic husband and ensures a positive outcome of the holiday, not just for them as a couple (memories to talk about after the holiday), but also for her husband as an individual. That her great concern for the common good of the couple, as well as for the individual good of her husband may in fact be a cover-up for her individual sightseeing interest becomes apparent in the context of the whole interview. Individual interests are thus also at play among the couples, but they are often revealed in this convoluted manner and staged as couple-driven rather than individually driven. This point will be further developed below.

Not just differentiation from other groups of consumers but also affiliations with other consumers is apparent in the respondents' staging of their consumer identity. Both people that are known and close to the respondents and people that are unknown function as ideal Others. One respondent who longs for grandparenthood sees a role model in his brother:

If we had some grandchildren, then we would be as active as when we had children of our own, I think. Now, when I look at my brother, he is just as active, when the children are there — perhaps even more than when his own children were small. He jumps about, arranges and does this and that. I also hope I will be like that. They [his daughters] just have to hurry to get some kids. (M3)

M3 is looking for a new, family-oriented identity in the grandfather role. Holidays are seen as the ideal time for living out this identity, and in his brother he sees the ideal super-granddad who is more active and committed to this role than he ever was to parenthood. In presenting his brother as a reflection of himself, M3 also seems critical of his own performance as a father, and grandparenthood is portrayed as the time to make up for previous flaws. Grandchildren seem also to function as a pretext for including more physically active and playful elements into the holiday and so an element of criticism of his own and his wife's present holidays may be inherent in this.

Significant Others, in the form of friends, also function as the identifying entity for some of the respondents, but concomitantly with affiliation with the holiday patterns of friends, differentiation from the way of life of the visited culture materializes:

We also have friends who have been both to Thailand and Bali, and where there is something that is also culturally different from what we have seen. The reason why I also like seeing things like that is you simply start to think about how we live ourselves, right. Ohh, often you become so fond of Denmark . . . (F2)

In the context of the whole interview, it appears that distant destinations have quite recently become part of this couple's holiday patterns, after the husband sold his truck fleet business. The couple seems to have been under the influence of what is socially prescribed in their circle of friends when settling on a destination in the Far East (Goa) for their first long-haul

holiday. Experiencing that which is culturally different and thereby gaining elements of insight but also, simultaneously, confirming the qualities of one's own way of life and cultural background, are clearly central holiday ingredients, and this may very well be the holiday currency that counts in this respondent's social group.

Affiliations with unfamiliar Others also appear in the holiday discourse of the respondents:

We read a story together the other day . . . wasn't it a couple from Northern Jutland . . . yes, they were from around here. They had sold their house and everything and had moved into an apartment, and then they bought one of these rather expensive camping buses, and then they spent, a year driving around all of Europe and parts of Eastern Europe. And then they had made a description of this with some photos — it really sounded exciting. They could fool me into doing that. (MI)

Being in the process of disposing of a previous life role as a busy career person and adapting to a new life role as retired, MI is engaging in an identity play in which he is fantasizing about a new possible self characterized by new categories of meaning. Carefree living without dull obligations related to mortgage, household maintenance and work, and being a full-time adventurer, at least for a while, seeking out exciting experiences, stand in stark contrast to his previous life, and so this respondent uses the holiday experiences of unknown Others as a vehicle for coming to terms with his own identity.

An interesting feature to notice in relation to the respondents' discourses on affiliation is that the T is used more often than the 'we', whereas when talking in terms of differentiation from others the usage of 'we' is clearly more significant than the usage of T. This may indicate that when expressing needs and wants in positive terms through identification with attractive consumer groups, collective identity work may be less prevalent than when negatively laden differentiation from unattractive consumer groups takes place. So even though the couple is clearly the central identifying entity for these mature respondents and collective groups of other consumers are used as a means of identifying particularly who the couple is not, individual interests also appear in the interviews and they seem to testify to different degrees of engagement in the couple's holiday project. In the extensive quote above, and in the interview in general, MI stands out as the one setting the agenda for the holiday. Having retired two years ago, this respondent appears to be searching for a new identity after his

job-related identity is starting to fade away, and this is underscored by his repeated use of phrases such as 'this is exactly me'. In many respects, his wife appears to be an echo of her husband's wishes, and some of the explanation for this seems to rest with the fact that she is still active in the job market, and so holidays have a less significant position in her personal identity project.

Thus it appears that more individual identity is put into the holiday for some, and they are allowed by the partner to take the lead. Engagement seems to be more equally distributed among other couples and so holidays are a more equal means of identity construction for both parties.

