Social belonging and the social collective: Understanding how processes shape youth markets

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Abstract

Adopting a relative perspective on poverty, this paper reflects on the social and psychological aspects of market access in a context of abundance. We consider the recent introduction of a consumption related adolescent youth ritual and the implications this has for those who are financially disadvantaged and their ability to negotiate and navigate the market. Using dimensions of market practice as a lens, we reveal a system that resists reduction to individual actors and demonstrate how and in what ways the social collective facilitates social belonging as well as promoting higher level educational goals. This has important consequences for our understanding of meaningful social practice as well as realizing what is being shaped through market practices.

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> '*Everywhere children claim, contest and exchange among themselves the terms of their social belonging…what it would take to be able to participate among their peers*…[and] *this system of social meanings* [is] *the "economy of dignity"*' (Pugh, 2009: 6)

Social belonging in contemporary western society has become synonymous with consumption practices where marketing and popular culture offer access to new brands, products, services and experiences that have to be negotiated, navigated and 'translated' in the market (Miller, 2001; Pechmann et al., 2011). It has been suggested that low income parents prioritize "above almost all else" their children's social belonging and consequently consumer practices can include the way in which low income parents illustrate their own value and moral worth (Pugh, 2009). Combining the notion of evolving practices and the practical workings of markets, we take the opportunity to examine processes that shape a particular youth market with a view to understanding how social belonging manifests in a society where status hierarchies are increasingly dynamic and complex (Ulver and Ostberg, 2014). Similarly we establish practices that actors engage in to problematize markets (Lindeman, 2012) with a view to improving our understanding of their market characteristics and to appreciate the evolving boundaries of formal and informal economies (Araujo et al., 2010; Araujo, 2013).

Adolescent vulnerability

This study specifically focuses on adolescents who are potentially "struggling to survive in a contemporary material world" (Piacentini and Hamilton, 2013: 2) and are theoretically more vulnerable than their peers as a consequence of being financially disadvantaged. In relative terms, these adolescents are at the 'bottom of the pyramid'

(BOP) as a result of their heightened potential to be socially excluded from market related activities because of a shortage of familial income (Blocker et al., 2012). As Hamilton (2012) observes, living in a low-income household can be hard for young people, especially when they are exposed to the messages of abundance so prominent in society, and yet their financial status inhibits their participation in this consumer culture. Vulnerability through financial disadvantage in the marketplace therefore may make adolescents feel exposed (Baker et al., 2005) as well as socially excluded or stigmatized (Piacentini and Hamilton, 2013). This financial vulnerability will be amplified by events necessitating increased consumption activity as the terms of social belonging and the related claims and exchanges will be heightened (Pugh, 2009).

Gaining access

This study builds on extant work examining cultures of consumption (see Shove and Pantzar, 2005) to consider how social collective practices evolve to facilitate inclusion to a ritual event and the consequences therein. The focus of this paper is an exploration of "how those who are vulnerable or at risk improvise, solve problems, navigate and eventually gain access to consumption related experiences" (Pechmann et al., 2011: 28). The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of ritual participants and their wider social groups to establish how group members access consumption related experiences and manage the challenges of being able to 'connect', without always having the "symbolic means the local culture has deemed necessary" (Pugh, 2011: 5). This study employs an interpretive approach and reports data from qualitative research with adolescents, parents and teachers. In doing so, a system that can resist reduction to individual actors is revealed.

The high school prom: a new ritual

The context for this research is a relatively new ritual in the UK; namely the high school prom. Despite being an American institution, the introduction of this event in the last decade or so has prompted evolution in market practices and has led to the shaping of a new performance in the making (see MacKenzie and Millo, 2003; Pollock and Williams, 2009). Ostensibly the high school prom is a transition event where consumption capabilities focus on positive experiences of self-image creation which are embedded in social contexts. Those taking part across the UK are between 16-18 years of age and this ritual is now reported as "the norm" for schools in the UK (McVeigh, 2012). Tinson and Nuttall report on adolescent experiences of this event (2010) and observe that girls wear formal dresses and boys usually dress in black tie. The high school prom can have a theme (e.g. that of a popular film) and common activities include taking photographs, dining and dancing (and having fun). The high school prom can be a meal in hotel followed by a nightclub or can simply be an event organized by a student-led committee and/or by members of the staff in the school. To develop our understanding of this relatively new practice, it would be pertinent to progress beyond a partial view of this ritual e.g. the performance, and explore if and how it has the potential to enable meaningful social practice (Shove and Pantzar, 2005).

