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Invited Perspective - Engaging Aspirations to Nurture Communities

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Engaging Aspirations to Nurture Communities
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“Two tickets: \$28. Two hot dogs, two popcorns, two sodas: \$18. One autographed baseball: \$45. Real conversation with eleven-year-old son: priceless. There are some things money can’t buy. For everything else, there’s MasterCard” (Mastercard 1997).

Voiced by actor Billy Crudup and played against a video of a father and son going to a baseball game, those lines, accompanied by a gentle, lilting slide guitar, recited over just 30-seconds, start with a list of familiar ballgame purchases and crescendo to a powerful emotional climax. The 1997 commercial melted even the most cynical of hearts, and it launched one of the world’s most successful advertising campaigns; arguably, it rescued Mastercard from a steady decline (Vizard 2019). For the following two decades, Mastercard released a long series of commercials based on the same concept: a few purchases followed by a “priceless” human interaction. The ads became so widely known that they became a staple of comic parodies; at one point, U.S. presidential candidate Ralph Nader developed an attack ad against his rivals based on the concept (Wikipedia n.d.).

The ads are at once brilliant and devious. While the narrative reminds viewers about the important things in life, the subtext hints that priceless experiences can be bought. The commercials manage to twist ideas and emotions that are 180-degrees opposed into seamless alignment. The pattern of the commercials is to show a series of concrete purchases followed by a priceless experience, implying a causal chain in which bought commodities lead to meaning. Even as the ads explicitly state, “There are some things money can’t buy,” they are implicitly saying, “Actually, you can buy them.” The ulterior goal, of course, is to sell credit cards, a product class that epitomizes consumption culture and capitalist excess. At their best, credit cards make buying and borrowing so easy that many users spend beyond their means. At their worst, they charge usurious interest, collect hidden fees, fleece merchants, lead to debt, and enable identity theft and fraud. In the ads, however, all of that is swept under a beautiful story about a heart-warming human experience.

What ultimately makes the commercials work is that they tap into profound human aspirations. “Real conversation with eleven-year-old son,” “Starting a new life together,” “Watching [your toddler] play with a cardboard box [instead of expensive toys],” “Coming home after a long trip,” “Finally being the hero” (Funniest Commercials Compilation 2021) – all the priceless things we aspire to: connection with family and friends, strength to overcome struggle, efforts toward something larger than ourselves. The ads hook viewers with the promise of a moment of love or victory, and from that, they inspire action.

Mastercard, presumably, hopes viewers will choose its brand and make more use of its cards. But, could the power of such a campaign be directed toward something more than mere consumption? In this paper, I propose that aspiration-based marketing could play a greater role in nurturing subsistence communities.

The Problem

Subsistence communities are lower-income communities, ranging from those in extreme poverty to those on the cusp of middle-class status, for whom financial concerns are a frequent, if not daily, phenomenon (Viswanathan 2021). Though such communities vary greatly in geography and culture, they also share common characteristics because of their economic constraints. Members of subsistence communities, for example, must often make difficult tradeoffs between material needs, personal values, and long-term goals. A father may wish to feed his children healthful meals, but limited means, local “food deserts,” or lack of time from juggling multiple jobs may force him to compromise on nutrition. A microentrepreneur might hope to franchise her business, but scarce revenue may prevent her from being able to hire staff who would enable her to spend her time on expansion. Hard financial constraints are of course real for subsistence communities, and it is difficult to imagine addressing such problems through anything other than a direct injection of cash, whether through loans or grants. Indeed, many development efforts feature microloans (Yunus 2007) and increasingly, cash transfers (Bastagli et al. 2016).

But, economic constraints also have secondary effects that are not strictly financial. For example, a long line of research beginning with anthropologist Oscar Lewis documents habits that form under long-term economic hardship that make sense for everyday survival, but are suboptimal for exiting poverty (Lewis 1966). Poorer households, for example, rarely save money or pay for insurance, though these are actions that might help them escape the “poverty trap” (Barrett & Carter 2013; Noritomo & Takahashi 2020) – and this is sometimes true even when families have the means. Poorer families also sometimes decide against spending on healthcare or education, even when such investments might more than pay for themselves in the long term. Preventive health can save on larger medical costs later; and sufficiently educated children might be able to enter more lucrative professions. In some contexts, the daily struggle to survive is so severe that people decline to imagine a better future, in a kind of learned helplessness (Rabow, Berkman & Kessler 1983). Some research suggests that under conditions of scarcity, people tend to make less-than-ideal decisions (Viswanathan et al., 2005; Mullainathan & Shafir 2013).

