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Higher Education Marketing – Does inducing anxiety facilitate critical thinkers or more productive consumers?

Paul Gibbs

Consumerism acts to maintain the emotional reversal of work and family. Exposed to a continual bombardment of advertisements through a daily average of three hours of television (half of all their leisure time), workers are persuaded to 'need' more things. To buy what they now need, they need money. To earn money, they work longer hours. Being away from home so many hours, they make up for their absence at home with gifts that cost money. They materialize love. And so the cycle continues. (Baumann, 2007: 28)

Baumann is not alone in recognizing the link between consumer society and the existential anxiety created for consumption. This builds upon inequalities and encourages the moral hazards that it perpetuates. In *The Consumer Society: Myths and structures* (1998), Jean Baudrillard characterizes modern social-structural processes and forces in the structure of penury. In such a society where anxiety dominates, categorized by unlimited and insatiable need, there is a constant sense that one does not have enough of consumer goods, academic qualifications, fame or security. Further, Frank (2007) observes that insecurity and anxiety cause us to work too much, save too little and buy too much of those things that add little to our overall satisfaction.

The literature, however, is not clear when it discusses consumer anxiety as a specific way of being. This is the way whereby, at birth, one is thrown into such a society, created by consumer culture, and the anxiety within that society when one purchases certain goods, such as health anxieties over certain foods. The thrown-ness of societal anxiety is the fundamental mood of that society and is rooted in the practices of everyday life. It is a different form of ontological anxiety and borders on despair. It is of a different, more primordial form than the anxiety that is made manifest in the anxiety over buying decisions, concerned with this or that kind of purchase. Such anxiety is a derivative of the core forces of capitalist power that shape our human condition and our way of being.

This lack of clarity is evident in the seminal work by Warde (1994), who acknowledges that consumption choices can possibly be problematic, risky or anxiety-provoking. However, he argues against Baumann, Beck and Giddens to suggest that consumer anxiety is not a prevalent condition of consumer societies but relates to the type of purchase risk. This can be countered and solved by social mechanisms to alleviate such risk. One such mechanism is marketing, which might reduce the consumption risks at the individual level. However, such mechanisms are part of the lamented reality of consumer society and, whilst ameliorating consumer purchase anxiety, they facilitate the reality of social anxiety in a consumer culture. As Woodward states, the 'irony of a consumerist society is that it does not satisfy needs, but actually multiplies scarcities and as a result it also multiplies anxieties, through the stimulation of desire' (2006: 279). Under such conditions, we can

never settle for what is. We must progress in certain ways, continuing to strive to be better, never resting to reflect and critically appraise ourselves and others. We must always be busy.

According to Goodin (2012), the source of discontent under late capitalism is the constant avocation to strive: striving to be; striving to have; and striving to consume. Thomas Hobbes suggested that one is lost when one ceases to strive. The tradition has a long history. Hobbes argued that there is 'a general inclination of all mankind.... A perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only until death' (1996: 70). The purpose of such striving is evidently to satisfy desires that, once satiated, lead to more. He suggested that man cannot 'any more live whose Desires are at an end, than he whose Senses and imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter' (1996: 70). He went on to say that the satisfaction of desire is a function of ever-increasing power, which I assume is both personal and invested in the powers of society. Yet this constant striving, rather than fixing one's position, has been a concern that was revealed as early as Plato's time. In *Gorgias*, Plato uses the metaphor of full and leaking jars. One character is in perpetual anxiety, striving for more because her jars are always leaking (using resources), whereas the prudent owner of full and stable jars is by far the happier and more contented. More contemporary narratives along these lines can be found, for example in Scitovsky's (1976) joyless society and Offer's (2006) discussion of how affluence induces anxiety, if manifest in materialism. Goodin concludes that, without a settled and contented stance, the 'satisfaction of one desire leads to the arousal of another, leaving people constantly dissatisfied and questing for more' (2012: 3).

