The Capitalizing Practices of Lower-Class Consumers in the Context of Higher Education

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019984/volumes/v43/NA-43

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to understand how dominated consumers invest in legitimate forms of cultural capital. Through a qualitative inquiry with students of a distance learning program, we show how consumers’ capitalizing practices contribute to their identity projects beyond the actual conversion of other forms of capital into cultural one.

INTRODUCTION
Consumer research extensively shows the many ways in which consumption reproduces class distinctions. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theorization of cultural capital and social fields (Bourdieu 1979; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), studies advanced in the explanation of (1) how cultural capital shapes consumer’s tastes (Holt 1998; Üstün and Holt 2010), choices (Allen 2002), and self-perceptions (Henry 2005) among others, and (2) how established field dynamics preclude consumers occupying dominated positions to gain status in social fields, producing shattered (Üstün and Holt 2007), alternative (Castilhos and Rossi, 2009), or incomplete (Üstün and Thompson 2012) identity projects. Taken together, these works provide a rich explanation of how durable influences of primary socialization reproduce objective advantages of groups occupying dominant positions in social fields (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013).

Inspired by this first stream, an emerging set of studies begins to analyze the dynamics of specific fields of consumption. Departing from the differentiation between field-dependent and generalized cultural capital (Arsel and Thompson 2011), these works explore how consumers navigate between fields and constitute their identity projects through investments in a given specific field. Consumer’s identity investments organize group’s internal hierarchies (Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009), foster destigmatization of consumption practices (Sandikci and Ger 2010), protect field-specific status positions (Arsel and Thompson 2011), and enhance cultural legitimacy for marginalized identities (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). Despite its dynamic features, this emerging stream favors the study of consumers with high cultural capital, whose conversions into other forms of capital contribute to the enhancement of their position in different fields. However, little attention has been given to consumers with low generalized cultural capital, who remain largely represented as confined to dominated positions in the larger field of power.

We aim to problematize such prevalent structural perspective of dominated consumers. Drawing inspiration from the analysis of identity investments and capitalizing practices (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013) we conducted a qualitative inquiry with a group of lower-class female students enrolled in a distance learning (DL) University program. Through the analysis of their discourses and practices during the first semester of college, we aim to understand how these consumers’ identity projects are enacted through the daily investments of scarce forms of cultural, economic, and social capital into a socially legitimated form of cultural capital.

This paper addresses the intersection between the literatures on identity projects and the socio-historic patterning of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2007). Our intended contribution is twofold: first, we bring the dynamics of capital investments to the field of generalized cultural capital, showing a set of conditions in which consumer’s identity investments are performative of identity projects before and beyond the full conversion of one type of capital into another; second, we account for a largely absent temporal dimension in identity projects (Thompson 2013), which can be understood as processual, unfinished, and ongoing.

CONTEXT AND METHOD
Distance Learning is the fastest growing form of higher education in Brazil. Between 2003 and 2013, the number of programs jumped from 52 to more than one thousand. Also, the number of students raised from 50 thousand to more than 1 million, accounting for nearly 15% of college registrations in the country (INEP 2014). This phenomenon has its roots in the National Plan for Education, established by the Brazilian government in 2001 with the goal of increasing the number of students in higher education. Concretely, the plan facilitated the creation of new and the expansion of existing higher education institutions. Along with the popularization of the broadband, this contributed to the expansion of private universities. These institutions focused primarily on lower-class consumers, who historically had no easy access to higher education, due to economic, time, and geographic constraints. At the time, this group represented a massive and the untouched market to be explored.

Aiming at reaching these consumers, both new for-profit colleges, and traditional non-profit universities saw DL programs as the best way to increase its participation in the education market. Such programs are less expensive and are regarded as more flexible to those who cannot afford to be full-time students. Hence, DL programs have been attracting mainly lower-middle-class consumer in search qualification (Sanchez 2008). Additionally, DL programs hold a lower tier status among the Brazilian educational industry. They are newer, cheaper, and shorter than conventional presence programs.

Being part of what has been conventionally called “new middle class” (Neri 2011), the consumers targeted by DL programs seem to be better characterized as the “Brazilian strugglers”, a concept suggested by Souza (2010). This group totals nearly 55% of Brazil’s population. With a family income around US$9,000 per year (IBGE 2011), this class is located between the “really poor” and the traditional middle-class in the Brazilian social space (Souza 2009). This fraction is distinguished by a set of dispositions, such as ethics of hard work, self-discipline, and prospective thinking, which are employed in daily life in order to strive for a better future (Souza 2010).

