Gender, comsumption, and interaction among American[1]

by Mary Bucholtz

Abstract

Summary

1. Introducction
2. Language, gender and consumption
3. Youth culture and consumer culture
4. Marcant-se' un mateix
5. Conclusion
6. References

1. Introduction

As capitalism has been transformed in the United States and elsewhere in the past several decades, consumption has moved to the center of the relationship between political economy and social identity. Previously, social identities were linked to economic structures mainly through workers' position in the labor market and their potential for social and economic mobility. In the current global economy, however, the labor market, along with capitalism itself, has become diffuse and flexible (Harvey 1989) and so identities based on traditional economic systems, such as social class, are no longer as stable as they once were. At the same time, consumption has become a primary means of forming identities through the intensive global marketing of niche lifestyles (Lury 2004). In a variety of contexts, people are being invited to reimagine themselves as consumers first and foremost (Bartlett et al. 2004; cf. Collins 2001; Fairclough 1993).

One indication of this shift is that young people are heavily targeted by advertisers despite their marginal position in the labor market (Klein 2000; Quart 2003; Milner 2004; Schor 2004). Youth are a focus of corporate attention not only because they increasingly have access to disposable income but because they are seen as the initiators of new street-based styles that can be commodified and marketed to a mass public (including other young people). Although the commercialization of youth culture is widely recognized by researchers, commentators, and the public at large, the issue has been examined primarily from an adult perspective. Consequently, commentators typically take a critical view of the relationship between youth and consumption. American sociologist Murray Milner, for example, argues that "the status systems of high school … are an important contributing factor to the creation and maintenance of consumer capitalism" (2004:8). He maintains that teenagers' consumption-based status is a problem that can be solved through a range of substantial changes in U.S. schooling practice, including school uniforms, random lunchroom seating assignments, gender-segregated schools, and mandatory national service. Similarly, economist Juliet Schor considers advertisers' targeting of the youth market to be extremely harmful to children's development as social persons:

> Marketing is … fundamentally altering the experience of childhood. Corporations have infiltrated the core activities and institutions of childhood, with virtually no resistance from government or parents. Advertising is widespread in schools. Electronic media are replacing conventional play. We have become a nation that places a lower priority on teaching its children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually, than it does on training them to consume. The long-term consequences of this development are ominous. (2004:13)

Schor goes on to link the targeting of children as consumers to a range of highly sensationalized problems confronting contemporary American youth, from obesity to attention deficit disorder to bullying to psychological disorders.

---

[1] A longer and somewhat different version of this article appears as Bucholtz (forthcoming). My thanks to Joan Pujolar for invinting me to contribute to this special issue.

There is no question that the drive to market to children and teenagers and the consequent emphasis on consumption among youth have a number of pernicious effects, but at the same time the strongly deterministic view taken by these and similar researchers fails to look closely at how young people engage with commodities in their everyday lives. Such a view may therefore overlook the fact that youth do not simply fall into a predetermined economic script written by corporate marketers. Rather, young people take up complex and ambivalent relationships toward consumption that are primarily based in locally relevant social concerns rather than global market forces.

Unlike most previous work, an ethnographic and interactional approach to consumption does not impose the analyst's perspective but highlights the ways in which teenagers, as members of a culture, jointly make and make sense of their social worlds, moment by moment. Ethnographic studies of youth and consumption, though still scarce, enrich theoretically and politically driven accounts both by taking youth seriously as social actors and by demonstrating the variable meanings of consumption among youth in different cultural contexts (e.g., Liechty 2003; Wulff 1995). Such an approach enables researchers to acknowledge that the grasp of the new global economy is far-reaching but not all-encompassing, and to recognize that local processes of meaning making are still the best defense against the workings of power. These processes are closely tied to language use and social interaction, and as discussed further below, they are also bound up with gendered practices and identities.

2. Language, gender and consumption

Within language and gender studies, relatively little attention has been paid to the language use of consumers (McElhinny 2002, 2003). On the one hand, ethnographically based studies have tended to focus on economic production, examining the role of gender in workplace discourse (e.g., Holmes & Stubbe 2003), and how gendered language use is structured by social class and the labor market (e.g., Gal 1978; Milroy 1987; Nichols 1983). On the other hand, analysts of gender and discourse who focus on consumer culture generally do not take an ethnographic perspective. Such studies highlight the imperative to consumption created through advertising discourse and the reproduction of gender ideologies through consumer media (e.g., Benwell 2003; Machin & Thornborrow 2003; Talbot & Morgan 1999), but they usually do not document how social actors negotiate and give meaning to practices of consumption on the ground, in local ethnographic contexts. In addition, some language and gender research (Bucholtz 1999a, b; Cameron 2000) documents the commodification of language itself in gendered contexts of production and consumption.

