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Material and cultural consumption in Cuba: new reference groups in the new millennium

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AQ1

Reference groups serve as markers for citizen-consumers to determine tastes and preferences about work and material and cultural consumption. These groups have evolved slowly in socialist Cuba, mostly during the post-Soviet era. This paper examines the symbolism, roles, and meanings of three such groups: the Cuban Diaspora, Cuban Gen-Yers or Millennials (survivors), and entrepreneurs. A combination of these groups is changing values about a new consumption taking hold across the island and offers insight into material and cultural consumption.

Keywords: reference groups; cultural consumption; material consumption; Cubans; Cuban-Americans

Marketers define "reference groups" as go-to clusters of consumers who validate contemporary fashion and values and, in the case of Cuba (like the former Soviet bloc countries) reveal nuanced political positions (Dyker 2002). They often mute their expressions of material and cultural consumption because media outlets, neighborhood watch groups, and a thick security of clothed and plain-clothed onlookers monitor their actions. Still, objects serve more than utilitarian function; they reflect aspects of lifestyles, class, income, and how owners of those objects give meaning to their lives. In so doing, the importance that consumers assign to the meanings of material and nonmaterial objects serves as a broader window to society (Phillips 2007, 2008; Berger 2009).

This paper reviews the behaviors, trends, and symbolism displayed by three contemporary reference groups in Cuba. The first is the Cuban Diaspora. Liberalized travel by the Obama administration in 2010 has made the USA the third leading sending nation of "international visitors" to the island. Cuban-American travelers leaving Miami carry on average US$3500 cash (remittances) and several additional shrink-wrapped suitcases (in-kind remittances) containing hard-to-get consumer goods (González-Corzo and Larson 2007).

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If the security personnel open the bags for inspection, they must rewrap them at their (and not the traveler's) expense.

A second reference group is Cuban Gen-Yers or Millennials, who have only lived under the postdecriminalization of the dollar (1993) period; a post-Soviet watershed mark that denotes the change from exclusively state-planned and delivered goods and services to a hybrid of fledgling private sector and vibrant underground economy material goods (Frank 2010). I draw on selected Cuban hip-hop (reggaetón) musicians to illustrate this new political space for social and political commentary.

The third reference group is the emerging self-employed sector (~420,000 legal workers), which I have studied for two decades. I draw on interviews from 1998, 2008, and 2011 to illustrate how these entrepreneurs challenge the political, economic, and social status quo, and navigate the precipice of acceptable and ostentatious consumption. I argue that these hybrid forces—youthful Cubans abroad and on the island—forge a new mélange of social change that is chipping away at extant power structures and gives new meaning to material and nonmaterial consumption in the Cuban revolution. To situate the discussion, I turn to a brief summary of political and economic changes that have taken place over the past few decades.

Political-economic and regulatory history of revolutionary Cuba: 1959–2014

AQ2

The early and middle years: 1959–1992

The Cuban revolutionary struggle against the government of Fulgencio Batista (1952–58) began when Fidel Castro and a few dozen followers attacked a garrison in Santiago de Cuba on 26 July 1953. Most of the assailants were killed, but Castro was captured and sentenced to prison on the Isle of Pines (which he later "rebranded" and named the Isle of Youth). To the surprise of many, his sentence was commuted in 1955, at which time he left for Mexico. It was there that he met a young Argentine physician, Ernesto "Che" Guevara. In early 1957, Castro, Che, and a band of 80 other men returned to Cuba in a boat they had purchased from a retired US businessman in Mexico. The vessel was originally named "Granma." And Castro would later rename the province where the ship landed in southeastern Cuba Granma province and launch the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party with the same name. Indeed, the revolution remapped the island by changing toponyms that include counties, sugar mills, schools, and other landmarks to reflect iconic revolutionary historical events and personalities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The young revolutionary was, if anything, a consistent brander who has consistently denounced the inhumanity of industrial capitalism and its attendant patterns of consumption (Castro 2002).

In just over two years, the revolutionary forces had driven President Batista into exile (as dramatized in the movie, *The Godfather, Part II*). On 8 January 1959, Fidel Castro and several battalions under his command rolled

into Havana. Shortly thereafter, he established his headquarters in the recently (1958) completed Habana Hilton, which he would later rename Free Havana (*Habana Libre*). The revolutionary government moved quickly to nationalize private enterprise. In just two years (1959–61), more than $11 billion of US private and business assets came under state control. Most private workers were forced to labor for the state and were given a low state salary but received low or free housing, education, and health care. In retail, the number of stores declined from 60,000 in 1957 to just 4000 by 1970 (Gordon 1976; Morales and Scarpaci 2012). The US-imposed trade embargo that began in 1961 locked Cuba out of a sugar-trade relationship that had existed since the early twentieth century. Moreover, consumer goods readily imported from Gulf of Mexico (Galveston, New Orleans, Mobile, and Tampa/St. Petersburg) and Atlantic (Miami, Jacksonville, Savannah, Charleston, Wilmington, Newport News, Baltimore, New York, and Boston) ports could not be obtained without going through a third country. The new trade pattern increased the price of US imports, and alternative sources had to be secured. The Castro Government quickly differentiated between essential and "non-essential" consumer goods, arguing that the latter had no place in an egalitarian society. By 1962, the Soviet Union and its trading bloc had stepped in to provide trade, military, and technical support.

