Leisure Consumption As Conspicuous Work

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In a society where “time is money,” why would individuals consistently channel substantial amounts of time and labor energy to work-like activities in their leisure time? By investigating contexts of homebrewing and knitting, this research calls attention to the repositioning of manual labor as a symbolic marker of social privilege.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1011900/volumes/v40/NA-40

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
One characteristic of postmodernity that is of central interest for marketing scholars is the reversal and interpenetration of production and consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). This altered relation between the two is encountered in distinctive practices such as those addressed in the growing literature on co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Schau et al. 2009; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Beyond practices, this altered relation between production and consumption also generates the co-existence of sometimes conflicting ideologies (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Zwick et al. 2008) that are regarded as incompatible when viewed through a modernist lens (Campbell 1987; Gelber 1999; Weber 1958). Our research addresses this cultural condition in a consumer-centric study that asks: what are the personal and cultural meanings of consumer practices that emerge from contemporary interpenetration of production and consumption in leisure?

This ethnographic project was implemented in two empirical contexts of productive leisure (Gelber 1999) where individuals intertwine production and consumption both voluntarily and consistently across time. That is, they do not engage in productive activities because of financial need, as with low income people for whom producing may sometimes be cheaper than buying. Further, they are not occasional customizers of products or assemblers of do-it-yourself kits. In productive leisure, individuals (called productive consumers) acquire domain-specific skills to enact a continuous cycle of production-consumption in which they buy supplies, infuse labor and creativity to make a final product, and eventually choose the intended user. The formative stage of the research pointed to the importance of including both a female-dominated and a male-dominated context to understand the gendered nature of production-consumption. Ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted among knitters and beer homebrewers to enhance the depth and the conceptual nuance of the project (Pyett 2003; Whitemore et al. 2001).

Fieldwork indicates a key outcome of the interpenetration of work and consumption in leisure is the cultural re-signification and repositioning of manual, slow-paced labor. With contemporary late capitalism’s emphasis on efficiency and intellectual work, manual labor has been devalued in the realm of production (Sennett 2008). With regards to consumption, however, we argue that late capitalism has created the cultural and economic conditions for the assertion of social status through leisure activities that are particularly compatible with American production-oriented values of work and self-reliance (Gelber 1999; McClelland 1961; Weber 1930). Unlike the privileged classes’ historical practice of marking status through conspicuous consumption of luxury items produced by others as well as through non-productive leisure (Veblen 1899), productive consumers build distinction in their social circles (Bourdieu 1987) by dedicating leisure time to productive manual activities that are inefficient compared with capitalist mass-manufactures.

We find three practices that productive consumers of both genders employ to conspicuously display their work-like leisure and its handmade output to demonstrate distinctiveness. First, they find ways to take this activity beyond the realm of domestic production to also engage in the slow production of their crafts in public settings. When they do so with other hobbyists in places where the practice of productive leisure is expected (e.g., homebrewing clubs), they find recognition for creativity that is often scarce in their middle-class jobs. Productive consumers value this aesthetic feedback based on the emergent standards of the group, inasmuch as they operate in craft fields that tend not to have well-defined aesthetic standards (Becker 1978). When productive consumers take their activities to places where it is somewhat unexpected (e.g., knitting in the airplane), they commonly command admiration from others who show appreciation for the time and labor productive consumers apply to manually produce things in a society oriented towards convenience and efficiency.

Second, productive consumers engage in practices that ensure high visibility for the handmade origin of their output. In gift-giving, a common outlet for their handmade production, they draw the recipient’s attention to the handmade character of the gift through cards or commentaries to ensure that the time and effort invested in it will be converted into higher esteem (symbolic capital) from the recipient (Bourdieu 1987). Moreover, productive consumers from both genders often create products to insert in special social events (e.g., a homebrewer making beer for Christmas or a knitter making a huppah for her wedding) to signal their commitment to the occasion and enhance others’ esteem for them.

Third, in a subtle demonstration of their labor, productive consumers enact a self-presentation strategy (Goffman 1959) that downplays mass-manufactured items to emphasize both the quality and the handmade-ness of the item. Productive consumers use mass-produced items as a background for the display of the handmade, as with knitters who often favor relatively plain outfits that make a colorful handmade shawl stand out. Productive consumers thus relegate mass-produced items to an inferior position to draw attention to what is much more central to their identities and much more socially distinctive: their capability to produce things manually and inefficiently.

Strikingly, productive consumers invest a substantial amount of time and labor that is not remunerated in order to craft products that do not necessarily comply with current taste standards. The process through which the handmade items acquire value relies less on aesthetic and financial criteria than on the distinctiveness they convey when delivered in the context of the larger culture’s transition from modernity to postmodernity. This research unpacks a particular dynamic between time, leisure, and labor that emerges from a contemporary reencounter of work and consumption during leisure. In this dynamic, which is interestingly consistent across genders, relatively privileged classes emulate the work practices of lower classes to build distinctiveness and prestige. Unlike non-productive leisure, this strategy is validated by the centrality of work, time, and self-reliance in contemporary American culture. Productive consumers use unpaid, time-consuming, and labor-intensive activities to reassert and display their control over scarce, valuable resources, thereby acquiring and communicating symbolic capital.

REFERENCES