The situation of youth makes clear the importance of an ethnographic and interactional perspective in linguistic research on consumer culture. Language mediates young people's consumption practices in both the top-down, social-structural fashion that is the focus of cultural studies scholars and in the bottom-up fashion favored by ethnographers, which emphasizes local contexts and the agency of social actors. At the level of social structure, language encourages consumption through advertising, which links commodities to youth cultures by tying them to an ideology of coolness (Frank 1997). In this process, a rapidly shifting set of trendy products is targeted at specific niche markets: music, clothing, personal grooming products, sports equipment, even food. At the level of individual agency, however, language may be even more important than the actual acquisition of commodities in the local construction and differentiation of youth cultures. Such identity work takes place not only through the semiotic use of linguistic markers—phonological, syntactic, and lexical forms— that index specific youth styles, but also through interaction about consumption.

Language and gender researchers have explored both of these dimensions. Research on teenagers' reception of popular media demonstrates that as girls move into adolescence they become increasingly enmeshed in the gendered discourses of media and consumer culture (Coates 1999), and studies of gender and youth style in the United States show that young people's linguistic practices converge with gendered semiotic practices that are closely tied to consumption, such as clothing choices, in order to produce distinctive local categories of identity like jock, nerd, or gangster (Bucholtz 1999c; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 1999). In addition, a small amount of research has been done by language and gender scholars on how adolescents and preadolescents orient to and negotiate consumer products such as cosmetics for their own ends (Eckert 1996; Mendoza-Denton 1996). Such studies lay the foundation for more extensive interactional research on how young people use talk about

consuming to make social sense of commodities and their own place within late capitalist society.

Interactional analysis, like ethnography, focuses on the local sociocultural meanings of the practices in which social actors engage. It therefore provides a firm empirical testing ground for theoretically or politically derived claims about the social world. Close analysis of social interaction as it unfolds allows researchers to show how large-scale social phenomena like class or identity are produced in real time rather than residing in free-floating "discourses," ideologies, or structures that are not closely tied to specific social actors and situations.

In my own ethnographic and interactional research among American youth at a California high school that I call Bay City High (Bucholtz forthcoming), I show that through discourses of consumption—talk about where they shop and what they buy—young people positioned themselves as economic agents while locating themselves as particular kinds of classed, gendered, and racialized subjects. This process was supported by teachers' discourse concerning identity, in which teenagers were encouraged to acquire and display an individual style created through commodities. It is thus through the combination of top-down workings of corporate advertising and the bottom-up cultural practices and discourses of consumption among youth and those they interact with that the styles and subjectivities of youth cultures come into being.

3. Youth culture and consumer culture

At Bay City High, like most other U.S. high schools, students' lives were permeated and structured by commodities throughout the school day (see also Klein 2000; Schor 2004). They ate fast food from national chains at the school canteen and purchased soft drinks from corporate-sponsored vending machines on campus, a longstanding fundraising arrangement in many public schools.[2] While the integration of corporate advertising into public schools is a nationwide phenomenon, the need for such corporate support is especially acute in California. In 1995, when I conducted my research, California was one of the twelve wealthiest states in the nation, but ranked 48th with respect to per-student funding in elementary and secondary schools, a trend that continues today. As a result, teachers and administrators have been forced to turn elsewhere for educational materials. At Bay City High, materials donated by corporations and emblazoned with their logos appeared throughout the school, from record-company posters advertising the latest releases by popular music groups, which lined the walls in several classrooms, to the Coca-Cola logo on the scoreboard in the football field.

Yet even when the financial constraints of the school did not demand reliance on corporate resources, teachers often encouraged students to orient themselves to commodity culture. For example, in a health course that was mandatory for all sophomores at the school, the teacher had the students decorate their own three-ring paperboard binders with images and slogans from advertisements and articles in mass-market magazines to create a collage representing the kind of person they felt themselves to be. Most students clipped captions and photos from fashion and sports magazines, although some subverted the assignment by leaving their folder unadorned or by taking images from unsanctioned sources like the pro-marijuana magazine "High Times." Despite these few exceptions, students tended to acquiesce to this activity, for it further naturalized what was already a familiar experience to most teenagers: defining one's identity through discourses, images, and ideologies of consumption.[3]

Given that most American high schools, by necessity as well as by choice, are steeped in consumerism, commodity talk can be undertaken in almost any interactional context in school settings. Speakers regularly compliment one another on their acquisitions, comment on their own and others' possessions, and jointly recall past and plan future acts of consumption. Indeed, talk about shopping was so prevalent among Bay City High School students that although my research was not primarily concerned with this topic I soon added