Traditionally in the UK, recognizing the transformation from school to job seeking, employment or further education would have been recognized by holding a disco in the school gym; where adolescents would perhaps invest in a new pair of denim jeans and some hairstyling products (Pyke and Bloomfield, 2004). However, exposure to popular culture has enabled youth and their families, access to cultural practices and 'rites of passage' on a global scale (Hall, 2006) subsequently creating demand for glamour and related consumption activities (Tinson and Nuttall, 2010). Previous studies on rituals in consumer research have been underpinned by the work of Rook (1985),

where ritual artifacts (signs and symbols), a ritual script, performance roles, and an audience are essential to a ritual experience. These studies, however, have tended to focus on rituals as markers of change rather than exploring how access to such events are negotiated (see for example: McAlexander, 1991; Ozanne, 1992). While there has been limited research on collective occasions, such as food consumption (Chun et al., 2005), 'collective consciousness' or notions of collective solidarity (Collins, 2004) associated with accessing ritual events have not been fully captured.

BOP markets and the high school prom

The introduction of the high school prom in the UK offers the opportunity to extend prior research in relation to BOP markets as "the market for ritual participation is constrained by the material resources of would-be participants" (Collins, 2004: 160). This notion of inclusion leads to our first research question: in what ways do market actors and their relative roles facilitate (or impede) social belonging in this market? Using the dimensions of practice established by Shove and Pantzar (2005) we explore in the first instance how market actors through their various roles negotiate the activities for this event. As "the ability to act in the market depends on the makeup of the acting collective" (Lindeman, 2012: 239), this research will engage not only with those taking part in the high school prom but will derive a greater understanding of practices from those who are external to the event with "different forms of expertise and material devices" (Araujo et al., 2008).

Our second research question also relates to market actors and asks more specifically how do they engage in exchange practices directly or indirectly with the market? Here exchange is involves not only examining the buying and selling of artifacts but exploring how market actors perceive, depict, discuss and agree how to perform in the market (Lindeman, 2012). How actors engage with, construct and

problematize the market can also generate insight into formal as well as informal economies. This research will also improve our understanding of how those who are financially disadvantaged overcome barriers to accessing the marketplace as well as appreciating the practical workings of markets to improve our characteristics of them (Araujo et al., 2010; Pechmann et al., 2011). How and in what ways adolescents secure social belonging in this context will offer policy makers ideas as to how to support market actors' activities that contribute to market processes. It will also further develop notions of exchange practice.

There are conditions under which the high school prom has to be produced in order for it to be considered a ritual (Collins, 2004) and these include ingredients (an object or activity, a common focus of attention, barriers to outsiders and a shared mood); processes (collective consciousness and emotional energy) as well as outcomes (e.g. group solidarity, symbols and development of standards of morality). As the prom can generate insight into adolescent transition (Best, 2000), our third research question considers the 'outcomes' of this ritual. How do the symbolic meanings and images associated with prom offer a platform for developing confidence, initiative, enthusiasm and pride (Collins, 2004)? As Piacentini et al. (2013) note, some financially constrained consumers are creatively combining their resources to access the marketplace. Subsequently we will examine in the context of prom, how financially disadvantaged young adults use their skills and social resources to meet the conditions of this ritual and (have the potential to) transform from engaging in this practice.

