Iconoclasm, Autotelicity, Narcissism, and Cool Beyond Distinction

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Multi-layered data collected from the X Games events facilitate the understanding of a new mechanism of distinction-making. Consumers in the context tend to be iconoclastic, narcissistic, and naturalistic distinction-makers with their new currency for distinction. Consumers’ agentic translation of the quintessence of distinction into cool-hunting is theoretically illuminated in relation to the “trickling-up” logic of distinction and co-optation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Distinction as an imperative of consumer culture and a prerequisite for postmodern self-identity has been widely recognized and discussed by theorists ever since the homogenization of consumers in modernity provoked individuals to seek a distinct identity (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998; Jameson 1991). This subsumption of distinction under consumer identity project, which also manifests as an unprecedentedly important part of consumer culture, necessitates consumers’ proactive devotion to distinction-making (Firtat and Venkatesh 1995) and thus interests consumer researchers. Nevertheless, the extant literature on distinction tends to stay within the normative boundary of distinction that all can conceive, perceive, simulate, and emulate, with a slight exception as to gender and sexual-orientation issues (e.g., Kates 2002, 2004).

In order to contribute to the advance of the theories relevant to distinction as a recursive topic of consumer culture, this study employs a context that facilitates the understanding of novel styles of making distinction. The X Games event is selected as the context for the theorization of “hyper-distinction,” which seems quite evident in the extreme locale. As extreme sports participants display self-fulfilling characteristics of socio-cultural “distancing” from others in the context, newly emerged “freestyle” and “no string attached” distinctions become palpable. It is also frequently quoted that the followers of extreme sports are defying not only gravity but also social standards. This constant distinction-making that is to contrast with mainstream culture, establishment, social structure, and hegemonic brands ultimately brings much attention and value to the extreme sports event, as a culturally and theoretically rich context for this study of distinction and the dynamics in consumer culture.

Following grounded theory approach, this study employs a multi-sited and multi-layered approach, often used in consumer culture theory literature (e.g., Giesler 2006; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Schau and Gilly 2003). The multi-layered approach for this study involves ethnographic in-depth interview (primary data source), fieldnotes, participant observation, videotaping, and photographs. Among many possible forms that autotelic and/or narcissistic consumption praxes can take, extreme sports participants employ iconoclastic, self-complacent, and intrinsic(cool hunting) methods to make distinction. Extreme sports participants appear to pursue autotelic self-identity that is less negotiated and more asserted than what theories have by far codified (cf., Giesler 2008; Kates 2002; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Distinction in extreme sports context, in which “mild and naïve” distinctions become worse than “no distinction,” may be seen as the extreme case of “the cult of the self.” In order to turn the blurred line between self and others to a bolder one, consumers perform narcissistic practices with less concern about reflexivity of the self (cf., Finkielstein 1991; Giddens 1991). The narcissism consumers in the context take for granted is their ultimate to others that prevents unwanted overlaps of self-identity. Narcissism for those consumers is the mode of being that is not a pathological anomaly, but a purely cultural choice for cultivating the self as Giddens (1991, 81) states, “we have no choice but to choose.” The extracted themes of distinction indicate possibilities of presenting distinctiveness to the outside of the self without staying within the normative boundary.

Consumers who freely improvise and still display nuanced hipness are distinct in the context. Socio-cultural background is neither questioned nor relevant. Unlike some macro (national) and globalized contexts in which the logic and practice of distinction-making have been studied (e.g., Holt 1998; Ustuner and Holt 2010), in the relatively micro and more culturally defined context, consumers appear to unleash themselves from the rigid cultural propositions and schemata. Because Bourdieu (1984, 1990) is not a determinist, there is always a room for consumer agency, not subjectivity, even though the habitus is all-pervasive. In practice, perhaps consumers have to be a subject with minimal consumer agency in certain contexts wherein habitus is less malleable, but they can be rule-breakers in some contexts (i.e., X Games) that encourage agentic contribution to cultural progress (cf. Bourdieu 1990). Thus, some research has to follow in order to better understand how consumers perceive the boundary between the two possibly distinct types of context.

Research on how consumers maneuver within the field of distinction that connotes different levels of plasticity of the habitus will also provide a theoretical insight for consumer researchers. “Trickling-up” cultural penetration and proliferation are of particular interest. The hipness and cool invented and spread by a group of people (i.e., extreme sports athletes and participants), who socio-politically represents almost the opposite of “high-cultural-capital” consumers, are now the dominant form of distinction in many contexts. The encroachment of the culture from the “bottom of the pyramid” upon the historical role of cultural capital, which has been operating as the most important currency for distinction, is widely observed and rapidly developing. The Winter Olympic Games’ acceptance of some events (i.e., ski cross and half pipe) created by rebellious and yet cool people, who originally ridiculed the elitism in the sports, clearly shows how the logic can be upside down.

The consumers who portray a cool persona and practice natural hipness are comparable to the consumers in the past who enjoyed their high cultural capital. Although cool may not be something to be explained, analyzed, and theorized, it will be thought-provoking if research explores different facets of cool in different context to see if a similar manifestation of cool in a context can be transferred to the other. Cool as distinction in the context of X Games seems well-received in many other contexts as marketers strove to transplant the cool to brands and trends. However, the grass-roots types of distinction (cool), found in this study, is very far from what is usually targeted by marketers and consumers because they present extremity and essentialism. The distinction inflation promoted in such a context may hinder the co-option as business culture, and therefore it protects the distinction from commercialization. In that case, what would be hyper-co-option of hyper-distinction like?

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