

Does He Take Sugar? The Disabled Consumer and Identity

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Extended Abstract

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Consumption and possessions as extensions of the self play a central role in defining and communicating identity. As Miller (1998) points out, the shifting nature of personal identities in late modernity has been debated at length; narratives of self identity are constantly revised, yet remain largely relational and embedded in the social processes that are ultimately context specific. In proposing these theories of place and space, however, there is an implicit assumption that access to contemporary identity, via mass consumption, is both a right and a freedom. Theories of identity and its implications for consumption are ipso facto based upon able bodied consumers who make particular choices about their consumption activities with greater or lesser regard to the subsequent implications for social identification. This paper disputes the conventional view of the consumer by focussing on those (dis)abled consumers for whom the social processes of identification and social integration are challenged by their physical condition. Put simply, how do physically disabled consumers cope in a society in which the identity of the individual is expressed through consumption activities that are either unavailable or unattainable? Based on an idea of 'liveable lives', how does the experience of being physically disabled impact upon consumption and therefore the formation and expression of identity?

Disability as a field of academic enquiry is a relatively recent field, arising from the demands of disabled people for full citizenship rights during the 1990's. The emphasis at this time was the need to enact anti-discrimination legislation and to expose institutional forms of disability discrimination using objective evidence. The result, as Paterson and Hughes (1999) point out, was that structural and practical aspects of disability were researched at the expense of the disabling experience of exclusion in every day life. Research was concentrated on forms of exclusion from public forums such as education, the labour market, transport, housing, polling stations etc (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare 1999) rather than cultural and social aspects of consumption. As a result, there has been a necessary and laudable change in both disabled access arrangements, culminating in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995-2004, and attitudes towards the disabled as a group. There has, however, been little attempt to consider the experience of being disabled and how this impacts on self construction, social identification and the social conflict, or cohesion, that arises from the attempt to 'include' a previously marginalized group.

This research is founded upon an idea of identity located at the individual – society interface (Dittmar 1992). Whilst notions of identity and self have a long and complex tradition, more recent theorists have recognised that identity is not merely constructed, but depends upon some other (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999). The means by which individuals and groups negotiate and defend their identities is dependent on socially defined terms, as Berger (1966) suggests,

“One identifies oneself and one is identified by others, by being located in a common world”

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Indeed it has been suggested that consumption has become the overriding determinant of identity construction, replacing families, organisations and personal histories (Gabriel and Lang 1995). Baumann (1988) suggests that the ownership of

consumables may determine social evaluations previously dependent upon employment status, allowing products to become a currency of social mobility. By accepting that individuals actively choose to adopt and/or create identities through consumption, we require an understanding of how individuals understand possessions and the meanings they convey. Within a social world, it is also necessary that these meanings are validated and identities affirmed by others (Richins 1999). This implies first, the need to understand how identity is created and defined and second, how the nature of the relationship between the individual and society mediates this definition (Hogg and Mitchell 1996; Reed II 2002).

Theorising consumption as a social process in the tradition of, for example, Bourdieu (1979) and Douglas and Isherwood (1978) suggests that our identity is based on the symbolic, rather than material consumption. The implications of this approach in terms of the activity of acquisition of goods, is that all consumers are able to understand and interpret the self, and therefore socially significant relationships, in an equal way. When the consumer has a significant physical impairment this may inhibit both their access to purchasing opportunities, and equally, how they construct their identities in relation to particular goods.

The specific focus for this research is clothing consumption. As an identity relevant decision, clothing choice offers several important opportunities. First, the results are generally presented for public display; clothing is a fundamental aspect of every day life and a key communicator of social messages (Lurie 1992). Second, the process of making clothing purchases is generally a social activity, either by the physical activity of going shopping, or by the social effects of the purchase. Finally, as this research concerns physically disabled consumers, there are a number of practical constraints that have a direct effect on clothing choice (Hogg and Wilson 2003). As Calafato (1997) observes

If what we wear is a form of projection, or simulation of society, the clothed body becomes an expression of the present, which is both intensely personal and a language of social communication

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In this research we explore this communication in the context of disability and relate it to the democratisation of access to consumption implicit in recent legislation.