A syllogistic research outline

How does this apply to education, marketing and the morality of marketing higher education? My argument progresses along these lines:

- Education is a function of well-being
- Education is more than desire satisfaction, and also it ought to unsettle temporally yet should not lead to anxiety
- The resolution of this anxiety is in prolonged settled-ness, not despair in retentive, unresolved desires
- Therefore, education is about learning to be settled with oneself.

However:

- Marketing is desire-creating
- Desire resolution is short term and leads to further desires, but insufficient satisfaction
- Consumers' induced desire creates an ever-changing flux of anxiety feed, rather than being ameliorated by marketing (for if it did, it would mean negating itself)
- This leads both to sub-optimization, ontological uncertainty and discomfort.

Marketing and consumerization

One consequence of this move to the market has been a marketization of higher education (Gibbs, 2002, 2011; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009; Hemsley-Brown, 2011). This is an increasing emphasis by universities on how they promote themselves to potential students. The approaches have not honoured the nature of education as a distinctive, transformative process of the human condition, but have treated it (for the most part) as undifferentiated consumption. They have adopted marketing from consumer markets, albeit highly sophisticated and technical, that are best suited to selling chocolate, aspirin and supermarket discounts. As Molesworth et al. suggest, 'many HEIs prepare the student for a life of consumption by obtaining a well-paid job: a mission of confirmation rather than transformation' (2009: 278). Moreover, they suggest that this is manifest through a consumer desire of having, rather than being. The anxiety of consumer society was revealed in a study by Nixon and Gabriel (2015). They described that of those who sought not to buy as consisting of two types: 'moral anxiety, caused by the fear of being compromised or tempted to act contrary to their values, and neurotic, an anxiety that arises from being overwhelmed by their own unconscious desires, emotions and fantasies' (2016: 48).

The notion that education is the provision of intellectual and emotional desire satisfaction has tended to become a driver of university strategy, reflecting how institutionalized education (in some, but by no means all cases) has been interpreted in this consumerist epoch. Roberts (2013) writes that education now seems actually to be about promoting desire satisfaction, often in ways that are not implicitly edifying but that create satisfactory, pleasurable and measurable experiences. Satisfaction indicators are used to build reputation, inform educational policy and create conformity. Moreover, they make the university more marketable and tend to represent an agenda for desire satisfaction that is an extravagant imagined sea of opportunity (favoured by advocates of education for jobs and strong authenticity), not one where a tempered desire for settling oneself is achieved through balancing capabilities, potentiality and despair. Indeed, the current context of education seems to emphasize anxiety and fear for one's future. This suggests commitments that form sympathies and commitments to people, principles and projects. It does this through the need to optimize one's investment, to strive always to know enough to make the right decisions and to avoid any idea of sub-optimization. This, of course, is an impossible task, in the same class as achieving excellence.

With consumerism changing students into customers (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2010; Woodall, Hiller & Resnick, 2014) and tutors into service providers (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett, 2013), with evermore vulnerable and naïve students being encouraged to enrol, the higher education market's ethos has become competition, rather than sector collaboration. One consequence of such change is that a trust in the common good, once assumed of higher education (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Carvalho & de Oliveira Mota, 2010), has been shaken by the uncertainty of the market and the dissatisfaction with this need to sustain itself.

In the UK, the recent document which set out the government plans for higher education – ‘Success as a knowledge economy’ (Department of Business and Innovation: 2016) - could not be more clear. Early on in the document, the government states, ‘Competition between providers in any market incentivizes them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception’ (*ibid*: 8). The claim is that the student is at the core of the consumerized notion of education, and its analytics of performance are indicators of desire satisfaction. However, it is the consumer who is able to decide what is best for her future in terms of employment in a world of complexity, where all that is guaranteed is that her fees will be taken and her employment left to an unregulated, uncontrolled marketplace. Under such conditions, education is an expensive gamble where different odds reflect privilege. The bookies (employers) hardly ever lose, because they continually change the conditions of the bet. Further, they encourage those who can ill afford the debt to bet outside their financial competence, with claims that they will not have to pay if the gamble does not come off and they fail to secure employment. Somehow, this moral corruption is seen as opportunity, emancipation and liberating democratic principles.

