

Young Adult Perception and Attitude Toward Conspicuous Consumption and Poverty

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perception and attitude of young adults toward conspicuous consumption portrayed in mass media and their conception of poverty. Many young adults may not realize the cadre of consumerist ideologies portrayed throughout the culture and mass media such as buy more, buy newer and improved, buy wants over needs, buy comparatively, buy exclusively and buy to prove. In light of such mass media portrayal, young adult consumption habits may reflect unrealistic ideas about what it means to be poor. This research quantitatively examined the impact of mass media on young adult consumption patterns and sought to determine if there is a relationship between conspicuous consumption and poverty perception based on portrayals in popular mass media culture. The population for this research was primarily college-age student consumers under 25. The findings indicate that young adults view their consumption as an indicator of class and social status and that mass media portrayal have a significant relationship on their consumption perception.

Keywords: Young Adult, Perception, Attitude, Conspicuous Consumption, Portrayal, Mass Media, Poverty

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, there is a viscous cycle of consumption that permeates every facet of society that is increasingly perpetuated on American young adults between the ages of (18-25). In the U.S., young adults, represent approximately 15 percent of the nation's population (Henslin, 2012). As members of generation Y, also known as Millennials, young adults live in a time when more means better and there are increasingly diverse mass media outlets and advanced forms of communications (Steinberg, 2012). Their exposure to popular mass media portrayals about poverty and consumption can be summed up as 'it's not only good to consume but compare that consumption to others', a notion which may distort their perception about poverty and what it means to be poor (Nelson, 2011; Akcay *et al.*, 2012; Whybrow, 2005; Perrucci and Wysong, 2008). However, this study is about more than "keeping up with the Joneses" or "keeping up appearances", it is about the fact that each generation faces consumerism with little to no consumptive defense mechanism or awareness about poverty as it relates to conspicuous consumption.

In addition, mass media (radio, television, movies, newspapers, magazines and the internet) may influence young adult perception and attitude about conspicuous consumption and their ideas about what is poverty--that deprivation (of any kind) is negative and undesirable while consumptive abundance and overindulgence is positive and desirable. Behaviors best described as conspicuous consumption, a concept coined by sociologist Thorstein Veblen (Perrucci and Wysong, 2008), that describes the fundamental change in people's orientation and eagerness to show off their wealth due to elaborate consumption. In this respect, inextricably and intentionally, poverty can result from conspicuous consumption (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Constant exposure to popular culture influences and shapes societies portrayal and perceptions of poverty (Levine, 2006; Maconis, 2012). In many instances, mass media poverty portrayal is rooted in and based on conspicuous consumption and not the absence of resources that is life threatening also known as absolute deprivation/poverty. While people with basic or limited resources know the feeling of hunger, lack and want, popular culture portrayals influences their interpretation of poverty and

conspicuous consumption (Akçay *et al.*, 2012; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Nelson, 2011). The changing notions of community and exposure to different lifestyles through the media have fundamentally altered the reference groups (Akçay *et al.*, 2012; Perrucci and Wysong, 2008) upon which relative deprivation/poverty is estimated; thereby, changing consumption behavior. Today, the youth and young adults have greater access to the consumption cathedrals (Ritzer, 2009) through social networks, malls, high rises, internet, cell phones, video games, music videos, popular music, magazines and the list goes on and on.

Additionally, consumption is more convenient than ever through the new means of consumption or the new cathedrals of consumption according to Ritzer (2009)-“the new settings in and through which we obtain goods and services” (10). The cathedrals of consumption are fast food restaurants, chain stores, catalogs, shopping malls, electronic shopping centers, discounters, superstores, cruise ships, casinos, entertainment aimed at adults, entertainment, athletic facilities, luxury gated communities, educational settings, medicine and hospitals, museums and charities and last but not least mega churches (Ritzer, 2009). The appeal and mass marketing techniques used may create curiosity toward consumption for consumption sake while disregarding needs and/or actual wants.

