You-Can-Do-It-We-Can-Help: Emancipation Within the Marketplace?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the marketplace and its allure to consumers. Following the existential-phenomenological interview format, we conducted 11 depth interviews with both male and female consumers to examine their lived experience within the marketplace and in particular, their patronage of Home Depot. Based on Green’s view of freedom as combining both negative and positive freedom centering on concepts of opportunity and ability, we find that consumers can potentially begin a perceived journey toward emancipation within the marketplace. We also find that Home Depot, a dominant marketplace player, can portray itself as a benevolent emancipator, empowering consumers to start this perceived emancipatory journey.

INTRODUCTION

The marketplace has gained the attention of many consumer researchers in recent years (Murray and Ozanne 1991; Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hetrick and Lozada 1994; Holt 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson 2004). The traditional Marxist view portrays the marketplace as dehumanizing (Kozinets 2002) and totalizing (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) and proposes that emancipation occurs when the consumer escapes the marketplace (Hetrick and Lozada 1994) either on his or her own volition or through the urging of consumer activists (Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

Poststructuralists, on the other hand, regard the marketplace as an arena where consumers co-opt marketplace symbols to create their own symbolic resistance and thus work to redefine marketplace meanings. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997) study how consumers use fashion discourse to recreate meanings and to resist the repressive fashion norms in the marketplace. Thompson (2004) notes the blurred distinction between inside and outside the marketplace and advocates for studying how consumers engage in various discourses of power rather than assessing whether emancipation occurs inside or outside the marketplace.

However, through the idea of “the critical imagination”, Murray and Ozanne (1991) conceptually imply that while working well within marketplace ideology, some corporations could align their interests with consumers’ interest by critically examining and improving their practices, thus possibly contributing to the allure of the marketplace for consumers. Drawing from this conceptual possibility, this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the allure of the marketplace through an empirical examination of consumers’ perceived liberatory experience within the marketplace.

In this study, we examine a dominant corporation—Home Depot. The premise of this paper is that Home Depot’s market positioning enables its customers to begin a perceived journey toward emancipation previously considered to occur solely outside the marketplace. This paper seeks to examine this conceptual possibility introduced by Murray and Ozanne (1991) and thus explore one aspect of marketplace allure.

We draw on the freedom framework of T. H. Green, a British liberal philosopher from the 19th century, as the conceptual lens through which to examine the marketplace. According to Green, an understanding of emancipation can be realized only by integrating the ideas of both negative freedom (freedom from constraints) and positive freedom (freedom to achieve self-realization) (Simhony 1993).

In the next section of this paper, we develop our understanding of emancipation and how it has been applied in the study of marketplace phenomena. This is followed by a development of Green’s philosophy of emancipation which serves as the conceptual lens for this paper. This conceptual development is followed by an explanation of our research method and the results that were found.

THEORY

The Marketplace

Escaping the marketplace to be free from its ideology is advocated by the traditional Marxist view. This view argues that a logic of “self-interest” has increasingly undermined “the realization of the caring, sharing, communal ideal” and homogenizes consumers and suppresses their “self-expressive capabilities” (Kozinets 2002, p. 22). Firat (1994) finds that any countercultural ideas and practices could be co-opted by marketers and transformed for their own interests. As such, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue that consumers must find social spaces outside the marketplace to achieve emancipation. An example of such a social space is the Burning Man Festival whereby consumers escape the hegemony of the marketplace and its suppressive effects (Kozinets 2002). This is consistent with the view point of consumer activists who seek to awaken consumers from their false consciousness and blindness toward marketplace ideology and urge these consumers to escape its effects (Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

The poststructuralist view presents a slightly different view of the marketplace and emancipation. Consumer resistance occurs whereby consumers co-opt marketplace symbols to redefine meanings without differentiating inside or outside the marketplace. For example, sacred social spaces such as family and religion come to be inter-penetrated with marketplace ideology, so distinguishing between inside and outside the marketplace is difficult in contemporary capitalist society (Thompson 2004). From this perspective, consumers are never dominated by any singular hegemonic discourse (Thompson 2004). In a fragmented postmodern society, consumers use products and services in the marketplace to recreate their own discourses resisting potentially dominant ideologies of the marketplace. For example, Western natural health consumers construct their own microculture (Thompson and Troester 2002) and discourses (Thompson 2004) to challenge the medical authority and resist the dominant ideology. Instead of discussing emancipation inside or outside the marketplace, Thompson advocates understanding “the new opportunities for localized resistance that are produced in this matrix of overlapping discourses of power” (Thompson 2004, p. 173).