The focus of previous research on consumers living at subsistence levels has largely been concerned with BOP markets in developing countries (Viswanathan et al., 2012; Viswanathan, 2007). This focus is important and justified; for those living on such abject levels of absolute poverty there are real pressures concerning resource

management and generally meeting their daily subsistence needs (Prahalad, 2004). However, there is also recognition that poverty is a relative, rather than absolute, construct (Townsend, 1979) and researchers have noted how impoverished people living in developed countries also experience difficulties in fulfilling their consumption needs (Hill, 2001; Sen, 1999). In this paper, we extend the conversation around BOP by focusing on consumption lives in a developed country context. Our research questions focus on the experiences of adolescents in low-income families as well as the wider social collective as they seek to overcome financial disadvantage to gain access to a specific consumption experience: the high-school prom.

Methodological approach

An interpretivist perspective was employed to generate insights into market practices relative to the high-school prom as "gaining a familiarity with one context is an established method of theory generation, as nuances that are distinctive to a particular setting may be more easily captured, identified, and compared across participants than if a variety of contexts are used" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 294). Twenty six respondents participated in three concurrent studies with two methods employed to explore the research questions. Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of the findings.

Study 1

Fourteen interviews were conducted with an equal gender split of 16 year old adolescent males and females from two secondary schools in the North of England, UK. Contact was made by a researcher familiar with accessing schools in this area and these schools were categorized by the relative percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals. This was used as a guide to the number of financially vulnerable adolescents at the school. Teachers were then able to identify which students recruited for the study

were from the lowest income families (e.g. in receipt of free school meals because of their financial position).

Techniques suggested by Young and Barrett (2001) were employed to assist with building rapport. Those who were recruited for the study were pre-tasked to consider two weeks before the interviews what was important to them about the high-school prom and where possible to photo these things/people or associated material (throwaway cameras provided by the researchers). Photos were brought to the interviews by the researcher and served as ice-breakers. Not all respondents took pictures and where photographs were not available the adolescents were simply asked to consider what items they would have taken pictures of and why. The interviews lasted on average between 30 and 40 min. Before data collection approval for the study was granted by the University's Ethics Committee[1]. As the school is 'in loco parentis,' it has legal authority over children in their care and permission to meet with the adolescents was given by the school. On-going consent was provided by the students (Sin, 2005). A judicious ethical approach was adopted following Alderson (1995). Participants were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time and were assured confidentiality in the reporting of the results. At the end of each interview, the respondents were given £5 to recompense them for their time and their contribution. To meet ethical guidelines for research, £5 was to be awarded even if the respondent withdrew from the research (Wiles, 2012). The use of this small monetary incentive was based on the approaches identified by Dickert and Grady (1999) and reflected what seemed reasonable as well as the demands on the participant.

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[1] The University of Bath as the affiliated institution of the Principal Investigator provided ethical support for the study.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed for this phase of data collection. The questions were designed to gauge the expectations of the adolescents in relation to this ritual as well as to contextualize their 'shared' market practices e.g. shopping activities (including trying items on), online searching, bargain hunting and the use of social networks. We also sought to understand their level of spend relative to their own social groups, to encourage narratives of social interaction and ritual processes as well as to probe for evidence of informal economies and access to expertise and/or material devices. Finally the notion of the high school prom as a social marker was established and the significance of being able to participate among their peers was explored. The interview data collection was sufficient to ensure saturation (Guest et al., 2006).

Study 2

An online forum was employed to engage parents in discussion about the high school prom and the (longer-term) financial implications and associated social consequences for themselves and their children of attending this ritual event. Fourteen parents from across the UK were recruited using the services of a market research agency to ensure a purposive sample (7 parents who were BOP and 7 who were non-BOP). All the respondents had children who had attended prom in the last twelve months. Parental data used for this paper only reflects those in receipt of specific government benefits which would mean their children were eligible for free school meals. This offered an opportunity to explore the financial impact of securing social belonging for their children on the parents.