Inasmuch as consumerism is not new or unusual, its evolution and present form may be having a drastic effect on family, institution and societal stability. As scholars note, (Schor, 2007; Nelson, 2011; Akçay *et al.*, 2012) an inflated sense of consumption norms promulgated by the media may cause people to aspire to live above their means and buy more. This can spell disaster for middle class, working class and lower income parents who may already feel challenged to meet their children’s desires and expectations. Mass media portrayals may make even the most conscientious individual feel pressured to belong, to be a part of the group and a part of the in crowd starting as early as childhood. Conspicuous Consumption has penetrated practically every corner of American society and many parts of the world; thus, the new means of consumption is not only accessible but fast, fun and easy (Steinberg, 2012; Ritzer, 2009; Perrucci and Wysong, 2008).

In addition, the Consumption Peer Pressure (CPP) may lead to increased negative young adult partaking in potentially harmful conspicuous consumption behaviors, i.e., consumption that leads to exuberant long-term debt followed by an inability to pay. Many popular culture commercials feature young adults and encourage

consumption by portraying a particular lifestyle and advertising certain products. Avoiding the temptations of conspicuous consumption can be even more difficult when peer and reference groups exist but these pale in comparison to the influence of mass media. Mass media’s role and influence is tremendous and can convince, influence, manipulate and even intimidate consumers into popular culture ideologies about poverty leading to consumption. Conspicuous consumption promoted through mass media tends to target certain age, race/ethnic background, sex or other characteristics without regard for consumer well-being (Nelson, 2011; Akçay *et al.*, 2012).

In combination, mainstream media portrayals, consumption cathedrals and CPP lifestyles, many young adults may not fully grasp what being poor really means and demonstrate little if any consciousness (conception and perception) about their own poverty. Consumption can become a mechanism of want and competition instead of need and reasonable desire (Perner, 2005; Schor, 2007; Steinberg, 2012).

1.1. Research Question and Framework

The primary question that arises in this social context is:

What is the impact of mass media on consumption patterns and is there a relationship between conspicuous consumption and poverty perception based on portrayals in popular culture?

1.2. Hypothesis/Questions

Therefore, the following hypotheses are tested in this study.

1.3. Class Hypothesis

- Age will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Gender will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Race will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Occupational status will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Mass Media will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Television commercials portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Television show portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class

- Magazine portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Newspaper portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Radio portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Friends will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Family will have a significant effect on perception of class
- Entertainers will have a significant effect on perception of class

1.4. Consumption Hypothesis (Product Purchases)

- Age will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Gender will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Race will have a significant effect on attitude/perception of consumption
- Occupational status will have a significant effect on perception of consumption
- Mass media will have a significant effect on perception of consumption
- Mass Media portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Television commercials portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Television show portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Magazine portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Newspaper portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Radio portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Class perception will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Friends will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Family will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption
- Entertainers will have a significant effect on attitudes on consumption

1.5. Wants Hypothesis

- Mass Media portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Television commercials portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants

- Television show portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Magazine portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Newspaper portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Radio portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Class perception will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Friends will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Family will have a significant effect on attitudes toward wants
- Entertainers will have a significant effect on perception of consumption
- Co-workers will have a significant effect on perception of consumption

1.6. Poverty Conception Hypothesis

- Mass Media portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Television commercials portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Television show portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Magazine portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Newspaper portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Radio portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Income perception will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Friends will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Family will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Entertainers will have a significant effect on conception of poverty
- Co-workers will have a significant effect on conception of poverty

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants in this study are 201 undergraduate students, from a selective public university in southwest Louisiana, enrolled in Sociology, Criminal Justice and Political Science courses. Students completed a survey/questionnaire "Consumption Patterns and Behavior Survey" composed of open-ended and closed-ended questions about their consumer behavior and lifestyles.