Under this regime, the student is not a Newman scholar, learner or inquirer, but a consumer. This is a theme that Eagle and Brennan (2007: 44) have identified as being increasingly accepted in higher education, partly due to the tuition fees. This view is supported by Williams and Cappucci-Ansfield (2007), who believe that the introduction of tuition fees will force universities to act as ‘service providers’ and thus become responsive to students as consumer requirements. Watson (2003) and Narasimhan (2001) assert that fee-paying students may expect ‘value for money’ and thus will behave more like consumers. The concept of customer orientation has been gaining traction in higher education (Douglas & Douglas, 2006). This approach views students as the primary consumers of higher education (see Gremler & McCollough, 2002; Kotzé & Plessis, 2003). Such a position has led, wrongly, to a policy of educational consumerism that seeks to satisfy tangible, identifiable external manifestations of a satisfying consumption experience. This is an experience that can be readily, and often immediately, evaluated by consumers. Using their prior experience or terms that they are quickly taught to appropriate regarding education’s entertainment value, they assess the potential employment benefits and the ambient quality of the university lecture theatres. The outcomes from the annual National Student Survey (NSS) have shown that these ‘hygiene factors’ demonstrate that results improve annually. However, they do not equate to an enhanced learning experience for the students and, once beyond a certain threshold, will not contribute further to the ongoing experience.

Through the normalizing notion of consumerism, what is taken for ‘good education’ is converted into what satisfies the desires of stakeholders, as consumers. These, in turn, are identified not as internal goods of civic responsibility – *phronesis*, *dumanis* and *parrhesia* - but as ‘value for money’, cost efficiencies, counts of academic papers per scholar, contact hours, turnaround times and

the like. These notions drive, rather than follow, national educational higher education policy and cascade into institutional strategic directions. They are transitory and anxiety-inducing, through creating voids to be filled. They create an ethos of striving – not in the form of settling, but in the sense of Sisyphus.

Thrown into consumerism and blocked from critical appraisal?

We live in a world where what we are to be is often dictated by what others will have us be. This is anxiety inducing. The resilience to see beyond the wants of others to our own needs is allowed to atrophy through lack of nurture in the contemporary university. This leads to a fall from anxiety into despair, and a fear that is located in the specific rather than the general. A student is anxious about his or her ability to reach the goals that he or she sets herself. He or she despairs that these goals are not those ones that are stated for him or her – by parents, the university or government narratives. Being good enough in choosing what one wants to be, and using the university to help to refine this, is significantly different from seeking an excellent internship, having a high salary and being satisfied with the service provided along the way. These are the narratives of government and universities, whose own goals are increased university participation, increased tax revenues and high league table positions. This is not to say that these narratives are in themselves totally inappropriate, since the market determines educational values based on reputation of the university and the family background of the student. The narratives encourage constant striving, since the force of society is set against the realization of these goals, for many, as is the case in defining entry to elite employment. Such goals are used as core communication platforms for young people's attainment, and are marketed aggressively. They work when recipients respond as consumer literate; that is, literate in an unquestioning, ready-to-consume way. In so doing, the goals fail to allow students the time to reflect and question themselves. They present a busyness of action, not reflection. For instance, Reading University (as reported by the BBC, 2016) confirms the anxiety of higher education applications, in that it sees a very aggressive, competitive undergraduate market. The university makes stress-reducing offers to attract students by providing 'safety net' offers to those applying for places for the following year. These guarantee admission, even if students miss entry by an A-level grade. The university sees this as a more 'honest' approach to applications, yet this is not a case of settling for something in the sense just developed, but another form of sub-optimization. It is an anxiety-reducing mechanism along the lines proposed by Warde, perhaps even a gimmick.

