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Ethnographic and Critically Reflective Study of Consumption

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This study will be based on a recent trip the Bull Ring in Birmingham in which tasks were completed to analyse consumption. This study will look at my knowledge of consumption and how this applied to the study in Birmingham and relevant theorists.

Before the study I did not realise how out of control of our own consumption we are. In Birmingham, despite being there on a weekday, there were plenty of people shopping. In feedback from my peers, when they simply sat and watched everyone, they felt people were looking at them and wondering why they too were not walking around frantically, as if sitting still was unnatural. As President Hoover said in 1928, people needed to become 'constantly moving happiness machines' in order for capitalism in modern society to work and it was evident that consumers in Birmingham were rushing through the shopping centre seeking something out. I agree with Williams that this urgency is caused because the consumer has false needs; they are told they need certain products and that these products will help them live the lifestyle they desire (Williams 1983: 324).

I learnt that Marx would say this constant need to be consuming shown by shoppers is to escape from the alienation of work, to escape from '...self-estrangement...people exist in a world of their own making they relate to it only as strangers...' (Howard & King 1988: 18), as they '...no longer retain control of the potential that is embodied in their labour. This... labour-power has been exchanged with the capitalist for the abstract token of value to be found in wages' (Lee 1996: 6). This began in the 1980's when Thatcherism brought a promotion of wealth and a drive in people to succeed, people were encouraged to work to achieve their life goals and according to Letwin (1993), the government were persuaded to allow 'laissez-faire' (1993: 20) as it encouraged economic growth and the proletariat to become consumers as part of the meritocracy society. I believe this is true since this left the masses with disposable income and with the commodification of all products they began to '...work...not to stay alive but in order to be able to afford to buy consumer products' (Bocock 1995: 50). However in recent years, and in particular our current economic climate, it could be argued that these theories are no longer applicable because the people at the Bull Ring are unlikely to have had job else they would not be shopping in the middle of the day, so if they do not have disposable income then how can they still shop.

I learnt through this study that we still shop because we seek individuality; we think we have found it but it is simply an illusion, as Adorno (2001) would say pseudo individuality. From what I have learnt, I agree in general with Lyotard (1984) that we are in a post-modern society; this explains why we are all seeking to be individual, in a time of '...fragmentation, changes in the experience of space and

time, and new modes of experience, subjectivity and culture' (Best and Kellner 1994: 3) we find ourselves through what we consume 'it is not merely a material object...but something which conveys a meaning, which is used to display something about who the consumer aims to be at that time' (Bocock 1993: 52). Bocock interestingly suggests now people are 'hooked into desiring to consume goods' (Bocock 1993: 53), which explains the constant consuming, we are consuming ourselves, a process of reification, 'people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile' (Marcuse, 1968). This was evident in the study as there was something driving the shoppers to find the goods they were looking for, when a peer asked them for directions, one woman was unaware she was even being spoken to and many brushed off the query and barely stopped at all, they were too focused on the end result, as Bocock quite rightly suggests, '...the more they consume, the more they will desire to consume' (Bocock 1993: 69).

I agree with Bell's (1976) statement that in a post-modern society people want instant gratification; we consume because it gives us pleasure there and then, albeit short lived; which he says stems from the 'Protestant Ethic' (Bell 1976: 21) of which since it broke apart from the bourgeois society, only hedonism remained - 'the idea of pleasure as a way of life' (Bell 1976: 22) as it is another explanation for the constant consumption, it suggests that shoppers constantly consume because they have been socialised to think of it as a way of life.

In addition to instant gratification, I have learnt about and think Bell (1976) is correct in saying that 'society fails to provide some set of "ultimate meanings" in its character structure, work, and culture, becomes unsettling to a system' (Bell 1976: 21), so people find comfort from 'the cultural contradictions of capitalism (Best and Kellner 1994: 14) by consuming. This however opposes Bauman's suggestion that postmodernism is '...perhaps...a state of mind...' (Bauman 1992: vi) which from what I have learnt feel cannot be true as there is supporting evidence that post-modernism is becoming the way we live our lives. However Bauman also talks of '...imagined communities...' (Bauman 1992: xx), contradicting himself and agreeing with Bell (1976) , which is further evidence that post-modernism is more than just of the mind, these communities that were once there are now gone since society is more geographically mobile and everything is uncertain. Neoliberalists Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggest that this breakdown has left us with a 'risk society' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 1) in which we are left to control our own fate and the process of our lives and I think causes us to seek consumption, the shoppers in the Bull Ring felt in control of their shopping and therefore their lives.