The discussion was active for a period of five days (Monday to Friday), with new topics introduced daily to maintain interest and to ensure relevant data to develop the theoretic concepts. Topics included: 'Prom as an Emotional Experience', 'Prom as a

Community Event', 'Bonding and Belonging', 'Boosting Self-Esteem and Confidence', 'Buying Items Online', 'Longer-term Financial Impact of Prom', 'Picture Perfect', 'Preparing for Prom' and 'Pressure to Participate'. Respondents could use private messaging to avoid publicly discussing personal or sensitive issues. Parents were asked to raise any issues in relation to prom that they considered to have to been overlooked to ensure a comprehensive data set for analysis. In total (including private messaging) there were over 280 posts. An experienced researcher was periodically online for the five day period. While the topic generated sufficient interest in order that parents could discuss/agree/contradict one another, the discussion was guided by the researcher in a similar way to a focus group discussion (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014) to ensure in-depth responses from all participants.

Study 3

A further five in-depth interviews were conducted with secondary school teachers to supplement the data. Two of these teachers were familiar with the adolescents interviewed for Study 1 and all teachers were involved in various ways with this transition event, e.g. assisting the prom organizing committees or helping with fundraising activities for prom. We included this group in an effort to further explore, from the teachers' perspective, how informal economies were discernible and how market practices were shaped. We were also interested in how teachers could access or provide expertise and/or material devices. This phase of data collection extended our understanding of the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion of adolescents in this context, the problematizing of markets and collective participation.

An interpretive analytical stance was adopted drawing on the transcriptions of the interviews and data from the forum discussions. The analysis of the data explored activities, competencies and symbolic meanings (Shove and Pantzar, 2005) in the

responses using the methods outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Transcripts were examined to gain a holistic understanding of the respondent, noting themes in the margin as they emerged (see Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). This coding was driven deductively by the original issues identified in the literature review and inductively by searching for emergent themes. All the themes were reviewed through iterations of comparison and re-reading. The interpretations developed were because of the relationship between emerging insights and prior assumptions (Spiggle, 1994). That is, we examined data that represented a priori constructs, themes, or ideas to understand and explain how and in what ways new insights contributed to the underpinning of theoretic concepts. The authors brought different perspectives to the analysis and interpretation. All were involved in the design of the interviews and the forum discussions, and each independently looked for commonality in interpretation through discussion.

The next section provides an interpretive account of this analysis in relation to our research questions. Firstly we explore how the market actors facilitate social belonging through enabling access to this ritual. Secondly the competencies of the adolescents, parents and teachers in relation to the market are examined to further an understanding of the practical workings as well as the in/formal economies relating to market practices. Finally we establish the transformative nature of the high school prom and explore how and in what ways the symbolic meanings and images associated with prom generate changes in confidence, initiative, enthusiasm and pride.

Activities and Roles Facilitating Social Belonging

While previous studies on the high school prom have highlighted individual experiences of adolescents and have considered the gendered notion of the prom as well as youth cultural practice (Best, 2000; Elza et al., 2010; Miller, 2010; Tinson and

Nuttall, 2010), the role of the wider community in supporting this adolescent rite of passage is a pertinent issue not addressed in extant literature. What this study shows is that the material aspects of the market e.g. that which can be exchanged, has itself "become a collective symbol of group solidarity" (Collins, 2004: 171). Adolescents, parents, teachers as well as those in the wider community seek to extend meaningful social ties with others (Arvidsson, 2008) through ensuring access to prom market practices for the adolescents. As Bella (Adolescent) explains here, ensuring the experience is shared is as important as securing individual access:

> Bella: *Janet was not going to be going* [to prom] *'cause she could not afford the dress but me and Lauren and got her a dress for her birthday. Yeah, and we spoke to Miss. Judd* [teacher at the school] *so she did not have to pay for a* [prom] *ticket either.*

Similarly David (Parent) notes that his son would generally not engage with such events but that with a combination of family, peer and school support access to and attendance of the high school prom can nurture a sense of community where collective as opposed to individual ideals are fostered (Belk et al., 1989):

