

# Shopping in Mumbai: transnational sociability from the Netherlands

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**Abstract** *In this article, I present the concept of sociability as a preferable alternative to current network theories. I apply Simmel's concept of sociability to the bonding that occurs among ethnic networks at both the community and global levels. I argue for the need to separate the sociability elements of enjoyment and pleasure in time and place. I focus on the diaspora tourism of Dutch Hindustanis to show that joy and pleasure occur both when shopping in India and when giving gifts in the Netherlands. Furthermore, I argue that gifts purchased in India create bonding within close ethnic circles. As a result, these gifts become part of the material culture of the group, contributing to a feeling of home, ethnic consciousness and transnational bonds. Finally, I suggest that this joy and pleasure can be repeated because many of these moments are recorded with video cameras and photographs. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that transnational sociability, exemplified in diaspora tourism (specifically in shopping and gift giving), generates bonding both at the ethnic group and global level. I thus aim to add specificity to studies of transnational ethnic networks.*

**Keywords** GIFTS, MUMBAI, SHOPPING, SOCIABILITY, SOCIAL COHESION, TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

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Relationships between globally dispersed ethnic communities are often conceived of as social networks (Faist et al. 2014) – a term that applies to both occupational and family relations. However, expertise, rationality, and exchange mostly govern occupational relations, whereas affection and identity usually control family ones. Such differentiation, specifying the type of ethnic network, is largely absent from the literature on transnational relations (Bhat and Narayan 2010; Faist et al. 2014; Joseph 2011; Vertovec 2009). More generally, ethnic transnational relations involve social capital, professional relations between community members, lingual or religious relations based on cultural affinity, national pride and other kinds of glue that generate social bonding. This absence of specification is remarkable since much research has been conducted on, for example, transnational family relations (Lee 2011; Reynolds and Zontini 2013; Ryan 2008).

Against this background, the concept of sociability can provide an alternative to, or at least complement, social network theories. The concept originates from the work of George Simmel (1949) who cited ephemeral moments of ‘joy and pleasure’ as the distinguishing features of a family relationship. In this type of relationship, there is no return involved; the bonding glue consists of joy and pleasure. Although sociability characterizes a broader category of social relations, it fits ethnic relations. It highlights the mechanisms that foster the cohesion of the ethnic community at both national and global levels. However, the concept of sociability suffers from some limitations, in that it is restricted to isolated micro-level interactions and must therefore be adapted to identify and specify the bonding effects of sociability at group and transnational levels.

My argument here is that Simmel’s concept of sociability provides a good alternative to network theories and one that warrants a return. To that end, I apply the concept to the bonding that occurs in ethnic networks at both community and global levels, but note the need to separate the sociability elements of enjoyment and pleasure in time and place. I focus on the diaspora tourism of Dutch Hindustanis to show how joy and pleasure occur both when shopping in India and when giving gifts in the Netherlands. Furthermore, I argue that gifts purchased in India produce bonding in close ethnic circles. As a result, these gifts become part of the material culture of the group, enhancing its sense of home, consolidating its ethnic identity, and strengthening its transnational bonds. Finally, I suggest that, because these moments are often captured by video recordings and photographs, it is possible to retrieve and relive the joy and pleasure. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that transnational sociability, exemplified in diaspora tourism (specifically in shopping and gift giving), generates bonding at the ethnic as well as the global level. In this article, I thus aim to add specificity to studies of transnational ethnic networks.

The argument outlined is structured as follows. In the next section, I discuss the concept of sociability and its current use in both offline and online studies. I extend the concept to the field of diaspora tourism, shopping, and gift giving. In the section thereafter, I focus on methodology and more specifically on data collection. I then describe the Hindustani diaspora tourism from the Netherlands to India. This section highlights the background of the ‘visiting community’ and the meaning it attaches to India as a source country of culture. Next is the section on the pleasure and joy associated with shopping in Mumbai, the Indian city most Dutch Hindustanis have visited for buying presents. This section also discusses gifts in families. In the conclusion, some suggestions for further research are made.

### **Long-distance sociability**

Simmel (1949: 254) described the concept of sociability as *geselligkeit* (coziness), an ‘association for its own sake’ that can ‘occur only if the more serious purposes of the individual are kept out, so that it is an interaction not of complete but of symbolic and equal personalities’. As he put it, ‘the principle of sociability may be formulated thus: everyone should guarantee to the other that maximum of sociable values (joy, relief, vivacity) which is consonant with the maximum of values he himself receives’ (Simmel

1949: 257). It is a free and playful form of interaction, in which the pleasure of the individual is always contingent on the joy of others. It is a ‘social game’. Simmel specifically used ‘tact’, ‘talking’, ‘dance’, and ‘coquetry’ to illustrate the concept and states that all the effects are legitimate ends in themselves. However, Simmel omitted to point out that this type of relationship presupposes some similarities, namely sharing certain tastes that are specific to a particular generation, ethnic group or subculture.