As well as the break-down of community, we also live in a time where there are no grand meta-narratives, which Ritzer (2000) would suggest stems from rationalisation in a society of

McDonaldisation. I think that whilst we were are more rational beings, shown by secularisation, people still need something to believe in something as we cannot always think about everything objectively. So in a time where there are no grand meta-narratives, and people are struggling to find where they belong, I feel explains Bocock's idea that we consume to find ourselves and that '...consumption is not simply an economic process, but a social and cultural one' (Bocock 1993: 70) and the process of consumption is far from rational.

Consumption however is far from rational; we are not as free as we think. Before this study I thought that we were all our own people and that we consumed what we wanted to consume, however I have learnt that this is not the case. During the study in Birmingham male peers were required to find spaces in the shopping centre in which they felt comfortable, I was surprised to learn that these were few and far between. 'Under post-modern conditions, identities are in a constant state of change...they mix and match what were formerly distinct categories' (Bocock 1993: 81) so I found my peers' inability to find spaces strange as I thought that a post-modern society allowed men in typically female spaces. In light of this I agree with Bauman (1988) that 'complete freedom can only be imagined' (Bauman 1988: 51).

I have learnt in this study about the theory of Disneyisation. During the trip to Birmingham I had to walk around the Disney store and observe the interactions I had with the staff there, I did not receive the reactions from the staff as the theory of Disneyisation would expect. The theory of Disneyisation suggests control of the staff and a lack of freedom for the visitors as well, however I feel this control begins and ends in Disney-Land and Disney-World themselves. I was barely acknowledged in the Disney store so it cannot be said that 'from the moment Disney visitors [arrive] ...they are being controlled' (Bryman 2004: 1) and I did not feel made to look at anything in particular, say or do anything I did not want to. There was no evidence at all of the 'generation of a distinctive language' (Bryman 2004: 2) described in the theory as I was simply asked if I needed help, I was not subject to new descriptive words. I was smiled at by an employee but it was not an 'emotional labour... [of] friendliness and helpfulness...'(Bryman 2004: 107) it was perhaps not entirely genuine but it felt welcoming enough, it did not stand out as fake but I understand that she was there to greet people which Bryman (2004) would construe as false. I also do not 'expect this kind of behaviour' (Bryman 2004: 107) as the theory suggests, so consumers in general have not become victims to Disneyisation. From my findings during the study in Birmingham I cannot agree with Bryman on his theory of Disneyisation and his suggestions of the impact it has on consumption as I feel theory does not exist outside of Disney-Land and Disney-World.

I have however learnt of a lack of freedom of consumption in other stores, in particular Ann Summers, in terms of male versus female representations. My male peers were not free to browse around the Ann Summers store, one was asked to leave by the security and the others simply felt uncomfortable. This may be because as Rappaport (2000) described 'shopping ha[s] long been associated with women' (Scanlon 2000: 30) and now there is a 'new era of shopping' (Scanlon 2000: 31) of 'female exploration' (Scanlon 2000: 31) and 'new images of femininity' (Scanlon 2000: 43). I think this is relevant as McRobbie also notes 'changing modes of femininity' (McRobbie 1996: 157). Women have significantly changed and I feel this is why male peers felt uncomfortable in Ann Summers as it is now a place for the new woman.