Since the early years of the revolution, material scarcity has been a hallmark of the Cuban economy. The state issued ration cards (Figure 1) early on for the purchase of subsidized foods as well as household goods. In recent years, there has been official discussion that this venerable symbol of socialist subsidy and consumption may soon be eliminated (Valdes 2013). Most analysts agree that it was not until the 1980s that a deepening scarcity of food, cloths, and other consumer goods set in. As subsidies from the former USSR began to wane—reaching US$5 million daily by early 1989—so too did the material living conditions of the island's 11 million residents. Cuba had unwillingly confronted the realities of a global economy that was bereft of generous subsidizes. This crisis, exacerbated by the fall of the Berlin Wall in

Figure 1. Cuban food-ration card. Photograph by the author.

1989 and the demise of the USSR two years later, would usher in a new period of austerity that has shaped the life experiences of Cuban Millennials.

The Special Period, 1993—present

The Cuban economic free-fall into a nonsubsidized world economy in the early 1990s led to a restructured economy. The once steady flow of Eastern European and Soviet goods was disappearing from the shelves of Cuban shops. No longer could the island rely on the favorable terms of trade offered by the Council of Mutual and Economic Assistance (more commonly referred to as the Soviet trade bloc).

In 1993, on the 40th anniversary of the attack of the Moncada barracks, Fidel Castro announced the legalization of dollars for the general public (versus only diplomats), an expansion of limited private sector jobs, and the approval of joint venture offers with foreign companies. Before the announcement, most Cubans secured clothing, appliances, and food through state outlets and used Cuban pesos as legal tender. During that speech, President Castro announced that Cuba had entered a "Special Period in a Time of Peace" that provided the essential political–economic context for such a radical departure from Cuban commerce. More importantly, it meant that the exile community could bring or wire dollars to the island (Hernández-Reguant 2009).

As a result, a series of state retailing companies began to emerge. Large holding companies began offering a wide array of clothing, appliances, cosmetics, food, hardware, and other goods and services. Though prices remain high for Cuban standards and salaries, it marked the first island-wide display of goods in more than 40 years. Thus, both in state-run stores and on the backs, backpacks, and suitcases of foreigners, 11 million Cubans could now see, feel, and purchase previously illegal goods. Within a few short years, nearly 150,000 private sector workers were plying their trades, and many were charging in dollars. Window-shopping, of course, became quite popular as the islanders were suddenly allowed to acquire goods that were not considered ostentatious necessarily, but were largely unseen beyond the normal product placement of goods seen by Cubans in foreign films and television shows (Weinreb 2009).

Cuban diaspora

Travel between exiled- and second- and third-generation Cuban-Americans reflects the changing political relationship between Washington and Havana. Until the legalization of the dollar in 1993, and the Clinton administration's liberalization of travel to Cuba, few Cubans in the USA visited the island. President Obama undid George W. Bush's restrictive travel for Cuban-Americans (one visit every two years) in 2010 when Obama relaxed travel restrictions; Cuban-Americans can now visit the island as often as they want,

and they can wire up to US$10,000 daily to the island via services such as Western Union, VaCuba, Trans Caribe, and others. In 2013, about half a million Cuban-Americans journeyed back to their homeland, making the USA the third largest international travel group (after Canadians and European Union passport holders).

To remedy the lack of information about the "money bridge" between the USA and Cuba—despite the longstanding trade embargo—a colleague of mine and I conducted a survey of 822 Cuban-Americans in South Florida between May and August 2013 (The Havana Consulting Group 2014). We asked them a series of questions about whether they travel to Cuba, send money there, how that money is used on the island, and what they do (and what they spend) when in Cuba. We found that 62.8% of this convenience sample sends remittances to the island, thus highlighting a profound change in the behavior of the Cuban diaspora, its composition, and its relationship with family members on the island. All of this occurs in a setting where the island's government contends with a trade embargo that has been in effect for 54 years.

The survey employed a 95% confidence level and 3.3% margin of error to extrapolate and estimate the levels of remittance-sending for Cuban-Americans who reside in Florida and the USA. Accordingly, we estimated that between 59.5% and 66.1% of these Floridian Cuban-Americans forward remittances to the island. That means that some 718,355 Cuban-Americans drive this market. If we extend those same parameters used in the Florida figure to the rest of the nation, the amount of money sent would range between $1,062,354 and $1,181,195. For the year 2013, this translates into a total of between US$2,497,031,206 and US$2,776,363,411 reaching Cuba this way through a variety of channels (*mules*—persons who transport goods), friends, family, Internet, or wire transfers; Table 1). This figure includes cash-only contributions and does not take into account in-kind goods, which are a key component in many Cuban households and often find their way into legal and underground economies (as is common throughout Latin America and the Caribbean; see Comisión Económica para América Latina 1997; Orozco 2002).

One of the more revealing findings is that more than 9 out of 10 (93.8%) of the informants who send money to Cuba are between 20 and 49 years of age (Figure 2). This datum underscores that younger émigrés leaving Cuba are the main economic support for Cubans on the island and are perhaps more connected—emotionally and financially—to household challenges there.

Cuban Millennials

A second key reference group that is redefining material and cultural consumption in Cuba is the Millennial cohort, born roughly between the early 1980s and the late 1990s. These Cuban Millennials, whom I call "survivors," are but a subset of finer-scale research tackling broad issues of cultural globalization. Growing interest has developed in studying global

Table 1. Reported channels for sending remittances.