> *"My youngest has severe dyslexia. At times this can cause him to want to keep away from various events. But, my eldest talked him into going to the prom so he wouldn't miss out. I was surprised to see how happy my son looked in photos, although mainly stood at the back. He hid the excitement but by the Facebook posts he was very glad to have attended, especially as his close pals were also there."*

This sense of collective solidarity (see Collins, 2004) is also evident in how the teachers explain the significance of attending and illustrate that this performance is an inclusive event:

"Sometimes just getting [the adolescents] *to prom is enough.* [The adolescents] *tend at prom to include everybody so if it's just that one-off experience, just something to look back on, it's reason enough for the students to go."* (Louise, Teacher)

Our sample showed that although anxieties relating to self-presentation, peer relationships and financial constraints were apparent (and are detailed in the following sections) overall the collective experience was more important than individual ideals (Belk et al., 1989). Collective engagement and inclusion were evident here with the development of standards of morality (Collins, 2004) which sought at various levels to ensure social belonging. Similarly, while there were some examples of embarrassment associated with accepting (financial) assistance, the market characteristics primarily reflected a system that resisted reduction to individual actors.

Educational and Social Attainment

Varying levels of educational attainment and the achievement of pro-social activities and goals (Kaplan and Maehr, 2007) were also primarily realized through the way in which the school adopted strategies to harness motivation for attending prom to facilitate educational competence (Mansfield and Wosnitza, 2010). Despite the suggestion that "teachers tend to perceive low-income pupils less positively and have lower achievement expectations for them than for higher income students" (Phillips and Pittman, 2003: 118), our findings highlight their role as market actors actively incentivizing academic achievement. Parents similarly understand the inter-relationship between social belonging, attainment and prom attendance highlighting the importance of what is being shaped here through market practices as Lynne (Parent) explains: *"I think it did motivate my daughter to knuckle down at school as she felt more of a sense of belonging to the school…her school had a lot of prom related activities to get the*

pupils more involved which was a good idea." Maureen (Teacher) supports these notions and illustrates how this event is used to encourage engagement with examinations: *"We say to them* [adolescents] *get your GCSEs* [UK examinations] *out of the way and then prom is on your doorstep"*.

Schools also played an important role in facilitating access to the prom through material devices. In addition to the offer of pre-owned outfits in one school there were also proactive schemes in place such as 'Passport to Prom' which allowed for the accumulation of points for attending revision classes. On achieving the required number of points, the adolescents could look forward to going to prom without the anxiety of paying for a ticket. Similarly as Lauren (Adolescent) explains, those experiencing financial constraints could 'earn' money by passing exams:

> *"Our school has a method maths thing where before the* [final] *maths exams there was this* [scheme] *that if you get 5 C grades from this* [revision] *test you'd get a £5 voucher. So some people made £30 out of them, dead easily. So they paid their prom tickets off by these vouchers that we could just change with the school for money."*

These practices promoted inclusion, facilitated social belonging and offered ownership as well as responsibility to adolescents; adding to our understanding of how market actors engage in markets to both construct and problematize markets. How actors perform in the market as a collective rather than as individuals is also evident and offers an understanding of the market characteristics.

Market Actors and their Competencies

To develop an understanding of how this consumption experience was negotiated and navigated (Pechmann et al., 2011) adolescents and parents offered insight into their various consumption practices and as such revealed the practical

workings of this market. This included accessing formal and informal economies. As a consequence of the costs associated with this ritual, adolescents and their parents recognized the importance of careful financial management related to formal economies. An emphasis was placed on both preparation and knowledge of the market to maximize return on investment:

> *"For us the prom was very important and we started preparing for it about 6 months before the event. Me and her must have spent an age trawling through lots of online shopping pages and looking for the best prices and deals."*
>
> (Patricia, Parent)