Simmel’s article, first published in 1922 and again in 1949, had lain dormant for decades prior to being revisited, rather tentatively, at the end of the twentieth century. The concept of sociability came into increasing use, however, after the turn of the millennium, but it also became overextended – for example to describe street sociability (Lehtonen and Mäenpää 1997), public festivals such as Carnival (Costa 2001) and the urban sociability of youngsters (Sutko and de Souza e Silva 2010). Moreover, in some studies of online gaming and dating, it has been employed to refer to a modified form of sociability (Ducheneaut et al. 2007; Hsiao and Chou 2012; Molnár 2004; Papacharissi and Mendelson 2011; Rosen et al. 2008). In all these studies, the joy and pleasure derived from interaction align with Simmel’s original use of the concept.

In an increasing number of studies, concepts such as ‘sociability’ and ‘sociality’ are used interchangeably (Brandtzæg et al. 2010; Castells 2004; Ducheneaut et al. 2007). Because of this divergent usage, the concept of ‘sociability’ is losing its intended meaning, which is a good reason to adhere to Simmel’s original idea. The concept has hardly ever been used to describe ethnic minorities and their transnational connections.

It has been pointed out that India serves as a ‘source country’ (Gowricharn 2009) from which the Dutch Hindustani community draws cultural elements. The activities of that community are exemplified in downloading movies and songs, as well as searching for information and purchases (Elahi 2014). These activities presuppose access to and familiarity with the internet. As far as the Netherlands is concerned, these preconditions are duly met; according to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics, 99 per cent of youngsters between 12 and 25 years of age had access to the internet in 2010, with nine out of ten spending time on it daily (CBS 2011).

When applying the concept of sociability to transnational relations, three adjustments are required, of which two are at the micro-level. The first pertains to the separation of joy and pleasure in time and place. The concept of sociability, as defined by Simmel, involves a minimum of two people who enjoy the activity, such as dancing and flirting, at the same moment. Some joyful transnational activities (such as virtual gaming) require similar direct interaction too, while other activities, such as online shopping, chronologically fall in different moments as buying, receiving, using or giving (cf. Clarke 2008). This chronology in the shopping process illuminates a time-rupture in sociability. The second adjustment is that neither the sources nor the experience of joy need to be in the same location. That is the case when purchasing presents and the giving occurs in different locations and at different points in time.

The third adjustment concerns objects as sources and mediators of joy and pleasure. In Simmel’s representation, sociability was based on personal skills, with no interfering objects in the interaction. However, in the case of dancing, there is music involved, and

people who engage in flirting will more than likely dress up for the occasion. That is to say, sociability is not devoid of materiality. What matters here are effects like the joy and pleasure generated by material objects rather than the objects themselves. There is no reason to exclude mediating material objects like gifts from the concept of sociability. Although gifts mediate several types of social relations, this applies notably to migrants (Werbner 1990) and tourists (Clarke 2008). Note that the bonding impact of joy and pleasure at different moments and in different locations varies with the activities. For example, obtaining goods such as CDs can be a joyful experience in its own right in that they are not necessarily meant for sharing, whereas giving presents intentionally has a relational effect (Komter 1996). When the enjoyment generated by obtaining and 'consuming' occurs without sharing, there is arguably no bonding involved, so for sociability relations to emerge, it is paramount that more than one person shares the experience or participates in the activity. Since this joy and pleasure can be generated at both ends (obtaining and receiving or giving), the separation of joy and pleasure in time and space is both analytical and chronological.

Long-distance sociability includes many activities, but not all permit observation of joy and pleasure, and neither are they all shared. Tourism, including diaspora tourism, involves a longer separation in time and space compared with many other social activities, making this an excellent context for studying long-distance sociability. Diaspora tourism is a special kind of international tourism because these visitors return regularly, have social ties in the destination country, and are part of a larger and self-ascribed national unit (Scheyvens 2007). While Scheyvens (2007) argues for a definition of diaspora tourism as part of domestic tourism, most scholars describe diaspora tourism as the visits of first- or second-generation emigrants to the country of (parental) origin. Diaspora tourism is part of what Cohen (1997) calls 'cultural diasporas' and comprises several segments, including heritage tourism (Ari and Mittelberg 2008), visiting friends and relatives (VFRs) (Scheyvens 2007), and pilgrimage tourism (Collins-Kreiner 2009). A different category of this diaspora tourism includes those second-generation visitors who are reported to experience ethnification following a trip to the homeland (Ari and Mittelberg 2008; Huang et al. 2013; cf. Moufakkir 2011).