No. of channels used	Channels	No.	% channels used	No. (n = 516)	% of all remitters
None	None reported	3	–	3	0.6
One	Agencies	193	58.3		
	Mules[a]	128	38.0		
	Internet	16	4.7		
	Total	337	100.0	337	65.3
Two	Agencies	136	42.8		
	Mules[a]	100	31.4		
	Friends	39	12.3		
	Relatives	36	11.3		
	Internet	7	2.2		
	Total	318	100.0	159	30.8
Three (3.1%)					
Four (0.2%)					
Total					100.0

Channels used in descending order		
Channels	No.	Percentage
Agencies	341	48.0
Mules[a]	234	32.9
Friends	55	7.8
Relatives	53	7.5
Internet	24	3.4
Not reported	3	0.4
Total	710	100.0

Source: The Havana Consulting Group LLC.
Note: Informants could identify more than one channel.
[a]*Mules* (or *mulas*) refers to persons carrying money or packages to Cuba.

consumer culture and how it shapes lifestyles, preferences, tastes, and choices. Mass media drives what Nijssen and Douglas (2011) call "consumer world-mindedness." The three subsets of globalization—economic, cultural, and political—create this worldview and present challenges and opportunities to business faculty and international marketers (Waters 2000)—not to mention cultural geographers. Economic globalization has led to free trade and more open markets. Cultural globalization has homogenized many consumer products and services. Political globalization spawned inter-regional cooperation along the lines of the European Union, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which hardly seemed possible a few decades ago.

Despite these new realities, generalizations related to globalization may overlook unique outliers that can be insightful in understanding basic marketing principles (Schumpeter 1942; Drucker 1958; Liebenstein 1968).

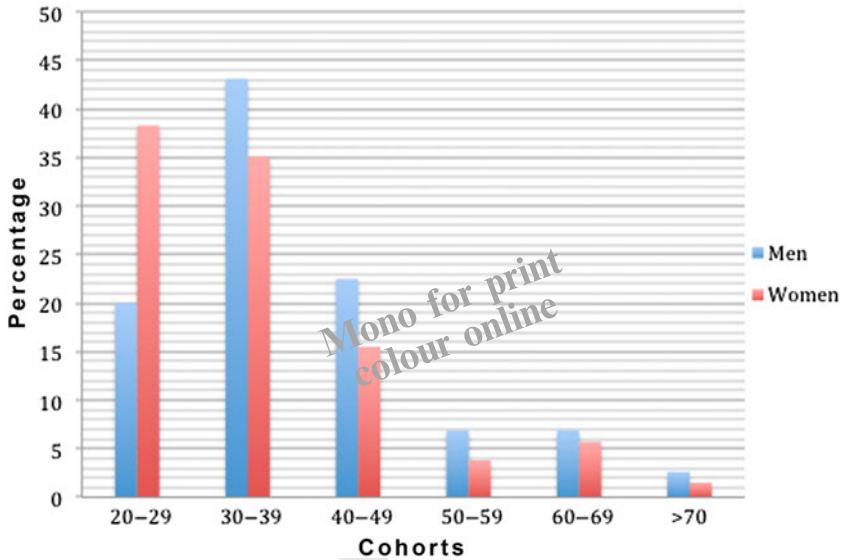

Figure 2. Age and gender breakdown of Cuban-Americans in South Florida sending money to family and friends in Cuba, 2013. Data source: The Havana Consulting Group (2014).

On the one hand, globalization means that marketing practices and consumers are similar across time and space. International marketing management and cultural and political geography courses can easily show the connectedness and spatial diffusion of products, ideas, channels, and tastes from Boston to Beijing, and places in between. On the other hand, the so-called "flattening of the world" (Friedman 2005) may lull the US college students into thinking that their familiar world of MTV, smart phones, YouTube, and Facebook is ubiquitous among their global cohorts. Granted, many of the US Millennials may assume that the purchasing power to acquire these newfangled technologies is the only limiting factor in acquiring them. To be sure, the US and Western European Millennials enjoy collaboration, thrive on being connected, value niche communities, and differ from their parents' cohort in substantive ways.

In the section below, I present an exploratory review about a Millennial cohort outside the USA about which no research has been conducted: Cuban Millennials. My study of the survivors took place during my 47th field trip to the island, out of what has become 71 visits since 1991.

A woman in her early twenties had remarked to me in a state-run sporting goods store:

> Those of us who were born during the Special Period [a time of austerity that began in the early 1990s] only know a little about what these market reforms mean. But we notice "brands" [gesturing her fingers as if placing quotation

> marks around the term] worn by classmates such as Thaba [a Cuban made book bag and backpack] or Nike.

Only recently are we gaining information about how Cubans of all ages acquire information about products and services that are largely accessible universally, but have only recently reached the island (Morales and Scarpaci 2012). Pirate themes tied to Captain Morgan rum, relaxing beach settings linked to Mexican Corona beer, and a plethora of reggae-based Jamaican icons may hold a firm place in the minds of Anglo-Saxon youth when they think about Cuba, the Cuban, and other tropical and spring break destinations to the south (Elinson 1999; Fernandes 2003, 2011; Holt 2004; Savage *et al*. 2006). However, Cuba is generally not part of the travel experiences of Millennials from the "industrial north"; if it is, it is likely centered on Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, the Buena Vista Social Club movie, cigars, and salsa dancing (Scarpaci and Portela 2009) (Table 2).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) and in-store promotion—tried and true channels for creating brand equity and brand loyalty in market economies—prevail in Cuba because of a lack of modern channels of communication such as radio, TV, Internet, newspaper, and even low-tech billboards. A common thread between the USA and Cuban cohorts is the role that contemporary music, particularly hip-hop, rap, and reggaetón play in creating consumer and lifestyle identity that, in turn, have a clear brand expression.