The argument that I want to consider is whether this is what the marketing of higher education be about. Should it be encouraging consumerism, or might it begin to encourage a criticality that questions itself? If it takes the latter route, it does not rely on free gifts such as sport memberships and laptops. It finds new ways of presenting higher education to a wider audience. These ways are compatible with the entity it represents, not one that it totalizes through both reducing opportunities and hiding the anxiety of consumerism in the hedonism of consumption. In moderation, this may not be harmful. However, when universities embrace consumer techniques of

marketing, they risk supporting an ideological norm that is hidden in our everydayness, and that needs to be questioned. Williams suggests an irony here: 'whilst the promotion of satisfaction may appear to be a response to students perceiving themselves as consumers, it also enhances trends towards the consumption model and constructs new generations of students as consumers' (2013: 101). Moreover, we should question the decision not to query this, or to provide information only on the powerful, rather than powerful information, often to students who are poorly prepared to make such choices. Questions need to be put by those who claim academic status in making the decisions, as well as those who make statements. Harrison and Risle (2015) analysed the effect of consumerism on the very infrastructure and functionality of higher education activities is that to revive student learning on campus demands us to forego the consumer model. This is because it diminishes the likelihood that institutions will organize themselves in ways conducive to meaningful curricular and co-curricular educational experiences for student' (2015: 73).

Education ought to provide an arena for the development of our potential within the flux of society and thus, paradoxically, a place where anxiety allows for us to be unsettled – unhappy, if you will. However, the institution has an obligation – an intent, I suggest – that this existential anxiety is not a threat to one's very being, but a process of settling on the being that is worthy of one's striving: to aspire to. The university (amongst other cultural and societal institutions) is an enabler and provider of the care to shape and resolve what one wills one to be. This is through acritical assessment, bracketed from the historicity of the context of one's being. This does not mean that aspiration is thwarted, nor does it assume some Nietzschean passive contentment. Neither is it driven by calculative and instrument thinking, embedded in the onto-epistemological infusion of disciplines where consumer logical and employability serve to foreground all notions of the future. It assumes a secure place from which to challenge oneself through meditative thinking and being. It is in the realization that one has yet more to learn, but not to consume. In this way, it discusses realistic potential rather than any ungrounded, imaginary choices about which one might fantasize and endlessly strive for, in a pointless and futile attempt to achieve the unachievable and risk falling into despair and a destruction of value.

Moreover, if we crudely follow Rorty (1999), in that higher education's duty is to encourage irony from the socialization of compulsory education, then higher education and its institutions represent a space for this questioning to take place. Further, it might be claimed that higher education has a duty to offer such a space, and not to close it out with the business of service delivery based on pleasure, entertainment and job grooming. It is in the Heideggerian sense of a fundamental attunement to the world through a mood of contentment that we find ourselves disposed to be in the world with others, open to them and not constrained by the consumerism entrapment of a notion of belonging by consuming. Heidegger talks damningly and directly about how consumerism is abandoning Being, through letting one's 'will be unconditionally equated with the process [consumerism] and thus becomes at the same time the "object" of the abandonment of Being' (1973: 107, author's brackets). The real danger, suggested by Dreyfus and Spinoza (2003), is

not 'self-indulgent consumerism but [it as] a new totalizing style of practices that would restrict our openness to people and things by driving out all other styles of practice that enable us to be receptive to reality' (2003: 341, brackets inserted).

Heidegger continues in a prophetic attack on consumerism as the totalizing power held by a few globalized leaders to negate our understanding of our being: the 'circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an unworld' (1973: 107). For example, if learning is consumption and consuming is a never-ending requirement of consumerism, then failing to learn fast is a failure of consumption, and to be feared. However, if failure to learn and understand quickly reveals issues about oneself that can be explored over time, this might bring deeper understanding or even acceptance that something is personally unlearn-able. Either way, one is content with the educational struggle when one accepts its reality.