The Indian diaspora is more complex than is commonly depicted in the literature, as it includes a major divide. One can reasonably describe first- and second-generation Indians living predominantly in Western countries and officially denoted non-resident Indians (NRIs) as transmigrants (Basch et al. 1994). Dutch Hindustanis, whose grandparents migrated long ago, however, more properly belong to the category of people of Indian origin (PIO). These visitors do not return regularly, have no social ties in India, do not feel part of the Indian nation, and do not intend to return there, but they nonetheless identify with the culture (Bandyopadhyay 2008; cf. Scheyvens 2007) and their visits usually generate bonding effects with their community of origin. Since PIOs have a more distant relationship with India than NRIs, their sociability takes the form of shopping and spending time there, whereas the latter group enjoys family visits.

The PIOs spend time visiting places of interest and purchasing commodities. This is not consumption vis-à-vis production as currently understood in economics but rather

the manifestation of a culture of consumption (Featherstone 1990). In this context, Zukin and Maguire (2004: 192) argue that ‘research on consumption should focus on both the production and reception of products, resulting in the production of *consumers*’ (emphasis in original). They criticized the dominant view in the literature that consumption enacts distinctions, creates life styles, reaffirms social relations, and establishes identities, especially since these effects do not apply to all social categories. Moreover, the images involved sometimes border on stereotypes while consumption patterns presuppose agency and finance (Featherstone 1990; Warde 2015). When it comes to globalized consumption – with specific reference to second-generation consumption in less developed countries (see Zukin and Maguire 2004 for some examples) – these criticisms may also apply, but with a focus on growing differences within and increasing communalities between countries (Cleveland and Laroche 2007).

While it may be true that global consumption does not affect all social categories to the same degree, it seems likely that disparities of agency and resources among diaspora tourists are less significant. Although there may well be differences between them, as tourists, they are spenders (Scheyvens 2007). Long-distance sociability is manifested in diaspora tourism – in the enjoyment of acquiring commodities, the pleasure of giving these to loved ones on returning and the impact this has on the (diaspora) community. Recreation is associated with consumption and fun (Warde 2015); the pleasure derived from purchasing, anticipating the joy of the recipient and gift giving itself has been well documented (see below). Although the literature offers ample reason to probe the issue of long-distance sociability from the perspective of diaspora shopping, this has scarcely been attempted. Schematically, at the micro level, the elements of joy and pleasure can be found among both buyers and receivers.

Turner and Reisinger (2001) argue that buyer satisfaction depends on affordability and the convenient location and cleanliness of shops rather than on demographic characteristics. Tourist purchases are commonly described as leisure shopping (Jansen-Verbeke 1991) and differentiated in several subcategories as ‘hedonistic shopping’, ‘thrift shopping’ and ‘pleasure shopping’ (Arnould and Reynolds 2003; Bardhi and Arnould 2005; Sinha and Uniyal 2005). Other differentiations include Bäckström’s (2011) distinctions between ‘leisure shopping’, ‘hedonistic shopping’, ‘recreational shopping’, ‘pleasurable shopping’, ‘shopping as hunting’, searching for ‘objects of desire’, ‘shopping as scouting’, and ‘shopping as socializing’. Some see bargain hunting, or thrift shopping, as a major source of shopping enjoyment (Arnould and Reynolds 2003; Bardhi and Arnould 2005; Cox et al. 2005). The element of pleasure runs through most of the subcategories and is associated with the acquisition of objects.

Authors often stress that utilitarian motives and hedonistic pleasure are intertwined, engendering shifts of motives on the spot and making manifest that convenience and functional motives are important to leisure shoppers, including the attractiveness of the physical environment and the design of the shopping malls (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Bäckström 2011; Jansen-Verbeke 1991). Apart from motives, shopping is also determined by the physical context and emotional experience of the shopping process. However, shopping is not only determined by economic and psychological motives, but also related to the sociocultural context, thus recognizing micro-level experience,

symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption. In a review of consumer culture theory, Arnould and Thompson (2005) argued that this perspective centres on ‘how particular manifestations of consumer culture are constituted, sustained, transformed, and shaped by broader historical forces (such as cultural narratives, myths and ideologies) and grounded in specific socioeconomic circumstances and marketplace systems’ (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 869). This anthropological dimension of shopping, while gaining increasing scholarly attention (Joy 2001; Mehta and Belk 1991; Mouffakir 2011) is largely concerned with the cultural meanings that shape consumer experiences and identities in everyday life.

The receivers of the objects exemplify the other end. Since these purchases are given to close ones, without expecting some return, they can be qualified as gifts. Gifts have been theorized as an element that fosters bonding and cohesion. The focus dates back to Mauss’s (1954) classical study on gifts. Like Werbner’s (1990) work on the formation of the British Pakistani community, most studies focus on the gift as part of a (often formalized) ritual and as an element of exchange between families and friends. Komter’s (1996) focus on the bonding effect of gifts between individuals within families or friends, or between families, is slightly different from this perspective. The former addresses the institutionalized forms of gift exchange, whereas the latter focuses on the bonding effects on personal relationships.