---

[2] In many school districts in California, including this one, such arrangements have now been banned as part of a national concern with childhood and adolescent obesity
[3] It should be noted that in addition to this uncritical use of advertising, the same teacher posted numerous paradies of corporate advertisements in her classroom, mostly with anti-smoking messages. Such "ad busting" is a form of resistance to the relentlessness of marketing (Klein 2000)

it to the list of issues that I inquired about during ethnographic interviews. I did not conduct fieldwork on students' actual shopping practices; however, talk about such practices is a rich source of information about language and consumption in its own right, for regardless of whether students were accurately reporting their buying habits, their decisions about how to represent their own and others' consumer activities in interactions with me and their peers revealed a great deal about the identity positions they claimed for themselves and assigned to others.

A frequent practice in teenagers' talk about consumption was *branding*, or the association of brand names with social groups. This term has been used in nonlinguistically oriented cultural studies to describe the top-down processes in which corporations create and impose a semiotics of commodities on consumers, especially the highly desirable youth market (e.g., Klein 2000; Lury 2004; Quart 2003). Naomi Klein, the most influential critic of the global branding phenomenon, traces the practice back to the beginnings of mass production, when the uniformity of goods demanded symbolic differentiation through the creation of brand images. Branding later extended to the corporation as a whole, in part due to the shift of production overseas and hence the need to highlight the corporation over the commodity, which it was no longer producing directly. Branding is accomplished via relentless advertising to reinforce the brand and to penetrate the distracted awareness of prospective consumers whose lives have been saturated by marketing. In order to do so, striking language and images and new advertising venues are used to present the brand as not simply a logo but a total way of life. Nike in particular is identified by Klein and other writers as one of the quintessential success stories (or horror stories, depending on one's view) of marketing the brand rather than the commodity. Klein characterizes current branding practices as "the project of transforming culture into little more than a collection of brand-extensions-in-waiting" (2000:31).

However, such a perspective is overly deterministic, missing the ways in which consumers themselves engage with commodities in local symbolic and material economies— engagements that are not always anticipated or embraced by marketers. My own emphasis is therefore on how young people respond to the hypercommodification of youth culture within interaction.

4. Branding the self

At Bay City High School, the brands and labels that students wore and discussed are a clue to youth cultural style. This local practice of branding, as the counterpart of global corporate branding, discursively associated social groups with corporate trademarks and thus provided a commodity-mediated means by which social identities could be claimed. Self-branding allowed for a range of stances from pride to (mock) shame. For some students, self-branding was a practice akin to patriotism or rooting for a sports team, involving symbolic acts of loyalty as well as financial acts of economic support through regular purchases of the company's products. Nike and Polo were among the brands that attracted this sort of loyalty among teenagers at Bay City High during the period of the study.

For some students, especially those for whom trendy fashion was an integral part of their identities, branding was synonymous with social identification. The examples below illustrate this situation. The examples are taken from an ethnographic interview I conducted with two European American boys, Willie and Brand One, who based their close friendship in large part on their shared fashion aesthetic, which they called "pretty-boy." Although these teenagers' fascination with fashion may be considered gender-atypical by outsiders, it should be noted that many boys at Bay City High were deeply interested in clothing and it was not generally considered unmasculine to display such an interest. Indeed, it is some indication of the shift in gender ideologies among California youth over the past several decades that Brand One and Willie were able to maintain an intensely homosocial relationship, to dress and wear their hair nearly identically and share each other's clothing, and to proudly and openly describe themselves as "pretty boys" without being the targets of homophobic suspicion among their peers. However, the degree of interest these two boys showed in clothing and fashion was unusual among the male students in my study.

The pretty-boy style involved baggy ironed pants, oversized basketball shoes, and neatly ironed oversized shirts over a white T-shirt. Heavily influenced by the hip hop fashions popular with African American students, Brand One and Willie's style was rare among

European American teenagers. In fact, the boys claimed that they had invented the style, a claim that could be heard as credible only if the origins of the style among African American youth were discounted or ignored. At the time the study was conducted, such styles were strongly racialized as black by both black and white students, and so Brand One and Willie may also be seen as locating themselves racially as white innovators rather than as wannabe blacks. This position was reinforced by their assertions that other (white) boys tried to imitate their style.

