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Consumer Mobility and the Communication of Difference: Reflecting on Cross-Border Shopping Practices and Experiences in the Dutch-German Borderland

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***Abstract:** The current debate on consumption and retailing represents shoppers as highly mobile and looking for different experiences. In an attempt to find satisfaction, shoppers are assumed to explore many places and countries. It is in cross-border regions that large functional, physical, and socio-cultural differences can be experienced in a relatively small area. Such differences could make crossing national borders appealing as well as unappealing. This contribution scrutinizes what cross-border shoppers are looking for and what level of “unfamiliarity” they are willing to accept. A brief analysis of cross-border shopping practices in the EU is combined with a detailed case study of Millingen in the Netherlands and Kranenburg in Germany to explore what shoppers see as (un)appealing. We argue that the knowledge shoppers have of people and places on “the other side” and information that is communicated may (re)arrange differences as “familiar” and “unfamiliar”. Places promising “familiar unfamiliarity” seem to appeal to shoppers and therefore generate cross-border shopping practices. Paradoxically, the construction of borders and the communication of appealing differences seem necessary to sustain and promote shopping mobility.*

Introduction

To announce the results of two new surveys on the attitudes of both consumers and retailers towards cross-border shopping within the European Union (EU), the European Consumer Affairs Commissioner Kuneva argues:

Our goal is that the consumers should be able to benefit from buying the best quality at the cheapest price – no matter where in the internal market these goods or services might be on sale. And it should be easy for the retailers to sell their products or services wherever the demand is within the internal market ... The potential for further internal market integration in this field is considerable – so it is clearly a priority to ensure that legal and practical barriers do not prevent consumers and businesses from trading cross-border – whilst ensuring a consistently high level of consumer protection. (EC 2008a)

This statement regarding the yet unfulfilled potential of cross-border shopping clearly reveals the goal of the (EU) to promote free international movement of people, capital, goods, and services. In general, mobility is seen as a precondition for

economic growth and, therefore, many attempts are made to diminish and delete borders as obstacles for mobility within the EU. However, the purpose of the paper is to scrutinize the possibility of borders and accompanying international differences causing mobility instead of immobility. We will investigate how borders settle and operate in the minds of shoppers and what makes them willing to explore “the other side” or prefer to stay “at home”. This will be done through combining theoretical discussions on the “Janus-faced” character of borders (Van Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005; Williams and Van der Velde 2005) with debates on the mobile lifestyle of shoppers (Spierings 2006; Edensor 2007). The empirical part of the paper consists of a brief analysis of international shopping practices and experiences in the EU as well as a more detailed analysis of cross-border shopping in Millingen (NL) and Kranenburg (D). Based on an analysis of appealing and unappealing “unfamiliarity” within Euregions, the paper also reflects on the possible impact of communication (which was mentioned in the press release quoted above as an important tool to encourage cross-border purchases) on cross-border mobility. Communication here is regarded in its broadest sense, ranging from informal mouth to mouth communication through professional advertisement and marketing campaigns. Both the communication and non-communication of information about shopping possibilities abroad create perceptions about “the other side” and influence the level of cross-border interaction. Advertisement and marketing campaigns are used in an attempt to change such perceptions and practices. In this context, the conclusion which we will draw is that borders should not be completely removed and deconstructed but in certain instances rather preserved and constructed, for shoppers to be(come) mobile. So the focus in this paper will be on the communication of differences themselves (*what* to communicate) and not on *how* and *when* to communicate. We will start our line of reasoning by discussing what shoppers are looking for and experience when they adopt a mobile lifestyle and cross national borders.

Shopping, Borders, and Mobility

When talking about borders in the context of shopping practices, first of all a clear distinction has to be made between borders, as administrative, historic, and more or less arbitrary lines on a map, and borders as actively (re)constructed and experienced demarcations between (groups of) people. Borders as *lines* are more or less objective and external interpretations and border as *constructions* can be seen as more subjective and internal (Van der Velde 2000a). Paasi (1996) makes a similar distinction when he talks about borders as morphologies (i.e. borders on the ground) versus borders as representations or interpretations (i.e. borders in the mind). Borders may settle firmly in the minds of people. Such mental borders can be seen as symbols of “us” and images of “them” which people live by. The subjective observation and interpretation of differences between both sides of the border have an important impact on cross-border behaviour.

It is still quite common to think of borders as obstacles for interaction between citizens in different countries (Nijkamp, Rietveld, and Salomon 1990; Plat and Raux 1998). In that case, borders are considered as “crowd repellers”. Focussing on shopping practices, this implies that the international mobility of shoppers is restricted and that they use their spending power “at home” whereas possibly nearby foreign places are avoided or perhaps not even considered. However, national

borders could also function as “crowd pullers” (Timothy 1995; Bygvrå and Westlund 2004), something which will be under close scrutiny in this paper. Both the repelling and pulling of borders signal the earlier mentioned “Janus-faced” character (Van Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005). Two of such dualities will be discussed here in more detail, based on the work of Williams and Van der Velde (2005), for they will prove to be very useful when trying to grapple with border effects on shopping practices.

