Towards Understanding of Arts as Social Mobiliser

Abstract

We use the case of Paragon – a charity music company in Glasgow – to argue how arts can foster ‘social mobility’ in contemporary society. Social mobility in our study does not follow the traditional definition and use of the term in economic and social class theories. Rather, we use the term in a broader sense to refer to the way different groups of people are empowered to participate in a variety of everyday life situations in the heart of society. Our key objective is therefore to draw the attention of marketing and consumer behaviour researchers to the ‘transformative’ nature of arts in our ever-changing society. Our study can contribute to the extant marketing and consumer behaviour literatures on arts and non-profit sector in two ways: (1) it extends the boundaries of ‘social mobility’ beyond the conventional concepts of economic and class culture and tap on other areas (e.g., disability, ethnicity, age disadvantage) which have been deemed highly critical by transformative marketing and consumer behaviour researchers. (2) Building upon the existing literature on arts consumption, it demonstrates how the changing socio-cultural conditions of society give rise to arts as a social mobiliser.
Towards Understanding of Arts as Social Mobiliser

Introduction

In this working paper, we use the case of Paragon (http://paragon-music.org/) – a charity music company in Glasgow – to argue how arts can foster ‘social mobility’ in contemporary society. Social mobility in our study does not follow the traditional definition and use of the term in economic and social class theories (Goldthorpe, 1985), which emphasise the role of social status and class culture in positioning individuals in different social, cultural, and economic categories (Bourdieu, 1984; Stewart, 2010; Veblen, 1914). Rather, with a focus on the transformative role of arts (Scher, 2007), we use the term in a broader sense to refer to the way different groups of people are empowered to participate in a variety of everyday life situations in the heart of society. In our study, we argue for a need to re-think the application of ‘social mobility’ in the literature of marketing and consumer behaviour research, a stance that requires researchers to transgress the limited boundaries of economic and cultural class and investigate myriad phenomena and research topics that are emerging in contemporary society. To do end, we find the case of arts a useful platform on which to open up a new debate on understanding the changing nature of social mobility in society. Arts, as we shall discuss in our paper, has the potential to socially mobilise people and empower them to participate in many areas of life (other than economic and social class) that have remained significantly understudied (see Mick, 2006; also the proceedings of the past conferences on Transformative Consumer Research).

This aspect of arts in the literature of consumer behaviour research and marketing has remained largely overlooked. This oversight seems to be related to the fact that arts marketing has been generally viewed as just another context in which to study consumers’ interest in arts as ‘products (supply focus) and services (experience focus)’ (Sargeant, 2009) or a context in which to use conventional theories of marketing to enhance consumers’ engagement with products/services in the realm of cultural consumption (Fillis, 2011). In other words, production and consumption of arts have been generally conceptualised in relation to experiential marketing, a theoretical lens through which to study how a variety of benefits/values (e.g., aesthetic, emotive, and economic) are created for consumers, producers, as well as other stakeholders such as creative arts agencies, investors, and sponsors, to name but a few (Botti, 2000; Boorsma, 2006; Dennis, Larsen & Macaulay, 2011; O’Reilly, 2011).

Our key objective in this paper is to draw the attention of marketing and consumer behaviour researchers to the ‘transformative’ nature of arts (Scher, 2007) in our ever-changing society. We humbly believe that our study can contribute to the extant marketing and consumer behaviour literatures on arts and non-profit sector in the following ways: Firstly, we extend the boundaries of ‘social mobility’ beyond the conventional concepts of economic and class culture and tap on other areas (e.g., disability, ethnicity, age disadvantage) which have been deemed highly critical by transformative marketing and consumer behaviour researchers. Secondly, building upon the existing literature on arts consumption (e.g., Hamilton & Hewer, 2009; Hewer & Hamilton, 2010; Jafari, Taheri & vom Lehn, forthcoming; Jafari & Taheri, forthcoming), we demonstrate how the changing socio-cultural conditions of society give rise to arts as a social mobiliser.

Paragon: the Case

Paragon’s mission is summarised in the following statement: “Paragon is an inclusive music company inspiring people to create and perform their own music. We are passionate
about using music, dance, theatre and the arts as a dynamic medium to raise learning, positive self-image, teamwork, communication and people’s aspirations.” Its ethos is also explained as follows: “Paragon is dedicated to inspiring young people and adults in Scotland to create music; helping them to change their lives through opportunities to learn and develop new skills. Our core values are inclusivity and equality with the aim of producing work of the highest level.” As a non-profit organisation, Paragon is playing a significant role in transforming the lives of many people in Scotland. Paragon brings diverse groups of people – including children, young adults, disabled, and so forth – together in a dynamic atmosphere and enhances their life skills at large in the heart of society. Understanding such transformative roles of arts in contemporary society is vital to theorising arts in the changing landscape of consumer behaviour research and marketing.

