Yuppies as Arbiter of the Emerging Consumption Style

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Abstract

Yuppies are treated as both real and a media event in the recent history of U.S. consumption. This eighties consumption style is contrasted to those of the two preceding decades and a paradox is noted in yuppies' simultaneous dedication to career and leisure pursuits. This apparent paradox is argued to result from the demographic phenomenon of the baby boom and concludes that yuppies may be engaging in compensatory consumption, a practice previously associated with blue collar workers. Implications of yuppy consumption patterns are discussed in the context of world patterns of materialism.

A Brief Popular History of U.S. Consumption Since 1960

The Sixties

In examining recent patterns of consumption in the United States, the decade of the 1960s presents some interesting contrasts to adjacent decades. More accurately, starting in the mid-sixties and extending into the early seventies the U.S. saw the ascendency of counter cultural consumer values that increasingly challenged the middle class materialism that had flourished since the end of World War II. Due in part to the oil embargo of 1973 mind set this argument manifest for nearly all Americans. And hippies rebelling against middle class values and consumption patterns in a variety of ways. These included the rejection of achievement motivation and the work ethic, and the adoption of blue collar clothing (e.g., jeans, work shirts), Spartan furnishings, and pretentious automobiles (Yablonsky 1968, Levin and Spates 1970, Lind and Roach-Higgins 1985; Hirschman 1985). Communal living rose in popularity and the Peace Corps and social service occupations were greatly esteemed. Perhaps we should have been curious that this new austerity was accompanied by more self-indulgent use of recreational drugs and sex but we weren't. In the late sixties, with growing domestic protestii against U.S. involvement in Vietnam and much popular press coverage of hippies as the trendiest youth movement, the decline in consumption of prestige goods appeared to have some potential for the future. Similarly, after some initial support, tests of Inglehart's hypothesis of decreasing material emphasis have failed (Jek 1973, Maran 1975, Flanagan 1979). The communes of the sixties have largely disbanded and the free stores have long since closed. Counter-culture poet and former voluntary simplicity advocate Gary Snyder explained or rationalized, "I ask you, which is the real simplicity: a person who owns almost nothing but is obsessed with it, or one who owns a great deal but is unattached to it?" (Barlow 1985). Whether or not the underlying cause for these failures is the untenability or lack of universality of Maslow's need hierarchy as some have suggested (New 1983), the proximate cause seems to have been a change in consumption patterns beginning in the decade of the seventies.

The Seventies

The seventies have been called (Weber 1974, Wolfe 1976) "the 'me' decade". While this suggests a reemergence of self interest or selfishness, the 1970's appear to be something of a searching transitional decade in the way that this selfinterest affected consumption. Rather than an immediate reemergence of fifties-style materialism, it appears to have been a time of inward turning self-fulfillment seeking. As Yankelovich (1981) concludes from his firm's tracking of value trends, the use of exercise, health foods, self-help books, and self-awareness programs (e.g., Keenan, Eee, primal scream therapy) all represent a searching for a meaningful self definition. The emphasis was largely experiential (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), emphasizing the acquisition of services and non-durables over significant increases in durable expenditures. This is still potentially consistent with a person's self-actualization drive rather than a return to a material need focus.

To the extent that the seventies saw an increase in material expenditures, it seems to have been subtle rather than blatant. For instance, jeans became less blue collar when they were replaced with expensive designer jeans in what Brooks (1979) calls parody display. Parody display involves the use of reverse status symbols or status symbols
based on ostensibly low profile consumption. There was status competition, but the association of bigger and more expensive cars was not so prominent or revered. A small car under these circumstances might be more desirable than a large car. Perhaps such practices reflected a desire to return to materialistic ostentation that was inhibited by guilt from the residual mores of the sixties and the energy crisis of the seventies. Thus in 1979, U.S. News and World Report headlined “Status Symbols: U.S. Swings Back to Basics” (U.S. News and World Report 1979). The following year the headline was an even more austere “Goodbye to Our Good Life!” (Maloney 1980).

The Eighties

Interestingly, one year later U.S. News and World Report ran the nearly opposite headline, “Flaunting Wealth: It’s Back in Style” (U.S. News and World Report 1981). It may well be significant that between these two headlines Ronald Reagan was elected to his first term as President of the United States. Not only was he perceived as a staunch ally of the rich, but some of first lady Nancy Reagan’s first acts were to spend extravagant amounts on new china and decorations for the White House. If such symbolic acts did not by themselves mark the death of sixties altruism and idealism, the “defection” of former counter-cultural heroes such as Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden, and Eldridge Cleaver into the ranks of the establishment did.