Different from the above-mentioned views, Murray and Ozanne (1991) imply the possible attractiveness of the marketplace. They propose an approach of critical imagination whereby consumers can “expose the social dysfunctions of marketing strategies in order to motivate regulation and change” (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 139). Similarly, private profit-oriented marketplace players can align their interest with public interests by critically examining their own practices, educating consumers, collaborating with progressive social groups, and thus building an attractive dimension to the marketplace that may potentially appear emancipatory in nature.
Green’s View of Freedom

To explore the allure of the marketplace and the possibility of emancipation, or freedom, this paper draws on Green’s theory of freedom as elaborated by Avital Simhony (1993). According to Green, emancipation (or freedom) occurs when self-realization occurs—that is, realizing one’s life themes and life projects that are free from false consciousness. Life themes are consumers’ “profound existential concerns” addressed in their daily life; life projects concern consumers’ self-development and meaning systems relating to self and extended self (Mick and Buhl 1992, p. 318). To achieve freedom or self-realization, one needs a combination of internal ability (mental discipline and relevant knowledge) and external opportunity (Simhony 1993). Internal ability is “the ability to structure one’s desire into a coherent system” that is aligned with one’s well-being (Simhony 1993, p. 38). Achieving this internal ability requires mental discipline for breaking free from one’s false consciousness and the knowledge necessary for achieving self-realization. External opportunities include absence of manipulation and equal enabling opportunities to develop and to exercise one’s internal abilities. So, we frame the achievement of emancipation (and self-realization) as centering on internal abilities and external opportunities (refer to the figure 1).

For Green, complete emancipation occurs when both negative and positive freedom have been achieved. Negative freedom is freedom from constraints to self-realization. These constraints may be both external constraints (e.g., coercion, manipulation, lack of external opportunities) and internal constraints (e.g., false consciousness, lack of knowledge necessary for achieving self-realization). Consumers must be free from manipulation and coercion and have equal and sufficient opportunities to learn knowledge and exercise their internal abilities to realize their life themes and life projects. However, being free from these constraints is not enough. Positive freedom, therefore, is the achievement of one’s life themes and life projects through exercising one’s freedom from the internal and external constraints that may have existed. In this study, we re-conceptualize Green’s Utopian ideal of freedom as not an all-or-nothing proposition (i.e., either free from all possible constraints or not free at all), but instead regard emancipation as a process, a journey without necessarily a guarantee of reaching the ideal Utopian state.

Recognizing the adaptability of the marketplace (Holt 2002), the theoretical possibility exists for consumers to start a perceived emancipatory journey (realizing their life themes and life projects) within the boundaries of an ever adapting marketplace. Corporations can potentially tear down some internal and external constraints (negative freedom) while aiding consumers in their pursuit of their life themes and projects (positive freedom), in other words, empowering consumers to start a perceived journey toward self-realization inside the marketplace.

Green’s view of freedom provides a useful framework to study the allure of the marketplace and emancipation inside the marketplace. We propose that emancipation integrates both negative freedom (freedom from internal and external constraints) and positive freedom (freedom to realize one’s life themes and life projects by fully developing and exercising one’s internal abilities). Drawing on this framework, we analyze consumers’ own narratives about their experiences and interaction with Home Depot. We explore the following questions: Why is the marketplace alluring? Can consumers start an emancipatory journey inside the marketplace?

METHODOLOGY

For this investigation we sought a site within the marketplace to which consumers flock. Home Depot, founded in 1978, is the world’s biggest home improvement retailer with more than 1500 stores worldwide. In growing numbers, consumers flock to Home Depot to “do it yourself” (DIY). The “DIY” theme resonates with
the concept of self-realization and prompted our choosing Home Depot for this investigation. One Canadian store was selected as the research site.

The informants selected were randomly approached in the store and asked for their willingness to participate in this study. They were told that they could select the interview place, refuse to reply to any questions, and stop the interview at any time, and that this study had been approved by the store manager and was independent from Home Depot’s sponsorship. Six male consumers and six female consumers who all had at least one year of experience shopping at Home Depot agreed to participate in this study. In the end one female consumer retreated from this study for lack of time.