Linked to the view on national borders as “crowd repellers” and “crowd pullers”, an important distinction to be made is between borders as *barriers* and *opportunities*. On the one hand, borders may be observed as guardians against threats from “the other side”. Such barriers are seen as natural and logical instruments to provide for protection. On the other hand, borders can be regarded as creating differences between adjacent countries and territories. These differences may create opportunities for people to interact across borders. Another distinction that is important to our analysis is borders seen as more or less *static* and much more *dynamic* concepts. In the first case, the term border is used as a noun. It indicates the quite stable outcome of a demarcation process. In the second case, the term border is used as a verb. It is seen as an active process in itself.

This paper focuses on shopping opportunities offered by borders and dynamic (re)interpretations of borders. However, this implies that the flipsides (i.e. borders as possible barriers obstructing shoppers to take opportunities and the possibly static view and unwillingness to reinterpret borders) are also taken into account. One cannot go without the other when we see the “Janus-faced” character of national borders as the core of our approach to analyse shopping mobility. Borders may have an inviting impact on shoppers to come and have a look due to functional, physical, and socio-cultural differences between places on both sides of the border. Borders could arouse consumer interests because of strangeness of places but could deter them for the same reason. Borders could strongly influence our everyday lives, including shopping practices and experiences.

Shopping for Differences

Contemporary academic literature and studies on retailing and consumption predominantly discuss mobile shoppers looking for the fun in shopping. The consumer is represented as looking for new shopping experiences (including entertaining differences between places). They are on a Baudrillardian “quest for difference” (Baudrillard 1988). Three related dimensions of “shopping for differences” will be elaborated on next, based on the work by Spierings (2006), (i.e. the consumption of (a) consumer goods and services and (b) the shopping environment as well as the practices of (c) a high consumer mobility). In doing so, however, we do not make a strict distinction between goal-oriented “run shopping” practices and non-goal-oriented “fun shopping” practices. In fact, shoppers may simultaneously consider the same shopping practice as work and entertaining (Lehtonen and Mäenpää 1997; Goss 2008). This paper analyses cross-border shopping practices whereas the focus is on shoppers looking for differences between places (which can be entertaining for some and troublesome for others) –. We consider functional, physical, and socio-cultural differences as possibly important motives to both visit shopping centres on “the other side” and to stay “at home”.

Consumer goods and services

While looking for functional differences between places, shoppers consume the consumer goods and services on offer. They stroll and gaze around shopping streets and shops to find new shopping experiences. The consumer services mix is browsed and the goods for sale are contemplated. However, contemporary consumers are not easily seduced to spend money. They approach shopping centres as “worlds of seduction” in a “cool” manner (Lash and Urry 1994). Shoppers are “just looking” and they may stroll around spending their leisure time without spending any money. Consumers are provided the free opportunity to examine the goods and services of offer in shopping centres but, obviously, the intention is to turn strollers into shoppers buying commodities (Bauman 1993). Both functional facilities and physical features of shopping centres are meant to extend the stay of consumers and increase their spending. Retail services are mixed and increasingly converge with the catering industry and the cultural sector to provide shopping entertainment (Hannigan 1998). Speciality shops, department stores, restaurants, pubs, museums, and street festivals, for instance, can be found in most, if not all, shopping centres to keep shoppers occupied as long as possible (Clement and Reinartz 1997). The layout of shopping centres is also designed to keep shoppers inside and to make them contemplate as many goods and services as possible (Goss 1993). This is done by designing shopping circuits, for instance, to keep shoppers strolling around while exploring more of the seductive functional facilities.

Shopping environment

While looking for physical and socio-cultural differences between places, shoppers also consume the shopping environment. The architecture, design, and vibes of shopping centres are consumed to find new experiences. It is by strolling shopping streets and visiting shops that the physical environment of places is visually consumed along with contemplating consumer goods and services (Urry 1995). The built environment of shopping centres is even deliberately designed these days for the entertainment of shoppers. Shop facades and windows as well as the interior of outlets, the street pavement, billboards, and benches, for instance, are changed and created to contribute to the pleasures of shopping (Featherstone 1998; Kooijman 1999). Constructing “ludic landscapes” is expected to increase the amount of time and money spent in shopping centres. While strolling around, shoppers observe the large socio-cultural diversity being performed in streets and shops, a spectacle which they co-perform by being part of the crowd. Contemporary consumers not only want to observe but also want to be observed. By showing the branded bags they carry and the branded clothes they wear, consumers sell themselves as commodities (Clarke 2003). In addition to the social interactions with other shoppers, consumers also interact with the shop floor staff. It is inside shops that the latter aim to create entertaining shopping experiences in order to encourage consumer spending (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

