



(Research on Lifestyles, Values and Environment)
UNIVERSITY OF SURREY, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH

FORTHCOMING SEMINAR

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45b AZ 04
University of Surrey

Ann Phoenix

"I shop, therefore I am?" The interlinking of identities and consumption for young people'

Many young people in neoliberal societies are concerned to project the 'right' image in relation to the groups to which they belong through wearing the 'right' clothes, carrying accessories and listening to music. Consumption is, therefore, central to their identity construction, so much so that some researchers refer to this in an adaptation of Descartes' statement of Cartesian dualism ('I shop, therefore I am'). At first sight shopping appears to be one way in which neoliberal subjects have a plurality of pleasurable choices about both identities and consumption. However, such choices are constraining for many young people in producing anxieties about wearing the right labels, being sufficiently like their peers, yet also individual. In addition both young people and their parents can be very anxious about the material resources necessary to this consumption and the ethics of such spending.

This paper uses data from a quantitative and qualitative study of young men and women from a range of ethnic and social class groups in three English cities. It explores the ways in which they negotiated the choices and constraints that result from current emphasis on consumption. The paper argues that, for many young people, the anxieties that result from these constraints make choice illusory and consumption both painful and pleasurable. It illustrates the ways in which consumption helps to maintain racialised, gendered and social class inequities and examines some of the issues that arise for young people and their parents as they negotiate consumption. There are, necessarily, wider implications of this push to short-term cycles of consumption for sustainability. For example, young people contribute to the production-consumption-disposal interaction and are likely to buy brand-name products that rely on global supplies of cheap labour.

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