**Conflicting institutional logics and consumer identity work in a Facebook group:
A focus on the role of emotions**

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Abstract

In line with previous articles that encourage authors to take an institutional perspective in marketing studies, we aim to better understand the interplay between institutional logics and consumer identity works. Specifically, we argue that emotions are significantly involved in the process through which consumers—exposed to oppositional institutional logics—experience an identity conflict and engage in identity work strategies to overcome such conflict. Through a seven-year netnography of *Ketogenesis*, a Facebook group dedicated to ketogenic diet, and ten semi-structured interviews with members and managers of this community, we show that these consumers experience an identity conflict triggered by two contradictory institutional logics (i.e. food as medicine vs. food as identity). This conflict generates several negative emotions (e.g. loneliness, anxiety, nostalgia), which the *Ketogenesis* members address through specific identity work strategies (i.e. promotion, idealization, adaptation) that evoke various positive emotions (e.g. belonging, hope, inspiration) and help them overcome their identity conflict.

Keywords: Institutional logics; Identity conflicts; Identity work; Emotions; Ketogenic diet.

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1. Introduction

In this article, we empirically examine the social activities of an Italian Facebook group called *Ketogenesis*, whose members follow a ketogenic diet and are, consequently, exposed to two contradictory institutional logics related to food consumption. On the one hand, the "food as medicine" logic argues that, when consumers follow a ketogenic diet, it is a powerful, non-pharmacological treatment for many important diseases (e.g. epilepsy, migraine, and obesity). The "food as identity" logic, on the other side, argues that eating should also be consistent with one's identity. Since following this diet requires excluding almost all types of food usually consumed in Italy (e.g. *pasta*, bread, legumes), it is no wonder that Italian consumers following it often experience an identity conflict, implying a high emotional involvement with their traditional food.

We investigate this context by contributing to marketing studies that take an institutional perspective (Ben Slimane et al., 2019). More specifically, while previous articles demonstrated that consumers engage in identity works to overcome the identity conflicts that oppositional institutional logics may trigger (e.g. Regany et al., 2021), we show the importance of considering individuals' emotions to better understand this process. We build on an emerging stream of research that calls for more attention to the role that emotions play in institutional dynamics and identity work (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016; Voronov & Vince, 2012) to argue that emotional discourse is a key actor in the process that allows individuals aiming to solve their identity conflicts to implement effective identity work strategies.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The interplay among institutional logics, identity conflicts, and identity work

The literature has demonstrated that institutional logics and social actors' identity projects are closely interconnected (Lok, 2010). On the one hand, by offering specific categories, beliefs, expectations, and motives, institutional logics play a significant role in shaping individuals' social identities. On the other hand, by fostering an institutional change, identity movements may contribute to creating new institutional logics.

It is also quite common for different institutional logics to interact, or even to contradict one another in institutionally complex fields (Greenwood et al., 2011). When this happens, actors exposed to oppositional institutional logics may experience an identity conflict (e.g. Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017). That is, they experience a stressful condition in which two or more inconsistent identities become salient at the same time (e.g. Hirsh & Kang, 2016).

While inconsistent institutional logics could provoke identity conflicts, previous research shows that, in order to overcome such conflicting situations, individuals undertake various types of identity works, trying to confirm, criticize, or defend one institutional logic as being better than another (Creed et al., 2010). From a marketing perspective, consumer research has contributed significantly to the understanding that consumer identity projects developed at a micro level (i.e. identity works) affect the way marketplace structures work and may transform institutional logics accordingly

(Thompson, 2014). However, while these processes are increasingly understood in the literature, many aspects regarding how they actually occur in practice still need to be explored. According to various authors (e.g. Hirsh & Kang, 2016; Voronov & Vince, 2012), the role of emotions in the identity work that social actors perform, is a key topic requiring more study.

2.2 Emotions and identity work

In his literature review, Winkler (2018) observes that, although many contributions do not specifically focus on the emotional dimension of identity work, they do note that emotions play an important role in identity work. In the last years, in particular, the literature has switched from considering emotions as a factor illustrating how an identity work occurs to conceptualizing identity work as a real emotional labor.