Who receives the gifts? In a study on Hong Kong, Joy (2001) constructed a continuum of gift receivers including ‘close friends’, ‘good friends’, ‘just friends’, ‘hi-bye friends’, and the ‘romantic other’. In addition, as with the Chinese, in-laws and close friends within the Dutch Hindustani community become ‘like family’. Joy (2001) distinguishes three ‘models’ of gift-giving – utilitarian, generalized and sacrifice, or a deep desire to please the other. Referring to a few studies conducted in Asia and Africa, Joy questions the universal validity of statements based on data collected in Western societies, such as reciprocity. In Chinese families, reciprocity is not expected, which rules out a need to build or reaffirm relations through gift-giving. In the Dutch Hindustani community reciprocity among families is practically absent, although Western conceptions of returns and claims creep into the patterns of expectations. It is the ‘deep desire’ to please that reflects Simmel’s sociability and characterizes giving in this community. The gift reflects the occasion for which it is chosen, the gifting capacity of the donor (finance, time, personal effort), and the altruistic motives related to specific status as husband–wife or grandmother–grandchildren (Clarke 2008).

Apart from the two micro-level adjustments of the sociability concept, which are pivotal for ethnic bonding, gifts, insofar as they reflect material culture, generate bonding at the level of the ethnic and the global community. The literature on home and home possessions is of assistance in illuminating these connections (Mallet 2004; Mehta and Belk 1991; Miller 2001). In this context, Mehta and Belk (1991) provide a striking example of the meaning of possessions. In their emigration to the USA, Indians took many material artefacts that had the function both to preserve identities as well as to transform religious and cultural identities. Possessions secure identities, for example to ‘fuse the house to self-concept’. Money (2007) argues that home possessions act as familial obligations, as markers of memory, and commemorative potential. The Indian

emigrants use material objects as 'identity kits' (Goffman 1961) to anchor themselves in the USA. This cultural arrangement of identity does not apply only to home decorations; it extends to many private spheres of life, such as music, dress, souvenirs, pictures and movies. It fosters home feeling and ethnification and identification with the Indian source culture.

## **Methodology**

The Dutch Hindustanis are descendants of British Indian indentured labourers who were shipped to Suriname, then a Dutch colony, between 1873 and 1917. In Suriname, they retained many albeit modified aspects of Indian culture, including religion, language and customs. Currently, the Hindustani community in the Netherlands comprises an estimated 175,000 persons (Choenni 2014). The community is internally bonded mostly by family and friendship relations. Community members meet frequently at birthday celebrations, religious meetings, community festivals, social gatherings, and public lectures about Hindustanis and India or Indians, all over the country.

Visitors to these events normally chat about children, work, family matters and holidays, especially holidays in India. For more than two decades, I (a male and active member of the community) have on many occasions taken part in these conversations about holidays in India. One recurring topic, connecting and expressing the sociability of Dutch Hindustanis in India, is shopping. The conversations took place in groups of between five and ten people who would meet about four to six times a year. The people discussing shopping in India were mostly women, the majority of whom were over 30 years of age. While part of the data collection relied on hindsight and recollection, there was only a slight risk of lost memory or distortion of information as stories were told repeatedly and referred to in terms such as 'when I visited India for the third time in 2002'. Information about shopping in India has been 'disseminated' in the community through numerous gatherings and has become a kind of 'community knowledge' comparable to knowing about religious rituals. Since early 2014, when I began to explore sociability relations in diaspora tourism, I have made more focused observations and asked more specific questions. Among these were what concepts might capture this informal social life? Is the concept of sociability applicable to these visitors to India? What is it about these visits to India that affords informality and pleasure? What adjustments are required to apply the concept of sociability in transnational relations? What effects do these visits to India have on the Dutch Hindustani community? These were open questions and there was no prior research design; instead, the research design emerged and continued to evolve during exploration.

This type of research and data collection is known as 'opportunistic research', which, according to Riemer (1977: 469), characterizes researchers who 'use familiar situations or events to their advantage. They *know* rather than *know about* their area of study. They are insiders' (emphasis in original). Riemer points out that many sociologists use these familiar situations to understand society and ongoing social processes; and he deplores the frequent neglect of this first-hand knowledge and expertise. Opportunistic research comes closest to participant observation and data collection in

focus groups. I focused my participation on listening to stories, and observed the other visitors, the gifts they produced (especially dresses and jewellery), their chatter and the joy and pleasure they showed at all stages. Since the stories were repeated at several meetings and many families were having similar experiences with shopping in India, it enabled me to cross-check their stories.

