



# Chapter 3

## Neoliberalism, Self-Identity, and Consumer Culture in the UAE

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### ABSTRACT

*Over the last half-century, modern societies have been experiencing a drastic social, cultural, and economic transformation. The change in the behaviors and habits of consumers under the strong impact of neoliberalism demonstrates the close relationship between economy and social psychology. Globalized neo-liberalization has become an unavoidable, powerful force that impacts all elements of social, cultural, and economic life and defines people's identities and their consumption preferences. This chapter addresses the link between neoliberalism and consumer behavior, with a focus on non-Western societies. It examines if there is a contradiction between the features of consumer culture and the prevailing domestic culture in these societies. Many scholars associate consumer culture with Western societies, but the authors argue that consumer culture has become a significant phenomenon even in the most religiously conservative, non-Western societies. By taking Dubai in the UAE as the case study, this chapter demonstrates how consumer culture helps redefine culture and self-identity. The chapter concludes by arguing that since individual behavior is not rational, individuals' needs are defined by the dictates of consumer culture across the globe in neoliberal times.*

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## INTRODUCTION

How the citizens of the UAE have redefined their behavior, values and identity under consumerism help us understand the influences of globalized neoliberalism in non-Western societies. In order to understand the dynamic processes of acculturation on identity in a setting where cultural pressures are obvious, this study was undertaken in a religiously conservative city of the UAE. The data was collected in Dubai, a city with a liberal economic environment in which a very big expatriate population contributes to its economy (Malecki & Ewers, 2007).

With the welcoming liberal environment it offers, Dubai is an important cosmopolitan hub in the Gulf. The increase in foreign investments and job opportunities has made the expat population significant within the total population of Dubai and thus, multiculturalism has become the central feature of the Emirati culture. The multicultural and the multinational environment in the city has produced cross-cultural communication and cultural exchange.

Not only this multicultural population but also multinational companies, hotels, investments and schools have changed the social and cultural structure of the Emirati society. With the strong penetration of foreign western brands such as Armani, Chanel, Sony and Mercedes, luxury consumption has penetrated into the city. As Shukla and Purani (2012:1417) indicate, the symbolic value attached to consumer goods may be *'highly influential among all cultures and countries. However, their degree of influence may differ dramatically.'* Similarly Al-Mutaaw (2013) points out that this influence is more related with cultures, where differences are more significant. According to Marciniak and Mohsen (June, 2014) consumers in the Gulf are almost obsessed with brands that have highly recognizable logos such as Louis Vuitton, Tiffany and Dior. This chapter argues that the choices of consumers in Dubai represent a homogeneous attitude when it comes to consumption of luxury products and famous Western brands with flashy decoration. The consumers in Dubai have economic power to engage in luxury consumption. Also, they are extremely interested in consuming Western life style. In contrast to traditional Emirati life that was very simple and modest, the Emiratis today have an interest in integrating themselves into a globalized world. In this context luxury consumption has become not only a consumer behavior but a matter of identity, prestige and power in the UAE society.

This chapter aims to understand the main motivation of Emirati consumers in consuming luxury goods and redefining their identities at the age of globalization. In doing so, the purposes of the research are: to understand how Emiratis perceive luxury, modernization and materialism; to define the greatest personal motivation for the consumption of luxury goods among the people of the UAE. This chapter also highlights the increasingly important position of shopping malls in Dubai nowadays. Today, shopping malls with their restaurants, bars, cafes or even hairdressers,

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