It is obvious that there has been a 'dramatic rise in the re-sexualization of women's bodies' (Evans et al. 2010: 114) as 'girls are highly sexual in their dress and appearance' (McRobbie 1996: 169). Now 'sex and sexuality have been conceptualised... an approach to sex which focuses on...materialization within a whole range of social and cultural arenas' (Attwood 2006: 3) and with the 'mainstreaming of explicit, 'up for it' female sexuality' (Evans et al. 2010: 115), 'the proliferation of sexual products directed at women has opened up spaces from which women can express their sexuality and experience themselves as active sexual subjects' (Evans et al. 2010: 115), shops like Ann Summers are part of the high-street and are seen as predominantly female shops in which women strongly express their sexuality. This is consequently why my male peers felt uncomfortable as they did not fit in with the purpose of the shop. I also have learnt that 'young women (top girls) are now understood to be ideal subjects of female success' (McRobbie 2007: 2) and '[have] become wage-earning subjects' (McRobbie 2007: 2) so I think that they have perhaps earned the right to express themselves to a certain extent however they see fit and should not be subject to such criticism, it unfortunately seems to happen at the expense of male freedom of consumption.

I have also learnt about the theory of McDonaldisation, however I feel that generally it ceases to exist outside of McDonalds itself. The study in Birmingham showed that Ritzer's (2000) theory is evident in McDonalds itself in that when served twice and asked for the same products twice, my peer had the same conversation with the worker both times, a pseudo interaction. I think that as I said previously, the rationalisation part of Ritzer's (2000) theory is the only part relevant to today's society, 'the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate...' (Ritzer 2000: 1) is incorrect; as not everything can be predicted, controlled and not everything is seen as the bigger the better e.g. iPods. As Turner (2003) suggests 'The McDonaldization of Society ... was explicitly a study in Weberian sociology insofar as it described the rationalization of contemporary society' (Turner 2003: 137), I feel that Weber's theory explains sufficiently in itself

society in that rationalisation is simply the change in society from grand meta-narratives to scientific explanations, rather than the grander theory of McDonaldisation.

I agree with Weber's ideas that are furthered in Nietzsche theory that there has been a 'general process of enlightenment, a movement towards nihilism (the devaluation of ultimate values)...' (Gane 2002: 2) and that the meaning or value of objects have been taken away, devalued, and replaced by gratification, the mere pursuit of the products by any means necessary (Weber). As Baudrillard (1994) suggests the products we are consuming are 'hyper real' (Baudrillard 1994: 1), a simulation of something we once knew the meaning of, so like Weber says we no longer know what we are consuming but we seek the gratification of consumption itself because 'consumption is more than ever before an experience which is to be located in the head' (Bocock 1995: 51).

I think this is increasingly evident in our consumption of places. I knew from my own experience that sometimes I think about how visiting somewhere will look to others, but this study taught me that it is not only me that does this. We visit places that we think we want to see but that are actually 'social constructions, created, amplified, and promoted to attract visitors' (Herbert 2001: 2). This also explains why people are shopping in Birmingham; aside from consuming products they are consuming the place of Birmingham and the shopping centre. In choosing the Bull Ring to shop in, those consumers made a decision of what that place would say about them, as both the Birmingham City Council website and the Bull Ring website describe the city as a vibrant and lively city, full of culture at the heart of the country, consumers would see this somewhere not only to shop but also show that they enjoy culture and value their country. This highlights how 'places are increasingly being restructured as centres for consumption' (Urry 1995: 1) the Bull Ring is there as a distinct location for those who want to purchase products, the shopping centre is a main location in the city and people know to go there if they want to shop, it is also a distinctive building which people were taking photographs of even whilst we were there on the study, which supports the theory that 'places themselves are in a sense consumed, particularly visually' (Urry 1995: 1). I also agree that 'places can be literally consumed; what people take to be significant about a place' (Urry 1995: 1) the culture and architectural buildings that Birmingham presents are eventually lost and those who constantly visit no longer see them, they disappear after constant visits as they seldom change.

It is of no doubt that those shoppers in the Bull Ring were also using their shopping trip to present themselves online. 'So-called Facebook Places, a location-based service (LBS), which allows you to 'check-in' when you are entering new locations on the go. This is a very popular feature and the

same people often use it frequently' (Olsen :2) means that you can show your online friends where you are/have been, allowing 'Facebook [to] be where people live their digital lives' (Hempel 2009: 3) and thus fix those values of the place onto you. So people put consideration into choosing the Bull Ring as 'it [is] very clear that almost everybody is concerned of how they stand out on Facebook. On Facebook it is possible for all your friends to "see" and "hear" you all the time and therefore it is extremely important to think about what kind of signals you put out there' (Olsen :3). This also means, as I have learnt, that a place is 'a distinct entity formed from physical structures, functions, activities, atmospheres and even symbolic values' (Ashworth and Voogd 1990: 66) which is created by the city marketers from what they think the public want from the place.