2.1. Instrumentation

A new measure of behavior and attitudes about poverty and conspicuous consumption was developed and used in this study. A new measure addressed the lack of existing scales that address consumption behavior as it relates to poverty and conspicuous consumption, which is the primary focus of this research. The new scale covers three areas. First, participants provided demographic or background variables: age, race/ethnicity, gender/sex, income, occupation and family size. Second, participants responded to open-ended items about their lifestyle conception of needs and wants. Third, participants responded to statements that assess their behavior and attitude about consumption. Each statement the respondent rated on a 5-point likert scale from "Usually" to "Almost Never." An illustrative item is, "I buy products that are featured in television commercials."

2.2. Validity

The Sims Consumption Patterns and Behavior Survey (CPBS) was given to a group of scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology and child and family studies for the purpose of determining the extent to which the items (content) measure the observations under investigation. All of the members on the validation committee were asked to assess the validity of each item according to their responses to the instrument, using a scale of zero to two (zero meaning the statement was not valid, one meaning the respondents were unsure and two meaning the statement was valid and measures what it was supposed to measure). A mean score of 1.875 was computed; therefore, validating the instrument for use in this study.

2.3. Reliability

The split-half procedure was used to establish instrument reliability. This technique involves the total score for the odd number questions correlated with a total score for the even number questions. A split-half reliability coefficient of 0.823 was calculated. The Spearman-Brown formula produced a reliability coefficient of 0.852. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 is considered appropriate for an investigative instrument.

2.4. Demographic Profile of the Participants

The participants in this study were 201 undergraduates' students. Of the 201 undergraduate students, one hundred and seventy six (176) were under the age of 25 and twenty-five (25) over the age of 25. Sixty-three (63) percent identified as White/Caucasian, thirty (30) percent African American/Black, three (3) percent Latino/Asian/Other and four (4) percent provided

no race/ethnic identification. Fifty-nine (59) percent were female and forty-one (41) percent male.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Analysis

Thirty-eight bivariate hypotheses are tested. These fall into three categories (1) determinants of one's self-categorization into a socioeconomic class, (2) determinants of one's attitudes towards consumption and (3) determinants of attitudes about poverty.

3.2. Findings

Table 1 shows that older adult students and black young adult students tend to assign themselves to a lower class. White young adults tend to assign themselves to a higher class. Most interesting was that students overall tend to assign themselves to a higher class. Those who assign themselves a higher class also say they are more likely to buy things featured in all kinds of mass media.

Table 2 reflects four items on the survey designed to elicit young adult purchasing patterns or attitudes toward consumption. Generally speaking: Those who spend the most freely-buying things they do not need, buying things because they are newer, buying replacements for things that are not worn out and caring about brand names-are the most influenced by every hypothetical source measured in the survey instrument; all media measures, friends, families and entertainers. More specifically, those who spend the most freely tend to assign themselves to a higher class. Young adult males seek out brand names more than young adult females. Older adult students tend more toward buying only what they need. Black young adults tend more toward buying things they do not need. White young adults tend more toward buying only what they need. Asian young adults tend to buy things because they are newer. Professional young adults tend not to buy things because they are newer. Service workers young adults tend not to replace things before they are worn out.

In **Table 3**, young adults who make buying decisions based upon their income tend not to buy the things they see in magazines. It is noteworthy that for those who make purchasing decisions based upon their income, no other form of mass media has any discernable effect-neither do friends, family, entertainers or co-workers. Those who pay off credit cards every month are only influenced to buy things like their co-workers possessions.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations with class

		Class
- = Significant ($p < 0.05$), Negative Correlation		
+ = Significant ($p < 0.05$), Positive Correlation		
Age will have a significant effect on perception of class.		-
Gender will have a significant effect on perception of class.		
Race will have a significant effect on perception of class.	Black	-
	White	+
	Hisp/Latin	
	Asian	
	Other	
Occupational status will have a significant effect on perception of class.	Student	+
	Service	
	Industry	
	Professional	
	Other	
Mass Media will have a significant effect on perception of class.		
Television commercials portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class.		+
Television show portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class.		+
Magazine portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class.		+
Newspaper portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class.		+
Radio portrayals will have a significant effect on perception of class.		+
Friends will have a significant effect on perception of class.		
Family will have a significant effect on perception of class.		
Entertainers will have a significant effect on perception of class.		