Consumer mobility

In their attempt to find functional, physical, and socio-cultural differences between places, consumers are considered to have adopted a mobile lifestyle. The aim to find new experiences makes shoppers visit several shopping centres at near and distant locations (Rojek and Urry 1997; Terhorst and Van de Ven 1999). Visiting the nearest shopping centre seems to have become less of a habit these days. It is by

travelling and combining several shopping centres and shops at the regional, national, and international levels that shoppers create their own consumption space (Gregson, Crewe, and Brooks 2002). The intention to enable and encourage the mobile lifestyle of shoppers as well as to attract their travelling spending power, results in the redevelopment of shopping centres into “strange” spaces (Spierings 2009). It is with the same intention that these spaces are also made well accessible and that large parking spaces are constructed. To appeal to mobile shoppers, however, functional facilities, physical features, and socio-cultural spheres should not be too different from what they are accustomed to. Large differences between shopping centres could cause shoppers to feel estranged, which could scare them off and prevent them from visiting such places. Shoppers want to feel “at home” mentally when they are away from home physically (Tester 1994; Van der Velde 2000b). To achieve this, differences should remain familiar to shoppers somehow (Edensor 2007). As will be discussed next, both making familiar differences and communicate them through marketing seems a necessity for consumers to become interested in travelling to foreign places, visiting its shopping centres and consuming the offered goods and services as well as shopping environments.

The Bandwidth of Unfamiliarity and the Communication of Difference

Based on the foregoing brief discussion of contemporary consumers looking for spatial differences, the argument can be raised that shopping centres on the other side of a national border may have a great appeal on them. Cross-border regions usually reveal relatively large functional, physical, and socio-cultural differences compared with regions of the same size within national boundaries. A dissimilar look of shopping centres, different commodities and another urban atmosphere may motivate shoppers to cross borders, but only when shoppers do feel at home in foreign places, in other words when the “strange” does not frighten (Bauman 1996). Large socio-cultural differences, for instance, could generate mental borders and thereby obstruct international mobility (Van Houtum 1999). This implies that shoppers may want to prevent uncomfortable situations and feelings of uncertainty (Wang 2004; Tosun et al. 2007).

Spierings and Van der Velde (2008) use the “bandwidth of unfamiliarity” concept in an attempt to scrutinize how and why functional, physical, and socio-cultural discourage and encourage cross-border shopping practices. In doing so, these differences are recategorised into emotional and rational differences between countries. This was done for analytical purposes only. In fact, it would be almost impossible to draw a clear line between emotionality and rationality (see Svašek and Skrbíš 2007). Some shoppers may perceive price differences, for instance, as a rational reason to cross the border whereas others might experience the fun of finding the cheapest price for the same product, pointing at an emotional shopping motive. However, clearly distinguishing emotionality and rationality is not our aim here. The goal is to understand how rational and emotional differences could be used to explain cross-border shopping (im)mobility and the bandwidth is used as an instrument to achieve this.

The “bandwidth of unfamiliarity” consists of two arbitrarily placed and shifting blocks of rational and emotional differences. It shows what level of unfamiliarity shoppers are willing to accept during cross-border practices. Rational and emotional

differences between places falling within their bandwidth function as push or pull factors. These differences are perceived as acceptable as well as appealing and therefore stimulate cross-border shopping. *Push factors* imply that consumers consider shopping centres at home less appealing than in foreign places. This encourages cross-border mobility. The same goes for *pull factors* because they imply that foreign shopping centres are perceived as more attractive than shopping possibilities in the home country. Differences falling outside the bandwidth function as keep or repel factors. These differences are perceived as too large and unacceptable. As a consequence, international mobility is discouraged and even prevented. *Keep factors* imply that shopping centres at home are seen as more appealing than shopping possibilities on the other side of the border. This encourages cross-border immobility. *Repel factors* also stimulate the immobility of consumers when they perceive foreign places as less attractive for shopping than places at home. The more international dissimilarities shoppers perceive as push and pull factors and the less differences as keep and repel factors, the more cross-border interaction is expected to occur.

[Figure 1 about here]

Different people may have different perceptions of “familiarity” and acceptable “unfamiliarity”. There might be dissimilar ideas of what rational and emotional differences operate as push, pull, keep or repel factors. The willingness of shoppers to accept cross-border differences could also change during the course of time. The communication of knowledge of international differences, for instance, may rearrange what people consider as “familiar” and acceptably “unfamiliar”. Marketing plans of shopping centres “on the other side” could cause the shifting of blocks of rational and emotional differences (pointing at the dynamics of the bandwidth). Communicating cross-border differences may focus on changing unacceptable differences into acceptable differences. In case of effective communication processes, shoppers will see more reasons to cross borders. The strength of push and pull factors together grows and the strength of keep and repel factors together declines, causing the blocks of rational and/or emotional differences to shift to the left and the right respectively. This implies that more cross-border interaction will take place. However, communication focussing on the insignificance of international dissimilarities and on disappearing acceptable differences could cause the opposite effect. In fact, the strength of push and pull factors together may diminish and the strength of keep and repel factors together may increase (causing the blocks of rational and/or emotional differences to shift to the right and the left respectively). This means that cross-border immobility is encouraged. Thus, paradoxically, the construction of borders and the communication of cross-border as well as appealing differences seem a prerequisite for sustaining and encouraging shopping mobility. More precisely, foreign shopping centres promising the experience of “familiar unfamiliarity” seem to have an appeal on shoppers and promote cross-border interaction.