In addition to the community's recollections and observations, in September and October 2014, I joined a group of five members of my family on a three-week trip to India with a view to corroborating my previous observations in the Netherlands and in the hope of supplementing data I had already registered. This was typical of opportunistic research, albeit in a different location. Although this was not my first visit to India, I focused my observations of the sociability experience on Mumbai. Of all the major cities in India, Mumbai is the one that Dutch Hindustanis frequent most, probably because of its lively shopping atmosphere. On that occasion I also had some chats with Indian vendors. Despite my observations being restricted to a specific family, they did not contradict the experiences of other Dutch Hindustanis shopping in Mumbai. It is important to note that only a small part of the data relate to shopping experiences observed in Mumbai. The greater part comprise stories that other visitors repeatedly told about their experiences in India during encounters in the Netherlands. It should also be emphasized that the previously recorded descriptions by other visitors of the whole shopping process always express joy and pleasure.

Although most of my experience in India seemed familiar from the stories I had heard in the Netherlands, I built in an additional crosscheck. After finishing the first draft of my paper, I discussed my observations and findings with Hindustani colleagues and friends. I excluded people who visited India annually and ensured diversity of gender, age and education; of the many people with whom I spoke about my trip, 11 remained. Of this highly selective sample, one was a businessman who visited India frequently and had a negative attitude; two had never been to India but were familiar with the stories; and one corroborated the pattern of interaction with vendors (see later section 'Shopping, giving and bonding'). While disagreeing on minor issues and topics unrelated to the article, their accounts verified my major findings. This is hardly surprising, given the small variation in the community, with high similarity of motives and requisite accumulated savings to spend on a holiday in India.

### **Dutch–Indian diaspora tourism**

As argued, long-distance sociability is represented by diaspora tourism. The tourism of Dutch Hindustanis assumes two forms – tourism to Suriname when visiting family and friends; and tourism to other Indian diaspora communities such as London (Southall), Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa and especially India. The first type of tourism is geared to the visit of family and friends and is to a varying degree subject to moral obligations, although they generate much joy and involve many gifts. Leisure, however, is different and limited because of family obligations. The second form of diaspora tourism to India is devoid of family obligations. Consequently, Dutch Hindustani tourists become explorers in diasporic cultural environments without any moral obligations to relatives.

Their explorations are interwoven with visiting places and shopping. In other words, the two types of diaspora tourism represent different kinds of sociability.

From the 1980s onwards, Dutch Hindustanis became increasingly interested in visiting India. The tourist flow to India swelled as a result of more or less the same conditions that gave rise to transnational communities – increased welfare, wider and greater exposure of India worldwide, more opportunities to travel and internet-accessed information (Vertovec 2009). The size of the Dutch Hindustani tourist flow is difficult to establish. Dutch travel agencies do not register all tourists to India. An increasing number are organizing their own journeys and sometimes depart from Belgium or Britain. The Indian embassy, when extending visas, does not register the ethnic origin of the visitors. However, according to travel agencies' advertisements and talks in the community, travel from the Netherlands has increased substantially in recent decades. One could say, although it may be a slight exaggeration, that every Hindustani family has a member who has visited India at least once.

A few specialist travel agencies, run by Hindustanis acting as tour operators, initially organized the visits to India. They advertised group travel, mostly to the Indian cities of Mumbai, Agra, Delhi, Chennai and Bangalore, and to regions such as Goa. These visits to India are increasingly being combined with other diaspora destinations such as Mauritius and Fiji. Initially, it was the first (and older) generation that was eager to visit India. Gradually, all age categories were represented among the visitors, although couples with small children are seldom encountered. Many of the groups visiting India consist of families (including in-laws) and close friends (Joy 2001). Once India has been visited once or twice, further visits are planned and conducted independently, without the mediation of tour operators.

There are many reasons to visit India. At first, the two most important ones were to visit the parents' or grandparents' country (a search for roots) and Bollywood (Gowricharn 2009; Hira 2000). The latter included tours to the houses of actors and actresses and, happily, returning with a photograph with one of them. Recently, the number of people visiting India for medical reasons has started to increase. India is offering medical checks and treatment (Connell 2006), which Hindustani doctors greatly appreciate. These medical visitors are predominantly men. The number of visitors spending time in ashrams (places for meditation) has also started to rise. Tours for reasons of pilgrimage are much older and more wide ranging. Occasionally, Hindustanis go to India to visit religious places or to attend spectacular religious happenings such as the Kumbh Mela (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2008). Although leisure is limited on these religion-related visits, it is nevertheless enjoyable.

