

ARTICLE

Fringe Consumers

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Abstract

We all consume the humanities through our engagement with the cultural, creative, and historical materials that influence our views on ourselves, others, and the world around us. However, can consumers also be considered humanists? We argue the answer is yes when consumption choices become symbols and expressions of one's authentic self and meaningful connective points to others. Using hard-core surfing enthusiasts and thrifters as examples, we introduce the notion of fringe consumption as a form of cultural entrepreneurship and public expression of the humanities that centers individuality, authenticity, and otherness in an otherwise dominant mainstream environment that pushes people to always want more of the same.

Keywords: Alternative Consumption; Authenticity; Cultural Entrepreneurship; Fringe Consumers; Consumer Humanism

1. Introduction

Today's global retail regime relies on consumers continually conforming to ever-changing notions of what is considered the best and most desirable. Corporate designers and marketers continually fabricate and hype homogenous molds of fashion, lifestyle, and pleasure, leading consumers to crave the same newest and greatest things. Consequently, mainstream consumerism pushes widespread conformity and sameness at the expense of individual authenticity and otherness.

Enter fringe consumers – individuals who step out of the mainstream and into the fringe of retail spaces in search of one-of-kind items that hold irreplicable value via originality, wear and tear, patina, and nostalgia. Fringe consumers act as cultural entrepreneurs by reclaiming authenticity for themselves and curating spaces for sub-cultures to form around shared interests and collective celebrations of otherness. Authenticity and otherness provide respite from the homogeneity and relentless conformity of the mainstream, making fringe consumerism an act of humanism.

2. Reclamation and curation

One of us recently noticed a student on our campus wearing a Ramones T-shirt – one of our favorite punk bands from the 1970s and 1980s. We excitedly asked, “you like the Ramones?”

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They responded with a blank stare. We pointed to the well-worn T-shirt and, following another awkward pause, the student responded, “I don’t know them. I just like the shirt.” They had no knowledge of the punk pioneers and cultural renegades. They simply liked the shirt’s unique look. For us, the shirt evoked a sense of nostalgia. For the student, the uniqueness of the shirt enhanced their sense of individuality and otherness.

Fringe consumption, such as the student repurposing the Ramones T-shirt, involves autonomous acts that disconnect individuals from the manufactured ideals and pressures of mainstream consumption. In doing so, fringe consumers express individual authenticity and foster sub-cultures that celebrate authentic connectedness and shared otherness. In essence, fringe consumption is an act of mainstream market resistance.

Bourdieu’s sociological view on highbrow esthetics and taste is relative to our humanist view of fringe consumption, albeit in an unconventional way.¹ Bourdieu argues that those with large amounts of economic and social resources largely determine what is considered tasteful and desirable (i.e., “highbrow”) and what is not (i.e., “lowbrow”). The perpetual creation of perceivably better material goods by corporate retailers continually (re)shapes mainstream perceptions of what is most tasteful and seductive and what is sub-par and unsavory. Mainstream consumption is a cog in the social reproduction cycle – that is, squelching individuality and sustaining distinctions between the haves who can afford to keep pace with ever-evolving trends and fads and the have nots who are swayed to crave the same with feelings of inadequacy and shame.

Fringe consumption flips Bourdieu’s perspective on highbrow esthetics and taste, privileging individual authenticity over mainstream conformity. Fringe consumers autonomously curate identities and freely express their otherness without concern over how their choices (mis)align with popular molds and highbrow standards. Nevertheless, humans are social beings who connect with others around common interests, concerns, passions, and so forth. Fringe consumption can thus foster distinct sub-cultures that are grounded in shared interests and identities. In this way, fringe consumers act as cultural entrepreneurs who foster humanistic connections with others through expressions of their authentic selves.