Next, empirical data will be scrutinised to flesh out the theoretical abstractions on cross-border consumer mobility and the communication of international differences. In order to do so, both studies on cross-border shopping practices and experiences in the EU in general and in Millingen en Kranenburg (on either side of the Dutch-German border) in particular will be discussed.

Cross-Border Shopping Practices and Experiences in the EU

From several reports commissioned by the European Commission (EC) (e.g. EC 2002 and 2008b), it becomes clear that cross-border shopping activities have become more common. In 2008, on average one of every four citizens of the EU27 indicated that they had performed at least one cross-border transaction in that particular year. This share has been relatively stable since 2006 when it came from only 13% in 2002. Cross-border shopping in these studies is defined as purchases made:

- while travelling to another country with the specific purpose of buying;
- while on a holiday or business trip;
- through distance shopping (Internet, phone, etc.);
- from sales representatives from another country.

As we are scrutinizing shopping mobility per se, the first category is the most appropriate. In that case, about 9% of the residents of the EU27 have performed at least one cross-border shopping trip in 2008. Also this share has doubled since 2002 and again seems to level off recently. It shows that shopping across borders is still not a very common activity.

There are quite large differences between the member states, ranging from 42% in Luxemburg to only 3% in Portugal (see figure 2). Of course this can partly be explained by geographical reasons. Many of the smaller countries are in the top half of the ranking. Obviously, people living close to the border will have a greater propensity to cross that border. The Netherlands, as the country we will focus on in particular is amongst the smaller countries. Here, almost one of eight people have at least crossed the border once in 2008 to go shopping, a share that came down from one of six in 2006. The Eurobarometer-data do not allow for any further regional breakdown of the pattern. However, from a study in the mid-90s we can learn that in the specific border-region of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, at least half of the population had been across the border at least once a year, mostly with the purpose of shopping (Van der Velde & Vergoossen 1995). Given the general increase of cross-border shopping in the EU, we can assume that this percentage has also grown. But still the European Commission considers the level of cross-border mobility as too low.

[Figure 2 about here]

Motives

Witnessing the importance given by the EC to stimulate cross-border activities in order to increase mobility, it is surprising to see that the exact motivations for cross-border shopping trips have not been studied much more, especially by the EU. If the topic is dealt with at all, it mainly focuses on the role of consumer protection and information (see e.g. EC 2008b and 2008c). From two more qualitatively-oriented reports from the EU (2002 and 2004) comes that price differences are still very important push and pull factors for cross-border interaction. Also the mere products themselves, both in the sense of a better quality as well as the (non-)availability, can be a reason for cross-border trips. In the context of this contribution, it is furthermore

worth noting that the pleasure of shopping is also mentioned as a reason to cross the border.

The same arguments also surface in a recent report on regional consumer flows in the Dutch-German-Belgian border region Maas-Rhine (BRO 2007). Although this report focuses more on daily shopping and less on the leisurely aspects, still some indication can be deduced. Two thirds of the respondents mentioned price differences as one of the reasons for a visit abroad. In line with the EC-reports, this study also shows that the availability of specific products and the leisure aspect of shopping are mentioned by about two of every five respondents. This again shows that “difference” as an argument for shopping is applicable beyond the realm of the pure functionalistic rationality of price differences.

As reasons for not buying on the other side of the border, especially expected extra costs and time and language barriers as well as fears of post-transaction problems are mentioned (EC 2002 and 2004). From the aforementioned report on the Euregion Maas-Rhine (BRO 2007) comes that next to these repel factors also keep factors can be at play. In this sense, the most mentioned reason for not going abroad is the fact that all the necessary products are available in the home country (about two third of the respondents). Also the unfamiliarity of shops per se plays a role.

To recapitulate, insights in the motives and experiences of cross-border shoppers are partially at best. In the next part, the data presented in this section therefore will be elaborated on and enriched by adding a study on motives and intentions of cross-border shoppers. This is done by focusing on two small places in the Euregion Rhine-Waal, namely Millingen in the Netherlands and Kranenburg in Germany.