I have also learnt that 'McDonaldisation constitutes...standardization and homogenisation...' (Alfino et al. 1998: xxi) and '...can been seen correctly as a contribution to the study of global consumption...' (Turner 2003: 137). However I disagree with two of Levitt's (1983) three points of standardisation; firstly that there is a homogenisation of consumer needs and interests worldwide and secondly that there is a willingness by people to sacrifice product quality for price. I agree with Czinkota and Ronkanien (2004) that 'referring the first point, global segments with homogenous customer interests and response pattern may be identified in some product markets, but there is substantial evidence for diversity of behaviour within countries, and the emergence of country specific segments' (Torun 2007: 1), I feel that even in developed countries it is difficult to say that everyone has the same needs and interests because 'someone who thinks globally is still a product of his or her own culture' (De Mooij 2009: 2) and I think it is not possible use the same advert for multiple countries as every country has different cultures and beliefs, even a colour can mean something different in different countries as 'paradoxical values are found between cultures' (De Mooij 2009: 3). I agree with Halliburton and Hunerberg (1993: 91) that 'it is not whether to go global, but for which product/market, at what time, with which aspect of the marketing operation, and to which extent' (Torun 2007: 1), 'you have to 'think global but act local' (De Mooij 2009: 2). I also agree with Cazdyn and Szeman in Part 1c of their book *'After Globalization'* (2011) that globalisation does not exist but the elements associated with it; for example technology and worldwide trading; are obviously there but as Robertson (1990) says 'the concept of globalization [has been] ... applied to a particular series of developments concerning the concrete structuration of the world as a whole' (Featherstone 1994: 20) and to give the impression the world is moving on from capitalism.

I do however agree with Levitt (1983) on his third point that 'substantial economies of scale in production and marketing can be achieved through supplying global markets' (Torun 2007: 1), as global trading means better and more business opportunities. I think that businesses are becoming global by trading internationally. The process of internationalisation 'a process in which the firms gradually increase their international involvement' (Johanson and Vahlne 1977: 1), and they not only trade with other countries, but they 'increas[e] the involvement of the firm in the individual foreign country' (Johanson and Vahlne 1977: 1), they begin making products overseas.

The constraints of consumerism and capitalism I learnt through this study made me wonder if there is an alternative. 'Communism is the opposite of free-market capitalism' (Lansford 2007: 9) in which 'the ultimate goal... is to create a society in which everyone is equal and there are no social or economic classes' (Lansford 2007: 9). In reality though, with an individual or small group in power communism fails as propaganda begins to be used for control in 'the trend towards totalitarianism' (Lansford 2007: 45). In light of this, there seems to be a choice between two types of control. In my opinion I would rather be trapped in a capitalist society where I feel free and can enjoy consuming.

Global trading gives us global brands, which this study has taught me are a driving force behind consumerism. The shoppers in the Bull Ring would all recognise brands and what they symbolise. People buy certain brands to attach the meanings to them, 'we consume signs not objects' (Lury 1997: 69) and consumers have the opportunity to not only buy the brands but to tell their online friends; what Meyrowitz (1985) calls their 'front stage presentation' (Olsen :3); by "liking" the Facebook page. So not only are they driven by their false need for something but they are now considering how they can appear online to others and now 'internet growth has exploded. [It] force[s] people to see themselves in relation to other cultures as well as their own' (Holt et al. 2004: 3) but 'the rise of global culture doesn't mean that consumers share the same tastes or values' (Holt et al. 2004: 3); global trading does not mean globalisation. It seems though, that there is little alternative to capitalism and consumer culture, so perhaps we should just enjoy our products and the freedom digitalisation gives us.

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