To understand how lower-class consumers experience higher education, we combined participant observation and in-depth interviews among students enrolled in an undergraduate DL program in Pedagogy, which is the biggest DL program in the country (INEP 2014). Data collection was restricted to a single class. Our participant observation consisted in attending weekly presence classes and interacting with students in these moments. After the first meetings, we recruited six informants to conduct the interviews. All informants fit Souza’s (2010) category of “Brazilian strugglers”, having a low cultural and economic capital background.

Interviews took place at students’ home or workplace. Observations of presence classes and interview locations were conducted and supported by a field diary in which we recorded impressions, notes, and feelings about the fieldwork. Data analysis followed a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997). First, we identified key emic terms, including motivations, expectations, as well our informant’s decision process. This first set of data was then critically challenged during the subsequent iterations. Further analysis allowed us to dis-
tistinguish etic perspectives of the social construction of DL as a long
term strategy for mobility and the daily investments in cultural capi-
tal, which are elaborated in the following sections.

**CAPITALIZING PRACTICES IN THE PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

In their analysis of the emerging group of at-home fathers in the
US, Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) show the multiple ways
in which this group, usually endowed with high generalized cultural
capital, seek to convert their domestic (field-dependent) cultural
capital into forms of symbolic capital, with the intent to build cul-
tural legitimacy for their contradictory performance of masculinity
and fatherhood. Those capitalizing practices are inspiring of our own
analysis, summarized in Table 1. Contrary to them, however, we ac-
count for the multiple investments of other types of capital in order
to acquire cultural capital, to break with social origins and progress
in life. In our context, capitalizing practices include the investments
of economic, social, and specific forms of cultural capital.

**Specific Cultural Capital**

Throughout their lives, our informants have learned and em-
body a set of dispositions that equip them to navigate in the neo-
liberal world. Having a structured family, most of them were social-
ized to be self-responsible, having developed and ethic of hard work
and specific dispositions for self-discipline and prospective thinking.
According to Souza (2010), this is the set of dispositions that dis-
tinguish this fraction from the “Brazilian rabble”. As they envision
college as a path for a better future, they invest these dispositions in
order to overcome the challenges posed by the new life stage. Our
informants believe that especially because of the characteristics of
the DL program, they need an extra discipline to keep up to date with
all themes and assignments. This requires time, effort, and organiza-

tion, but it seems worthwhile because, for them, it is the way that will
assure them getting the most they can from the program. “You have
to take time for that. It is useless just to do it like that, especially in
a distance learning program. You have to push yourself hard. You
have to study at home, you have to read, you have to adapt yourself
to this kind of program.” (Maria)

Students are aware that they are responsible for their own learn-
ing and that they need to diligently find time between job and fam-
ily obligations to study and keep up to date with assignments. Even
Jaqueline—who is the only at-home mother— reports that she has to
find time to study within her busy daily schedule. Specifically she
finds the “time and peace to study” every day after her husband and
daughter go to sleep. For those students who work, the pressure of
their schedule is stronger. In most of the cases, they report taking the
less busy moments at work as well as the scarce free times at home
to prepare assignments and to study.

**Table 1. Overview of the Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Forces</th>
<th>Influence over the Education Market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brazilian Government</strong></td>
<td>Ministry of Education’s measures aiming at increasing the number of students in higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>DL as part of the growing strategies; targeting working-class consumers to DL programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Highlighting the value of higher education as “the” path to success at the job market.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employed Capital</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Main Feature</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Capital</strong></td>
<td>Embodied self-discipline</td>
<td>Juggling with a busy daily schedule to keep up to date with studies.</td>
<td>Taking advantage of free-time at work and at home to do assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Capital</strong></td>
<td>Daily economic sacrifices</td>
<td>Frugality in other dimensions of consumption to pay costs of college</td>
<td>Postponing vacations and purchases of home appliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Capital</strong></td>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>Relying on relatives to help</td>
<td>Students are released from financial obligations at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Capital</strong></td>
<td>Community support</td>
<td>Mutual support from classmates to reinforce feelings of being a “real” student</td>
<td>Exchanging course materials and professional experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Economic Capital

Tuition fees are expensive to our informants. As most of the students are responsible for the payment of their own tuition fees, they report that once they started college, they have elected it as a priority, beginning to restrict their consumption of other goods and services.

I can afford [to pay the tuition fees] because I am not that kind of person that spends a lot on crap stuff. Now is very tight, because besides paying for my college tuition, my laptop crashed and I had to buy a new one. I bought it in five hundred times [joking about the number of installments she financed the laptop] because we can’t make it without a laptop in a DL course. No way! (Karen).