Literature Review

Following the increasing rise of interest in arts in the past two decades, marketing and consumer behaviour researchers have endeavoured to explore multiple dimensions of arts in people’s everyday life situations. A review of the extant literature in this domain shows two main trends: (1) ‘art for art’s sake’: research that investigates how consumers seek aesthetic (e.g., Goulding, 1999b; Schroeder, 2002; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006, 2008; Swanson, Davis & Zhao, 2008) or hedonic (e.g., Goulding, 1999b, Zwick & Dholakia, 2004; Slater, 2007; Slater & Armstrong, 2010; Swanson, Davis & Zhao, 2008) benefits from their arts consumption. Such studies provide evidence for the conventional theory of ‘art for art’s sake’ and stress how arts create aesthetic, affective and escapist (and sometimes extraordinary moments of flow; see Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) experiences for consumers. (2) Research in this domain goes beyond conceptualising art for art’s sake as studies of this kind investigates how, in their consumption of arts, people seek other benefits such as identity construction (e.g., Goulding, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Sandell & Janes, 2007; Stewart, 2010), self-esteem (e.g., Swanson, Davis & Zhao, 2008), recreation (Iso-Ahola, 1982; Packer, 2006; Prentice, 1998) or education (e.g., Falk & Storksdieck, 2010; Slater & Armstrong, 2010). Within this second group of studies, there is a rise of interest in understanding the social aspects of arts consumption.

For example, Hamilton & Hewer’s (2009) and Hewer & Hamilton’s (2010) investigation of salsa dancing reveals how dance becomes a reflexive form of knowledge enacted in and through people’s bodies. Dance, as a self-expressive practice, facilitates sharing passions, exhilarations and desires lacking from people’s everyday lives. Such potential of dance goes beyond conceptualising the body as a site of self-expression (Featherstone, 1991) and conceptualises the body as a social entity (Bourdieu, 1984). Other research on music consumption testifies to the fact that music plays a significant role in people’s identity construction and self-image. As such, Goulding, Shankar & Elliott (2002) and Goulding & Shankar (2011) demonstrate that clubbing is not confined in hedonic experiences. The social context of music and dance clubs provide people with opportunities to form consumer tribes where they can (re)construct multiple forms of identities, heighten their imagination and engage with other social actors. In a rather similar manner, Hogg and Banister (2000) stress that music consumptionscapes avail young consumers of pop music with a rich repository of symbolic meanings to be drawn from pop stars. Such symbols become enacted in celebrity cultures amongst youth.

In other arts instances, Jafari, Taheri & vom Lehn (forthcoming) demonstrate how consumption of visual arts in museums nourishes ‘interactive sociality’ amongst museum visitors. Such sociality strengthens the fabric of society amongst a diversity of museum visitors not only in the physical context of the museum but also beyond the museum walls in
online and offline contexts. Similarly, Jafari & Taheri’s (forthcoming) analysis of people’s nostalgic sensations and sensibilities in the museum of transport in Glasgow confirms that such dynamics transgress the boundaries of emotive interpretations and become solid sites of reflections on society’s historical change, a stance that mirrors economic, social, and cultural transformation of society in the timeline of history. Examples of this kind indicate that once enacted in public domain, arts are no longer confined within the boundaries of people’s private lives. These studies, as Swanson, Davis & Zhao (2008) also observe, indicate that arts can no longer be studied in the context of ‘art for art’s sake’ as they contribute to people’s lives in a variety of ways. Our study builds upon such studies to further explore the role of arts in people’s everyday life situations, particularly those areas in which arts socially mobilise people.

Methodology and Preliminary Findings

Our research follows an inductive qualitative approach. Data collection is going on with the participants of different genres of arts (e.g., music, dance, theatre) at Paragon. In our study we are interested in understanding how participation in the consumption and production of arts socially mobilise people. We use interpretive interviews and participatory and non-participatory observations. These informants are both female and male individuals of varying age groups who are involved with Paragon. Our analysis of preliminary data collected through non-participatory observations indicates that our informants are highly mobilised through involvement with arts. This kind of mobility happens in the form of the following key areas: 1) being socially included in public spaces: e.g., those suffering from different types of disabilities 2) learning life skills: e.g., young adults learn artistic skills such as dance, music, and acting 3) social interaction skills: people learn how to become part of, and interact with social groups such as teams. Such general themes have so far build the foundation for the next stage of the study which will consist of in-depth interviews and participatory observations. Ethical approval will be sought for this stage of our study.

Conclusion

As highlighted in the beginning of the paper, our objective in this study is to use the case of Paragon as a context in which to study the transformative role of arts in contemporary society. Our interest in particular is in the concept of social mobility. We seek to transgress the boundaries of conventional theory of social mobility and highlight the changing nature of social mobility and the role of arts in society. Our study, therefore, can contribute to the ongoing research in arts, heritage, and non-profit marketing as we seek to emphasise that within the literature of marketing and consumer behaviour research, arts can be conceptualised beyond the framework of ‘art for art’s sake’.
References


Jafari, A. & Taheri, B. (forthcoming). Nostalgia, Reflexivity, and the Project of Self: Reflections on Devine’s ‘Cutting the Rough Edges?’ *Consumption, Markets & Culture*.


