Digital media, consumer culture and the city: An investigation of the relationship between youth lifestyles and cultural spaces

Konstantinos Theodoridis

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Abstract

Consumption is linked with the contemporary urban way of life, identity formation and social meanings. In addition, the term 'digitalisation' is continuously attracting researchers' attention from various academic disciplines. More specifically, the digital effect on consumption practices has impacted upon the multiple ways consumers seek validation for their choices. Young people are able to use their digital devices and social media applications to capture photos and videos in order to represent cultural spaces. This presentation is based on the research project LOCUS "sociaL media, yOuth and Consumption of cUltural Spaces" and a qualitative study with young people, as well as communication and marketing professionals who work on cultural institutions in order to understand the wider socio-cultural processes, the digitally mediated youth lifestyles and young people's sense of belonging in cultural spaces.

Keywords: consumer culture, social media, city, cultural spaces, youth.

Introduction

During the past decades the academic debate in relation to consumer culture and the marketisation of spaces and places has been at the centre of the attention (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998, Zukin, 1998). This was reflected in the attempts to understand the meaning of "urban lifestyles" both for individuals and the cities. The high visibility of new urban consumption spaces has generated a new visually oriented culture of "aestheticisation" of public spaces. In this way, spaces and places are increasingly organised by consumption practices (Mullins et al., 1999). In addition, the narratives regarding the commodification of urban space, and in particular the city, produce and reproduce the social imaginaries linked to the notion of consumerism. This paper focuses on the multiple ways that such dominant representations of place are interrelated with youth lifestyles in the social media era. More specifically, it puts at its centre the digitally mediated relationship of young people with cultural spaces.

Theoretical and academic discussions of consumption have been relatively slow to engage with the complex characteristics of the interrelationships that we can find between the physical and the digital (Turkle, 1999). In particular, it could be argued that such relationships are

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increasingly (re)produced in urban settings, and more specifically, in cultural spaces. Cultural spaces have gradually begun to provide one of the primary contexts within the city where consumers engage with experiential forms of consumption (Thompson, 2015). In spite of this, questions around the intersection of urban settings, media and the digitalisation of consumer culture remain under-explored to a great extent. In this context, this is the main aim of the research project *LOCUS "sociaL media, yOuth and Consumption of cUltural Spaces"* funded by the Hellenic Foundation of Research and Innovation in which the author of this paper is the Principal Investigator (PI) and Scientific Coordinator. It is an ongoing project that started in October 2022 and the Host Institution is the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Department of Communication, Media and Culture. In particular, the project *LOCUS* tries to understand the continuous transformations in the complex ways that young people communicate and engage on social media platforms in relation to cultural spaces.

One of the authors who has contributed to the theoretical and empirical debate as well as the complexities deriving from any attempts to an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural importance of the relationship between media and the city is Myria Georgiou (2013). Georgiou focuses on digital connectivity and the multiple ways that it (re-)makes the city as space for experiencing and imagining subjectivities, arguing that:

> [T]he global city's cultural diversity becomes the platform for imagining oneself in the world, and digital connectedness becomes a tool for making worldliness manageable. Urban imaginaries are collective, discursively constructed processes that involve mental mappings of city spaces as sites of opportunity or exclusion. As internalized meaning-making mechanisms for understanding the city, its opportunities, and its limits, they resound stratified physical and digital urban mobilities (Georgiou, 2016: 3704).

The discussion that follows highlights the theoretical background of this study in relation to consumption, young people and the city. Additionally, we are interested in the digitalisation of consumption and the role of social media, which are linked to youth lifestyles and as a result to their physical and digital connectivity to cultural spaces. Drawing on some preliminary findings from a pilot study in the context of the project LOCUS which was completed eight months from its beginning, there is an attempt to analyse in what ways young people engage with cultural institutions. The qualitative data which are analysed and presented here come from semi-structured interviews with professionals in cultural organisations in the field of communication and marketing, as well as, photo-elicitation interviews with young people between the ages of 16 and 30 years old during the pilot study. After the theoretical background of this paper, it follows a brief discussion of the methodology. Finally, we examine the way that cultural institutions approach technological changes and in what ways young people make sense of cultural spaces.

Theoretical background

Consumption, youth and the city

There are not many people who would be in a position to question the significance of youth consumption within the current socio-economic and cultural context. In light of this, it is within the urban settings that young people's consumption practices gain even more importance (Leccardi, 2016). Of course, it is generally accepted that it was the process of urbanisation which have enabled consumption to thrive within the postmodern context to a great extent. There is no doubt that the link between shops and socio-cultural life in the city can be summarised in the historic representations of galleries, department stores, arcades etc. (Featherstone, 1998). During the last decades, shopping malls -the contemporary cathedrals of consumerism (Corrigan, 1997)- have become one of the core features of young people's engagement with consumption practices. What is important here is that the research about the city was mainly developed in relation to economic activity and growth. Only later, during the 1980s, there were some attempts to investigate the socio-cultural interrelationship between consumerism and the city (Glennie, 1998). In this context, consumption is linked with the contemporary urban way of life, identity formation and social meanings.

It is suggested that in order to be able to investigate young people's experiences in the contemporary context, there is an increasing need to pay attention to the dimension of space (Skelton and Valentine, 1998). The connection between young people and spatiality has been described through the study of youth cultures and subcultures (Farrugia and Wood, 2017). More specifically, researchers have focused on young people's urban living, such as the cases of night life, deviant behaviour, youth at-risk etc. (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002). In youth studies, the conceptualisation of the metaphor of transition has been used to explain young people's linear development, their progression to adulthood, and their path from education to employment (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). From an urban studies perspective, one of the criticisms related to the notion of youth transitions is linked to the theoretical assumption about the significance of the relationship between the issue of temporality and the wider processes of social change (Leccardi, 2005). In other words, it could be argued that there is a lack of analysis and understanding of youth identities through the lens of spatiality and the notion of space. The attention here is in the (re)production of young people's social relations both in local and global scale.