This is the context in which Cuban Millennials have been raised, thus evoking three questions that guide this research.

Cuban youth and brands

An exploratory ethnographic approach guided this field research in the summer of 2011 in the capital city of Havana. To situate the survivors' knowledge of brands and their tastes and preferences for them, the following questions guided two focus groups that I moderated:

(1) How do Millennials select products, brands, and services in ways that are similar or different from their parents' generation?
(2) How does the dual currency system influence how Millennials select brands and services?
(3) How do Cuban Millennials find out whether a brand is good or is bad?

I gathered two groups of Cuban youth through a snowballing technique. I knew four households in the capital city of Havana who had children in the survivor cohort, which I defined as those born after 1986. Seventeen informants between the ages of 18 and 25 constituted two focus groups whose sessions lasted 80 and 95 minutes. I introduced myself as a marketing professor who was interested in how young Cubans made decisions about

Table 2. Comparison and contrast of North Atlantic and Cuban consumer profiles.

North Atlantic consumer generational cohorts					
Cohort	Tweens and Millennials	Gen Y	Gen X	Baby boomers	Seniors
Range of birth years	1996–2000	1977–1999	1965–1976	1946–64	Before 1945
Age in 2014	14–18	25–39	38–49	48–68	69
Traits	Rely on their parents for purchasing power. Begin desiring "grown up" products and services. Prone to viral (a.k.a. buzz) marketing.	Realistic and optimistic, seek killer lifestyle, institutions are irrelevant, multitaskers, assume technology	Analytical and pragmatic, live killer life, reject rules, distrust institutions, multitaskers, use new technology	Idealistic, conformist, created institutions, participated in social movements, task, and technology specific, possess new technology	Control the majority of discretionary income, share many of the product and service "likes" of younger cohorts, value-oriented
Cuban consumer generational cohorts					
Cohort	Survivors	Revolutionary babies	Reared in the revolution	Straddlers	Seniors
Range of birth years	1993–2000	1977–1992	1959–1976	1946–1958	Before 1945
Age in 2014	14–21	23–38	38–47	56–68	69
Traits	Born during the Special Period. Know only nascent market reforms. The most exposed to mass communication marketing media. Aware of global styles and trends. Notice "brands" worn by classmates such as Thaba or Nike backpacks.	Lived childhood during modest prosperity of 1980s before collapse of Soviet bloc. Some familiarity with global styles and fashions before advent of technology used by "survivors."	Reared as youth in times of sacrifice and scarcity but knew some modest prosperity of 1980s. Parents of survivors.	Straddle the early years of the revolution and prerevolutionary period as well. Have lived adulthood with the hope of promised yet unfulfilled consumption in both quality and quantity.	Have vivid recollection of market mechanisms, rewards, and weaknesses before 1959; now relying on lean state social security and pensions in a mainly weak peso economy

Source: Author.

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brands and product quality.[1] The sessions were carried out entirely in Spanish. Focus group sessions were held in the homes of one of the participants' parents. The sessions were audio recorded, transcribed, translated, and then analyzed for content analysis.

The audio recordings of the focus groups produced a database of about 26,000 words. Transcription proved to be tedious because the informants were so eager to speak about the topic that they often "talk over one another," causing me to interrupt, and asking them to speak one at a time. I immediately noticed how "safe" the topic was because it allowed informants to talk about their "generation" and thus couch their opinion in the third person in case the focus were problematic.[2] The resulting "word cloud" (Figure 3) (representing the frequency of the words used in larger or smaller font size commensurate for how often a word was used) underscores the topic at hand. The words "generation," "think," "currency," "really," "brands," and "agreement" were the most frequently used.

The first question was: "How do you think you and your generation select products, brands, and services in ways that are similar or different than your parents' generation?" It elicited a collective narrative that seemed to say: "Our generation is different from the older one."

Two key themes were recurrent: there is much more product variety in today's marketplace than there was in the 1980s, and there is less stigma

Figure 3. "Word cloud" reflecting the frequency of the most repeated words in focus groups among two sessions with Cuban "survivors," July and August 2010. Data source: Author's transcribed/translated interviews. Word cloud calculation by www.wordle.net.

affiliated with consumption today. Miguel, a 23-year-old auto mechanic from the Havana suburb of Lawton, captures this sentiment about variety:

> I don't think our parents even thought about brands. Everything was pretty much, "Ok I'm the state, and here are the goods that we have for you." There was not a lot of choice. The *libreta* [ration book] was the way you had it before the Special Period.

A related theme in the officially socialist island of Cuba is the act of consumption. Recall that the state's premise in controlling the means of production is to avoid social inequality. A common response to the dissipation of stigma surrounding consumption follows:

> Now I think it is okay for everyone to talk about brands [called *marcas* in Spanish] and to show them. I mean, it was never really a problem for us. I think in the 80s it was not so. You really could not be so showy, so wearing something like Gucci or Versace was taboo. But not today, I mean things have just changed! (Angela, 19, a vocational-tech student from Centro Habana)

Informants were emphatic about how they gathered information on brands through hip-hop, rap, and reggaetón musical videos. Benito chimed in on a discussion about the role that international media has on Cuban youth, even though such media is not widely broadcast on the island but is played by musicians:

> And then there is MTV Latino, the pirated DVDs and what the reggaetón players wear and say. I mean, darn it, we see Tommy Hilfiger and Coach, and Gucci and other brands. The Cuban young person is no fool [*no es un bobo*]; we pay attention to what's out there! [followed by a cacophony of laughter and nodding of heads]

Mimi, a 24-year-old nurse from Miramar in western Havana, confirms this: "That's true. Those videos and the DVDs and the music at least let you know what is out there." Oscar, presently unemployed, corroborates Mimi's remark: "Yes, it lets you know what is happening, what exists beyond the island. Outside the island."