Patricia also reinforces that affordability is indispensable for success in subsistence marketplaces building on the studies of Weidner et al. (2010) in an emerging market context. Similarly opportunities to circumvent formal economies were identified and improved our understanding of the evolving boundaries of formal and informal economies. For example, families and friends who were (training to be) beauticians or hairdressers offered their services for free. Alternatively those facilitating processes related to accessing prom (who did not use their own premises) offered a cheaper alternative to traditional market practices. This is not to say that services are offered for no payment, but the prevailing view is that informal economies and relevant competencies can be accessed and that these offer a service of equivalent standard to commercially available options: *"My Mum's got a friend who does tans, so she'll come to my house and do my tan, and then I've got a hairdresser who's doing my hair, makeup and nails."* (Gina, Adolescent)

However, accessing commercial options was not the only alternative for the participants in this study. Sridharan and Viswanathan (2008: 460) observe that in subsistence marketplaces, "there tends to be significant knowledge sharing, learning and

co-created innovation". This is mirrored here where the making of a prom dress by Miriam (assisted by her daughter) illustrates how access to prom artifacts can be an informal opportunity to educate: *"I helped my daughter prepare in the build-up to prom and when there was about 2 months left, I helped by helping her make her a prom dress."* This notion of expertise (see Araujo et al., 2008) is further developed by Susan who positively discusses the creative abilities of her daughter in not only being able to design her own accessories but in her adeptness at using materials at her disposal to produce unique items: *"I am very proud of her!! Amber is very creative and made the flowers for her prom dress herself. She does her own card making as well…I don't know where she gets it from, but she can spend hours creating things from scraps of paper."*

Although there were opportunities to draw on social resources as observed by Viswanathan (2007) in subsistence markets, parents often navigated the market by trading-off their own consumption 'rewards'. In the following excerpt, Alex explains how he has managed access to the prom for his daughter despite the impact on his own leisure enjoyment. This is consistent with discourses on parental sacrifice and prioritization of the needs of children in limited income households (Hirsch et al., 2012):

> *"Sometimes I think that my wife and I are just banging our heads against a wall with no relief in sight… We have scrimped and saved to try and manage our financial commitments… to be honest things like prom nights are just a nightmare for us. My daughter attended her school prom courtesy of Sky TV in order to pay for her dress, shoes and accessories…we 'cut' the Sky subscription which freed up the money to pay for everything. Now I just listen to the football on the radio."*

What appears to be evident through this market practice is the significance of and parental need to secure social belonging for their children as earlier asserted by Pugh (2009) either at the expense of an already limited income or through personal sacrifice. The importance placed on securing social belonging recognizes the social meaning associated with the high school prom as well as its role in the transition of adolescents from school to job seeking, employment or further education.

Symbolic Meanings and Images

Notions of transformation and transition are central to the performance of prom (Best, 2000); offering an opportunity to explore "experiences of the individual or group in flux and evolution" (Cody and Lawlor, 2011: 208). Interestingly adolescents and parents often defined the prom as akin to a wedding with Shelley (Adolescent) describing the prom as "*something big that happens in your life…other than when you get married*". Jennifer (Parent) similarly likens the prom to a wedding but additionally introduces the idea of the social collective. Here, the wider community engage in this transformative event to ensure self-presentation is supported through consumption practices and the acquisition of artifacts: "*Family definitely helped as everyone chucked in a little something − be it the use of one student discount card or fashion tips and hair styling…I guess it's the same as a woman on her wedding day. Everyone just wanted her to be the happiest and prettiest as she could be this one time*". This wedding analogy supports the assertion that the prom is associated with transitional phenomena (Kalmijn, 2004), and importantly the symbolic meanings are both understood and shared within the social collective.

As Susan (Parent) observes, "*it was an exciting time for all of us* [in the family], *especially as* [my daughter] *was talking about it all the time…*". Here, emotional energy (Collins, 2004) is positively generated amongst the social collective engaging with this

ritual; further reflecting the wider impact of this event. Trevor (Parent) also notes these heightened levels of enthusiasm and observes that this excitement has led to changes in his daughter's household practices as well as altering her self-perception: "*My daughter seemed a lot more confident in herself in the build-up to prom...she kept getting compliments from everyone who saw her dress on Facebook etc. This made her take more pride in even little things like tidying her room which benefitted me*". This reflects the process of transformation rather than the liminal transition itself (Cody and Lawlor, 2011) and contributes to an understanding of what happens during the 'space' of this liminal period as opposed to simply focusing on the actual performance.