Such contentment does not seek an end to learning. It is a moving and ceaseless state of learning, ready to face the unanticipated future resolutely as oneself. It is a mode of practice where the poles of action and holding back form a mode of disclosing and affirming within oneself what is understood to be practised. Such disclosing is through our attunement to a mood. When one is settled, it brings a sense of hope (Rorty, 1999). To manage this issue requires thinking about what education is intent in doing, for 'true happiness consists in decreasing the difference between our desires and our powers, in establishing a perfect equilibrium between power and the will' (Rousseau, 2013: 39).

Rather than an economic acquisition agenda for higher education, with continued striving that denies students the potentially valuable educational experiences at its core, a university should challenge students to develop the capabilities to optimize their potential to make responsible, or at least informed, choices as privileged civic partners. This may often be achieved by having more space in the curriculum to 'potter about', to follow the byways of their curiosity and not to worry about learning outcomes or assessment criteria. These are designed to fill up time, to create the urgency of immediate demands and to induce a fear of forgetting who you are. Such adventures may often be painfully uncomfortable yet, in and of itself, this does not diminish the mood of contentment, but strengthens students' resolve and resilience to create a personal identity within the context of being a member of society. As Heidegger claims, 'real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it' (1998: 167).

This laying hold of the soul requires the development of sustainable commitments to a bundle of beliefs and desires. These specify what a person cares about and, in so doing, define both the person and the narrative identity of that Being. This connects to settling, which consumerism seeks to avoid, because the narrative identity is temporally extended identity. As Korsgaard writes, 'Some of the things we do are intelligible only in the context of projects that extend over long periods.... In choosing our careers, and pursuing our friendships and family lives we both

presuppose and construct a continuity of identity and of agency' (1989: 113). Of course, one's principles, values and projects can compete and change, over time. However, they need to be tolerably coherent and to persist for a length of time if they are to form the basis of what is commonly regarded as a remotely satisfactory life.

The future for marketing higher education is not to turn education into a marketable entity, but to contribute to accessing education as an edifying and transformative experience. It is, I suggest, its greatest challenge. It is one which, from my reading of the literature, is not being faced. The edifying experience is being changed, if not downgraded, by marketing. Moreover, it is harming our students by inducing anxiety. We are teaching our students not to be resiliently critical, but to cope with the anxiety of the market through short-term palliatives. Ultimately, these just contribute to the reproduction of anxiety as the core of consumer culture. In so doing, they create a generation whose anxiety is founded on the guilt of not having been, or being, good enough.

Concluding

I finish by returning to Baudrillard. To cope with the fund of anxiety that consumer society develops, he suggests two alternatives. One is a proliferation of caring agencies, and these are now central to most university student engagement policies. The other is a confronting of such anxiety that is socialized, itself, as a cultural commodification that Baudrillard claims 'leads more deeply into anxiety' (1998: 178).

Given the market conditions in the UK, university authorities and policy makers have accepted that the dominant force in education is consumer marketing of desire satisfaction, which is not in favour of students' (or academics') well-being in terms of a settled-ness. Without the fixedness of being settled on topics of learning, this critical thinking is problematic, for it is conspicuous.

The case for settling within our university experience has two central arguments. The first is that settling is often, although not exclusively, based on principles and values. We might settle for less than others, because it is the right and fair thing to do. We might conclude that we do not need so much emotionally, as well as materialistically, or that a contribution to the sustainability of our community or to humanity itself (in the present and future) is worth more to us than endlessly striving to have more. This is absent from many models of consumerism. The second argument is more prudential, in that settling creates stability: finding some fixed points around which to plan our life; and settling on who we are going to be by intending to operate our agency. We are temporally extended beings who want to access agency over time by forming, implementing and sticking to our plans.

These reasons are ethical and not necessarily central to the role of optimizing or 'satisficing'. They are central, not to being a good consumer, but to being a good citizen.

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