During these exchanges about the role of song lyrics, MTV Latino, and VH1 Latino, informants would often break out into song with lyrics about brands. When asked who authored the song to which they referred, they cited the band names of Orishas, Las Krudas, Doble Fila, and Obseción. One stanza in particular was frequently repeated by the female informants of the focus groups and was sung when the question of price and clothing brands came up. I was able to link the faint audio recordings later with the following lyrics sung by an Afro-Cuban female rap group: "You are beautiful being you/the body isn't the only virtue/You are beautiful being you/ebony in flower, black light" (Krudas Cubensi 2011).

However, music and electronic media, although discouraged by state authorities (Whynach 2005), do not supersede the weight that friends' opinions carry. WOM endorsement matters among Cuban Millennials. Naomi (24, homemaker, from Alimar in eastern Havana) underscores this sentiment:

> If people want to get out there and find out what is fashionable and current, they can do it. I mean, it is not always easy, but you can do it. But, look, in the end, I think we all agree that what our friends tell us is worth a million. Isn't that right my people? [she looks around for support; other informants nod]. I mean, what my girl friends say, that to me is advertising.

The second theme addressed a concern that permeates the Cuban retail sector in general: the use of one or two currencies. I introduced the topic by reading the following statement to both groups: "Now that you have commented on how your parents' and grandparents' generations differ from yours, I would like to know whether the dual currency system influences how you select brands and services." Both groups and each informant agreed that the items for sale in the peso market—formal or informal (underground)—were low-value goods. A recurring narrative was that hard currency items were of good quality and that peso-valued items were undesirable. Manolo, a 24-year-old construction worker from Old Havana, captured this feeling:

> For me and my friends, I think, there is no real peso economy. I mean really, the difference is so notable in terms of what is available in pesos and what there is in hard currency. For me, I think that almost everything I really want and need is in hard currency. So, I don't even think about pesos.

When asked about whether a fair currency exchange of 24 pesos to one CUC[3] was acceptable, everyone concurred that it was imperative for the buyer—not the seller—to make a mental conversion before finalizing a transaction.

The final question guiding the focus group was read to both sessions: "What other ways exist for you to find out whether a brand is good or bad?" Responses concentrated overwhelmingly on the role of gifts brought to the island by family and friends, which, in turn, constitute in-kind remittances. In tongue-and-cheek Cuban humor, informants referred to the role of the exile community that is pejoratively referred to as "worms" (*gusanos* by the island's government because they "crawled away" from the revolution, but *gusanos* is also the name given to long duffel bags). These *gusanos* bring money[4] to the island as well as gifts, often paying hefty duty at the in-bound airport. Mimi described the role of gifting like this: "My cousin in Orlando gets information from the Internet but we don't have the Internet, so we have to do our homework—so to speak—before we take money out of our pockets. [My cousin] also brings lots of stuff in those duffel bags [*gusanos*]."

Benito remarked that his aunt brings over burned DVDs and CDs that a cousin of his, two years his junior, prepares for him.

Benito: And [my aunt brings] MTV Latino [recordings], the pirated DVDs that include what the reggaetón players wear and say. I mean we see Tommy Hilfiger and Coach, and Gucci and other brands.

Mimi: That's true. Those videos and the DVDs and the music at least let you know what is out there. My stepfather is an American citizen and comes back a few times a year…You had asked me what brands I like and, for example, between Avon products and Chanel, I mean, I think Avon works better; its fragrances and make-up. Chanel and Estée Lauder are nice, but when I found out the price difference [between them and Avon], I couldn't believe it…And besides, my aunt sells Avon and she has good taste.

Oscar [23 years old, Centro Havana, public office worker]: And those gusanos carry all the latest material. Some of it is pretty cool and some of it's just not my taste. But it is better than what the state stores carry. [everyone agrees, nods, yes, yes]

Mysladys[5] [19, biology major, Vedado]: Sometimes I look and see what my friends' family sends over and then I compare it to what I see the Europeans wear. I know [the European tourists] dress informally here …the tropical heat and all that, but frankly, I think Latino good taste [*buen gusto*] is better than what the Europeans wear.

Cuban Millennials in context

This Cuban "survivor" cohort is an important segment to the often facile generalizations that embed discussions of globalization. Survivors display what Nijseen and Douglas (2011) a "consumer world-mindedness." However, the Millennial cohort in Cuba differs from their North American and European counterparts, even though music is a common denominator in reaching young adults. Cuban rap, hip-hop and reggaetón provide an important venue to promote styles, tastes, and lifestyle references (Fernandes ~~1993~~, 2011; Gámez Torres 2011). Hip-hop has served both as a defiance of the regime as well as an acceptance of "foreign" brands like Fubu and Tommy Hilfiger. Had Fidel Castro not met with the rising Cuban band Orishas in the late 1990s (thereby tacitly approving their music and artistic expressions), these survivors' tastes and preferences may not be as defined as they are in the new millennium.[6] Product placement in music videos and the survivors' focus on what tourists wear and the contents of *gusano* bags sent from Miami appear to drive brand promotion among these young consumers.