Cross-Border Shoppers in Millingen and Kranenburg

The data underlying the current section stem from a follow-up project (Van der Velde 2000b; Van der Velde 2001) of a large-scale project on cross-border consumer flows (Van Middendorp 1999). To get insights in the motives and intentions, around one hundred inhabitants in each of the border towns Millingen and Kranenburg were approached with questionnaires during the fall of 1999. The respondents were confronted with a number of propositions concerning their feelings regarding shopping, on which the respondent were asked to react.¹ The data is still highly relevant for our purpose, first of all because all the propositions were posed in a very general manner, not including any references to time, place or specific contexts. Secondly, there is no indication that there have been big changes concerning the relations between and consequent perceptions and assessments of the Dutch and Germans. Of course the Euro was introduced, but already before that there were hardly any problems regarding the different national currencies. In the border region, both the Dutch and the German currencies were readily accepted. And finally, what is maybe the most important argument, there is no more recent data available where in such a particular and detailed way cross-border shopping behaviour and the underlying intentions, perceptions and assessments have been addressed.

Groups of consumers are distinguished here on the proportion of the shopping trips per respondent that is crossing the border for shopping trips in which emotional differences are likely to play an important role (to wit trips for buying clothing and

the recreational day-out to do window-shopping, without the explicit aim of buying goods).

In the analyses, the respondents are aggregated into two groups, based on the frequency of their cross-border visits. The group that crosses frequently are hereafter indicated as borders-crossers, the other as non-crossers. In Millingen, one quarter of the respondents were border-crossers and in Kranenburg about 60%. The difference at least for a large part can be explained because the nearest town of considerable size in the region, Nijmegen, is located in the Netherlands. The stronger cross-border orientation of the inhabitants of Kranenburg is induced by the lure of this city.

Driving forces

In general, determining the covert but salient driving forces or intentions behind cross-border activities is very difficult, much more so than confronting overt behaviour with perceptions and images. These perceptions and images are connected with more or less concrete objects, like the border. Intentions, however, are connected to actions. This is why in general no direct reference is possible to concrete objects or destinations. Intentions towards “the other side” and “them” can only be analysed in an indirect manner, which is done here by presenting propositions to people from Millingen and Kranenburg (see also Werlen, 1993 and Walmsley and Lewis, 1993).

In the project from which the present data originate, shopping behaviour and spatial patterns in general were at stake. With regard to the two types of trips at hand, some four dozen propositions were presented to the respondents. The present analysis is restricted to correlating the answers of the samples with their overt behaviour concerning crossing borders (see table 1).

The first comment that has to be made is that, partly due to the relatively small size of the samples, not many propositions differentiate significantly (in a statistical sense) between the sub-groups of border crossers and non-border crossers. This is in particular the case for window-shopping. Nevertheless, some clear indications with regard to differing motivations can be observed.

Three propositions stand out in both the German and the Dutch sub-group, one relating positively to shopping abroad and two negatively. The positive one relates to the opportunities created by the border (12²). This is related to rational differences, in the sense that sometimes for certain goods or products, the neighbouring country offers better opportunities to succeed. This might be caused by the fact that for the Dutch going to Germany, when considering clothes, the bigger sizes are more readily available, something they will not be that familiar with therefore in their home situation. More over, Germans, especially the younger ones, consider the Dutch “boutiques” often more fashionable. These are clear examples of (depending on the perspective) pull or push factors.

The other two significant propositions relate to the potential keeping and repelling character of the border. The proposition concerning the wish to shop in a familiar surrounding (31), which can relate to the socio-cultural atmosphere, leads to this presumption. This is also supported by the fact that in the German sample propositions on buying in local and familiar stores (29, 30) strongly correlate

(negatively) with actual border-crossing. So, a too unfamiliar environment can act as a repel factor. However, possibly based on a somewhat more functional, rationalistic reasoning, also the proposition on clothes that should be bought as fast as possible (32), correlating negatively with the level of cross-border shopping, supports that for some, too much unfamiliarity may act as a keep or repel factor.

[Table 1 about here]

Next to the striking results for both of the sub-groups, there are propositions that correlate contrastively in both samples. With some exceptions, however, they are in general quite weakly related to cross-border activities in at least one of the sub-samples. One of the most remarkable exceptions is first of all the importance of prices when buying clothes (23). This serves as a very rational push and pull factor. The Dutch who try to shop as cheap as possible tend to stay in their home country whereas the Germans are somewhat more inclined to cross the borders. This might be explained by the regional context again, as shopping facilities on the Dutch side of the border are more abundant because of the presence of bigger cities and more possibilities of shopping at cheap prices. This could also explain the opposite relations when considering bigger cities for buying clothes (24) and strolling when window-shopping, which might be more fun in the bigger cities (8). This is a clear expression of “familiar unfamiliarity” in a functional, physical, and socio-cultural way. Given the positive correlation in the German sample, one might conclude that the bigger cities in the Netherlands are more often considered by the Germans to offer differing (surprising and therefore unfamiliar) experiences. At the same time they are familiar (i.e. known). Dutch respondents who do cross the border, do not do this apparently because of the big-city-atmosphere in Germany. Here one might conclude that the bigger cities in Germany (e.g. in the Ruhr-area) are too unfamiliar, maybe because they are too far, both mentally and geographically.