The result, at least according to the popular press, was the emergence of what the New York Times has called “the yuppie” (with the punning allusion to the elite prep school garb and mass adoption of “signature goods”), followed by the yuppie (or young urban professional) with a whole pattern of elitist consumption. As Mason (1981) argued, conspicuous consumption had come within reach of the masses. To the searching egoism of the seventies was added hedonism, ostentation, and status-seeking materialism. By the end of 1984 the year had been designated “the year of the yuppie” in a Newsweek cover story (Andler 1984). Yuppies have also become the subjects of comic (After 1984), songs (Royko 1985), poems (Freundlich 1985), and advertising and marketing strategies (Advertising Age 1985, Morgan 1985). Reactions against threats of the “yupification of society” have also emerged (e.g., Fotheringham 1985, Heard 1985). Reactions against the “yupification” of society have also emerged (e.g., Fotheringham 1985, Heard 1985, O’Reilly 1985, Samuelson 1985, Thornton 1985, L. W. 1985, U.S. News and World Report 1985), just as reactions against the “hippification” of society emerged in the sixties.

The fact that these trends in the recent history of U.S. consumption have primarily been dealt with in the popular press should not cause us to dismiss or discount them as either fictitious or beneath scholarly inquiry. Real behavioral insights are hardly the sole province of the academic scholar or scientist (Belk forthcoming). In addition, as will be argued more fully, it is possible that popular press coverage of a lifestyle legitimizes it, makes it a concrete symbolic pattern to emulate, and hastens its adoption. And one need only look to the reawakened consumption ethic emerging in the People’s Republic of China to appreciate the potential impact of such a change in consumption attitudes (e.g., Schell 1986).

What is a Yuppe?

The yuppie is much more than a media fiction, even though precise criteria defining who is and is not a yuppie are somewhat arbitrary. The Newsweek cover story defined yuppies as age 25 to 39, earning $40,000 or more in professional or managerial positions (Andler 1984), which would mean there are 1.2 million yuppies in America. By more liberal definition, estimates go as high as 12.2 million (Fisher 1985). Even the most liberal estimates make it clear that yuppies are a minority, even among the baby boom generation of which they are a part. A study by Market Facts estimates that less than one-fifth of the baby boom generation meets the financial criteria to be considered yuppies (Marketing News 1985b) and a zip code based classification estimates that young urban professionals comprise just over three percent of U.S. households (Marketing News 1985a). But both because of their large incomes and the media attention that makes them a socially distant reference group (Cocanougher and Bruce 1971) to be emulated by others, the impact of yuppies on U.S. consumption greatly exceeds their numbers. The Market Facts study finds that half of the baby boom generation (born 1945–1966) think and act like yuppies, not to mention the impact on those younger and older. For instance, one recent study (Sporkin 1985) found that the most desired possessions among college students included VCRs, compact disc players, Filofax organizers, and skis—all stereotypical yuppie items.

Thinking and acting in unique ways is the key to defining a yuppie more than mere demographic qualifications. Only partly satire, The Yuppies Handbook defines a yuppie as “a person of either sex who meets the following criteria: (1) resides in or near one of the major cities; (2) claims to be between the ages of 25 and 45; (3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money or any and all combinations of the above” (Piesman and Hartley 1984, p. 12). This attitude is summarized in the updated view of Maloney titled “Success! The Chase is Back in Style Again” (Maloney 1983). More than anything else, the yuppie is distinguished by pursuing both quality and status symbolism in their production and services. For instance, the male on the cover of The Yuppies Handbook is shown with a Cross pen, pin stripe suit, Rolex watch, squash racquet, Burberry trench coat, Gucci briefcase, co- op offering prospectus, and L. L. Bean duck hunting boots, while the female yuppie is shown with a Sony walkman, Ralph Lauren Suit, Cartier Tank Watch, coach bag, fresh pasta, gourmet shopping bag, and running shoes (Piesman and Hartley 1984).