Then, too, like people of other wealth classes, lower-income people sometimes spend lavishly on things they cannot readily afford. For example, in some communities, it is a social expectation that families host large, expensive weddings and funerals, and they do so even when those funds might be applied to other longer-term goals (Sandigov 2021). Studies also suggest that some people spend money that would otherwise have gone to their children’s nutrition or schooling for mobile devices and data plans (Diga 2007).

In other words, apart from the hard realities of financial constraints, members of subsistence communities also make decisions that may be suboptimal with respect to socio-economic growth or improved well-being. To the extent that these are actual decisions – not hard constraints imposed by limited finances, but a voluntary or semi-voluntary choice among viable options –

they should be open to influence. With some nudging, encouragement, incentive, or inspiration, their decisions could be guided toward better outcomes.

The Potential of Aspiration-Based Marketing

I define an aspiration as “a desire that is persistent and aiming for something higher” where the something higher might be a better life, greater capacity, greater status, or more time spent on what is valued (Toyama 2017). Because they are both persistent and aiming for something higher, aspirations have the potential to motivate positive, longer-term changes. Desires that dissipate once met – such as a short-term hunger for food, or the desire to own a mobile phone – do not have the enduring pull of an aspiration. (However, the chronic re-experiencing of the same short-term desire might lead to an aspiration. For example, being in a state of constant hunger that is only intermittently alleviated, might lead to an aspiration for a steady, reasonable income.)

People are aware of their aspirations and tend to name ones that fall into a relatively small number of categories. In a study to elicit people’s personal aspirations, I asked the question, “Among those things which you have some control over, what would you most like to change about yourself or your life over the next five years?” (Toyama 2017). (This question was calibrated to ask after people’s personal medium-term aspirations, and to work in a range of languages.) Of the 1793 responses received in a sample survey run in Kenya, the responses could be coded into one of seven types, involving aspirations to (1) increase income; (2) own a business; (3) improve standard of living; (4) obtain more education; (5) grow or strengthen family; (6) serve others; and (7) improve oneself in some way not specified by the previous categories (e.g., in terms of personality, or spiritually). I suspect there might be other types of aspirations that were not explicitly voiced in the survey. For example, some people aspire to greater social status, and while some of the responses (e.g., “I’d like to own my own house”) might have included social status as an aspect, status itself was generally not mentioned. The respondents may have exhibited social desirability bias, feeling that expressing such a desire was less than noble. Further work is needed to better understand aspirations and methodologies for eliciting them, but that study’s result is sufficient to demonstrate that people have aspirations (that are persistent and aiming for something higher) and are conscious of them.

For subsistence communities, the question is whether aspirations can be applied to motivate behavior that is, on the one hand consistent with people’s aspirations, but which might otherwise be difficult to elicit. Could poorer households be encouraged to save, to spend more on their children’s education, or to act against unhealthy social norms? A couple of examples suggest this is not only possible, but highly successful in contexts where other appeals fail.

Sanitation, and specifically, the resistance to using modern toilets, is a public health problem that plagues some of the world’s poorer communities. Attempts to explain the health benefits of toilets routinely fail. In rural northern India, for example, traditional norms and considerations of cost or maintenance discourage the use of toilets in many lower-income communities, even when governments pay to build them. (At some level, it makes perfect sense to avoid having one’s waste pass through the home and instead dispense it outdoors.) In that context, an aspiration-led marketing campaign was shown to increase the uptake of toilets (Stopnitsky 2017). Called the

“No toilet, no bride” campaign, the program aired commercials suggesting that no self-respecting upper-middle-class woman would marry into a household without a flushable toilet, as having to go outdoors erodes her privacy and dignity. One study found that communities exposed to the messages exhibited 6% more toilets among families with marriage-aged boys than those without, a 21% increase above the base rate of 29% (Stopnitsky 2017). By associating toilet use with upper-class behavior, the campaign hooked into a prevailing aspiration for social status, and redirected it toward an important health outcome.

Another example, also from northern India, demonstrates how linking with deep aspirations can change societal behaviors toward the raising of girls. In the rural communities that encircle Delhi, the combination of low income and patriarchal norms cause families to invest disproportionately in their sons (especially first-borns), in part due to the calculation that one son who succeeds financially will be better able to care for the parents in their old age than multiple children with meager prospects. Girls are often neglected with respect to nutrition, health, and education, since the expectation is that they will marry and join other families, with no funds returning to their original family. In trying to change this status quo, appeals to gender equity rarely succeed; the norms seem deeply entrenched. One study showed, though, that this sexist calculus could be changed through an appeal to parental aspirations. In a randomized field experiment, a small number of well-educated young women from a random set of villages were recruited into high-paying city jobs. Doing so had a stunning effect in the affected villages within two years: the rate of stunted girls was reduced and girls’ attendance in schools improved; the effect was not matched by control villages that did not see local women hired (Jensen 2012). In other words, proof of an educated woman’s ability to earn a high wage caused families to rethink their approach to their children’s education. Given an underlying aspiration for greater family income, a concrete demonstration that girl-children could satisfy that aspiration caused rapid changes in the entire community’s behavior, leading to greater gender equality without making an explicit appeal for it.