At present, the most important motive for diaspora tourism to India is shopping. Dutch Hindustanis often travel to an Indian city (mostly Mumbai) to purchase their wedding outfit. If they had to obtain the same garment in the Netherlands or British cities such as London or Birmingham, they would have been worse off financially. The savings made from the difference in prices between Europe and India are large enough to finance the journey and accommodation in India (Gowricharn 2009). For people other than young marrying couples, the journey to India includes buying things for family members and, to a lesser extent, close friends. One cannot visit India and return

as if it had been a trip to the USA. It is a community-wide expectation that visitors to India will return with gifts, which makes giving presents part of a 'returning ritual' (Clarke 2008). Indian goods are desired because of their relative cheapness, although due to the swelling stream of tourists, there is (as vendors in Mumbai pointed out) an upward pressure on prices, but especially because commodities, including Indian dresses, house decorations and cultural items fit into the culture of the ethnic group (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Back in the Netherlands, people discuss, if not advertise, their Indian experience in their family circles and among close friends. It is almost impossible to provide a full list of what they talk about, but recurring themes are showing pictures and video films made with a mobile phone or other device; stories about what they purchased; how beautiful, disappointing or disgusting some places were; how they managed to negotiate low prices; how much fun they had together; how economical they were; how they enjoyed watching movies on Indian television; how sick you can become from eating the wrong things; how frustrating it is trying to get a visa; the advantages the PIO card offers; how well India is doing in the world; what season would be the best time to visit India; what places (including shopping malls) are worth visiting; and, not least, how similar or different Dutch Hindustanis are from Indians. These expressions of the India visit are clear manifestations of long-distance sociability, including joy and pleasure, rendered by diaspora shopping in India and giving presents in the Netherlands.

### **Shopping, giving and bonding**

Although tourists to India enjoy many aspects of their visit, the topic in this research is about the sociability generated by shopping and giving presents. From stories gleaned during gatherings in the Netherlands, it was clear that there were several categories of shoppers among the Hindustani diaspora tourists. Although many classifications of shoppers can be made (Sinha and Uniyal 2005), for the purpose of this article, I will restrict myself to those who enjoy and do not buy, and those who enjoy and make purchases. The first category are just spectators. The spectators knew they would not buy; they spent a good deal of time looking at things, enquiring about prices, trying on clothes, and discussing the utility of commodities. This was a major source of spending leisure time and gaining pleasure. Some of the spectators knew before their departure to India if and how much money they would spend. Others had no clear prior idea and decided on the spot whether or not to buy.

The visitors who intended to buy, mostly middle-aged and elderly people, were predominantly thrift shoppers (Bardhi and Arnould 2005). Both in conversation in the Netherlands and during their journey to India, their most frequent explanation for shopping was that 'we came this far, it would be a waste not to buy things for the family', 'the stuff is much cheaper here', 'you don't know if and when you will come back', 'I have paid so much to be here', 'I have come this far so I intend to enjoy it to the full', and 'you pay ten times this amount in Europe for the same commodity'. The meaning of the commodities is closely related to their cultural background. Typical Indian dresses such as the sari and sherwani, and jewellery, religious artefacts and medicine,

for example, are objects that culturally fit their own community. Hence, this consumer culture is a specific part of the Indian diaspora (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Without a cultural fit, these purchases would be no different from commodities in a Chinese market and, therefore, unlikely to be made.

Most of the purchases were made in small shops, including bazaars, to a lesser extent on the streets in front of shops, and in open markets. While there is a variation in the design and arrangement of markets across Indian cities, the market in the shopping centre of Mumbai represents a stylized and enhanced picture of the shopping process. The marketing literature suggests that the make-up of the shopping centre is relevant for customers (Bardhi and Arnould 2005; Cox et al. 2005; Jansen-Verbeke 1991). While this may apply to shopping malls and urban design, the attraction of the Mumbai market lies in its deviation from the neat and orderly organization of Western-style shopping centres. The people I accompanied to India had a preference for bazaar-type markets; as one said, 'you can come closer to the commodities and take a better look at them'. Another voiced the feeling that they 'were much more in control of the assessment of the commodity and less dependent on the sales talk of the vendor'. Similar thoughts were advanced during talks in the Netherlands.

The Mumbai shops, which offer an abundance of beautiful goods, contrast sharply with the shabbiness of the street market. Merchandise frequently used in Bollywood movies, such as dresses, make-up, jewellery, music and movies, dominate the shopping centres. In most cases, Western dresses are also available. Dresses were mostly bought in the shops, while smaller commodities were easily purchased in the street. The shops have a greater variety of the same commodity (such as saris) and they also have tailors who can adjust clothes to the proper size. The speed of adjustment is negotiable and this has been a convenient service for all the Dutch Hindustanis with whom I spoke.

Part of the joy and pleasure observed in Mumbai and at meetings in the Netherlands derives from interacting with vendors. Two types of sellers are of interest. The first sell from small shops that carry a range of specialist goods such as dresses, footwear, and DVDs of music or films. Communication takes place in English and occasionally Hindi, mixed with Sarnami Hindustani, the Hindustani vernacular in Suriname, which is closely related to Bhojpuri. The second type of seller operates from stalls on the street in front of the shops. The products in this sub-market are cheaper, the range much smaller and the vendors' command of English and Hindi poorer.

