

MARKETIZED EDUCATION AND COMMERCIAL LEARNING BRANDS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONSUMER VULNERABILITY IN THE “NEW GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY”

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ABSTRACT

Higher education discourses in many academic institutions air considerable concern over student performance and retention. A common goal of these discourses is to identify systemic causes underlying high drop out rates and shifting enrollments across colleges. In this context, questions of the preparedness of students for college emerge, as well as, students' ability to early-on identify colleges that align with their individual academic strengths and career interests. Students are deemed vulnerable to shifting and dropout if their pre-collegiate grounding is uncertain.

Consumer vulnerability is a state of experiencing powerlessness and a lack of control in a consumption situation (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2005; Baker, Hunt, & Rittenburg, 2007). Education constitutes a consumption situation owing to the marketization of education such that there exists choice among academic learning brands and education venues that are priced and promoted to attract students as customers (Burch, 2006; Codd, 2005; Giroux, 2005). The rapid proliferation of commercial academic learning brands is a phenomenon that counters expectations deriving from the heretofore accepted notion of the nation as a welfare-state that provides education to citizens as a right (Codd, 2005). We apply theoretical notions of consumer vulnerability to account for the emergence of commercial academic learning brands targeting precollegiate students. A select few marketing scholars have drawn from educational literature to inform policies and practices of consumer education and consumer literacy, in some instances advocating for school reforms that improve understanding of the marketplace and how to navigate it (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005a, 2005b; Ringold, 2005; Wallendorf, 2001). We take the position that the education system itself is within the market and rather than viewed as a venue or mechanism to foster consumer literacy, is deserving of attention in its own right. Cultural shifts shaped by globalization forces render the U.S. educational system (like those of other nation-states; Codd, 2005), not only one enmeshed within market forces and marketing practices, but also a context capable of producing theoretical insights with broader applicability to the marketing and consumer

research disciplines (see Deighton, 2007). “There is virtually no scholarship on globalization and precollegiate education” (Suárez-Orozco & Quin-Hilliard, 2004, 7), with most of the published work on school marketing in the United States being of the “how-to” variety (Lubienski, 2007). We think the field of marketing is well positioned to contribute to needed knowledge in this domain and hope our venture into this context of consumer vulnerability area will stimulate further research.

Drawing from a discursive analysis of public debates over U.S. educational policy reforms, we extend present theorizing of consumer vulnerability to highlight the role of macro-level forces in its construction, and the positioning of commercial brands in assuaging it. We find that in U.S. educational policy debates, the narrative of the “new global knowledge society” is engaged as a promotional mechanism for heightening consumers' perceptions of their vulnerability. This narrative posits a declining material well-being of the nation-state in the face of an emerging world-wide economic order and labor market where a premium is placed on knowledge. At risk, according to this narrative, is the future ability of our progeny and nation-state to succeed in acquiring knowledge-based jobs in the global labor market where “winners” are better able to market the self, thereby claiming better jobs, incomes, and material lives. While both supporters and opponents of new marketized educational reforms make claims that there is an increasing consumer vulnerability wrought by global forces, they debate the means of alleviating consumer vulnerability within the educational system, as well as the “ends” or goals of education. We extend Shultz's and Holbrook's (2009) theorizing of consumer vulnerability by identifying macro-level local-global dynamics that exacerbate consumer vulnerabilities which for-profit educational companies then seize as brand positionings.

While our analysis draws from a pre-collegiate educational context, our discussion features extension of this context to higher education.

References Available on Request