What lessons can be drawn from these examples? First, they demonstrate the immense potential of aspiration-based community development. Some positive community outcome – better sanitation and health; improved nutrition and education for girls – results from an appeal to a common aspiration – for social status; for family wealth – that has little on the surface to do with the outcome. In other words, hooking into a dominant aspiration can improve outcomes for subsistence communities in dimensions beyond those directly related to their aspirations.

Second, the cases demonstrate the potential of marketing as an intervention. In the case of “No toilet, no bride,” the impact was achieved through a very straightforward marketing campaign – the intervention involved nothing more than public-service television commercials (Stopnitsky 2017). In the case of the recruited women, something more than traditional marketing was involved – actual women were hired into real jobs. However, it is conceivable that the same program could be turned into a marketing effort, though probably with weaker effects. There could be, for example, commercials telling the stories of educated women from rural villages earning well through good jobs.

I should acknowledge that marketing for social change is not new, and neither, necessarily, is an associated emphasis on aspirations. Public-service programming has a history going back to the early days of radio (Scannel 1990; Slotten 2006), and advertising for public purposes is not infrequent (Wallack & Dorfman 1992). International development has also seen its share of communication-based efforts to encourage a range of activities, from hand-washing to enrolling children in school (Schramm 1964).

But, contemporary discussion of social impact and international development especially at the community level tends to highlight technological innovation and entrepreneurial acumen as the keys to impact. The examples above demonstrate that marketing, and the creative, humanist skill that underlies it, still remain a powerful force for positive change in subsistence communities.

Caveats

There are several points that should be clarified. First, not all problems faced by subsistence communities can be addressed through aspiration-based marketing. Aspiration-based marketing is helpful only when real options are available, and where a shift in the choices made by community members could make things better. Subsistence communities, however, often face stark constraints on funds, resources, and time, and those constraints may limit the practical options to just the status quo – such situations may even be the majority. If so, aspiration-based marketing, far from being a potential solution, might exacerbate problems by holding up hopes that community members cannot afford to have, or by causing behavioral changes that do not actually help.

Another pitfall to avoid is any confusion between what I am proposing and “aspirational consumption.” The two concepts share the word “aspiration,” and marketing and consumption are often closely linked, so they seem to be related ideas. They differ greatly, though, in end goals: Aspirational consumption is consumption above all. For the marketer, the goal is profit. For the consumer, the goal is social status or self-satisfaction through the purchase or use of a product or service, often ostentatiously. In contrast, with marketing for nurturing subsistence communities, the goal is some kind of positive social impact that goes well beyond any satisfaction gained from consumption: improved health, more education, greater income. Consumption itself *may* be the cause of the benefit – as with purchasing soap for hand-washing – but the benefit is separate from ownership and display of the product. Viswanathan (2016) makes a similar distinction between brand and life aspirations.

A related source of potential confusion is that aspirations for social status are, in fact, partially satisfied by aspirational consumption. A community that believes that toilets represent status will grant toilet owners greater status, and so installing a toilet leads to the thing aspired to. But, the social value of toilets is not primarily in achieved social status, but in the ensuing health benefits. Conversely, consumed goods are usually a consequence of the underlying causes of social status, not the causes themselves. Social status is conferred on those with wealth, celebrity, or power; those people also tend to own what others associate with social status, whether it be fancy cars, Swiss watches, or articles of high fashion, but while the goods are strongly associated with status, they are not the underlying source of it. In fact, nothing sinks a person’s social status more than the revelation of their pretending to wealth or power that they do not actually have.

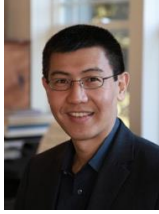
“Aspirational consumption” is thus faux-aspiration: It leads to something less than the fulfillment of the real aspiration.

Finally, aspiration-based work remains under-explored and under-researched. Many questions about how to do it so as to achieve ethical, meaningful impact remain. How should a community’s aspirations be gauged? What kinds of activities and behaviors can be induced by what types of aspirations? How can aspirations be factored into the product development process (Viswanathan and Sridharan 2012)? How does aspiration-based marketing compare with other attempts to elicit changes in behavior? When does aspiration-based marketing crossover into unethical manipulation? There are exciting possibilities in aspiration-based marketing for nurturing subsistence communities, both in practice and in research.

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