Vendors in the shops as well as in the streets recognize Dutch Hindustanis as foreigners: they speak a strange language among themselves (Dutch); they dress as Westerners; and they behave like tourists. Moreover, they engage in almost every offer the vendor makes, while local Indians know what to look for, can easily distinguish kitsch from genuine goods, and know what price belongs to what commodity. The vendors believe all foreigners from Western countries have purchasing power and this warrants an upward adjustment of prices. Dutch Hindustanis, on their part, are convinced that they are being overcharged and negotiate the prices downwards. All prices are in Indian rupees and are converted to euros before making a decision.

The buyers' joy derives from discovering bargains, the cultural suitability of the commodity, and the anticipated joy of giving the present. The bulk of the commodities

bought were clothes, followed by jewellery, religious artefacts, DVDs, medicine (for the treatment of several complaints), books, footwear and anything remotely useful and cheap. Dresses are often fitted on the spot and, when needed, given for alteration, thus costing additional time and effort. Most purchases are made in anticipation of a birthday or other events, or with a view to dressing up for a special occasion in the near future. By far the largest number of purchases are made for the family, including in-laws. This behaviour felt familiar to me from stories heard in the Netherlands

The time and effort spent acquiring goods is tremendous. Of all the opportunities India offers to diaspora tourists, Dutch Hindustanis seem to find shopping the most relevant, expensive and, no doubt, exhausting. During the conversations, which my own observations in Mumbai corroborated, women are proud of taking the lead and seem physically better able to shop than men. Men, especially in the absence of their partners, often say how boring and tiring it is to shuffle for hours behind their shopping wives, family and friends. However, some men try their utmost to help their wives with selections, trade-offs and decisions. A large minority of the visitors intentionally go with empty suitcases and return fully loaded with purchases. Sometimes they buy extra suitcases to carry all the goods back home 'because other people do that too'. 'We do not buy presents for family and friends when we go to Dubai or the USA; we cannot buy so much.' As they argued, the gifts from places outside India are 'culture-neutral', that is to say, not Indian or Hindustani by taste and design.

The interaction between Dutch Hindustani shoppers and vendors is an additional source of pleasure and joy. Hindustanis usually speak Dutch among themselves, thus provoking the curiosity of many vendors. Inevitably, the question comes: 'where are you guys from?' Sometimes the Hindustanis make jokes and answer 'Suriname', 'Malaysia', 'Brazil', knowing that the vendor does not have a clue where these countries are located. Eventually, the final word is 'we are from Holland' or 'Europe'. Conversations include topics such as Bollywood, Indian politics, local cuisine, the region from which the first British Indians in Suriname were shipped (Uttar Pradesh) or Dutch football. These conversations often provide the trigger to start negotiating a price reduction. Indian vendors are usually very persistent and tend to unpack many commodities to seduce the customers. In a few cases, it appeared that some visitors and vendors were acquainted from previous visits.

In later conversations, some Hindustani visitors gave amusing accounts of the strenuous efforts vendors would make to show them goods they did not intend to buy. However, most of the people with whom I discussed my findings disapproved of such behaviour, so only a few admitting to doing anything similar: 'it is improper to do that, especially because those people depend on us for their living.' Making fools of vendors was a source of joy and pleasure for only a limited number of people, both among my travel companions and in the Netherlands. Most of those with whom I discussed my observations appreciated the vendors' courtesy (although this was contradicted by two people who found Indians ill mannered). Literature suggests that being pampered by vendors is, like window shopping, most gratifying for customers (Cox et al. 2005).

The stage of giving generates a different source of sociability. Joy and pleasure are often shared by donor and recipient. Sometimes the giving happens on the spot in India,

shortly after the commodity is purchased. That happens when the gifts are meant for spouses or children who are present. Often the gifts are meant for close ones in the Netherlands. The way this is given varies. Sometimes all involved are invited and the gifts handed over, much like unwrapping Christmas presents. This usually happens when everybody is getting something. Grandparents are especially reliable gift-givers to their children and grandchildren. The danger that somebody is not receiving something and is passed over is avoided by handing the gifts over in smaller circles or in face-to-face encounters. The gift is given because of an occasion and/or because of a visit to India. Thus, three features of the gift can be identified – its low price, its cultural design, and the occasion on which it is given.

In reporting the giving of presents, givers seem to enjoy the event more than receivers. Grandparents (and to a lesser extent richer parents) were particularly indefatigable about publicly demonstrating their generosity to their children or grandchildren, especially through gifts of clothing: ‘Look what Nani [meaning mother’s mother in Surinamese Hindustani] has brought you from India.’ Similarly, grandchildren showed off their Indian costumes, saying such things as ‘this is from India, I got it from Nani.’ Gifts given by grandparents to parents (dresses, jewellery, objects to decorate the house) were mentioned less often, unless someone else enquired; women would sometimes say, ‘look, this I got from Hans.’ There were differences in terms of spending behaviour. While the affluent visited India and other places regularly, less fortunate people had to save for such expensive journeys. Among those with whom I discussed these observations, there was no disagreement about this, although some felt embarrassed by the description, as it also applied to them.