To understand individuals’ lived world inside the marketplace, we followed the existential-phenomenological interview format (Thompson et al. 1989) to attain consumers’ first-person description of their marketplace experience with Home Depot as the focus of discussion. This format allowed our informants to freely talk about their personal experience with Home Depot as a social space rich in cultural symbolism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Interviews were conducted at various locations depending on the informant’s preference: the informant’s home, cafes, and a seminar room and a meeting room at a business school. Each interview began with an introduction of the aim of our study (to explore consumers’ understanding of their experience with Home Depot) and then a grand tour question regarding their purchasing experience with Home Depot: “Please tell me something about your purchasing experience with Home Depot.” Other questions emerged from the on-going dialogue. The time of the interviews ranged from 50 to 100 minutes.

The analysis of the data followed an iterative process whereby an interpretation of each single interview transcript as a whole unit was conducted, followed by a comparison between the transcripts. Three themes emerged.

FINDINGS

For our informants, Home Depot helps them start an emancipatory journey by tearing down some internal and external barriers while providing our informants an opportunity to achieve their life themes and life projects (self-realization). This apparent emancipatory role by a dominant marketplace player is now explored.

Theme One: A Marxist Arcadia

Ray, a 31 year old paramedic who describes his daily life routine of being on-call to respond to medical emergencies as a combination of “very boring” yet “upsetting”, expresses a starkly different vision in his pursuit of life themes and projects. He said: “It’s kind of my sanctuary area, my workshop. … When I build, I just relax. I create and build things. … I create, just create. I only make paddles. Three hours later, I have made a paddle. … I love canoeing. I love the sky. So, I am just trying to make paddles to see if they could work properly, and how I could make them better. The hope is that you can make them aesthetic. … You know what you are doing is interesting.” Here, in contrast to his daily life marked by boredom and distress, Ray discusses what for him is the achievement of positive freedom—a life where the day is spent creating paddles that enable him to canoe under the open sky. The place where he “creates” these paddles is not only his “workshop” but also his “sanctuary”—his Arcadia—a social space set aside from his daily life reality where simple and pastoral pleasures, beauty, and creativity can be pursued. Ray is seeking freedom from self-estrangement, in other words, freedom from the inability to find intrinsic values in life’s daily pursuits.

For Ray and our other informants, Home Depot provides not only the raw materials but also the moral guidance in the construction of their sanctuaries. Feila, a 48 year old single mother and high school teacher talked about her close familiarity with Home Depot employees as a result of her frequent visits to Home Depot. She said: “I prefer to go to one place [where] I know the people and I know who they are because I need, because I think it is not just a game. … You know, there is a time when everybody knows everybody in the little community. … I do think this is personal, hmm, in terms of knowing you as a friend or things like that. It [Home Depot] is just a friendly store.”

The marketplace is often referred to as a place of social isolation, exploitation, and dehumanizing encounters to be escaped (Kozinets 2002). But for Feila, her life themes and projects are enhanced by the “little community” feeling she gets at this otherwise gigantic retailer. At Home Depot, she knows the employees and they know her as a “friend”.

Feila continued her life story and said: “When I grew up … we were not allowed to take mechanics and I wanted to do. My brother did the mechanical stuff, my father did the work, you know, the trade parts of a family. So when you think of that type of thing thirty or forty years ago, children would not be encouraged, if you were female, to do certain jobs because of the division of roles.” In Feila’s past, in another social space and time, there was gender inequality imposed upon her where her brother had the opportunity to learn a trade, but she was denied the opportunity simply because of her gender. This gender inequality meant that Feila, like so many women, lacked the necessary socialization to enable the attainment of equal opportunities later in life (Bristor and Fischer 1993).

Daphne, a 38 year old elementary school teacher elaborates on the hurdle that gender inequality creates in her pursuit of her life projects. When going to other home renovation stores with her husband, she notes, “They are almost talking down to me … I hate that kind of thing. It bothers me. It bothers me because they judge me incorrectly based on the fact that I am a female.” Her opportunity to learn and grow is stunted as employees of other stores look past her to speak to her husband. But when she refers to Home Depot, a very different chord is played. She said: “But I don’t get the same feeling at Home Depot. … That’s one reason why I go there because I don’t feel like they are looking at me and thinking ‘Why are you (as a woman) doing this?’”

For Feila and Daphne, Home Depot transcends past and present gender injustices enacted by others, enabling our informants to pursue their life themes and life projects free from gender discrimination. In Feila’s word, Home Depot is “sexless”.

