

Is consumerism a private, or public process?

Abstract:

In this paper I will endeavour to answer the question: Is consumerism a private, or public process? Also is it possible that the public concepts of diversity and inequality, are able to be understood and envisioned, through the private act of a consumer, participating within their social life dynamics? I will investigate, examine and analyse these questions, from some observations, which I undertook of an Oxfam retail store and via a literature review process. As a result I will engage in an ethnographical and limited, auto - ethnographical account, to thus present my findings within this essay. In fact I will argue, that in regards to the public issues, of diversity an inequality concepts, it is possible, that individuals can attain an understanding and respect of diversity an inequality concepts, if an individual engages within the private act, of participating within an ethically oriented consumerism process.

Is consumerism a private, or public process?

Some of the questions I am to ask in this essay are; is consumerism a private, or public process? Can the public concepts of diversity and inequality, be able to be understood and envisioned, through the private act of a consumer participating within their social life dynamics? How it is possible that a private consumer can understand differences, in regards to the public concerns of diversity and inequality? What are these differences and how do they impact upon a consumer's private and public behaviour / way of living? I will investigate, examine and analyse these questions and more, from some observations, that I undertook of an Oxfam retail store and via a literature review process. As a result, it's from these observations and a relevant literature review process that I will engage in an ethnographical and limited, auto - ethnographical account, to thus present my findings within this essay. In fact I will argue, that in regards to the public issues, of diversity an inequality concepts, it is possible, that individuals can attain an understanding and respect of diversity an inequality concepts, if an individual engages within the private act, of participating within an ethically oriented consumerism process. Consequentially within the context of this essay, a private individual can gain an understanding and respect of the public issues of diversity an inequality, by purchasing products / services, from a non for profit - Oxfam retail store. The Oxfam retail store, in which I did my observations, was the Perth central city, (CBD), Hay Street - West Store. Figure: 1 - 2. This is a relatively large store with many products available. Figure: 2 - 5. My observations were done from a bench outside of the store and from a bench across the road from the store. Figure: 4. I conducted my observations over a two day period, on Friday - 02/10/2015, between the times of 10am-11am and on Saturday - 03/10/2015, between the times of 10am-11am. However 1st of, lets gain an understanding of what consumerism is? According to Krebs, Consumerism is defined as: "The consumption / buying and selling of goods and services," p.190. ¹ Indeed consumerism is not a new concept, as it was started, when humans 1st began trading. ² For instance, within Europe, in the early 14th century art, was seen as the most desirable consumable product, by the Italian elite of the time.³ So what then is an Oxfam retail shop? This is non-profit

¹ Krebs, W, A, (ED), 1982, p.190

² Stearns, P, 2001, pp.1-11

³ Macabe, I, B, 2014, p.3

retail store, which sells handmade products, so that the poor and developing countries can benefit. ³ ⁴ Also how diversity and inequality / equality concepts presented within an Oxfam store? Considering that diversity and equality concepts are defined as: To respect all differences and that everyone be treated fairly and equally, regardless of race, gender and religion etc.⁵ Indeed it can be seen that within an Oxfam store, diversity and inequality / equality concepts are obvious within the products that are available for sale. For instance, organic / fairtrade teas – coffees, a variety of cultural / country specific, foods, fabrics, pottery, jewellery and miscellaneous goods etc., are for sale. ⁶ In fact this is where an individual's ethically oriented consumerism process comes into play. Whereby fairtrade, or ethically oriented consumerism is defined as: "Improving the situation of individuals, groups and employees, in developing countries with the context of everyday consumer goods."P.18.⁷ Indeed, I would argue, that it's in this way that the public concepts of diversity and equality, are enhanced.