It should be noted that the joy and pleasure can be recorded on video and relived many times. This element of repetitive joy was absent from Simmel’s account of sociability, for obvious reasons. However, while most diaspora tourists make video films of their vacations, not all look back at old holiday videos. Nevertheless, the technological option to repeat the experience of joy and pleasure during vacations is an addition to the social phenomenon addressed by the concept of sociability. Most of the memories, being part of their identity, are condensed in the purchased or received objects that decorate the house (Money 2007).

The literature on gifts, as well as on marketing, claims that giving strengthens personal relations (Clarke 2008; Komter 1996, Mehta and Belk 1991). However, in the Dutch Hindustani community, gifts from India also have an impact on the ethnic community. As a result of this leisure-inspired thrift and diaspora-shopping, practically every Dutch Hindustani family has religious artefacts, clothes and other possessions with which to decorate their houses. From these decorations, visitors to their homes can see that these people are religious, have visited India, and are ‘truly’ Hindustani. The Hindustanis dress for special occasions according to cultural customs, thus shaping a culturally familiar environment beyond their homes. Consequently, shopping and giving enhances the stock of Indian commodities in the Dutch Hindustani community, serves as a form of identity preserver or transformer, and fosters the ethnification of the group. Here, diaspora consumers operate as identity seekers and markers (Mehta and Belk 1991).

As a consequence, visiting the grandparental country of origin helps Dutch Hindustanis to re-establish their ethnic identity. Moreover, the visits strengthen identification with India. Even though some people find the poor hygiene and poverty disgusting (Chaudhary 2000), they are impressed by the geographical and demographic size of the country as well as by its economic and political advent on the world scene. Most of all, a visit to India enables the visitors to participate in the conversations during gatherings in the community circles in the Netherlands. Participation in these meetings increases self-esteem, cultural recognition, and identity. In other words, consumption per se matters less than the effects that emanate from it. Put another way, Indian gifts not only contribute significantly to relations at the micro-level, but they also strengthen the ethnic consciousness of the Dutch Hindustanis at the community level and their connection at the transnational level.

### **Conclusion**

This article addressed sociability as a type of bonding characterized by joy and pleasure. The application of the concept of sociability in ethnic transnational relations sheds light on an under-researched dimension of the bonding of global communities. To substantiate this claim, a few conceptual adjustments have been made. The first is the separation of joy and pleasure in time and place. This separation is obvious when gifts are bought in distant places on vacation, while the giving occurs later and in another place. A second adjustment relates to the locality as the sources and the experience of joy do not need to be in the same place. In tourism, in particular, buying and giving presents often occurs in different locations and at different points in time. Third, the impact of gifts on home feeling and community cohesion, and the subsequent strengthening of identification with India has been explicated. This is bonding with a cause rather than the outcome of just a network.

Scholars since Simmel have hardly noticed this dimension. I have argued that both shopping and giving generate sociability, as well as ethnic bonding and transnational involvement. In the context of diaspora tourism, sociability has effects on both sides of transnational relations. Diaspora tourism imbues relationships with (anticipated) joy and pleasure at the purchasing and giving ends of the scale. At the same time, it strengthens prior existing identifications when visiting the ancestral country and acts as a major source for cultural possessions. Because of the cultural similarity inherent in diaspora tourism, these material possessions contribute to individual bonding, to the ethnification of the group and to group identity, and to the source country. Pleasure and enjoyment are the central glue of bonding at different levels.

In contrast to Simmel's suggestion that flirting and dancing are momentary enjoyments, many pleasurable holiday moments these days are video recorded, so enabling their repeated enjoyment. The concept of sociability also comprises culturally specific forms of joy and leisure, as is implicit in Simmel's account of flirting and dancing. Like flirting and dancing, sources of sociability presuppose a similarity of norms, bodily and behavioural moves, and cultural meanings, a point that Simmel and other authors have failed to explicate.

Finally, a few limitations of this study merit attention. First, this study is based on a research population that has been described as PIOs. Since PIOs and NRIs differ in familiarity with Indian culture and the goals of their visits differ remarkably, similar research based on NRIs may yield different results and may force adjustment or differentiation of the concept of transnational sociability. Likewise, other diaspora populations or other activities may generate different theoretical insights. A second issue concerns the actors involved in the generation of sociability relationships. The focus in this article has been on the Dutch Hindustanis, but the vendors with whom the tourists are interacting are no less interesting in comprehending the interactive joy and pleasure fully. Because of the frequent visits of the diaspora tourists, the vendor may have become acquainted in due course and derive similar enjoyment and pleasure from the interaction. After all, in the original meaning of sociability, as suggested by Simmel almost a century ago, joy and pleasure include more than one actor.

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