### **Negotiating individual interests through mutual contracts**

Within the couples, differences of interest seem to be dealt with through 'contracts' and compromises as there are situations when 'we' and I do not merge together no matter how well established their relations are. This is illustrated by F2 and M2 who talk about how they make holiday decisions:

F2: We talk about that . . . Well, I am the kind of person who wants to go out and see something and that kind of thing. Like in India where we got out to see the mosques and all that down there. That's not really my husband's kind of thing. He wants the warm weather . . .

Int: But what happens then when you want to go out and see those mosques or whatever it is . . . temples . . . and your husband wants to enjoy the sun?

F2: Well, then we usually say that every second day we go out on a tour and see something and every other day we just enjoy it.

Int: Couldn't you think of doing things apart, so that you just park him by the pool and go out by yourself?

F2: Yes, I would do that if he said that he didn't want to come, but because he comes along every other day, then I think that . . . I think that the experiences too . . . if you want to talk about them afterwards, then it is nice that we've seen them both of us, and at the same time I think that he gets too little out of the country itself we're visiting, if he doesn't get out and see something. And he thinks too himself, and afterwards he is happy enough about it. Ha . . .

This couple has made a contract about their holidays. The wife gets her cultural events and sights, the husband gets to be lazy by the pool. He joins her every second day even if it is a struggle and only enjoyed afterwards. In this way activities are undertaken together and in mutual understanding of the contract even if it does not happen without some giving and taking.

M3 and F3 prefer doing nothing on their holidays, as they find it stupid to use up all their energy on rushing around on their holiday. Shopping, however, is an activity F3 happily engages in.

F3: I like to go shopping.

M3: She could spend her entire holiday in the pedestrian area.

F3: And then go to a cafe or go in and have a little drink or something.

Int: What kinds of shops do you like to shop in?

F3: It's all kinds. We like to go for long walks too. We do go for many walks. Around the holiday house, we take a walk everyday.

F3 changes the subject. Shopping is not all she wants to be identified with. Shopping does not fit into M3's universe of what a man should engage in, but he does not let her down — at least not when the weather is bad.

M3: I can't be bothered with things like that [shopping]. Men can't be bothered with things like that. But we don't do it when the sun is shining. If there is sunshine for a whole week, then we do it [the shopping] little by little for example in Hirtshals or Tarnby, where she is then allowed to go and look. But otherwise we bloody well don't do it.

She clearly has a stronger preference for shopping than he does, but they do not split up, as they like to do everything together. He lets her do her shopping, maybe he does not mind at all, but he does not perceive it as compatible with his image of what men can do. He legitimizes it by presenting it as something of "which he is in control: 'then she's allowed to' and 'only on rainy days' (even though this rule is clearly bent even within the same quote 'except when there are many sunny days' . . .). So in a way they also make a contract to legitimize that they do everything together even if shopping in M3's universe is a female activity.

In a few cases, differences in wishes might be too incompatible to be handled. M1 is clearly a restless man and detailed in his scrutiny of history, cultural sights and museums. F1 likes to sit peacefully with a cup of coffee

and her knitting. And at certain points, despite the fact that they like to do things together and that they present themselves as a strong 'we', they split up. An example of this was when visiting a Swedish mining area a couple of years ago, where FI at a certain point felt that she had seen enough mines and decided not to go along on daytrips. This seems, however, not to be a characteristic feature of the data as a whole.

All in all, what is special about these mature consumers who are in or at the verge of a transitional phase is that what has been stable in their lives for decades — work, having children/teenagers at home, being physically fit — has changed or is envisaged to change in near future. And this is a central reason why they are especially eager to pinpoint 'who they really are'. What is, furthermore, special about these consumers, is that the collective entity of the couple plays a central role in forming their identity. This is particularly evident in processes of differentiation from unattractive consumer groups whereas processes of identification with attractive consumer groups seem also to be influenced by individual identity work. Individual wishes seem, however, to be pursued according to mutual 'contracts', which ensures that conflicts are avoided and the collective identity is not seriously challenged.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to find out in what way mature tourists use holidays as a vehicle of identity construction in their new life situation, as individuals and as couples. It brings together the identity-related consumption literature to a discussion of age-related life changes on the one hand, and on the other hand it problematizes the strong focus on the individual and the larger social groups in consumption research, and on this basis contributes to an understanding of the couple as a decision-making and purchasing unit in relation to holiday consumption. In earlier work on identity formation processes, identity was considered as finished after adolescence. This piece of work shows, in line with more recent work on identity, that this is not so. This seems to be closely related to the transitional phases between different life roles that the studied consumers are in the midst or at the brink of, which reinforces identity work also in the context of holiday consumption.