According to our informants, gender is not the only social issue associated with Home Depot. Byron, a 30 year old physician described his roaming experiences at Home Depot and said: “I like dressed down, putting on the purple jeans, maybe they are dirty, maybe they are greasy, or full of saw dust, going into Home Depot, drinking my coffee, shopping for stuff, [and] talking shopping with people who know shopping. This is something completely different from my career. I enjoy doing that.” Byron, an upper income professional shares his experience of escaping the familiarity of his career by “dressed down” into clothes symbolic of a working class laborer and connecting with people as social equals—“drinking coffee” and “talking shopping”. Byron seeks out Home Depot on his distinct (from his regular career) journey towards his life themes and projects. Unlike his work environment of clear social class distinctions and professional hierarchy, Byron seeks out the egalitarian atmosphere of Home Depot, actively playing the part of a laborer with his dirty, greasy, and saw dust filled jeans. Feila underscores this egalitarian atmosphere at Home Depot when she
describes it as a place where “people come together. It doesn’t matter who you are”. For these informants, Home Depot is an egalitarian, working class social space where all class barriers are removed.

In this first theme, we find that Home Depot is intricately tied to our informants’ pursuit of their life themes and projects—their Arcadias that are distinctively removed from the reality of their daily lives. For these informants, positive freedom is achieved in a social space where simple, aesthetic pursuits fill one’s days. But even more, Home Depot instills this social space with Marxist ideals of social interaction and familiarity, and gender and class equality. Home Depot presents a Marxist Arcadia where informants can achieve their life themes and projects, free from social, gender, and class constraints. What does Home Depot do to become so revered by these informants?

**Theme Two: A Temple of Knowledge**

Rather than just being a retailer that sells building supplies and provides functional product and price information, for our informants, Home Depot is where one goes to seek emancipatory knowledge—knowledge that empowers one to transcend the constraints of daily life.

When describing her interaction with Home Depot employees, Daphne said: “They are like my friends telling me about, you know, just like someone who happens to have a lot of work experience here, making fences or whatever. It is not that I am the stupid one. This is (I am) a person that doesn’t know it at all.” This is not teaching…. You know, [it is] more sharing.” For her, Home Depot employees “share” their knowledge that they gained from their own hands-on experience (making fences, or whatever). But she is not left feeling inept or unworthy. She feels like one of the workers, engaging in a dialogue where experiences and knowledge are shared. Rene, a 60 year old retired teacher, goes further in describing her interaction with Home Depot employees. She said: “They will let you see [that] you don’t really need ceiling lights though you really want them.” In fact, Rene tried to buy a fancy ceiling light for her bedroom but one employee persuaded her not to buy it because he thought that she didn’t really need it according to her description of her bedroom. From our informants’ perspective, the information they gain from Home Depot employees is starkly contrasted with manipulating sales pitches. The employees don’t try to sell you what you don’t need. Instead, the informants feel they receive important knowledge—emancipatory knowledge that can guide them with their life projects.

In addition to the informal interactions between customers and employees, Home Depot also offers regular workshops for both adults and children. These workshops offer equal opportunities for men and women, and boys and girls to gain emancipatory knowledge. According to Feila, “they [workshop leaders] are encouraging everyone to make their own choices by teaching [participants] how to use certain things. And they make it sound easy… It allows, it empowers females to do more.”

These workshops provide information, guidance, and training that “empowers” our informants to transcend the barriers of their daily lives. The workshop leaders encourage women to do projects by themselves and so help them break the stereotype of gender role, one type of false consciousness which is initially imposed on women and then might be internalized by some of them. With the encouragement and education of Home Depot, Feila continually tries new projects and develops new skills which were considered to be men’s skills.

So enthralled with the emancipatory potential of these workshops, Feila is enthused to have her daughter attend the child workshops offered around holiday themes. She said: “They just take that step [teaching children about structures and tool applications in the clinics] into our community, as a part of our community, basically allowing our kids to do it themselves. Dates like Christmas, March Break, Father’s Day and Mother’s Day. These kinds of dates are for kids, always the time for them to come together.” Home Depot emerges as a community elder, entrusted with imparting potentially emancipatory knowledge to the children “allowing our kids to do it themselves”. In a certain sense, as Feila hopes, Home Depot helps the young girls avoid accepting the stereotype of gender role, a historical product of the male-dominated society.