Nor are yuppie consumption patterns limited to the United States. In Great Britain there are the very similar Sloane rangers and similar satirical consumption handbooks are available (York 1980, Barr and York 1983). And in France the yuppie’s counterpart is the bon chic bon genre and one can find Thierry Mantoux’s Bon Chic Bon Genre Handbook (Patterson 1985). Although Sloane rangers and the bon chic bon genre differ in some respects (e.g., concern with titles) from yuppies, they share the same purpose in using consumption to make a statement about their success and status. Significantly, these phenomena seem to be confined to the wealthy post-industrial countries of the world; the very countries where declining materialism was predicted a decade ago (e.g., Inglehart 1971, Bell 1973). Not confined to a single race, marital status or religion, the ability and willingness to spend in a particular fashion that shouts success seems to be their hallmark. Subgroups and imitators are to be expected. Piesman and Hartley (1984) identify buppies (black urban professionals), guppies (gay...), huppies (Hispanic...), Juppies (Japanese...), and puppies (pregnant...). Others have suggested additional variations. These cultural and subcultural variations merely highlight the significance and impact of yuppie consumption patterns.

In order to clarify the distinguishing conceptual characteristics of yuppies, it is useful to compare their traits to those of the hippies of the sixties. The following list is distilled from the few empirical studies of these groups and the abundant journalistic accounts of each:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hippies</th>
<th>Yuppies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value of clean, neat appearance</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of success/achievement</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of conspicuous consumption</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to others</td>
<td>Altruism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary activity emphasis</td>
<td>Leisure</td>
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<td>Focus of gratifications</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
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Why this Consumption Emphasis?

For the most part, the consumption distinctions just noted can be explained in terms of a shift toward greater materialism in the early 1970's. The reason for their greater materialism may lie in the fact that yuppies are a younger generation of baby boomers. They grew up during an era of economic expansion, and their parents had greater purchasing power than the previous generation. This has created unique problems for yuppies and their poorer or less urban peers. They have had to compete for jobs and promotions, which has led to increased materialism in their lives.

Other distinctions such as clothes and food have already been noted. Why this Consumption Emphasis?

For the most part, the consumption distinctions just noted can be explained in terms of a shift toward greater materialism and more conspicuous consumption. However, two of the distinctions above require further explanation: the suggestion that yuppies seem to seek immediate and delayed gratifications and that they value work and leisure activities. To understand these seeming anomalies and to understand the reversion to materialistic patterns of consumption in what was forecast to be an age of voluntary simplicity typifying the postindustrial era (Bell 1973), it is necessary to further consider the origins of yuppies in the baby boom generation.

Being a part of the U.S. baby boom generation has created unique problems for yuppies and their poorer or less urban peers. While those born during the low birthrate years of the thirties through World War II had a relatively easy time competing for jobs and promotions opened by the retirement of the larger generations that preceded theirs, the situation has been just the opposite for the baby boom generation. The economy has stagnated at the rates of the 1950's and 1960's, and real income has actually declined in the past ten years for the first time since World War II. Furthermore, while their parents who grew up during the Depression had modest expectations of financial success, the baby boomers who grew up during the strong economic growth of the fifties and sixties had high expectations for their futures; expectations that made their inconsistent actual futures all the more disappointing.

And this may paradoxically be the key to understanding the hedonistic consumption patterns and simultaneous career success orientation of yuppies. In order to enjoy the income they expected to earn and might have earned a generation earlier, yuppies have postponed marriage, relied more on two incomes when they do marry, and had fewer children at a later age (Levy and Michel 1985). They have also been willing to take on more debt than earlier generations (Fisher 1985). Debt and an upward, if slower than hoped for, job mobility have kept yuppies dedicated to careers at least until recently. It is delays in job gratifications that yuppies have tolerated rather than consumption gratifications. If it were merely a case of sacrifice for the sake of career, yuppies would simply be a reincarnation of the organization man of the 1950's (Whyte 1956). But the yuppie appears far less dedicated to the organization than to their consumption (Maloney 1983). Lately career sacrifices such as long hours of work are being examined more critically, with yuppies increasingly asking themselves whether it is worth it (e.g., Prince 1985, Schwartz 1985). If career sacrifices are increasingly scrutinized, the question remains as to why yuppies make the sacrifices they do for the sake of consumption.