Holidays clearly entail much more than functional meanings (the need to get out, the need to relax), they are clearly also used for signalling a certain identity to peers and other reference groups, and at the same time they are a means for understanding oneself/ves as a couple and as an individual. Findings show that the consumers have their identity firmly

anchored in a close relationship with their partner, and that the two individuals to a large extent share ideas about what they stand for and hence portray themselves as one unit with a collective 'we' identity. It is interesting to see that particularly in the beginning of the interviews and in view of unattractive consumer groups that they wish to dissociate themselves from, these couples very much present themselves as a unit by means of expressions like: 'we are', 'we would never do that', 'that's us' and particularly the phrase 'the two of us alone' indicates that the partners feel close to and comfortable with each other. Further into the interview, and particularly in relation to affiliation with attractive consumer groups, individual preferences become more obvious: 'she likes to shop' or 'I want to experience new things', and so as the interviewer gains access to the lives of the interviewees, it appears that individual differences do exist and negotiations take place. Hence, on the front stage, publicly, it is important the couple stands united as being a harmonic couple. And even if individual interests occasionally appear to shape the couple's choice of holidays and activities, these are often disguised and legitimized as being for the common good of the couple. Backstage, where the couple can relax and be themselves, individual differences appear but it also materializes that the couples handle these differences through well-established contracts that facilitate a satisfactory distribution of interests throughout the holiday for the partners involved.

That these mature couples do almost everything together is different from what was found among younger couples with children (Gram, 2004; Gram and Therkelsen, 2003). Here it was found that the partners are much more inclined to carry out activities by themselves and that it is acceptable to express this. This is possibly because these young couples are not as established yet in long existing relationships, but it could also be because they belong to a different generation with more individualistic traits, and so whether a strong couple identity will develop in future generations may be questionable. Thus the locus of meaning that clearly rests with the 'we' for the mature couples may shift more towards the T for future generations of mature consumers. This, however, needs to be the subject of further investigation in the future, preferably in the form of both in-depth qualitative and more large-scale quantitative studies on the basis of which a valid intergenerational comparison can be undertaken. A longitudinal study of younger generations would, furthermore, facilitate a discussion of a possible shift in identity orientation of couples over time.

For future research, it would also be interesting to look more closely into the consumption and identity formation of mature couples in relation to other types of consumer objects just as it would be highly relevant to study

this consumer group in an intercultural perspective, where different traditions, gender roles and economic situations without any doubt play a role in the way in which mature consumers perceive themselves and each other.

## References

- Askegaard, S. and Firat, A.E (1996) 'Towards a Critique of Material Culture, Consumption and Markets', in Susan M. Pearce (ed.) *Experiencing Material Culture in the Western World*, pp. 112—39. London: Leicester University Press.
- Belk, R. (1988) 'Possessions and the Extended Self', *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (September): 139-68.
- Benwell, B and Stokoe, E. (2006) *Discourse and Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bradley, D.E. and Longino, C.F. (2001) 'How Older People Think About Images of Aging in Advertising and the Media', *Generations* 25(3): 17-21.
- de la Ville, VI., Tartas, V. and Tufté, B. (forthcoming) 'Children as Economic Actors. An Examination of Three Psychological Perspectives', *New Review of Social Psychology*.
- Djursaa, M. and Kragh, S.U. (1998) 'Central and Peripheral Consumption Contexts: The Uneven Globalisation of Consumer Behaviour', *International Business Review* 7(1): 23-38.
- Erikson, E. (1968) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Fjord Jensen, J. (2002) *Livsbuen* (The life arc). Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Giles, J., and Middleton, T. (1999) *Studying Culture. A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gram, M (2004) 'Family holidays', *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 5(1): 2-22
- Gram, M. and Therkelsen, A. (2003) 'Børnefamilieferie' (Family holidays), Aalborg University, Denmark.
- Griot, D. (2001) 'Subjective Age Biases among Senior Women', *Psychology and Marketing* 18(10): 1049-58.
- Hirschman, E.G. and Holbrook, M.B. (eds) (1981) '*Symbolic Consumer Behaviour*': *Proceedings of the Conference on Consumer Aesthetics and Symbolic Consumption, New York, May 1980*. Valdosta, GA: Association for Consumer Research.
- Holt, D.B. (1995) 'How Consumers Consume: A Typology of Consumption Practices', *Journal of Consumer Research* 22(1): 1-16.
- Jantzen, C., Ostergaard, P. and Vieira, C.S. (2006) 'Becoming a "Woman to the Backbone": Lingerie Consumption and the Experience of Feminine Identity', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(2): 177-202.
- Kleine, S.S., Kleine III, R.E. and Allen, C.T. (1995) 'How is a Possession "Me" or "Not Me"? Characterizing Types and an Antecedent of Material Possession Attachment', *Journal of Consumer Research* 22(3): 327-43
- Lamont, M. and Molnar, V. (2001) 'How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape their Collective Identity. Evidence from Marketing Specialists', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(1): 31-45.
- Levy, S.J. (1959). 'Symbols for Sale', *Harvard Business Review* 37: 117-24.
- Milliman, R.E. and Erffmeyer, R.C. (1989) 'Improving Advertising aimed at Seniors', *Journal of Advertising Research* 29(6): 31-6.