In fact according to the scholars Welford and Young, they would suggest that as fairtrade processes, such as that advocated by Oxfam shops, are top down values. Whereby a (Western) developed countries values and concepts, are imposed upon developing countries. It thus implies, that a developing countries - private citizens voices, *really do not* get to be heard and that any public concepts of diversity and equality concepts are virtually non-existent. ⁸ Indeed I found this to be relevant in my observations, whereby many pedestrian shoppers, who were wearing the ubiquitous western invention of sunglasses, and the majority of t-shirt wearing male pedestrians, that were advocating western values, such as Coke or Nike etc., did not even glance into the Oxfam shop. In fact according to social scientist – Harris there is nothing wrong with this sort of naive ignorant behaviour of the other or Oxfam shop. For it's because many modern societies are orientated towards social constructionism concepts, in that they may advocate equality in theory, in reality what they really want, is for individual and social equality processes to be homologized / or ignored to a certain degree, so that their society can operate efficiently, without an outside "other" imposing their will upon an already established society / order. ⁹ Indeed the concept of status consumerism is a good indicator of how / why social constructionism concepts can and do work. ¹⁰ Accordingly in regards to the context of this essay, as an example of how ethical consumerism / fair trade processes can be irrelevant in regards to enhancing equality concepts. Is how Starbucks, (who sell fairtrade coffees), has been endeavouring to persuade their own fairtrade suppliers, such as Ethiopia, to not engage in trade making some regions of their country, so as to gain higher prices for their fair-trade product. ¹¹ Moreover as the majority of purchases within the Oxfam shop, while I was observing, consisted of customers purchasing well known western products, such as teas, coffees or porcelain, this tended to indicate to me that the private act of an individual endeavouring to attain some understanding of public diversity, via their product purchases, was non-existent. Which is counter to what is indicated to be available for consumers, to purchase both within an Oxfam shop and via an Oxfam catalogue. (Figure: 2 - 5) ¹² In fact according to Brewer and Gardner engaging in too much

⁴ Oxfam Australia, p.2

⁵ The University of Edinburgh, p.1

⁶ Oxfam - Spring Catalogue - 2015, pp. 1-23

⁷ Welford, R, Young, W, 2002, p.18

⁸ Ibid, p.28

⁹ Harris, S, R, 2006, pp.225-228

¹⁰ Dittmar, H, 2008, pp.111, 212-217

¹¹ Dinnen, M, 2015, p.2

¹² Oxfam - Spring Catalogue – 2015,pp.1-23

diversity within a society may not be good thing, as it may eliminate the concept of the “extended self” whereby an established collective identity of a society, can become deactivated.¹³ This is evident in how diversity has become a contested area, with some fairtrade Oxfam products, such as coffee. In fact many developing countries supplies, are now preferring to sell their product in mainstream supermarkets, as they are getting more value for money, with all their business processes. For instance, in South America there are many cooperatives that are not selling their coffee under Fair Trade labels, at present.¹⁴ Thus according to some, the private and public domains are distinct areas and its best for a / some society to not intermingle the two.

However as indicted by the anthropologists Douglas and Isherwood the *real goal* of the private act consumerism is to engage the public concepts of, eliminating social stratification, enhancing communication process and giving significant meaning to an object and to an individual’s worth.¹⁵ Indeed according to the social scientist Turly, this is where modern status consumerism fails to engage these public concepts as mentioned above. For he implies that modern consumerism, focuses rather, on an individual participating within a status consumerism process, so as to gain inequitable, private immortality.¹⁶ Indeed such a process is evident in my observations of the City West - Oxfam store, where I observed, that in a 2 hour period, out of approximately 2,000 individual pedestrians, passing by the Oxfam shop, maybe 40 - 60 individuals looked into the Oxfam shop, while only around 15 - 18 individuals went into the Oxfam shop and only 5 - 7 individuals, purchased any products from the Oxfam store. This to my mind, is not a good thing, as the principle of ethical consumerism, as in the Oxfam store, is oriented towards enhancing the public concepts of diversity and equality. (This is evidence in an Oxfam store, in the products for sale, as they are all diverse and unique and have come from suppliers, who have embedded significant cultural contexts within the products, they have supplied to the Oxfam store.) Figure -3. In fact according to the philosopher Maffesoli, he suggests that today’s modern consumerism globalisation culture, is oriented towards a concept of what he call “neo-tribes”, whereby groups of individuals are infatuated with a collective consensus of in-group - “fellow feeling” - empathies. Which focuses upon the decline of individualism, or cultural diversity’s, etc. (E.g. – modern individually oriented, aesthetic tattoos and distinct body piercing processes, can attest evidence, of this “neo-tribe” concept).¹⁷ Indeed my observations outside the Oxfam shop, tended to imply that this may be the case, as I noticed that the majority of individuals, focused their gaze upon other individuals, which were on the pedestrian pathway and that individual’s, which were in groups of 2 or more, did not acknowledge that the Oxfam shop, which they passed by even existed. Such behaviour by individuals negates the concept of fair trade to be irrelevant. Which is counter intuitive behaviour really. Especially when its considered against one of the major goals of fair trade, which is to give all individuals as sense of dignity, respect and self-sufficiency.¹⁸ As a result, it is possible, that a private consumer can understand and respect of differences, in regards to the public concerns of diversity and inequality. But only if both the private and public domains, which are indicted, are blended into each other, so as to *really* have an impact, on both an individual and society’s behaviours, etc.

