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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **Consuming Modernities: the Global Youth Segment As a Site of Consumption**

Dannie Kjeldgaard, University of Southern Denmark

Soren Askegaard, University of Southern Denmark

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT** - In the marketing literature youth has been held up as the prototypical example of a global segment (see for example Hassan and Katsanis 1991, Tully 1994, Marketing News 2002). The basis for the excitement about the youth segment (under various names such as the 'teen segment', the 'Gen X' culture', 'baby busters', 'the MTV Generation' etc.) largely stems from the allegedly uniform consumption habits of young people all over the world B their clothing, music tastes, and media habits.

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# Consuming Modernities: The Global Youth Segment as a Site of Consumption

Dannie Kjeldgaard, University of Southern Denmark  
Søren Askegaard, University of Southern Denmark

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the marketing literature youth has been held up as the prototypical example of a global segment (see for example Hassan and Katsanis 1991, Tully 1994, *Marketing News* 2002). The basis for the excitement about the youth segment (under various names such as the 'teen segment', the 'Gen X' culture', 'baby busters', 'the MTV Generation' etc.) largely stems from the allegedly uniform consumption habits of young people all over the world – their clothing, music tastes, and media habits.

This paper seeks to explore aspects of the globality of the global youth segment by analysing young consumers' discourses of identity and consumption within a system of centre-peripheries (Hannerz 1996) of the global cultural economy (Appadurai 1990). It is suggested that the global youth segment constitutes a global site of consumption in which multiple discourses of modernity are played out according to local positions in relation to the global cultural economy.

Within consumer research the main focus on young people as consumers has generally followed two strands: one which deals with the notion of adolescents and the dark side of consumption and the study of the socialization processes of consumption among young people (cf. Roedder John 1999). These two strands of research, while valuable contributions in terms of policy and to the understanding of consumer socialization, have given very little voice to the consumers in question and has not analyzed cultural or global aspects of young consumers' lives.

The study was conducted as a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995). Data was collected among high school students in Denmark and Greenland and in an urban and rural context in each of the localities. From the ethnographic material we identify several discourses of identity and consumption and analyze these in relation to modernity and globalization. The material from the Danish context suggests that consumers in this context account for identity and consumption along the lines suggested by theorists of late modernity – that is, a discourse of the reflexive construction of individual identity. In the Greenlandic context we identify several discourses revolving more around collective logics in relation to ethnicity, post-colonialization and globalization, hence highlighting other aspects of modernity.

The identity discourses identified facilitate a broadening of the notions of identity in late modernity. The predominant model of identity posits the increased reflexivity of the construction of identities whose focal point is the individualized biography, due to new time and space configurations (Giddens 1991), global consumer culture (Bauman 2001), and the dissolving of traditional modern social categories such as class (Beck 2001). The presence of the relatively collective discourses in Greenland, it is argued, can be seen as (being) products of the locality's position in the periphery of the global cultural economy. This position (and the socio-cultural history of Greenland) means that other discourses are prevalent and foregrounded, pushing the discourse of individual self-realization into the background. While the discourses identified in the Greenlandic context are situated within the realm of late modernity, they are different answers to different problems of late modernity than those pointed out by late modern theorists. Miller (1996) in this respect has pointed out that while the present theorizing of identity in late modernity provides an interesting analysis of how the notion of identity itself becomes what is of

concern for individuals (which is why it is a reflexive identity), the theories do not rest well with the experiences and discourses emerging from other places in the global cultural economy outside of the Occidental sphere.

That young consumers buy the same things is taken as evidence that they have shared preferences. However, preference implies choice among alternatives. Since the institution of youth as an identity space is a relatively recent invention (primarily arising in the post-WWII era) and often one that continuously seeks to break with tradition, local culture cannot significantly provide youth cultural imagery. The only choice is Western products (or Westernized local youth cultural products such as local versions of rock music). The institution of youth, and the historically global nature of youth culture, can therefore be said to be what facilitates the apparent similarities in consumption preference.

The multiplicity of discourses identified in the ethnographic material are analyzed as emerging from localities' positions in relation to the global cultural economy, and hence the meeting with modernities. Youth as an institution is one aspect of global modernity, and it makes itself present through the market representations of youth. We argue that the global youth segment, rather than constituting a homogeneous group of consumers with similar preferences, is a site of consumption, a representation of the idea of youth which is available globally. The global youth segment is used for different purposes in different localities, and hence is a site in which locally constituted discourses of identity can be articulated.

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