- Moisio R., Arnould, E.J. and Price, L.L. (2004) 'Between Mothers and Markets: Constructing Family Identity through Homemade Food', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(3): 361-84.
- Morgan, C.M. and Levy, D.J. (2002) *Marketing to the Mindset of Boomers and their Elders*. St Paul, MN: Attitude Base.
- Ostergaard, P. and Jantzen, C. (2000) 'Shifting Perspectives in Consumer Research: From Buyer Behaviour to Consumption Studies', in S.C. Beckmann and R.H. Elliott (eds) *Interpretive Consumer Research. Paradigms, Methodologies and Applications*, pp. 9—23. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Noble C.H. and Walker, B.A. (1997). 'Exploring the Relationships among Liminal Transitions, Symbolic Consumption and the Extended Self', *Psychology and Marketing* 14(1): 29-47.
- Ropke, P. (2004) *Fifty Plus Marketing. Om kommunikation og produktudvikling til voksne*. Copenhagen: Forlaget Markedsforing A/S.
- Schousteri, J.W (1991) 'Selves in Transition: Symbolic Consumption in Personal Rites of Passage and Identity Reconstruction', *Jowraa/ of Consumer Research* 17(March): 412-25.
- Sorensen, A. (1999) *Travellers in the Periphery: Backpackers and Other Independent Multiple Destination Tourists in Peripheral Areas*. Nex0: Research Centre of Bornholm.
- Sorensen, E.B. and Thomsen, T.U. (2005) 'The Lived Meaning of Symbolic Consumption and Identity Formation in Stable and Transitional Phases — An Analytical Framework', paper prepared for the EACR-conference, June, Goteborg, Sweden.
- Szmigm, I. and Carrigan, M. (1999) 'Consumer Innovativeness and Cognitive Age among "Older" Consumers', paper presented at the 107th Convention of the American Psychological Association, August, Boston, MA.
- Szmigm, I. and Carrigan, M. (2000) 'The Older Consumer as innovator: Does Cognitive Age Hold the Key?', *Journal of Marketing Management* 16(5): 505-28.
- Thompson, C.J. and Haytko, D.L. (1997) 'Speaking of Fashion: Consumers' Uses of Fashion Discourses and the Appropriation of Countervailing Cultural Meanings', *Journal of Consumer Research* 24: 15—42.
- Treas, J. and Longino, C.F., Jr (1997) 'Demography of Aging in the United States', in K Ferraro (ed.) *Gerontology: Perspectives and Issues*, pp. 8-33. New York: Springer,
- van Gennep, A. (1960[1909]) *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Warde, A. (2004) 'Consumers, Identity and Belonging: Reflection on some Theses of Zygmunt Bauman', in R. Keat, N. Whiteley and N. Abercrombie (eds) *The Authority of the Consumer*, pp. 58—74. London: Routledge.

**Anette Therkelsen** MA, PhD, is an associate professor at Aalborg University, Denmark. Her main research interests are consumer behaviour, tourism and place branding. *Address*: Tourism Research Unit, Aalborg University, Fibigerstraede 2, DK-9220 Aalborg 0, Denmark, [email: at@ihis.aau.dk]

**Malene Gram** MA, PhD, is an associate professor at Aalborg University, Denmark. Her main research interests are consumer behaviour, intercultural communication, and childhood. *Address*: Tourism Research Unit, Aalborg University, Fibigerstraede 2, DK-9220 Aalborg 0, [email: gram@ihis.aau.dk]