¹³ Brewer, M, Gardner, W, 1996, p.84

¹⁴ Murray, D, L, Reynolds, L, T, Taylor, P, L, 2006, p.184

¹⁵ Woodward, I, 2012, p.176

¹⁶ Richins, M, 2005, p.341

¹⁷ Maffesoli, M, 1997, pp.536-537

¹⁸ Wright, C, 2008, p.13

Though also according to Welford and Young, they would imply that as the fairtrade trading mechanisms are orientated, to be of major benefit for retailers, like the Oxfam shop and its private customers. This tends to limit, a developing countries - citizens bargaining / negotiating power, so that they can get better opportunities for themselves, in regards to the public concepts of diversity and equality. Thus some of prices of goods, in an Oxfam shop, may seem too expensive to some, due to a retailers high mark-ups on a supplier's product.¹⁹ In fact I found this to be relevant in my observations, when some customers who came into the Oxfam shop had already decided on a specific product to purchase and had no inclination to browse around the Oxfam shop for any other items that may be of interest to them. In fact such a process, may also have something to do with the "self-attribution theory" of consumer's behaviour, whereby an individual convinces them self, that they have greedy intentions, and thus via a guilt complex, will not purchase other products, be that ethical or conventional products.²⁰ I also found in my observations, that as some of pedestrians passing by the Oxfam shop, were already from a diversity of races and cultures, such as a mix of Australians, Europeans, Asians and Africans, it is possible, that they would have had their own heritage / cultural embodiment, of what foods, clothing, crockery and gifts, etc. they preferred. Thus purchasing a product from an Oxfam shop may not be relevant for them. (Indeed there are many specialty stores within our society today, which cater to a specific cultures needs etc., e.g. – Asian supermarkets, African furniture - clothing stores, halal butchers, etc.). Moreover according to the scholars Ratneshwar and Glenmick, such a process would tend to confirm, the implications that individuals purchase products, to thus reinforce particular self-identity formations.^{21 22} As result for some, private individual choices, are not necessary embodied within certain public arenas.

However according to the sociologist Sassatelli, it's the private ethical consumer, who is able to symbolically use, their consumer decisions and actions, to engage in a form of cultural / political voice and thus challenge an established hedonic consumerism process, which in turn, thus helps enhance positive, public diversity and equality concepts within a society.²³ Indeed such a process also reaffirms McArdle and Thomas view that the concept of fair trade, such as in an Oxfam store can be seen as a different economical / developmental model to a free trade / globalization economical concept, and one which empowers and enhances sustainable development in developing economies.²⁴ The key here of course is that a private individual has to use, their consumer decisions / actions, to engage in a form of public cultural / political voice, via the process of ethical oriented consumer shopping. Yet I found in my observations that those individuals that were fashion consciousness, such as those wearing designer label clothes, or carrying prestigious hand bags /

