Adolescents Yet Again Speak of Fashion: an Account of Participation and Resistance

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This paper aims to examine the female adolescent friendship groups’ consumption of fashion from a perspective of participation and resistance in the marketplace; and intends to build a case for analyzing the consumption of fashion, and ‘peer pressure’ outside of the traditional belonging vs. independence dichotomy; both in order to bring a new outlook to the adolescents’ relationship with the market and one another, and to fill the gap arising from the absence of the female adolescents’ voice from the resistance literature. The informants of this study revealed the formative tactics and practices of resistance to the fashion imagery and communications; and the analysis also revealed that readings of fashion and consumption of it demarcate practices of participation and resistance.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14161/volumes/v36/NA-36

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper aims to examine the female adolescent friendship groups’ consumption of fashion from a perspective of participation and resistance in the marketplace, and intends to build a case for analyzing the consumption of fashion and ‘peer pressure’ outside of the traditional belonging vs. independence dichotomy; both in order to bring a new perspective to the adolescents’ relationship with the market and one another, and to fill the gap arising from the absence of the female adolescents’ voice from the resistance literature.

Resistance to marketing efforts (Dobsch 1998) and to the domination of corporations (Holt 2002), and the emancipatory efforts to avoid the market (Kozinets 2002) have been studied and given way to new conceptualizations regarding the general issues of resistance and emancipation. Although Thompson and Haytko (1997) have studied the interpretive acts of naturalizing, problematizing, juxtaposing, resisting, and transforming in the case of fashion, their analysis is based on adult informants’ narratives. Understanding how fashion and related marketing communications fit into adolescents’ daily lives and how they are employed in the process of participating in and/or resisting fashion will fulfill some of the gaps in the literatures of both adolescents’ consumption practices and marketplace resistance. Taking into account the above-mentioned gaps, we explored the resistive/participative practices of adolescent consumers by making use of adolescents’ narrations of fashion and its communications. The extended case method (Burawoy 1991) was used, based on three friendship groups (popular, unpopular, normal), and two 12.5-13 year-old adolescents from each friendship group were interviewed; the data was analyzed using a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997). The name and nature of the groups emerged from the preliminary conversations with the adolescents, and were later used to define cases; the three groups’ understanding of the social spaces they occupied at school matched one another.

The key results of data analysis are twofold: the first is that the adolescents narrate readings/acts of both resistance and participation in fashion; they use several tactics to resist the hegemonic practices and images of fashion. The second, and unexpected, key result is that the patterns of reading and the resistive/participative acts described seem to be consistent within friendship groups; small friendship groups act as micro-interpretive communities (Fish, 1980; Kates 2002; Yannopoulou and Elliott 2008).

The data analysis revealed three resistive tactics used by the adolescents: the trivialization of fashion, ascribing tyrannical qualities to fashion, and surrealizing the images in fashion and beauty communications. Trivializing fashion or projecting it as a not-so-important part of one’s life and consumption practices has as its main building block the claims of not-following fashion seasonally, if at all, and ‘just wearing what I wanna wear’. Similar to the way Dobsch’s (1998) informants who defined themselves as “I’m not a consumer”, the adolescents defined themselves as “I’m not into fashion”. However, these claims do not exclude them from consuming fashion. Secondly, seeing fashion and its related beauty imagery as one of the root causes of the ‘size zero’ buzz, the adolescents ascribed tyrannical qualities to fashion, blaming it for the eating disorders they see both around themselves and in distal references such as Kiera Knightley: ‘It is a dangerous industry because fashion is super skinny people, which is forcing people just to feel bad about themselves if they are slightly over weight or something’. Finally, regardless of the ‘interpretive position’ (Thompson and Haytko 1997), the adolescents surrealize the images in fashion and beauty communications as a form of passive resistance. However, this derealization emerges not as a suppressive force in that its’ way of existence (surreal imagery) is the very tool used by adolescents in order to resist fashion communications, evident in such quotes as ‘They [models] are just impossibly thin, impossibly happy… They just don’t seem like real people to me’; echoing deCerteau’s (1984) viewpoint that subversion can be found in people’s daily practices, tactics that are grounded in the signification system foreign to the system they have no choice but to accept.

Penaloza and Price (1993) argued that the range of actions viewed as resistance was narrow and that altering the meaning of consumption and consumption objects were neglected. Trivializing the meaning of consuming fashion and treating fashion imagery as surreal classify as attempts at altering the meaning of consumption (e.g. Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). As the accounts of resistance seem to be embedded in the grander act of participation, as “the effective strategies and tactics of consumer resistance are limited to those stemming from outside the market” (Penaloza and Price 1993), and as the adolescents are still taking part in the fashion ‘system’, their resistive interpretations/acts are not likely to have large-scale effects on the way they are treated by fashion communication and marketing; although this does not exclude the presence of ‘agency’ in the adolescents’ narratives.