Unlike their parents' and grandparents' generations, Cuban Millennials have only known a dual currency market and rely exclusively on product placement in stores, through tourists, and exiled family tastes. Like young people everywhere, WOM and music are key factors that shape brand knowledge in clothing and electronic goods categories. To assume that Cuban Millennials are just a subculture of their Miami cousins requires clarification (Borna *et al*. 2007). Knowledge of local Millennial culture and the use of

Cuban rap, hip-hop, or reggaetón artists to endorse products and services may one day be as commonplace as it is today just 90 miles to the north.

Entrepreneurs

A third key reference group is the emerging self-employed Cuban worker in Cuba. Previous research shows that they value their independent work setting, enjoy having a steady cash flow, and relish colocating work and residence even though credit and wholesale markets have yet to be established often making the use of cronyism and black market purchases necessary to sustain small enterprises (Nee and Matthews 1996; Morrison 2000). The Cuban experience over the past two decades indicates similar entrepreneurial drivers (Sriram *et al*. 2007; García 2013; Ritter and Henken 2014). The island's government has reluctantly accepted them as a necessary evil in the new millennium (Digital Granma Internacional 2010). Moreover, even Fidel Castro has publicly questioned whether the island's model of socialism has ever really worked, let alone been exported abroad (Goldberg 2010). While one universally accepted appraisal of workers' attitudes about their daily task acknowledges the role of material rewards accruing to individual workers (Hofstede 2001), the Cuban revolution has valued moral versus material rewards during most of its existence; that, however, is changing.

As noted above, self-employment quickly disappeared in the first decade of the Cuban revolution as the government soon nationalized the principal means of production. Although almost all workers have been tethered to public sector employment since the early 1960s, a small number of workers were allowed to ply independent trades. Professions such as locksmiths, beauticians, upholsterers, and other single-worker enterprises characterized much of this workforce. As noted earlier, though the legalization of the dollar in 1993 moved in tandem with liberalizing work laws (Pérez-López 1994; Scarpaci 1995; Osborn and Wenger 2005), by 1996, the government reported approximately 200,150,000 workers (not quite 2% of the labor force in Cuba at the time) as *cuentapropistas* (self-employed workers, or those "who work on their own account"; *trabajadores por cuenta propia* in Spanish). By 2007, the figure had shrunk to about 150,000 (Figure 4). The more popular of these trades included home restaurants, home renters, cobblers, beauticians, bicycle-taxi drivers, lighter refuelers, confectionary and juice vendors, and artists (Scarpaci *et al*. 2002), all of whom navigate a complicated regulatory environment (Ritter 1998; Benítez 2013; CafeFuerte 2013).

The regulatory environment for these workers has always been convoluted. Essentially, small businesses were outlawed in Cuba until recently, presumably because a nascent petite bourgeoisie threatens the socialist system (Cruz and Villamil 2000). Home restaurants (known as *paladares* in Cuba), for instance, could only employ family members, and the number of chairs was limited to just 12 (though reforms in 2010 increased the number to 20 and to 50 in 2011). Certain foods such as lobster and beef were long prohibited

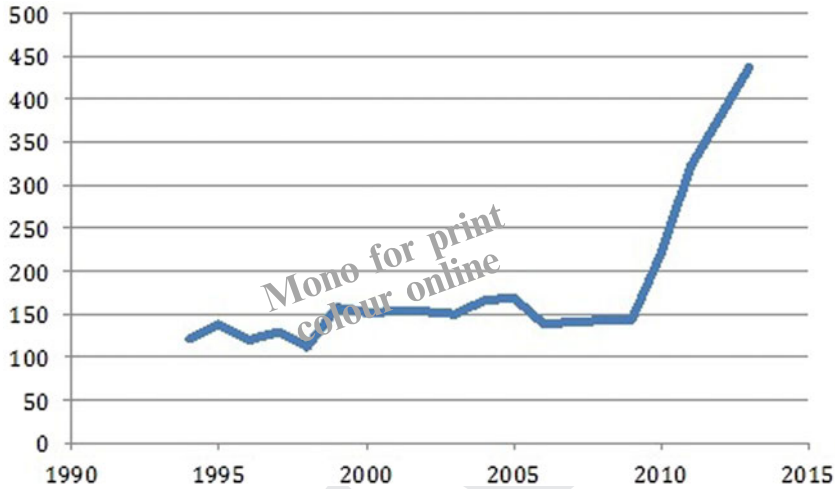

Figure 4. Self-employed workers in Cuba, 1994–2013 ('000s). Data source: Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (ONE), Havana: ONE, Republic of Cuba. Calculated by the author.

from sale in these home restaurants (also rescinded in 2010). However, lookouts often alert the operators of approaching state inspectors, thus allowing time to hide any wrongdoing (Henken 2002).

Some businesses naturally require collaboration, and Cubans have used all manner of social networks and connections to creatively circumvent legal obstacles thrust in their path by state regulators. The case of air pump operators is telling. With the collapse of favorable oil deals for sugar (between the USSR and Cuba), bicycle use soared throughout the island, from about 70,000 in 1989 to several hundred thousand a few years later (Scarpaci and Hall 1995). Operating an air pump compressor to inflate tires has been a common self-employment trade. Logically, the ability to patch tires is a parallel service in these settings, but the Cuban Government prohibits the same air compressor operator to patch tires. Therefore, many households will have one family member secure a license for the air pump and another works as a tire patcher. Similar Cuban-style "economies of favor" or *blat* are repeated across the island and among myriad trades and services, creating what might be considered small and medium enterprises (SMEs) elsewhere. A careful balance of subsidized purchases from state stores, more expensive hard currency stores, and the black market characterize Cuba-style *blat*.