Previous research in this area has focussed on the practicalities of disabled consumption (Burnett 1996), differences in service provision and the treatment of the disabled in services (Kaufman 1995) or the lack of positive images of disabled consumers in marketing and advertising. This highlights the tendency of many organisations to treat disabled consumers as an “afterthought” (Kaufman-Scarborough 2001, p 433) and an apparent inability to see beyond the disability. (Klerk and Ampousah 2002). Whilst this provides the enabling conditions for inclusion, no study to date has considered the way in which the disabled are either able or prepared to enter into these patterns of consumption or how this impacts upon their individual and collective identity.

The specific objectives of the research are:

1. to investigate the experience of being a disabled consumer and how this impacts upon choice in the context of clothing
2. to consider the implications of physical constraints on consumption as a communicator of identity and how changes in the physical purchase opportunities has an effect on identity formation

Method

It has been argued by disabled groups that research should be guided by the principle of ‘nothing about us without us’ (Charlton 1998). This highlights the fact that the vast majority of disabled research in the past has ignored the experience of disabled people themselves. In addition, much research in this area has been based on an *assumption* of a shared experience and vulnerability (Frankenburg, Robinson and Delahooke 2000) without adequate consideration of the way that disabled people actively engage in their consumption activities. This research uses a diary method of data collection backed up by in-depth interviews. Consumer diaries as a data collection method have a number of advantages. As they are non directive and largely within the reference frame of the writer, they can be seen as a ‘melting pot’ and a means of capturing the interplay of elements that a consumer brings to a study (Schatzman and Strauss 1973; Richards 1996). They provide a more contemporaneous record of events, feelings and experiences than other methods whilst avoiding the catalyst effects of participant observation.

One of the main limitations of such studies has been the need to select participants who are able to express themselves in writing. As a result two main diary completion methods were adopted: a written ‘traditional’ form, and a spoken form by providing participants with tape machines and allowing them to speak their ideas into a recorder. Practical problems associated with sustaining interest over the diary period were addressed by restricting continuous diary keeping to 4 week period and a weekly discussion with researchers during that period. A total of 20 participants were invited to keep diaries with 18 individuals completing the diary period. Participants were recruited through disability support groups and Shopmobility schemes. All data was transcribed and coded using Nvivo.

Preliminary Results

The analysis of data is in preliminary stages; however, initial analysis suggests that:

- How the respondents define themselves as ‘disabled’ is an important aspect of their consumption activities. Several respondents refer to the benefit of disabled facilities/access etc as enabling whilst at the same time describing a feeling of “inadequacy” in the need to use them.
- Respondents describe problems with disabled facilities being a grudging requirement rather than an acknowledgment of the needs of a consumer group, therefore commitment to these facilities is offhand by both organisations and other consumers. Diaries include incidents of disabled toilets being used as a storage room, abuse of disabled parking areas and broken automatic doors. As a result respondents are disgruntled and feel that their worth as consumers is not important to either the retailers or other consumers.

- A second recurrent theme is the provision of disabled facilities that do not recognise the experience of being a disabled consumer. The implicit assumption is that these are designed by able bodied people who assume an understanding of disability. These facilities can actually bar disabled consumers from the services they are attempting to access.
- A third theme is the problems with marrying 'fashion' which dictates not only what individuals wear, but also what is available in store, with the need to have convenient and comfortable clothing. This tension is particularly apparent with wheelchair users, one describes the feeling that the chair is the only thing people see and therefore what she wears is irrelevant as no one will notice her as an individual, simply the chair. Another respondent describes the difficulty in achieving any identity out with his disability and a 'blindness' that focuses on only one aspect of him.
- Despite the efforts of disabled groups to educate the public about disability, several instances of the disabled consumer being ignored or treated as incompetent as staff address their able bodied companion were recorded with consequent impact upon the consumers feeling of self worth.

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