In Example 1, Willie is describing elements of his and Brand One's style to me; I had previously learned about their "pretty-boy" style in a separate interview with Brand One. In the example, Willie responds to my question about style by naming the brand of his athletic shoes:

(1)

1	Mary:	What--
2		How would <u>you</u> (.) describe your style?
3		(1.7)
4	Willie:	.h::
5		Well like Nikes,
6		h: u:h h:
7		I haven't bought a other kind of pair of shoe,
8		(0.8)
9		since like fourth grade.

Brand One and Willie's style is influenced not only by the clothing fashions of African American youth culture but by the linguistic practices as well; the emblematic use of recognizable features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can be seen, for example, in line 7, in Willie's regularization of the indefinite determiner in *a other kind* and his use of zero plural marking in *pair of shoe*. Here language enters into the same symbolic economy in which clothing circulates, as a resource for the construction of style. At the same time, these boys' use of AAVE is tied quite directly to material economic processes. Their access to AAVE features was largely mediated by consumerism, for it was their consumption of commercial rap music even more than face-to-face interaction with AAVE speakers that allowed the boys to adopt emblematic features of the variety. Among European American students, such appropriation of African American clothing and speech styles was gendered insofar as it was both more common and more accepted among boys than girls.

Practices of branding arise at numerous points in this short excerpt. In lines 7 to 9, Willie offers a testimonial, a speech event characteristic of consumerism in late capitalism (Bucholtz 1999b): *I haven't bought a other kind of pair of shoe, (0.8) since like fourth grade.* His testimonial of brand loyalty bespeaks an expert knowledge of the excellent qualities of the endorsed product.
Later in the same interaction, brand names surface again in Willie's talk when he describes the kind of shirts he and Brand One wear:

(2)

109	Willie:	.h And mostly like (.) shirts and stuff,
110		like name brand,
111		like (1.0) Tommy Hilfiger,
112		Nautica,=
113		=like this is Nautica right here,=
114	Brand One:	

The first descriptor Willie offers is not oriented to visual style but to the status of the commodity—*name brand* (line 110)—and he goes on to list the particular brands that he wears, all of them labels that in advertisers' branding practices at the time were associated with a clean-cut, preppy, country-club image. These labels were appropriated and resignified by hip hop fans and performers in the mid-1990s as part of an urban youth style (see also Cutler 2003), an appropriation that is in turn appropriated by Willie and Brand One.

A knowledgeable stance is further constructed as the boys rapidly identify the labels of the shirts they are wearing and display them for me, an act that visibly illustrates their style.

This meticulous attention to and keen awareness of corporate brands recalls Marjorie Harness Goodwin's (2002) discussion of brand monitoring among preadolescent girls in California and is extremely widespread within consumer culture. These students' brand consciousness can even be found in the self-selected pseudonym Brand One, a name that positions the boy himself as a commodity. Through the self-branding practices they engage in, Willie and Brand One jointly align both with the brand and with each other as discerning consumers; like the brand, the indexicality of AAVE allows the boys to construct a hip hop-influenced youth style. Such social meanings come to be built through the kind of discursive work that these teenagers carry out here.

Branding is not an inherently gendered discursive practice, and indeed its wide availability across social classes and identities within capitalist society permits it to be used for a variety of local interactional purposes. But the styles that young people claim through the use of these discursive strategies are closely bound to gendered youth identities (like male hip hop fans). Thus branding is a flexible interactional resource for gendered and other kinds of identity work in the local context of American high schools.

5. Conclusion

As consumption eclipses production as the economic context for social identities, it is increasingly necessary to bring together top-down and bottom-up approaches in the analysis of language, gender, and political economy. Interaction must be recognized as the place where such meanings are forged and negotiated in dialogue with larger economic structures.

Rather than granting priority to adult (i.e., outsider) perspectives on this situation, the approach I advocate here privileges the local interactional and social meanings that young people themselves invest in commodities through the circulation of talk about brands, products, shopping, and consuming. Although new techniques of marketing research and advertising have infiltrated youths' daily lives, teenagers are not simply willing dupes of unseen hegemonic forces. Instead, in their talk about shopping, young people take up complex positions toward commodity culture that may variously resignify, reject, or reproduce dominant discourses of consumption. Through their stances toward commodities, speakers bring the economic world into their interactions in ways that are locally meaningful. In this way, they position themselves in relation to others in the commodity-saturated space of late capitalism.

6. References

Bartlett, Lesley, Marla Frederick, Thaddeus Gulbrandsen, & Enrique Murillo (2004). Marketization of education: Public schools for private ends. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 33(1):5-29.

Benwell, Bethan, ed. (2003). *Masculinity and men's lifestyle magazines*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bucholtz, Mary (1999a). Purchasing power: The gender and class imaginary on the shopping channel. In Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, & Laurel Sutton, eds., *Reinventing identities: The gendered self in discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press. 348-368.