With regard to the wish for good public transport (a difference in possibly a physical and/or functional sense), the Dutch public transport “fans” cross the border more often, while in Germany this is the opposite. This is both the case for window-shoppers (6) and, although to a much lesser extent, when buying clothes (21).

The remainder of this section will confine itself to an analysis of remaining propositions with a relative strong correlation, albeit that they are not statistically significant. Three propositions display relatively high scores in both samples. The first issue that quite strongly correlates to cross-border activities, is the tendency to shop where one happens to be (13). This might point at a group of people that is quite flexible and adaptive in their behaviour and not clinging to routine patterns. For these people, differences across borders are not important, be it in a positive or negative sense. The second factor (14) shows a contradictory result for the Dutch group compared to the previous observation (proposition 23) of the “cheap skates”. But maybe these kinds of bargain hunters have to be differentiated from them. A bargain still may cost a lot in absolute sense, but relatively (much) less, compared to prices in the home country. Furthermore, there is the issue of parking. Especially for window-shopping there seems a positive tendency of cross-border shopping for those that value good parking facilities (1).

Finally positive correlations are observable when shopping is regarded as a social or attractive event (2, 15, 17) and when one is willing to go at any length for shopping (3, 4, 18), and, furthermore, when local circumstances force you (16). All of the negatively correlated factors relate to familiarity. It concerns factors such as preferring buying in familiar shops, having a good chance of success, buying in local stores and branded products (26, 27, 28).

Conclusion

National borders often are seen as having a negative impact on international mobility. In the case of cross-border shopping, there are also arguments to pinpoint a positive impact of borders and accompanying international differences on the willingness of shoppers to undertake trips to the other side of the border. A quest for places offering appealing differences results in the performance of cross-border shopping practices indeed. In doing so, people may have many driving forces to cross borders, including several functional, physical, and socio-cultural differences of shopping centres. The provided empirics suggest that when foreign places promise “familiar unfamiliar” shopping experiences, both Dutch and German shoppers are more willing to travel across borders, albeit sometimes for different reasons.

Positively correlated with cross-border shopping for both German and Dutch shoppers are the more rational, (physical-)functional factors like the availability of certain products, prices, and the attractiveness of shopping facilities. One could consider this in such a way that these issues in certain instances are less familiar (i.e. less applicable or available) in the home region. Here the unfamiliarity acts as a push (and pull) factor. Shoppers in a way have “been there, seen that, and done that” and are now looking for new differences and new challenges. The sample furthermore reveals that there is a negative correlation between crossing a border and emotional factors like preferring to shop in a more familiar or local surrounding and the perceived chance of succeeding (as fast as possible). In this case the unfamiliarity translates into a repel (and keep factor) implying that differences are causing unease, either in an emotional or a more rational sense.

When reflecting on the empirics within the context of the “Janus-faced” border, there seems to be a *maximum level* of cross-border unfamiliarity which shoppers consider acceptable. Unpleasant and shocking differences will trigger the repelling dimensions instead of pulling dimensions of national borders. Places offering “familiar unfamiliar” seem to generate international mobility and ground the border in the minds of shoppers as something positive.

The things shoppers see as acceptable and appealing differences (falling within their “bandwidth of unfamiliarity”) obviously may change. Dynamics of what is considered (un)familiar may arise due to political, economic, and socio-cultural developments. Focussing on the latter, advertisement campaigns, for instance, might make shoppers more aware of interesting shopping opportunities in places on the other side of the border. In doing so, more mental “openness” for other social and cultural contexts could be created. Perhaps shoppers never considered foreign places, never knew about the possibly appealing differences or never thought the differences could be appealing (all resulting in cross-border immobility). Providing information

about foreign places, therefore, could cause differences to fall within the “bandwidth of unfamiliarity” and thereby promote cross-border shopping mobility.

In that respect, communication processes could result in the (re)interpretation of international differences and the (re)construction of national borders. Knowledge of functional, physical, and socio-cultural differences of places on the other side may (re)arrange what shoppers consider “(un)familiar”. This also implies that knowledge about borders being removed and disappearing international differences could decrease the appeal of other places. It can even make these places unappealing to shoppers looking for the “familiar unfamiliar”. Thus, there also seems to be a *minimum level* of cross-border “unfamiliarity” for shopper to become interested in other places. “Overfamiliarity” of places across the border will not push shoppers towards the other side and will keep them at home because similar shopping centres can be visited on nearer locations.

