The Collective Coping Strategies of Vulnerable Consumers

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This research investigates financially vulnerable adolescents and their consumer coping strategies. Employing a qualitative methodology, strategies developed by adolescents and their families to access a ritual event are explored. Individual and collective approaches to manage disadvantage include individual and collective problem solving and/or emotional techniques. Perceptions of vulnerability are challenged.

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The Collective Coping Strategies of Vulnerable Consumers

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although the need to focus on how low income consumers find themselves at a disadvantage in the marketplace has been recognised, contemporary calls for research suggest exploring how those who are vulnerable can improvise, navigate and eventually gain access (Pechmann et al., 2011: 28). This paper explores the experiences of adolescents in low-income families and establishes strategies they employ to overcome their financial disadvantage to gain access to a specific consumption experience: the high-school prom. The high-school prom has become a significant rite of passage for adolescents leaving secondary education (Tinson and Nuttall, 2011). This research identifies how adolescents from low-income families are able to meet the consumption-related expectations of this ritual event and affords an opportunity to move beyond understanding consumption under conditions of constraint.

Whilst the dominant discourse in (consumer) coping literature has emphasised the self, coping can also be conceptualized as social or collective. This study proposes that the role of relevant others in coping cannot be underestimated. The conspicuous use of goods and consumption rituals has long been recognised as a valuable resource for consumers to influence the way that others evaluate them (Veblen, 1899). Studies considering the influence of social comparison highlight discontentment felt by those who cannot equal consumption in their social environments (Ackerman et al., 2000). However the social dimension within consumer coping research has been somewhat limited (see for example: McAlexander et al., 1992).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Using a purposive sampling approach, forty in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 year old adolescent males and females from five secondary schools in the North of England, UK. Schools were selected based on percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals. Research was conducted over a one month period whilst respondents were preparing to attend their high-school prom; with the individual interviews providing an opportunity to explore emergent themes in relation to consumer coping strategies. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for the data collection phase. The questions were designed to explore the significance and importance of high-school proms in general, to gauge the expectations of the adolescents and contextualise their experience, to understand the level of spend relative to their own social groups and to probe for ways in which money could be ‘saved’. An interpretive analytic stance was adopted to analyse the transcription data and explored themes in the responses of adolescents using the methods outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Spiggle (1994).

FINDINGS

The individual coping strategies here reflect coping typologies in the extant literature and are ascribed to either (active) problem solving or emotional techniques. There was evidence of confrontive strategies (Folkman et al., 1986) where each consumption situation that related to the high school prom was tackled directly. Awareness of available alternatives was employed to alleviate disadvantage and reduce vulnerability. Emotional venting as well as denial (Duhachek, 2005) was also evident for individuals managing this consumption related ritual. Adolescents unable to compete with those who had more (financial) resource employed rational thinking to reduce goal tension (Yap and Bove, 2011). Emotional coping by the adolescents illustrated a greater degree of perceived vulnerability.

Importantly our findings also uncovered collaborative or community directed efforts by respondents. Respondents cited examples of collective practices when describing the role and significance of the prom for their peer group. Collective practices also included support beyond the peer group of the respondents. Collective coping repertoires also appeared to be integrated with a broader appreciation of the transitional nature of the prom and its status as a rite of passage. This represents a combined coping strategy that involves ‘bringing other audiences’ (Trocehia, 2004) who play an instrumental role in the projection of competency and strength, and in this case, successful socialization.

CONCLUSIONS

There are a variety and multiplicity of individual strategies employed here supporting the work of Duhachek (2005) and Hamilton and Catterall (2008) but this research also reveals a variety of skills respondents possess to exert agency as well as adapt to the financial realities with which they are faced (Hill and Stephens 1997). The role of the wider community in navigating the marketplace in support of those experiencing this event reveals an emergent and significant lead in the development of a collective coping strategy framework.

REFERENCES