Bucholtz, Mary (1999b). "Thanks for stopping by": Gender and virtual intimacy in American shop-by-television discourse. In Mary Talbot & Maggie Morgan, eds., *"All the world and her husband": Women in twentieth-century consumer culture*. London: Cassell.

Bucholtz, Mary (1999c). "Why be normal?": Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in Society* 28(2):203-223.

Bucholtz, Mary (forthcoming). Shop talk: Branding, consumption, and gender in white middle-class youth interaction. In Bonnie McElhinny, ed., *Words, worlds, and material girls: Language, gender, globalized economy*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Cameron, Deborah (2000). Styling the worker: Gender and the commodification of language in the globalized service economy. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4(3):323-347.

Coates, Jennifer (1999). Changing femininities: The talk of teenage girls. In Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, & Laurel A. Sutton, eds., *Reinventing identities: The gendered self in discourse.* New York: Oxford University Press. 123-144.

Collins, James (2001). Selling the market: Educational standards, discourse and social inequality. *Critique of Anthropology* 21(2):143-163.

Cutler, Cecilia (2003). "Keepin' it real": White hip-hoppers' discourses of language, race, and authenticity. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 13(2):211-233.

Eckert, Penelope (1996). Vowels and nail polish: The emergence of linguistic style in the preadolescent heterosexual marketplace. In Natasha Warner et al., eds., *Gender and belief systems: Proceedings of the fourth Berkeley Women and Language Conference*. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group. 183-190.

Eckert, Penelope (2000). *Language variation as social practice*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Fairclough, Norman (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse and Society* 4(2):133-159.

Frank, Thomas (1997). *The conquest of cool: Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gal, Susan (1978). Peasant men can't get wives: Language change and sex roles in a bilingual community. *Language in Society* 7:1-16.

Goodwin, Marjorie Harness (2002). Exclusion in girls' peer groups: Ethnographic analysis of language practices on the playground. *Human Development* 45:392-415.

Harvey, David (1989). *The condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Holmes, Janet, & Maria Stubbe (2003). *Power and politeness in the workplace: A sociolinguistic analysis of talk at work*. London: Longman.

Klein, Naomi (2002). *No logo: No space, no choice, no jobs*. New York: Picador.

Liechty, Mark (2003). *Suitably modern: Making middle-class culture in a new consumer society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lury, Celia (2004). *Brands: The logos of the global economy*. London: Routledge.

Machin, David, & Joanna Thornborrow (2003). Branding and discourse: The case of *Cosmopolitan*. *Discourse and Society* 14(4):453-471.

McElhinny, Bonnie (2002). Language, sexuality and political economy. In Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Robert J. Podesva, Sarah J. Roberts, & Andrew Wong, eds., *Language and sexuality: Contesting meaning in theory and practice*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Press. 111-134.

McElhinny, Bonnie (2003). Theorizing gender in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. In Janet Holmes & Miriam Meyerhoff, eds., *The handbook of language and gender*. Oxford: Blackwell. 21-42.

Mendoza-Denton, Norma (1996). "Muy macha": Gender and ideology in gang-girls' discourse about makeup. *Ethnos* 61(1/2):47-63.

Mendoza-Denton, Norma (1999). Fighting words: Latina girls, gangs, and language attitudes. In D. Letticia Galindo & María Dolores Gonzales, eds., *Speaking Chicana: Voice, power, and identity*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 39-56.

Milner, Murray, Jr. (2004). *Freeks, geeks, and cool kids: American teenagers, schools, and the culture of consumption*. New York: Routledge.

Milroy, Lesley (1987). *Language and social networks*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Nichols, Patricia C. (1983). Linguistic options and choices for Black women in the rural South. In Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae, & Nancy Henley, eds., *Language, gender and society*. Cambridge, MA: Newbury House. 54-68.

Quart, Alissa (2003). *Branded: The buying and selling of teenagers*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.

Schor, Juliet B. (2004). *Born to buy: The commercialized child and the new consumer culture*. New York: Scribner.

Talbot, Mary, & Maggie Morgan, eds. (1999). *"All the world and her husband": Women in twentieth-century consumer culture*. London: Cassell.

Wulff, Helena (1995). Inter-racial friendship: Consuming youth styles, ethnicity and teenage femininity in South London. In Vered Amit-Talai & Helena Wulff, eds., *Youth cultures: A cross-cultural perspective*. London: Routledge. 63-80.

Mary Bucholtz
University of California, Santa Barbara
bucholtz@linguistics.ucsb.edu