But Home Depot is not only a place where emancipatory knowledge is imparted. It is also a place where our informants can seek knowledge—roam and find their way. Byron related his experience in Home Depot compared to shopping malls and said: “I don’t know why, but I find that crowds stress me out. I find that in many shopping malls … I find it very straining, stressful, and exhausting to be around a lot of people. But in Home Depot, I will definitely get a cup of coffee, go in, roam around, maybe just get a hamburger, go back in and roam around again, and I leave with what I need.” Compared to stores in malls, he feels free and comfortable to eat, drink, and roam—free from stress and sales pressure. Replete with food, drink, and the dirtiest working clothes he can find, he presents a vision of himself wandering, roaming carefree around Home Depot discovering knowledge that helps him transcend the constraints of his daily stressful life.

For our informants, Home Depot is a Temple of Knowledge where emancipatory knowledge is imparted and discovered by those willing to make a pilgrimage. It is where one can take a journey to roam, free from stress and judgment, to gain knowledge that can help its recipient to transcend the constraints of daily life. In this Temple of Knowledge, social constraints such as gender roles (both imposed-upon and internalized) and class hierarchy are collapsed and the lost community is re-established. It empowers its followers with opportunities and abilities to achieve freedom.

**Theme Three: A Benevolent Emancipator**

In summing up their experiences, our informants present Home Depot as a Benevolent Emancipator—the friendly wise sage who only has the students’ interest at heart. They perceive no manipulation at Home Depot. Byron noted that Home Depot does not “target our own vulnerabilities with deceptive ads” such as the ads of Marlboro which indicate “You will be cool if you smoke like a Marlboro Man.” He said: “I haven’t felt a strong marketing pull to Home Depot to buy anything I don’t need, to buy anything cool.” According to Fred, “They (Home Depot employees) are not pushy and that’s nice. You get a more genuine feeling that they are really there to help you… In my experience, they do try to minimize my cost too”. Home Depot is presented as a friend with no hidden self-interests, but only a genuine desire to help.

Symbolic of their trusted presence, Home Depot employees wear aprons symbolic of the shop floor worker whose concern is focused on his craft, not profit. The apron comes to embody the Home Depot employee’s focus on his trade. Further, this Home Depot employee, particularly compared to other stores, is considered “mature” (Fred) where employees of other stores are regarded as “kids” (Ray).

What emerges is a portrayal of the Home Depot employee as an experienced, mature crafts-person, focused on his trade, bereft of worldly possessions, but rich with knowledge, interested only in sharing knowledge that will benefit his pupils in their pursuit of their life projects. The Home Depot employee is not driven by greedy self-interest. The Home Depot employee is the benevolent, sagely, (grand) fatherly figure concerned only for the emancipation of his apprentices.
DISCUSSION

Faced with the perceived negative and positive freedom presented by a dominant marketplace player such as Home Depot, we gain some insight into why the marketplace is so alluring to consumers. It must be noted that Holt’s (2002) argument that the marketplace is able to adapt to provide consumers with what they think they need, certainly resonates. In other words, the argument can well be made that our informants have not achieved “true” emancipation. However, while the marketplace has been described as a dehumanizing and totalizing space or as an arena full of discourse contests between consumers and marketers, our findings present a large marketplace player, Home Depot, helping consumers start a perceived journey toward emancipation by offering external opportunities (equality of gender and classes, freedom from social-isolation, and manipulation) and enhancing their internal abilities via transferring emancipatory knowledge. It is such knowledge that leads the way towards the realization of life themes (e.g., creativity, self-development, independence, and equality) and life projects, and thus, emancipation. This provides intriguing insight into the allure of the marketplace.

Our findings indicate that, as Murray and Ozanne (1991) imply, a perceived journey toward emancipation within the marketplace is possible and that corporations can play an active role in this process. How can other potential emancipators such as activists compete with the benevolence of a marketplace player like Home Depot? They might need to do the same things necessary for consumers to experience both negative and positive freedom: offering equal enabling opportunities and transferring emancipatory knowledge to enhance consumers’ abilities.

When we use the phrase “a journey toward emancipation”, we mean that emancipation is an ongoing process that occurs over time where some constraints are overcome, others still exist, and some new ones might be constructed at the same time or later. Here, emancipation is not conceived as an either-or issue whereby consumers are either emancipated by escaping the marketplace or still enslaved within the marketplace ideology.

This research has attempted at least a small look into the role that marketplace actors (such as Home Depot) can play in the emancipation of consumers (Murray and Ozanne 1991). Future research could also examine other forms of alienation—powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and cultural estrangement (Seeman 1975), and other types of false consciousness, and how they might possibly be overcome within the marketplace.

REFERENCE