Table 2. Bivariate correlation with attitudes toward consumption

		Brands	Don't Need	Buy Newest	Replace before worn
- = Significant ($p < 0.05$), Negative Correlation					
+ = Significant ($p < 0.05$), Positive Correlation					
Age will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		-			
Gender will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+			
Race will have a significant effect on attitude/perception of consumption.	Black		+		
	White		-		
	Hisp/Latin				
	Asian			+	
	Other				
Occupational status will have a significant effect on perception of consumption.	Student	+			
	Service				-
	Industry				
	Professional			-	-
	Other				
Mass media will have a significant effect on perception of consumption.		+	+	+	+
Television commercials portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Television show portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Magazine portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Newspaper portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Radio portrayals will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Class perception will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Friends will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Family will have a significant effect on attitudes toward consumption.		+	+	+	+
Entertainers will have a significant effect on attitudes on consumption.		+	+	+	+

Table 3. Bivariate correlations with conceptions of poverty

	Income based	Use credit	Feel better	Income display/ clothing	Income display/ peer group	Too much credit card debt	Cash	Unmet wants = poor	Income display/ housing	Income supports preferred Lifestyle
Mass Media portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.			+	+	+	+		+		
Television commercials portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.				+	+					
Television show portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.				+	+					
Magazine portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.	-			+	+				+	
Newspaper portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.					+					
Radio portrayals will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.				+	+					
Income will have a significant effect on conception of poverty									+	+
Friends will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.			+							
Family will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.			+	+	+					+
Entertainers will have a significant effect on conception of poverty.			+	+	+	+		+	+	
Co-workers will have a significant effect on conception of poverty		+	+	+	+					

Though they are not particularly influenced to buy, by any particular mass medium, those who feel better about themselves when they can buy the things they want, are more prone to say they use the mass media to inform their purchasing decisions. Also, those who feel better about themselves when they can buy the things they want, tend towards buying things similar to the possessions of their friends, family, entertainers and co-workers. The data also demonstrates that young adults who think their income is evident in their clothing tend to buy things they see in every kind of mass media except newspapers. Young adults who think their income is evident in their clothing also tend to buy things like the possessions of their family and entertainers and co-workers.

Though they are not particularly influenced to buy, by any particular mass medium, young adults who say they have too much credit card debt and people who feel poor when they cannot buy what they want are more prone to say they use the mass media to inform their purchasing and are more prone to buy what entertainers endorse. Young adults who think their income is evident in their housing tend to buy things they see in magazines and no other medium. They have higher incomes and they tend to buy what entertainers endorse. Young adults who think their income supports their preferred lifestyle tend to say they make purchasing decisions based on their income and tend to buy what their family members have.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study may have important implications about young adult attitude about poverty conception and consumption patterns. First, a significant difference between non-whites and whites perception of themselves as lower class may indicate that poverty consciousness may be more a reflection of race than class. The other significant difference in older and younger person's attitudes and perceptions of class and consumption may be due to a culture that ascribes modernity to youth. Moreover, young adults may have a different perception of poverty because of their exposure to more conspicuous consumption portrayals in mass media whereas older persons may discern mass media reality from fantasy. Young adults now more than ever may have limited realistic perception, attitude or awareness about poverty in comparison to their older counterparts.

The results of this study indicate that some young consumers consumption and leisure spending is based on influences from family, friends, mass media and entertainers. This may indicate that some young adult consumer perception of poverty and consumption may be attributed to popular culture portrayals in the mass media. Mass media portrayal shapes the ideology of success and then legitimizes the means to achieve success-conspicuous consumption. However, mass media portrayals, rarely engages the public in a discourse

that reflects a cadre of experiences, realities, circumstances and outcomes resulting from conspicuous consumption. Neither does it provide sufficient critical portrayals about poverty as it relates to overconsumption. As such, young consumers may not perceive a class versus poverty basis (as meaning) at the root of popular culture consumption portrayals and even if they do, they may find the consumption opportunities just too hard to resist.

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