Self-employment in Cuba fell sharply in the late 1990s after an increase in taxes, more onerous regulations, and a series of raids by inspectors halted the sector's growth. The squeeze on small entrepreneurs sent a strong message that private business was allowed, but only as a "necessary evil." A favorite target of keeping the private sector in check has been the periodic crackdown

on *paladares*, given the extensive regulations they must follow. Operating a paladar, like all self-employment in Cuba, requires paying monthly licensing fees by the first of the month. Each municipality has a matrix of prices based on whether the self-employed worker charges in pesos or in hard currency (today called CUCs or convertible currency units). In the case of restaurants, if alcohol is served, then a hefty alcohol license is added to the monthly fee. Thus, a home restaurant in Havana's Plaza municipality catering largely to tourists and charging in hard currency and serving alcohol would be required to pay the equivalent of US$800 before the doors open at the first of each month (regardless of the operation's actual earnings). A similar facility, purportedly charging only in Cuban pesos in the same area, would pay only 400 pesos monthly (about US$16). Authorities can permanently withdraw a business license if any self-employed worker fails to pay their monthly fee on time, and there is no guarantee that the state will allow re-entry into the market. Seasonal work related to peak tourist arrival months is particularly vulnerable in this regard. Thus, bed-and-breakfast establishments, restaurants, bicycle-taxi operators, and related ancillary services must "weather" the lean low season, and continue to pay licensure fees during the off-season.

Cubans look at successful entrepreneurs with considerable esteem; dealing with the system successfully merits praise, and providing a needed good or service at a reasonable price also garners prestige as a reference group. A jeweler's tale reveals this social value. For instance, if an inspector requests proper receipts from the jeweler but they cannot be provided for the batteries, watch bands, or faces of wristwatches, then the jeweler would be accused of purchasing the parts on the black market, which presumably is stocked by stolen items from the state or from criminal elements. In the worst of cases, the owner could be charged with "illegal enrichment" or theft of state property, both of which carry stiff fines and potential incarceration. Tales like these were echoed by a majority of the 1998 informants (Peters and Scarpaci 1998), as well as in the latter two surveys. However, entrepreneurship seems to have given some self-employed business workers a free reign on guarantees. I have heard repeated stories of self-employed workers in Havana changing their prices wildly, or failing to post them. When confronted, they responded to customers that because they were not state workers, they could charge whatever they wanted, and quickly change their service guarantees (watch repairers, upholsterers, and body shop repair specialists were cited).

I monitored the changing nature of self-employment in Cuba between 1998, 2008, and 2011 by conducting surveys of private workers and assessing the marketing and economic development strategies framing entrepreneurship over time. The Ministry of Prices and Finances will not honor foreigners' requests for a national sampling frame of self-employed workers. Therefore, I used snowball and convenience sampling techniques to reach the target audience. These methods are appropriate when working with sensitive information and when formal sampling frames are unavailable (Babbie 2007). Residents speaking to foreigners about economics or state policy

must use considerable discretion so as not to place these workers in peril. The same interview instrument was used in each of the three studies. However, the only significant difference in approach was the region from where the sample of informants was drawn. Where the 1998 study drew on workers from Pinar del Río, Havana, and Havana City provinces, the 2008 and 2011 surveys excluded Pinar del Río self-employed workers.

Survey findings show that self-employed Cuban workers value their independent work setting and having a steady cash flow; they also relish colocating work and residence. By 2008, only experienced and more educated workers had remained in this labor sector, while by 2011, the sweeping reforms had "opened the gates" as new and younger workers with less formal education rushed in to seek their livelihoods or strike out on their own after public downsizing (Table 3). Moreover, the tax/profit percentage rose from 41% to 45% between 1998 and 2008, reaching 47% in the 2011 survey, which underscores the government's goal of adding to the public till through taxation.

Although the number of self-employed workers fell by about one-quarter across the island between 1998 and 2008, the 2008 data revealed a slightly older, better educated, and greater compensated group of workers than a decade before. *Cuentapropistas* (self-employed workers) earned more than the average Cuban worker and physicians, and they were paying about 10% more in taxes than those in the previous study. With the recent labor liberalization implemented in 2010, the 2011 survey reflects that as more workers entered private businesses, the formal level of schooling and the age of the entrepreneurs fell. Gross income and tax levels changed little. It is noteworthy that in 2011 some 340,000 private sector licenses had been issued as state workers anticipated downsizing and increasingly opted to get a toehold in the emerging entrepreneurial sector before being left behind (Cunha and Cunha 2003).

Table 3. Cuban entrepreneur profiles, 1998, 2008, and 2011, mean survey results.

Variable	1998 (n = 152)	2008 (n = 154)	2011 (n = 149)
Age (years)	43	45	39
Years of schooling	12	14.5	10.5
Months in business	28	37	22
Net income (monthly)	743	1157	1095
Net income compared to 2008 Cuban physician wage (450 pesos monthly)	165%	257%	243%
Net income compared to average Cuban salary [time period mean]	347% [212 pesos]	386% [300 pesos]	257% [420 pesos]
Tax/Profit percentage	41%	45%	47%

Source: 1998 data from Peters and Scarpaci (1998); other years from the author.

Conclusion: new consumption in Cuba

Reference groups for Cubans on the island consist of friends and gifts from relatives abroad that shape how Cuban Millennials ("survivors") gage brand value. Although the process is imperfect, Cuban survivors assemble preferences and tastes in piecemeal fashion to fit their own lifestyles despite the uneven flow of information that reaches them. Across the Florida Straits, Cuban-American remitters are savvy in that 9 out of 10 use more than a single channel to remit money back home. Cuban "survivors"—like their Millennial counterparts to the north—pick up on branding messages through WOM promotion, product placement, domestic and international music, and observing what tourists wear and do.