As in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013), frugality plays an important role in the strategies of capital conversions among our informants. They reported having postponed vacations, replacement of home appliances and limiting their consumption of beauty products to the minimum, in order to prioritize their education expenses. The sacrifices are compensated by a moral discourse (Saatiçioğlu and Ozanne 2013) in which they exalt their qualities as self-disciplined and prospective persons (Souza 2010), which ultimately legitimates their (non)consumption practices.

Social Capital

Social capital investments include the ways that our informants arrange their network of family, friends, and colleagues to overcome the challenges they face to convert college with other obligations. The first form of social capital, family support (Portes 1998) can come in many ways. Costs for college go beyond tuition fees. It includes books, copying, transportation, and access to the internet which can be either at home, at work, or at cybercafés in some cases. These expenses can cost more than our informants can afford. In these cases, they openly rely on their parents or husbands. Interestingly, when families cannot directly help to pay for our informant’s studies, they help by not asking them to contribute to the family budget, as Karen told us: “I pay college myself, but I do not need to contribute to the expenses at home, so I can afford it.” Parents and family members are conscious that studies are important to our informants’ live projects. Furthermore, as in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013), the accomplishments of one family member are perceived to affect the whole family in a positive way.

Community building is the second form social capital, which emerges mainly from the weekly presence class. As students support each other with assignments, share course materials, and exchange advices and experiences, they build a sense of camaraderie. Also, as informants together face and overcome common flaws of the university DL service—which in their words treat them as “second class students”—they develop a sense of internal solidarity and reinforce self-responsibility for their own path in college. Through these moments, our informants increase their feelings of inclusion in the socially valued category of “university students”, which reinforces the idea of progressing in life, once they are part of an entirely new universe of reference, distant from the one of their primary socialization.

DISCUSSION

I’ll be the first one in my family to have a college degree. I think about this opportunity I’m having. I’m pushing myself and I’m getting it! To know that I can, that I’m getting it is very rewarding! (Laura)

Our study focused on analyzing the capitalizing practices of a group of lower-class consumers seeking to overcome social origins through the education market. Results show how the DL program is perceived as a privileged market resource for this group’s mobility project and how they engage in daily investments of other forms of capital in order to pursue cultural capital. In doing so, we contribute to the debates at the intersection between the literatures on identity projects and the socio-historic patterning of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2007). We now detail the twofold nature of our contribution.

Extant literature on dominated consumers provides numerous examples of how structural forces work to reproduce status positions. Based on Bourdieu’s work, the underlying assumption is that the enduring influences of primary socialization would endow consumers with a fixed amount of cultural capital (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). When performed in larger social fields, limited capitals would produce shattered identity projects (Üstüner and Holt 2007) and consumer agency would be reduced to coping.

Drawing inspiration on the dynamics of identity investments and capitalizing practices (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013), we found that the process of cultural capital acquisition, instead of the employment of its outcomes, is part of a strategy for improving social conditions, to which the educational industry provides a legit market resource. As progressing in life is a pervasive abstract ideal among the “Brazilian strugglers” (Souza 2010), the multiple investments in cultural capital acquisition gain centrality in their life projects.

Even if we don’t observe objective social mobility, our informants perceive themselves as in charge of their own fate. So, through the daily efforts to convert different forms of capital into cultural one, they build a progressing self as an ongoing, therefore effective, identity project, simultaneously grounded on distinction and inclusion. To our informants, starting college is distinctive per se. It is a rare accomplishment, which is hard to pursue due to social background and the difficulties of their daily lives. Starting university is also inclusive, once college education is historically seen as a privilege reserved to the middle and upper classes in Brazil.

Thompson (2013) distinguished two main analytic paths in the identity literature: recognition and redistribution. In both cases studies tend to emphasize the end point of identity work, leaving unquestioned the latent temporal dimension of identity projects. We found that identity is always under construction. To our informants, the enrolment in the Pedagogy program opens new perspectives in their lives. It grants the ability to dream and to make concrete career plans, as Karen exemplifies: “college is just a start; I want to study psychology, but then need more money. Now what I can pay is Education. Then, I will graduate and work. With the degree, my salary will increase, and then I can expect to start another college program, which will be a presence one.”

So, the construction of the progressing self is mostly processes. Particularly, it is anchored in a general past of reminiscences of poverty; it entails an ongoing present of sacrifices and self-discipline that will culminate with an idealized future of material rewards and self-completion. We showed that such transformation begins in the moment our informants enroll in the college program and is made effective through their daily capitalizing practices in the quest for a better social standing.
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