Best (2004: 199) observes that adolescents attending prom demonstrate skills "at assembling a range of signs or symbols…in a way that transform who they [are] at school". As Hannah (Adolescent) asserts, her dress allows her to change from sporting her school uniform to wearing a dress "*that's bright and outrageous because that's who I am...*". Tinson and Nuttall (2010) similarly note that the artifacts for prom can be used as a way in which to change the perceptions of others towards an individual or to reinforce or enhance latent characteristic/s. However the ambiguity associated with the liminality of this event can cause confusion and uncertainty (van Gennep, 1960) as Alice (Adolescent) explains in relation to the image she wants to create for prom: "*I need to get an idea of how I want my make-up and my hair, I've had an idea for absolutely ages but then I've just completely, completely got a different dress to what I wanted*". While this reliance on material goods by Alice may correlate with uncertainty regarding the next stage in her life (Burroughs et al., 2013), adolescent confusion and related identity negotiation is further complicated as these 'transformations' are also subject to peer evaluation.

The audience for such ritual events is virtual as well as diverse (Miller, 2010). For those at the 'bottom of the pyramid' negotiating an identity that will be positively viewed by those without financial disadvantage can be difficult as Chloe explains here: "*The snobby people think they're better and they're always like slagging us off* [discussing in a negative manner] – *sending tweets about us…it's just embarrassing. They write about us wearing extensions and fake tan and they swear* [blaspheme] *about us and it just gets you angry*". This perception of having a 'low status' can elicit shame as well as anger (Kemper, 1978). Similarly as the prom represents change for adolescents as they become "separated from prior relationships and roles" (Noble and Walker, 1997: 31) the additional vulnerability as a consequence of financial disadvantage can lead to social withdrawal. As Gavin (Adolescent) observes detachment strategies are used by those at the bottom of the pyramid who cannot access what they perceive to a lavish and exclusive event:

> *I know people who didn't go* [to prom]. *Some people cannot* [go to the prom]*, because they do not want to just buy some' at that's very cheap, just to go. They want something really expensive so they'd rather not go. They would just feel embarrassed.*

The symbolic meaning and images associated with the high school prom shown here reinforce the notion of change and transition. While the processes of transformation and identity negotiation are supported and shared through actor competencies they are nevertheless subject to both audience and peer evaluation. Similarly, although adolescents can benefit from affirmative appraisal, there is evidence here to suggest that those at the bottom of the pyramid can be stigmatized as a result of how they choose to assemble their image. When financially disadvantaged adolescents internalize disparaging messages about themselves this can promote negative views of the self and

have a demoralizing effect (Phillips and Pittman, 2003). This illustrates that social belonging and the system of social meaning is complex as well as contested (Pugh, 2009). Transformative consumption practices associated with prom can contribute to an understanding of what is meant by the economy of dignity; not only in how adolescents access this event but through social acceptance, the terms of their belonging and consequent outcomes of engagement.

Discussion

Pechmann et al. (2005: 208) note that "compared with younger and older people, adolescents tend to experience a larger number of stressful transitions and negative life events." Thus, every adolescent could be considered as being at risk or vulnerable (Larson and Ham, 1993). However, this study has specifically focused on adolescents who are theoretically more vulnerable as a consequence of also being financially disadvantaged in a context of abundance. This study offers insight into a contemporary consumption ritual, adopting a relative perspective on poverty (Townsend, 1979). Consequently the emphasis shifts from viewing poverty as simply a material condition towards a focus on the social and psychological aspects (Bauman, 2005) associated with market access. Utilizing dimensions of practice identified by Shove and Pantzar (2005) the role of the market actors and their relative competencies in securing access and social belonging to the prom through formal and informal economies were explored. This built on previous research to explicitly examine experiences of the individual and the wider social collective during a period of instability and development. In doing so, our study contributes to an understanding of those experiencing 'poor living' (Piacentini and Hamilton, 2013) in three ways.