Paradoxically, preserving and constructing some aspects of borders (through the communication of differences) rather than removing and deconstructing them seems to make shoppers adopt a mobile lifestyle. Shoppers seem to desire differences whereas possible feelings of discomfort are avoided at the same time. The foresight of a great deal of discomfoting unfamiliarity could cause fears of feeling “displaced” (see Lacan 2004). With regard to communicating “comfortable” differences across borders there is still a long way to go. Only one in five retailers is active in cross-border advertising and a little over half of the inhabitants of the EU has ever seen (consciously) a cross-border advertisement. This is all the more important realising that the more a consumer is confronted with these kind of advertisements the more often they go shopping across the border, as research by the European Commission shows (EC 2008b and 2008c).

An important question then would be what retailers should communicate in their advertisements, possibly supported by governmental marketing campaigns, to attract more cross-border shoppers, increase the frequency of visits, and generate more consumer spending? And an additional, certainly not less important, question would be which outlets they should use to communicate with (potential) cross-border shoppers? This asks for more detailed research into reasons why shoppers perceive international differences as attractive or not, how this depends on specific cultural, historical, and spatial contexts, and how these perceptions might be changed? This includes an analysis of what levels of perceived international differences or unfamiliarity are seen as appealing and unappealing and how this could be explained. Finding useful outlets to communicate across borders asks for an analysis of how people currently receive information about “foreign” places. Which newspapers and magazines do they read and what websites do they visit? In this context, mouth-to-mouth communication via social networks could have a strong impact on personal perceptions of borders. So, how can the messages of advertisements and marketing campaigns become part and, in doing so, alter the social and interpersonal discourse. And how can private and public actors combine their efforts to change this discourse and, in doing so, also generate more cross-border shopping practices? We believe that these questions already provide many intriguing opportunities to further scrutinise the complex relations between communication, borders and shopping.

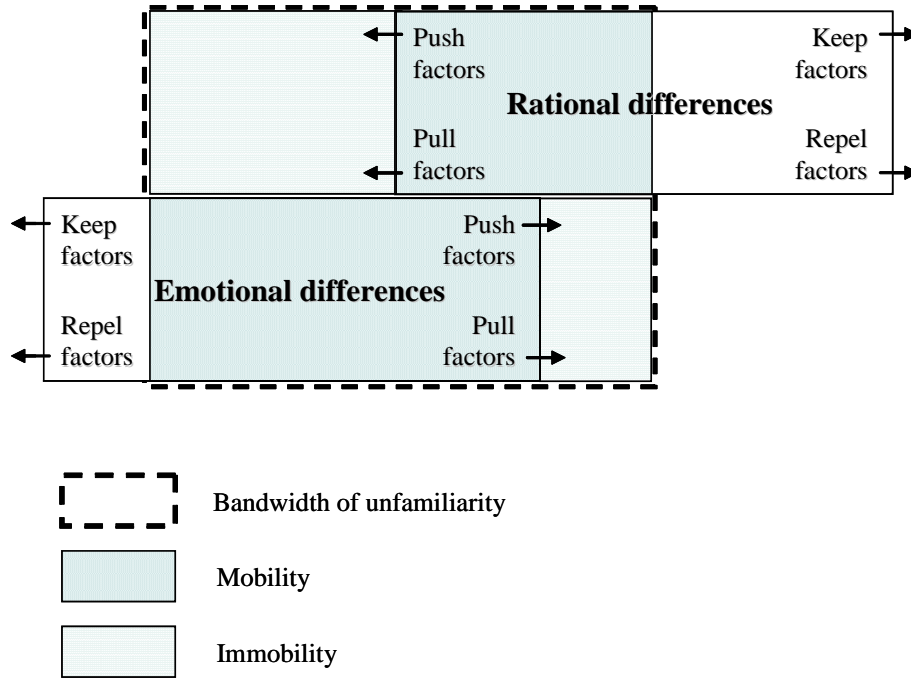
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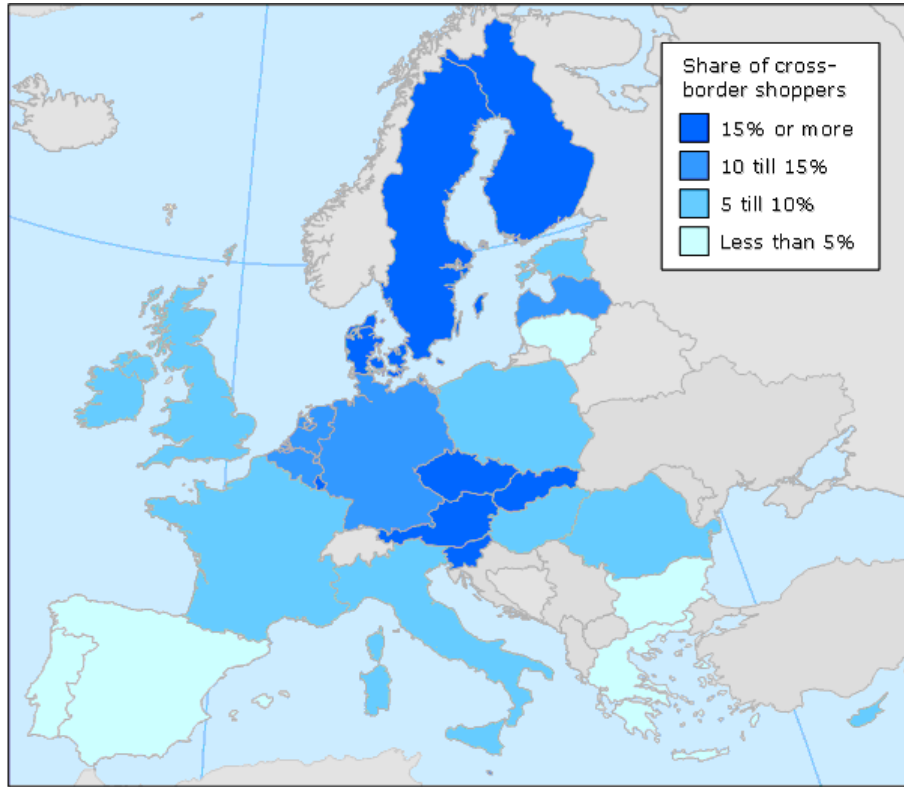
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Figure 1. The bandwidth of unfamiliarity