¹⁹ Welford, R, Young, W, 2002, p.28

²⁰ Uzma, K, Ravi Dhār, Wertebroch, K, 2005, pp.154- 159

²¹ Ratneshwar, S, Gelnmick, D, 2005, pp.5-6

²² Richins, M, 2005, p. 342

²³ Sassatelli, R, 2006, pp. 229 - 238

²⁴ McArdle, T, 2012, pp.277-290

bags and wearing expensive looking shoes, etc., did not even glance into the Oxfam shop. While those that were engaging with technology, such as by communicating on their Mobil phone, or listening to music with headphones on, etc. also did not acknowledge that the Oxfam shop was there. (*It was as though the Oxfam shop was not there at all, to these individual's?*). The key question here of course is - why? Some say this is due to the fact that consumption in general, is a process whereby we make meanings, either in social, cultural or personal context and it's via these contexts that status / image are seen to be a major motivator / connector for consuming behaviour.²⁵ Moreover I also noticed, in my 2 hour observation period that counter to what has been mentioned above, that the majority of individual's passing by the Oxfam shop were from either a Australian or European background. Yet the vast majority of individual's that went into the Oxfam shop that browsed and brought products, were of either of an Asian, African or non-European cultural background. For example a single Asian lady brought a variety of fairtrade teas, while a single African individual brought some crockery. Indeed in my observations it tended to be young single individual's, which purchased products from the Oxfam store were. In fact it has been indicted that those who purchases ethically oriented products are much more conscience of their own diversity / self-identity.²⁶ As a result ethically orientated individuals tend to understand how to be self-fulfilled / happy, and it's by purchasing ethical oriented products. For in turn, they feel that via their consumer choices, they can make a positive difference to a / the public realm.²⁷ Indeed according to the philosopher Hussain, when the boundaries between private and public become intertwined, such as is the case when individuals participate in a private ethnically oriented consumerism process, this in turn, enhances a positive outcome in regards to the public domains of equity and diversity concepts and thus benefits all concerned.²⁸

In concussion, throughout this essay, I have argued, that in regards to the public issues, of diversity an inequality concepts, it is possible, that individuals can attain an understanding and respect of diversity an inequality concepts, if an individual engages within the private act, of participating within an ethically oriented consumerism process. As a result I have suggested that a private individual can gain an understanding and respect of the public issues of diversity an inequality, by purchasing products / services, from a non for profit - Oxfam retail store. Indeed in closing this essay, I would tend to agree with Hardwig, when he implies that *relative consumption efficiency*, which advocates a *possession* like consumerism process. Such as that within the private act of ethically orientated consumerism, is a good way to attain, the public concepts of; diversity, equality and sustainability within a society.²⁹

²⁵ Corrigan, P, 1997, pp.18-21

²⁶ Shaw, D, Shiu, E, 2002, p.110

²⁷ Bedford, T, 1999, pp.173 -175

²⁸ Hussain, W, 2012, p.138

²⁹ Hardwig, J, 2015, pp.290-293

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Appendix:

Figure -1: General view of observational area:



Oxfam - Retail Shop front - Hay Street - west -Perth City CBD:

(Street Scape -looking west towards Parliament House)

Figure -2: Detailed view of observational area:

Oxfam - Retail Shop Front:



Figure -3: Some products that are available in the Oxfam store:

Some Products that are Available in the Oxfam Store:

Fair Trade
Tea - coffee



Fair Trade
Jams - Spreads



Assorted - China - Goods etc



Fair Trade - Clothing and Accessories etc

**Figure -4: Where my observations were taken from:
Where my observations were taken from:**

Observations - 1 - outside of shop - on bench:



Looking at Oxafam retail shop - from across the road

Observations - 2 - Across road - on bench:



Streetscape- looking towards CBD

Figure -5

Detail of Oxafam retail shop – Perth Central Business District (Hay Street – West):



Picture References:

Figure -1

Evans, P, 2015, "General view of observational area, "*photo taken by, Peter Evans – Anthropology Student - Curtin University*, on 02/10/2015.

Figure -2

Evans, P, 2015, "Detailed view of observational area, "*photo taken by, Peter Evans – Anthropology Student - Curtin University*, on 02/10/2015.

Figure -3

Evans, P, 2015, "Some products that are available in the Oxfam store, "*photo taken by, Peter Evans – Anthropology Student - Curtin University*, on 02/10/2015.

Figure -4

Evans, P, 2015, "Where my observations were taken from, "*photo taken by, Peter Evans – Anthropology Student - Curtin University*, on 03/10/2015.

Figure -5

Evans, P, 2015, "Detail of Oxfam retail shop – Perth Central Business District, (Hay Street – West), "*photo taken by, Peter Evans – Anthropology Student - Curtin University*, on 03/10/2015.