Initially we identified the various roles played by market actors in securing social belonging and enhanced our understanding of 'collective solidarity' (Collins,

2004). Previous research has emphasized the ways in which members of society exhibit a shared willingness to support and facilitate social ties within the community (Cohen et al., 2006; McNamara et al., 2013) and preparation for this ritual has revealed market actors as extending meaningful social ties with others (Arvidsson, 2008). We observed market actors not only making the market as inclusive as possible but harnessing motivation for this event to enhance educational and prosocial goals. Being part of a collective through contributing to this transition event shows that engagement with this event motivates group assembly in the form of accessing this youth focused ritual. Similarly this study builds on the work of Belk et al. (1989) and importantly emphasizes that the prom as a collective experience for those encountering poor living is more important than individual ideals. These findings, however, also raise social policy concerns for those who are isolated or excluded from a wider social network and highlight the need for targeted local approaches to ensure access and social belonging for a greater number of adolescents (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013). As this study has shown that motivation for prom can promote educational attainment as well as develop adolescent responsibility during this period of transition, there are opportunities to extend this meaningful social practice and the longer-term benefits to a wider and more diverse audience.

Next we were able to establish the use of formal and informal economies in the market. This research illustrated that market actors often use their competencies to circumvent formal economies and supports the assertion that low income consumers can show considerable skill as well as exerting control as they adapt to their financial circumstances (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006; Hill and Stephens, 1997). Adolescents were innovative and used materials to create the artifacts needed to meet the conditions of the ritual performance while distributed agency (Callon and Muniesa, 2005) was

related to the configuration of the acting collective. This agency was related to their proximity/ closeness to the adolescent and the market tools and devices to which s/he has access (Lindeman, 2012). The informal routes to market established here demonstrate the importance of accruing social capital, but also show how these practices can serve as a form of cultural capital or knowledge that reveals a consumer as discerning (Bradford and Sherry, 2014).

Finally, symbolic meanings and images were explored to enhance our appreciation of this ritual as an event offering the opportunity for transformation. The wedding analogy proffered by the market actors highlights the way in which this performance is viewed as a transition event. Importantly however, as the focus of this paper was not simply on the performance itself, this research also contributed to an understanding of what happens during the liminal 'space' (Cody and Lawlor, 2011) or prelude to prom. While the assembling of the signs and symbols was an affirmative experience generating pride and excitement for some adolescents, others were subject to concerns of 'low status' and embarrassment. Stigma or marginalization can "conspire to create a context that is not conducive to exploring identity issues" (Phillips and Pittman, 2003: 123) and as such events like prom can impede identity development which has important implications for healthy psychological development throughout the life course (Erikson, 1968). Further research is needed to examine the complexity of the practices associated with this event and the status hierarchies apparent in this market (Ulver and Ostberg, 2014).

Specifically this study explored how and in what ways market actors use their competencies to negotiate and navigate access to the prom and we did not recruit those unable to attend this event as a consequence of financial disadvantage. While adolescents attending prom alluded to those who did not, it would be pertinent to study

the impact of non-attendance on identity development and longer-term social interaction. Similarly, although there was evidence of parental saving and sacrificing, the extent to which parents are prepared to spend excessively to safeguard the social inclusion of their children warrants further research. Hamilton (2012) observes that families engage in conspicuous consumption practices to ensure children have access to the 'right' brands and reports on the financial difficulties therein. The longer-term financial implications of meeting the conditions of the prom and/or other ritual performances (e.g. christenings, weddings, funerals, birthday parties) have yet to be explored and may generate insight regarding the cyclical nature of being at the 'bottom of the pyramid' in a context of abundance and relative poverty.

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