Emotions seem to be especially involved in the processes through which individuals experience an identity conflict (e.g. Croft et al., 2015). According to Winkler (2018), however, the process through which individuals emotionally perform an identity work aimed at solving an identity conflict is largely unexplored. More specifically, while identity work studies have increasingly paid more attention to the strategies that individuals adopt in their identity work, there does not seem to be sufficient research addressing whether specific emotions lead individuals to perform specific identity work strategies. Building on these studies, the present contribution aims to better explore the role of emotions in the process through which consumers implement identity work strategies to solve their identity conflicts.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Research context

The main source of our empirical analysis is a Facebook group in Italy called *Ketogenesis,* dedicated to a ketogenic diet. At the moment of writing this article (September 2021), this private group has about 20,000 members. Broadly speaking, the main reason for the majority of these people following a ketogenic diet is that it proved effective against neurological disorders such as epilepsy and migraine, as well as other disorders, such obesity and diabetes (e.g. Paoli et al., 2013). Although different ketogenic protocols could apply to individual cases, consumers usually need to follow an ad hoc, and rather restrictive, nutritional strategy to achieve the diet's advantages. They might, for instance, need to limit their overall calorie intake and to consume at least 70% fat, less than 20% protein, and less than 10% carbohydrate (usually <50 g/day) from daily calories (e.g. Shilpa & Mohan, 2018). Following such a regime could therefore easily create issues for those adhering to the diet. In this regard, Webster and Gabe (2016) explored the identity conflicts that parents experience when they accept to treat their children's epilepsy with a ketogenic diet. In our case, we relate the emerging identity conflict to the Mediterranean diet, which, in Italy, is normally based on various associations with food that strongly contradict a ketogenic diet's adoption.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

We researched our empirical context by following an interpretivist paradigm. Starting in 2016 and continuing until the time of writing, we undertook a netnography of the *Ketogenesis* group (Kozinets, 2002). In addition, we contacted six members and four managers from the same group for a semi-structured interview. We conducted all the

interviews via Zoom, usually starting with very general questions about the members' background and their reasons for following a ketogenic diet. In order to gain a deeper understanding of their emotional involvement and identity work, our subsequent questions investigated their specific feelings related to this diet and food in general.

We also consulted data from other sources to facilitate our data analysis and interpretation. Then, all the material was read, coded, and interpreted by means of Atlas.Ti and by referring to Spiggle's (1994) guidelines on qualitative data analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Why following a ketogenic diet (especially in Italy) could lead to an identity conflict
From our data, it seems that whatever the reason for *Ketogenesis*'s members being interested in following a ketogenic diet, most of them admit not having paid much attention to food's nutritional characteristics before entering the group. Previous research has also proven that food products are not primarily chosen because they are healthy (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997), but for the symbolic meanings people attach to them, as well as for the social context in which they consume them (e.g. Delormier et al., 2009). By interacting with other *Ketogenesis* members, however, these consumers learn that following a ketogenic diet means conceptualizing food as nothing more than a medicine (Webster & Gabe, 2016). Consequently, no matter what people would like to eat, they should always follow strict rules in line with this new institutional logic, which views the diet like adhering to a medical protocol (Silchenko et al., 2020). Nevertheless, following a ketogenic regime represents a very radical shift in identity terms, especially for Italian consumers. In fact, three fundamental associations that Italians usually have with food (i.e. food as "conviviality," food as "carbohydrates," and food as "heritage") are deeply undermined when they adhere to a ketogenic diet. Therefore, the intense contrast between the idea of food as "medicine" and that of food as "identity" emerges in all these three domains.

4.2 How identity work and emotions interact in the Ketogenesis Facebook group
As our data show, the *Ketogenesis* Facebook group has developed three identity work strategies (i.e. promotion, idealization, and adaptation), each of which is associated with a specific emotional discourse through which the investigated community helps consumers overcome their identity contradictions.

Promotion. One of the hardest lessons that a person following a special diet has to learn is how to avoid feeling excluded from people with a free diet. In this regard, an important identity work carried out within *Ketogenesis* relates to promoting a ketogenic diet strongly, which should make it more popular and help the members feel less alone. For instance, by simply working to make this Facebook group as inclusive as possible, its members are given an opportunity to feel part of a large and welcoming community.