Source: Spierings and Van der Velde (2008)

Figure 2. Cross-border shopping in the European Union with the specific purpose of buying



Adapted from EC (2008b)

Table 1: Assessments of the propositions and cross-border activities³

		Dutch sub-group		German sub-group			
<i>When window-shopping ...</i>		MW	sig. †	sign	MW	sig. †	Sign
1	it is important for me to be able to park my car easily	1.34		+	1.26		+
2	this means also having a social drink as well	0.05		+	1.82	*	+
3	I don't mind a long travel	1.51		+	0.07		+
4	I know many cities to go shopping	0.19		+	1.35		+
5	an "unknown" city is more fun	0.38		+	0.46		+
6	<i>good accessibility through public transport is important</i>	0.89		+	1.82	*	-
7	<i>the outlay of a city-centre is determining my choice</i>	0.65		+	0.18		-
8	<i>strolling through a city is fun</i>	1.07		-	1.20		+
9	<i>the bigger cities are the better places</i>	0.55		-	0.01		+
10	<i>I am associating window-shopping only with shops</i>	0.01		-	0.45		+
11	<i>an abundance of shops makes a city attractive</i>	0.06		-	0.08		+
<i>When shopping for clothing ...</i>							
12	some clothing are better bought abroad	2.13	**	+	3.69	**	+
13	I shop in those places where I happen to be	2.24	**	+	1.61		+
14	I visit especially shops that offer bargains	1.90	*	+	1.18		+
15	for me a shopping mall is an attractive place	0.16		+	1.49		+
16	I often cannot succeed in the local shops	1.43		+	0.08		+
17	shopping is a social event	1.00		+	0.83		+
18	I don't mind a long travel	1.11		+	0.32		+
19	it is important for me to be able to park my car easily	0.20		+	0.51		+
20	it is not annoying when I return with other products than planned	0.55		+	0.60		+
21	<i>good accessibility through public transport is important</i>	0.88		+	0.12		-
22	<i>I don't mind where I buy as long as it is of high quality</i>	0.59		-	0.12		+
23	<i>it is a challenge to buy as cheap as possible</i>	0.78		-	1.08		+
24	<i>I prefer bigger cities</i>	0.40		-	1.01		+
25	I patronise only high-quality shops	0.48		-	0.96		-
26	good prices are important	0.95		-	1.38		-
27	I prefer shops where I have a good change of succeeding	0.58		-	1.49		-
28	I am only buying branded products	1.54		-	0.91		-
29	I buy in local stores whenever possible	0.21		-	2.76	**	-
30	most of the time I buy in familiar shops	0.55		-	3.25	**	-
31	being in another town I prefer shopping in familiar branch stores	2.40	**	-	2.51	**	-
32	I try to shop as fast as possible	1.97	*	-	1.97	*	-

Italics: nationally contrastive correlations

Grey: very weak correlations in either sub-group

† One asterisk (*) indicates significance at a 90% confidence-level (two-tailed) and two (**) at a 95% confidence-level.

¹ In order to assess the different propositions, the respondents were confronted with a five-point Likert scale.

² The numbers mentioned refer to the numbers in table 1.

³ The analysis in the table is confined to two sets of Mann-Witney tests. These sets consider the Dutch and German respondents respectively, with regard to how much coherence exists between the assessment of the propositions and whether or not window-shopping is done, respectively clothing is bought abroad across the border. In the third and sixth column the pluses and minuses indicate whether a positive or negative correlation exists between a more positive assessment of the proposition and the level of cross-border interaction. In the first two columns the Z-score for the Mann-Whitney test and the level of significance are recorded respectively.