Official discourse about what constitutes essential versus nonessential consumption, although perhaps somewhat dated, appears to have little impact on Cuban youth. Accordingly, there is less stigma affiliated with consumption today than there was before the Special Period. Further, research is needed to build on these initial findings. What is clear, however, is that unlike American Millennials, new technology (cell phones, smart phones, Twitter, Internet, Video chat, Pinterest, Facebook, and Digg) is not directly shaping survivors' brand preferences even though it may influence the reference groups that condition their tastes for material and nonmaterial culture.

Defining the so-called global consumer necessarily requires some level of generalization. At the same time, perceptive international marketers and cultural geographers should realize that the diversity of culture requires searching for the appropriate way to satisfy consumer tastes and preferences across the globe. International companies seize the opportunity to tap into this convergence of consumer wants and needs (Keegan and Green 2011). In that process, the particular nuances of demographic segments of the international market may get lost in the process, especially in the unique economic and political contexts that frame the Cuban market. Cuban "survivor" Millennials display a level of sophistication that is somewhat unexpected, given the virtual absence of mass communication channels. Listening to Millennials describe their perceptions about brands, and doing so "in their own words" by posing open-ended questions, provides a first step in understanding their view of a consumer world that their parents hardly imagined.

Local entrepreneurs, though barely half a million in an island of 11.2 million, round out the third reference group analyzed here. Since the decriminalization of the dollar in 1993, their labor force size has waxed and waned. Survey data show that over time, the mean average that appears place them as Gen-Xers (in their 40s), and they earn on average at least double the national public wage, even though their taxation hovers at the 40 percentile. Unable to buy wholesale goods from private distributors, they continue to have to purchase inputs (legally, at least) from state retail outlets, cutting into their already slim profit margins. Nonetheless, they reflect the newly emerging untethered individual that is shaping everyday living (*la vida cotidiana*) in the

595 twilight of the Castro administrations and are likely to play an important role in the coming years (Dilla 2001). Like the Cuban diaspora and the young "survivor" cohort, they provide a modicum of goods and services that will continue to shape material and nonmaterial consumption in subtle yet significant ways.

600 ## Acknowledgments

The author dedicates the paper to the memory of Larry Ford, who encouraged young cultural geographers to probe all corners of the discipline.

Notes

1. The English-language translation of the introduction to the focus groups—read out loud in Spanish—is as follows: "Thank you for joining me. The aim of this encounter is to learn about how your generation gets information about brands as well as consumer goods and services. Please do not give me your last name, just your age and first name. If you wish, you may use a different first name. These conversations will be audio recorded, transcribed into Spanish, and then into English. I will destroy the audio files when I have completed the transcription. I promise to grant you full anonymity. Your participation implies that you are older than 18 but younger than 25. I am a university professor. No one is paying me to do this research. In exchange for your time here today, I will provide you with a small honorarium of $2 CUC. When you introduce yourself, please give me only your first name, age, and county in which you reside. Do you have any questions?"
2. Cubans have become somewhat more cautious in recent years when speaking to Americans, I have found, in part due to the arrest of the US citizen and US AID subcontractor Allan Gross who is being held in a Cuban prison for spying on behalf of the US Government.
3. A CUC is a convertible currency unit that is worth about US$.87. It is used as the "hard currency" unit for purchasing all nonpeso priced items. Usually, things that are imported or that are produced for tourism are sold in CUCs. Cubans, however, are paid in Cuban pesos. The 24:1 ratio is used to assess value with the US dollar and CUCs.
4. The largest source of hard currency is remittances, reaching over $2 billion annually. Despite the trade embargo, this amount surpasses net revenues from tourism. See Morales and Scarpaci (2012, Chapter 7). You can read or listen to the following interview on National Public Radio which explains this phenomenon at http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/06/24/324898879/with-cash-and-fat-fryers-americans-feed-cubas-growing-free-market.
5. Cubans fondness of labeling and what can be called "personal branding" is evident in the names they give their children, such as this one. Seniors tend to have very traditional names (Antonio, Francisco, and Maria), baby boomers indicate the influence of the USA (Frank, Johny, Tony, and Nancy), and many Gen-Xers show both a Soviet influence (Boris, Ivan, Natacha, and Vladimir) and madeup names derived from brands or acronyms. For example, the name Usnavy comes from the US Navy; Myslady(s) is derived from My Lady; and Usmail stems from the US mail. Other madeup names—with seemingly little connection to existing

words—include Misleidy, Yoleysi, Yulaikis, Yusimi, Reyner, Deandy, and Duniel. See Marrero (2004).

6. Fidel Castro met the Orishas in 1999 in what proved to be a seminal event. The lead vocalist of the band described the incident this way in an interview in 2008. Q: "We heard you taught Fidel Castro about rap? Answer (Orisha lead singer). It was funny. We played at a big party in Cuba. Next thing, [Fidel Castro] called because he wanted to know what we did. We explained to him about Cuban rap and our message. He thought it was curious and he asked us: "How many are you?". We told him "three." And he said "Just three of you make that much noise? Of course! And he said to us: "Like me when I made the Revolution." We ended our talk [with Fidel] was really pleased, it was a nice meeting. (my translation: Source: *El Correo* (http://www.elcorreo.com/vizcaya/20080920/rioja/tuvimos-explicarle-fidel-castro-20080920.html), Accessed August 25, 2011.

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