The surfboard cottage industry further illustrates the notion of fringe consumption. Professional, cottage-based surfboard shapers retain supremacy among hard-core surfers with their custom-shaped boards and unique designs being in constant demand. Why? Shapers co-create boards with individual customers that are tailored to body size, favored break conditions, and wave riding styles. They co-steward their brand narratives through vigilant grassroots branding with their surfer co-creators boasting about their custom boards across social media, at competitions, and out at local breaks. Board owners tell stories of wave conquests that their boards enabled. Each ding is a badge – uniquely marking the board and further telling its story and that of its rider (see Figure 1). These stories are chronicled and retold by posting pictures and videos of the board, its dinged-up badges, and its rider on the shapers’ workshop walls and across relevant social media sites. A well-ridden board is more precious than a new one to the hard-core surfer turned fringe consumer. As one prominent California shaper says with pride pointing to a video feed of one of his boards and its owner in action, “That board is one of a kind... It’s shaped for him [surfer]. See the worn curve? That is from his stance.” No claims of leading-edge

¹ Bourdieu 1984.



Figure 1. Individually crafted surf boards that are highly prized with stance marks, dings, and blemishes conveying authentic stories of use and cultural belonging.

innovation or mass-produced perfection would compel the hard-core surfer to abandon their beloved, one-of-a-kind board. As their stance marks convey, a well-used board becomes tightly entangled in the surfer's authentic identity and sense of being fully human. Further, their otherness serves as a connective tissue with other authentic surfers/fringe consumers.

Thrift shopping is also an example of fringe consumption. More and more people are finding joy in the experience of seeking out one-of-a-kind garments and accessories at second-hand stores, swap meets, and pop-up markets as advertised in Figure 2. Thrifters step out of mainstream retail in search of irreplicable items from the past that once found are curated into unique treasures of the present. These salvaged objects bring individualistic value that is unmoored from the meanings they once conveyed. The creative curation of vintage objects across periods become idiosyncratic displays of identity, far removed from any brand's original image, for example, seventy-year-old rehomed Carhartt dungarees move from work clothes to hipster chic wear when combined with a faded Def Leppard concert tee found at a swap meet, and grandad's threadbare L.L. Bean cardigan reclaimed out of an attic box. Reclaimed items add unique flair to the thrifters' individual wardrobes and in that bring greater authenticity to the identities they curate for themselves. Thrift shopping can also be a social experience with thrifters routinely exchanging and sharing items and meeting up for group excursions to local shops, estate sales, flea markets, and swap meets.



Figure 2. Vintage market pop-up sign on The University of Arizona campus.

3. Fringe consumers as humanists

Can fringe consumers be considered humanists? Given the humanities center on the “meaning-making practices of human culture,”² we believe they can. Our argument rests on the understanding that expressing one’s authentic self through consumption choices is a humanist practice with authenticity being a trait of being fully human.³

Individual authenticity implies uniqueness. Fringe consumers seek uniqueness via one-of-a-kind items and experiences that become self-curated into their own looks, styles, and identities. Authenticity and uniqueness cannot be experienced through perfectly replicable molds nor commodified into homogeneous, profit-making widgets. Indeed, fringe consumption centers the experience of hunting for, curating, and cherishing beautifully imperfect things. The things found and the experience of the hunt itself combine to push consumers closer to being fully human.

Fringe consumers are cultural entrepreneurs who create and maintain alternative consumption spaces that embrace individuality over conformity and champion human connectedness by way of authenticity and shared otherness. Fringe consumers perform cultural entrepreneurship by expressing their authentic selves and in doing so co-create spaces

² Small 2013.

³ Guignon 2008, 277–90.

within which others can also find, express, and celebrate their authentic, fully human selves. Fringe consumption is not, however, an economically just panacea that breaks down social class divides. It instead occurs along a continuum with some forms being highly inclusive, such as low-cost thrifting, and others being far more exclusive, such as cottage crafted surfboards. Furthermore, fringe consumption is humanistic when it is a choice rather than an economic necessity, as thrifting sometimes is for those with scarce means.

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