Cruising the Unadulterated Terrain of Consumption: Rural Snowmobilers’ Interpellation Through Collective Simplicity

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The reflexive interpellation process unveiled by rural snowmobilers helps explicate how poor rural consumers maintain ontological security. The received view of inherited and institutionalized cultural and symbolic capital is inapplicable to the context where upward sociocultural mobility is collectively achieved through agentic appropriation of highly stylized and politicized consumer movements.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer research has thus far been virtually taciturn about poor consumers in rural areas who have less access to, or interests in what has been normalized as mainstream lifestyles in urban, suburban, or exurban areas. Bourdieu’s (1984) cultural and symbolic capital that embodies tastes (consumption practices) and configures the consumer’s ideological position has instead been the focus of various analyses of contemporary status consumption phenomena (Holt 1997; Ustuner and Holt 2010; Ustuner and Thompson 2012). Nonetheless, the economic capital, as a boundary condition of consumption, needs to be considered more essential rather than tangential when exploring marketplace performances by the poor (Bauman 2007).

The current literature employing discourses about the intersection between consumption and social status explains that cultural capital operates as a determinant of lifestyle choices (Holt 1997), a basis for aesthetic and ideological claims (Holt 1998), a catalyst for socially stratified consumption (Ustuner and Holt 2010), and a requisite for a smoother acculturation process (Ustuner and Holt 2007). The listed research, however, has not documented how consumers with low economic capital in a highly developed country carry on their identity projects and execute their ideological positioning in the immensely hierarchical field of consumption. Therefore, this research aims to explicate the process in which relatively deprived consumers build social capital, cultivate cultural capital, and potentially rearticulate the meaning of symbolic capital.

The interwoven and thus inseparable connections among social status, interpellation, and consumer identity have been illuminated (e.g., Kozinets 2008). However, the social aspect of the dynamics does not necessarily address the plasticity of social constraints (i.e., habitus), made possible by individual consumers’ agentic endeavors (see Bourdieu1990a). While different kinds and degrees of capital constitute habitus, it is not totally predesignated boundary of individual ideological positioning. Bourdieu is never a determinist (Bourdieu1990b).

Nor are consumers. The sociocultural backdrop for an individual is also reflexively malleable insofar as one empowers oneself as an ideologically autonomous agent, rather than incapacitating him/herself based on the notion of habitus’ reproduction of itself (Calhoun et al. 1993; Henry 2005). Interpellation imposes personal and social identity (status) upon an individual and concomitantly sets limits that make individual desubjugation possible (Butler 1997, 2002). Social power relations, norms, dominant ideologies, mainstream consumer culture, and episteme together create an arena wherein consumers can stylize themselves as agents at the limits of their socially interpellated being, as long as they espouse critical mode instead of obedient mode (cf. Foucault 2003). Critical resistance to what orthodox interpellation process inculcates is witnessed in the context of rural snowmobilers, especially when consumers with low economic capital collectively governmentalize not only their identities, but what governmentalizes them as well.

In order to unpack the “critical interpellation” process embraced by rural snowmobilers, a snowmobilers’ club in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was contacted for participatory observation and unstructured depth interviews. Twelve members participated in the interviews at their homes and outdoors as the weather permits. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 150 minutes, and observation was conducted as often as possible at such places as bars, gas stations, grocery stores, hotel lobbies, and other local shops that the snowmobilers frequented. The author also participated in road trips and rallies to different places. Fieldnotes, photographs, and videos were kept. Based upon the conventions of hermeneutic approach (Thompson, Pollio and Lacander 1994), the informants’ narratives and lived experiences were explicated, employing semiotic clustering method (Feldman 1995).

Rural snowmobilers rearticulate the meaning of social stratification of consumption and dismantle the relevant sociocultural fields in which players are expected to comply with the logic of “foreclosure (subordination).” Six distinct thematic manifestations of rural snowmobilers’ ontological positions were identified, three of which contrast the other three with respect to ethics, social status, and ideology (see Figure 1). Owing to the harsh conditions (cultural, economic, and climatic) of rural life, snowmobilers subordinate their desires and aspirations as contemporary consumers to self-discipline and self-preservation. Simultaneously, the mirror images of such hardship, as postmodern lifestyles, and the subsequent pragmatic positioning of rural snowmobilers’ sociocultural statuses are also uncovered as rearticulation and reconfiguration of their own styles of being, or emerging statuses. Such highly agentic repositioning and transformation of their personal and social identities take place in a collective setting, in which constant interactions with other snowmobilers enhance the camaraderie amongst them, as “narrowcasted” and “enclaved” social capital.

Ethical consumption practices facilitate snowmobilers’ interpellation, as they subscribe to Nietzschean notion of indebtedness, which determines the degree of ethicality. Abnegation of extensive use of credit cards, excessive domestic wastes, gluttony, and materialistic worldview in general is what stylizes their statuses as ethical consumers whom relatively affluent consumers seeking new statuses emulate and simulate. The reflexivity between their consumption practices and the newly developed lifestyles in mainstream consumer culture also creates an ideological niche where poor consumers find a new status that is both subsistent and stylish.

A simple life is what rural snowmobilers collectively pursue, and it signifies environmental consciousness, human ecology, communal harmony, and cultural preservation. The nuanced dissimilitude between their everyday practices and the movement of responsible consumption in the mainstream consumer culture caused by varied levels of economic capital is sublimated into a new source of cultural and symbolic capital. The bases for the novel type of cultural capital comprise habits, skills, and knowledge about thrifty living and self-sustainability. By the same token, rural snowmobilers rewrite the prescribed recipe for symbolic capital, as they earn socio-politically high-ranked position of conscientious consumers.

The reflexive interpellation process brought out in the context provides a platform for researchers to enunciate how poor rural consumers maintain ontological security (Giddens 1991). The received view of inherited and institutionalized cultural and symbolic capital is not necessarily applicable to the context where upward sociocultural mobility can be collectively achieved through agentic appropriation of highly stylized and politicized consumer movements. Avenues for future research extend to the theoretical and empirical junction between anti-consumption and conscientious consumption where both practices bestow unique ideological positions on consumers. Perhaps poor conscientious consumers co-opt socioculturally distanced simulacra to glamorize their lifestyle.
REFERENCES

Foucault, Michel (2003), Society Must Be Defended, New York, NY: Picador.