Adolescents continuously took up of different interpretive positions from which to ascribe meanings to their fashion behaviors and to describe the motivations for others’ fashion behaviors (Thompson and Haytko 1997). There seem to be different meanings attached to some of the resistive acts at the micro-group level: how the ‘popular’ girls view resistive actions versus how the ‘unpopular’ group views resistive actions differ. There is a difference between how friendship groups read the resistive/participative practices of the other friendship groups, giving way to sanctions that further induces differentiation of friendship groups, which resonates with the viewpoint that it is the form of resistance that is sanctioned, not resistance itself. The adolescent identities seem to be located within micro-communities of interpretation and practice (friendship groups); the self has been integrated with the social and the material (Elliott 2004). Finally, the female adolescents view fashion as dominant because it is what is available; given that the informants are very young, they have still not experimented with alternative shops or ways of getting dressed, and to them, fashion is dominant not because it is capitalism’s tool, as consumption is seen by the respondents in Dobsch (1988) and Holt (2002), but because it is what makes clothes available.

Overall, Thompson and Haytko’s (1997) study on the interpretation of fashion and Murray’s (2002) re-interpretation are contrasted by the adolescents’ interpretations in that the interpretive positions need not be individualistic, they can rest on a common point of reading. While this study does not argue that a friendship group ‘causes’ a particular interpretive strategy and the accompanying resistive/participative practices to emerge, it suggests that the friendship groups as micro-interpretive communities should be explored. Understanding close-friendship groups as the context within which the complex background of established cultural meanings and belief systems are formed and as a part of cultural
background (Thompson 1997) leads the way to conceptualizing close-friendship groups as interpretive communities (Yannopoulou and Elliott 2008), which follow-up research will explore.

REFERENCES

Fish, Stanley (1980), Is There A Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities, London, England: Harvard University Press.
The Effect of Parenting on Adolescent Susceptibility to Peer Influence: Mediating Role of Self-Esteem

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Individuals are often influenced by the opinions of peers, such as their friends, activity partners, and colleagues at work (Price and Feick 1984). This is especially true during adolescent years, a time when individuals are particularly sensitive to ideas and trends popular among their peers (Bachmann, John, and Rao 1993). Peer influence on adolescents has significant marketing and public policy implications, since many adolescent decisions ranging from brand choice to substance abuse are affected by the opinions of peers (Kandel 1996; Rose, Boush, and Friestad 1998; Wooten and Reed 2004). In fact, peers influence not just adolescents’ choices at the brand level, but also their attitudes towards retailers, amount of money spent shopping, and attitudes towards consumption in general (Batra, Homer, and Khale 2001; Mangleburg, Doney, and Bristol 2004). Peer influence is also viewed as one of the most important factors, if not the most important one, to affect adolescent smoking or other forms of consumer misbehaviors (Akers and Jensen 2006).

Acknowledging the important role peers play in individuals’ consumption-related decisions, previous research in marketing has validated the fundamental role of susceptibility to peer influence (SPI) and its powerful impact on consumer behavior, where SPI is defined as the tendency for individuals to look to standards from peers to develop their own motivations, attitudes, and behaviors (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). Despite the vital role SPI plays in understanding consumer behavior, little research has been conducted to investigate the driving forces of susceptibility. This issue is important because knowing about the key antecedents of SPI allows researchers and practitioners can develop effective intervening strategies to alter individuals’ vulnerability to peer influence.

In the present research, we fill this gap through examining the effects of parenting strategies on SPI among adolescents. Specifically, we develop an integrative model of adolescent susceptibility to peer influence that includes parenting strategies (parental responsiveness and parental psychological control) as driver, adolescents’ self-esteem as mediator, and stage at adolescence as moderator of susceptibility to peer influence. The overarching finding in our studies is that responsive parenting decreases susceptibility by bolstering adolescents’ self-esteem, while psychologically controlling parenting increases susceptibility without influencing adolescents’ self-esteem. This is especially true for children at their mid and late-adolescence stages. Notably, these results were observed in both cross-sectional (Studies 1 and 2) and longitudinal data (Study 3), as well as data from both adolescents and their parents. Implications of the results for improving the effectiveness of parent-oriented anti-smoking campaigns are discussed.

REFERENCES