The reason for their greater materialism may lie in the same baby boom job pressures that require them to sacrifice family life for the sake of purchasing power. The phenomenon is called compensatory consumption and has previously been observed only in lower class occupations for which job advancement is blocked by lack of skills, lack of education, and prejudice (Chinoy 1952, 1955; Gorz 1967; Best and Connolly 1976; Gronmo 1984). With the traditional blue collar situation, given no opportunity for further advancement on the job, aspirations are directed to consumption (Nicolaas and Mayer 1976). The analogous situation among yuppies may not arise because of lack of job mobility as much as slow job mobility relative to aspirations and preceding generations, coupled with lesser prospects for gains in real income due to the same job market competition slowing their advancement. Looking for some reward to justify their work effort and lives, and not finding it often enough in their careers, yuppies have increasingly turned to consumption to seek their gratifications. From this perspective, while yuppies may indeed be materialistic, they are not necessarily more greedy and selfish than others. They just have fewer opportunities to derive the same ego-enhancement from careers than were available to their parents.

Thus the explanation advanced for the simultaneous commitment to careers and consumption by yuppies is that job competition from the large number of other baby boomers forces sacrifices to (often dual) careers in order to accumulate enough anything like those expected; the same slow job mobility and career advancement has deflected their search for ego fulfillment into the realm of consumption. What remains is to consider what yuppe consumption patterns mean for more general consumption trends.

The New Materialism

It is important to recognize that the yuppie phenomenon is to some degree a media phenomenon, just as were the hippie phenomenon of the sixties and the me generation of the seventies. While yuppies and materialism, and to a lesser degree hippiers, are relatively upper class phenomena engaged in by a minority of the population, there exists a strong possibility of trickle-down effects when media pay such great attention to the consumption patterns involved. Besides specific consumption fads, it may be more significant that the general sanctioning of materialism may spread throughout the population of the U.S. and quite possibly to other countries as well.

Besides attention to yuppies qua "yuppies", U.S. mass media has generally portrayed a very upscale portrait of the new generation of the 1970's. Television programs have been found to show a similar bias (DeFleur 1964, Fox and Phillips 1978, Gerber...
and Signorelli 1982, O’Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985, Smythe 1954, Stein 1982). Prime time television programming has largely abandoned featuring the minorities and lower class characters of the sixties for instead featuring the higher class characters of the eighties. Both here and abroad the potential heroes presented nightly are now mostly millionaires living and loving in a very selfish fashion (Gunderson 1984). The foreign influence is due mostly to the wide distribution of U.S. television series like "Dallas" or "Dynasty" called "Chateavallon" (Tuttle 1985). Research reviewed by O’Guinn, et al. (1985) suggests that those exposed more heavily to such programs trend to overestimate the wealth and consumption patterns of the society represented. Shows like "Dallas" and "Dynasty" (both highly popular) are indicative here, but the epitome of such shows may well be "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" (MacKenzie 1984, Greenfield 1985, VerMeulen 1985). Belk and Polley (1985) also find a generally escalating pattern of materialism themes in twentieth-century U.S. magazine ads. A similar trend was found in Japanese magazine and television advertising since World War II (Belk, Bryce, and Polley 1985). Friedman (1985) has found evidence of increasing materialism in popular U.S. and British plays, songs, and novels. In this context yuppies may be seen as merely the latest catalyst for a continuous parade of materialistic lifestyle before the American consumer, with hippies the sole recent exception to this trend. And yuppies themselves may be seen less as arbiters of consumption styles than as interpreters helping such styles to trickle down to the masses and simultaneously reinforcing and legitimizing such consumption. Their greatest importance may lie in the fact that they have a name and thus form a label that people may try to affix to themselves via consumption.

Taking a longer view still, materialistic consumption patterns seem to follow cyclical ups and downs (McCracken 1985). High points and places of consumption since the industrial revolution that made mass consumption of luxuries a possibility include 15th and 16th century Europe (Braudel 1967/1973, Mukerji 1983), 17th and 18th century England (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1985), 19th century France (Williams 1981), and late 19th and early 20th century America (Boorstin 1973, Harris 1981, Lears 1983). While there have been fluctuations during some periods (e.g., depressions, the sixties), the overall trend is toward greater materialism. This rather than a less materialistic post-industrial consumer, seems to be the main lesson of historical studies to date. Yuppies are an interesting recent manifestation of this long run trend, but what has burst upon the scene in the eighties is perhaps more the label than the phenomenon.

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