Idealization. Given that a ketogenic diet is almost a total contradiction of a Mediterranean diet, a second identity work is required to educate people to have a new, radically different, view of food consumption (i.e. to accept a new institutional logic about food consumption). Contrary to what they believed in the past, *Ketogenesis*'s members now need to learn that fats are good for one's health, while carbohydrates could be a cause, or at least a trigger factor, of many problems, including migraine and epilepsy (Webster & Gabe, 2016). This identity work could take two different forms.

On the one hand, the group's administrators do an especially impressive job of producing a continuous narrative in support of the diet, which all the other members welcome enthusiastically. On the other hand, members themselves attempt to idealize the ketogenic diet by reporting their positive, personal experience with the diet and by helping others accept even its more paradoxical premises (i.e. fat is good).

Adaptation. Another significant problem that many group members share is how to maintain a link with past traditions and habits (e.g. typical Mediterranean food), while on a ketogenic diet. The third identity work to emerge from the community is therefore to argue that recipes are not necessarily immutable; instead, consumers can manipulate and reinvent food preparation to adapt it to new situations. This work is specifically based on sharing recipes about and guidelines on how to prepare Mediterranean food (*pasta*, *pizza*, etc.) ketogenically.

To summarize, precise identity work strategies target the various negative emotions that the oppositional institutional logics raise. For instance, following a ketogenic diet undermines the Mediterranean idea that food should be related to conviviality and pleasure, leading to feelings of disorientation and loneliness. A promotion work endeavoring to make the diet grow and become a reference point for all its followers, addresses these feelings. In turn, people who eat ketogenically feel a positive sense of belonging and joy. Similarly, the logic that specifically conceptualizes food as a source of carbohydrates is questioned when someone follows a ketogenic diet, fostering anxiety and concern in such a person. An idealization work counterbalances these emotions, allowing feelings of hope and interest to emerge in the community. Further, the strong association between food and heritage, which is typical of a Mediterranean diet, could cause depression and nostalgia in someone eating ketogenically. An adaptation work addresses these emotions by developing amusement and inspiration for new food creations.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Theoretical implications

Our article contributes to extant literature in several ways. First, we confirm that multiple institutional logics may interact—and even contradict one another—in the same domain (e.g. Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015) by generating institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011) and identity tensions (Regany et al., 2021; Zanette & Scaraboto, 2019). Second, by imitating the approach of recent articles exploring institutional processes at a micro-level (e.g. Shekhar et al., 2020), we contribute to a better illustration of the process through which individuals exposed to institutional contradictions engage in specific identity work strategies to overcome their identity conflicts (Creed et al., 2010; Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017). However, while certain previous studies (e.g. Zanette & Scaraboto, 2019) indicate that a material good might incorporate more institutional logics and trigger identity conflicts, they do not necessarily explore the strategies that consumers implement to address these conflicts. In our case, we go beyond the identity conflict and focus on consumers' reactions to it. Third, by illustrating that consumer identity works interact significantly with emotions to solve identity conflicts that oppositional institutional logics trigger, we contribute to the emerging stream of research that focuses on emotions' role in institutional processes

(Creed et al., 2010; Voronov & Vince, 2012) and identity management (Croft et al., 2015; Hirsh & Kang, 2016). We mainly confirm previous research's results (e.g. Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016), showing that social networks, such as Facebook, can amplify the emotions that its members express and share in the various groups of interest. In this way, emotions become essential resources that individuals adopt to build their own identity work. More specifically, by addressing Winkler's (2018) call to investigate the specific emotions that individuals associate with ad hoc identity work strategies, we provide the initial insight that feeling specific emotions (e.g. loneliness, anxiety, depression) could stimulate distinct identity work strategies (e.g. promotion, idealization, and adaptation). It thus seems that, by adopting an emotional discourse, people provide other individuals with opportunities to address the inconsistencies between their identity and the institutional logics to which they are exposed.

5.2 Managerial implications

From a managerial viewpoint, our research specifically sheds light on the processes through which diets can be institutionalized in the market. While previous work considered market agents' role in this process at depth (e.g. Ertimur & Chen, 2020), we confirm that final consumers could also produce new institutional logics from the bottom up, particularly through social media platforms (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). For instance, while Ertimur and Chen (2020) consider adapting food characteristics to please consumers market actors' key work, our study proves that such activity might also emerge as a consumer practice. Managers should therefore pay more attention to social media by both listening to consumers and addressing their expectations and concerns (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016).

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