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Social mobility and consumption culture
A cultural critique of the judgement of consumption

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Introduction

I present here an abstract of the conceptual and theoretical background to my PhD research project, together with my research questions and practical research method.

My research is an ethnographic study of consumer culture among young people from the Technical School in Aarhus, Denmark. My data collection will be completed in spring 2010, so I will be able to take some of the results with me to the EACR.

Focus

My project is driven by an interest in exploring social mobility in a consumer culture theory context. That is to what extent one can talk about the market being a lever or a barrier for social mobility? Thus the focus of my empirical study is to find insights into what role the market and its related consumption culture, plays in consumers' social mobility and habitus (Cf. Bourdieu 1984).

My specific contribution in this connection will be through an ethnographic study of young students in the Technical School, to see how their life-world, interaction and identity work takes place through the interpretation and negotiation of meanings of the various manifestations of consumption ideologies. Of particular interest will be to seeing to what extent education in it self is perceived as a consumption choice, and looking into structure-agency tension that may arise in this context. To give an example: Just as it is politically correct in a democracy to highlight equal and free opportunities for education and education choices regardless of social background, so the market-mediated consumer culture and the dominant ideology that it manifests celebrate the freedom and capacity of the consumption choice. In other words the market offers narratives of freedom related to consumption choice. That is narratives about wise consumption choices being a privileged place for a sovereign individual, who has free access to all market values. My specific contribution in this context is to see how this unfolds in a school context, where we find young people with a social background characterized by few resources and weak cultural capital and where the dropout rate is over 30%. (Cf. Bourdieu 1984, Stormhøj 2002, Hansen 2003).

Conceptual Framework

P. Bourdieu's theory about the relationship between cultural capital, habitus and distinction through consumption will be my conceptual framework (Bourdieu 1984).

As Holt in a consumer culture theory context (1997 & 1998) has pointed out, Bourdieu's theory offers dynamic dialectical thinking which can both reflect the social structuring in consumption patterns and active interpretation and sense making around consumption, which in turn influences the social practices and creation of meaning. It is this particular dialectic between a structuring structure, and a structured structure Bourdieu captures in the concept of habitus. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 170). In this sense habitus is a central conduit between objective positions - structures (classes) and patterns of practices - agency.

Allen (2002) has in this context, following Bourdieu, demonstrated how social shaping stemming from gender and social class is internalized in the habitus and gives rise to embodied educational choices that are more a product of "feeling right". This is called "The Fits-Like-a-Glove" (FLAG) framework where "practical experience is composed of the entire complex of understandings, feelings and actions evoked in situ" (Allen 2002, p. 519) It goes without saying that "feeling right" can be replaced with "feeling odd", and what seems to be FLAG educational choices can be disembodied and create tensions if they don't fit the habitus. How interpretation and sense making through consumption plays a role as a force that guides agency in this context of educational choices is central to my research. I think that this is a rich foundation for a differentiated and reflective analysis strategy, for the exploration of the relationship between consumer culture and social mobility.

Research questions:

Following the focus and theoretical framework for the project my general research interest lies in the tension arising between consumer habitus and identity projects, and the social and historical patterns of consumption. With this in mind I have formulated 3 research questions:

- 1) Eric Arnould and Greg Thompson have put forward a question about social mobility that I will look into and that gives a new perspective on the structure agency discussion: “can individuals use consumer culture to transcend the internalized or habituated orientations that emanate from their socialization in class, gender, ethnicity, and other dimensions of social structuring?” (Arnould and Thompson 2007 p. 11). One could add the opposite perspective: Can consumer culture hamper social mobility?
- 2) How does the prevailing consumer ideology about the sovereign individual's free choice, influence young consumers' consumption of education at the Technical School?
- 3) What is the importance given to the social background by the students themselves? How do they relate to themselves? How do they experience the social background, and what significance do they assign to it in proportion to their consumption choices?

How am I going to answer these Questions?

I will produce my primary data in three ways. First, I will conduct *field work* in the form of participant observation at the technical college in Aarhus.

For 2 weeks I will observe social life in the college, and enter into conversations with some of the students to discover their interpretations of the events I observe.

After processing these data, I will start identifying the practices and cultural categories that could be important to my understanding of the consumption culture of the students.

(Sunderland, P.L., Denny, R.M. 2007 and Alexander, B.K., Tedlock, B., Holstein, J.A. & Gubrium, J.F. in Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

In the second phase I will conduct focus groups as a means to understand group dynamics, and to start to understand preferences and interpretations in the field of consumption experiences. I will use these focus groups to test how they interpret and uses different advertising materials and statements. (Aitken, Gray and Lawson 2008, Ritson and Elliott 1999).

In the final part of my research I will engage 6 – 10 students on an individual basis in the research project. I will ask them to take pictures of what they think symbolizes good and bad life for them. With this material as a starting point I will organize in-depth interviews with each individual (auto driving cf. Heisley & Levy 1991).

Why is this important and what contribution will I make

My project will provide insight into the meaning consumer culture has for a special group of young people enrolled in education, and how the social background plays a role in their interpretation and negotiation of this meaning.

The study could provide insights that can be used by practitioners in educational contexts.

A better and more nuanced understanding of young people's motivations and the social tensions underlying their conflicts, could be used to address these in the planning of education and as input to pedagogical practice. For the young people themselves, there will be a reflexive gain by participating in the project.

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