Researchers have examined the multiple ways that young people negotiate their identities in relation to everyday practices and the mundane (White et al., 2017). It is suggested that modern youth cultures and their relationship with urban fashion, music style, clothing etc. highlight the importance of symbolic values and aesthetics (Bennett, 2018). There is an increasing interest in city cultures and youth urban lifestyles. As Featherstone (2007) argues, the boundaries between high culture as an expression of arts and popular culture are gradually blurred. This is manifested in the distinction between youth lifestyles as class defined or as an active way to

engage with everyday life (Miles, 2000). Of course, it is widely accepted that when it comes to sociological and cultural perspectives on youth lifestyles, places inside and around the city are the centre of academic attention (Robinson, 2000). However, it has to be mentioned that there is a critique of the exclusion of the rural perspective in any attempts and approaches for a geographical oriented youth sociology (Farrugia, 2014). Before analysing the impact of social media in the relationship between young people and urban space, we need to focus on the effects of digitalisation on consumption.

The digitalisation of consumption

The term 'digitalisation' is continuously attracting researchers' attention from various academic disciplines. Within the consumption and consumer culture studies, it is imperative to investigate whether and to what extent reproduces or challenges our previous knowledge about self-expression and mass consumption. In this context, we need to reconsider one's relationship to clothes, leisure, music preferences and other products through the lens of new technologies and digital media. It is important to highlight that the everyday consumption practices and styles of life have been digitalised (Nowak, 2016). Of course, this general transition towards digital consumer culture that is based on screen culture, mobile applications and the Internet, would not suggest the end of the physical consumption. However, even if people still seek forms of more traditional consumption as a source of identity formation, Belk (2014: 1106) suggests that:

> Besides digital devices and avatars, there are also a number of purely digital possessions that have emerged and that potentially form a part of the extended self in the same way that the tangible possessions and other people (either as part of aggregate or as 'possessions') can. These digital possessions include photos, videos, music, books, greeting cards, emails, text messages, web pages, virtual real estate and virtual possessions such as clothing, furniture, weapons, cars, magical spells and shields for our avatars.

The digital effect on consumption practices and the increasing level of participation of each consumer to the processes have impacted upon the decision making, especially in the multiple ways consumers seek validation for their choices in the digital environment increasing the continuous engagement with elements of shopping (Ashman et al., 2015). The new digital sphere introduces also new technological operations and platform infrastructures that produce personalised forms of data through 'computational consumption' (Alaimo, 2014). For Śledziewska and Włoch (2021), digital devices are at the core of the transition to this digital economy, as well as the significant role of digital platforms that promote online shopping and collaborative consumption. More specifically, they argue that new forms of digital consumption are related with 'digital information goods' (e.g. e-books) and 'intelligent products' (wearables). In this sense, the world of digital goods is central to the understanding of digital society.

According to Featherstone (2007: 83), "consumption, then, must not be understood as the consumption of use-values, a material utility, but primarily as the consumption of signs". To a similar extent, it could be argued that digital consumption reflects the online consumption of signs and representations. In a way, this emphasises the dominant position of digitalised culture in the reproduction of consumer capitalism. In addition, Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018) argue that the digital changes in the creative and cultural industries signify a transformation both in businesses and consumption practices. In particular, while they focus more on the music industry, they attempt to understand the new technological landscape by putting emphasis on the Internet-connected PC and mobile phones as the main digital alterations that have played a significant role in the reinvention of consumer experiences. They suggest that such transformations reflect a wider transition to higher levels of atomisation, what they describe as 'networked mobile personalisation'.

It is important to highlight that the digitalisation of consumption is not only related to people's practices, products and business strategies. It could be argued that it is related also with the notion of marketplace. In this way, we need to consider the online shopping terrain as the modern marketplace in which commercial exchanges through global and local e-retailers. However, we need to consider that nowadays e-retailing is not the only form of marketplace, but social networking sites are arenas in which the sense of consumerism is present and 'turbocharged'.

Urban space, young people and social media

For the specific discussion, it is significant to highlight that commentators have put emphasis on the role of power as the normative way to advance particular representations of the urban space related with specific interests and ideological backgrounds (Lefebvre, 1991). In the wider context of the social media era, we need to acknowledge that the ways the city might be represented is not necessarily linked with traditional sources of such representations. Instead, it could be argued that people are able to use their digital devices and social media applications to capture photos and videos in order to represent the urban settings in multiple and different ways (Hatuka and Toch, 2014). In a sense, it appears to be their own choice what to include and exclude from their posts and profiles. However, we need still to be critical to what extent such choices and selections are independent of power structures in contemporary cities. More specifically, it is important to focus on the ways young people represent the urban space in relation to their everyday lives through social media.

Over the last two decades and due to the proliferation of social media platforms, the online self-presentation practices are something that is widely explored and discussed (boyd, 2014). What is interesting here for our discussion is that the locative services of social networking sites and the capability to link a post with a specific location has transformed to a great extent the self-presentation practices in relation to spaces (de Souza e Silva and Frith, 2012). According to Hatuka et al. (2020), the impact of digital platforms is linked with an individual's everyday way

of life as well as with the material and physical settings of places within people are obliged to navigate their lives. For Martin and Rizvi (2014), in their research about young international students in the city of Melbourne, 'media reterritorialization' can be enabled through social media practices in relation to how young people find ways to engage with the city as a locality. In light of this, social media platforms can provide a source to actively interact with the city and promote young people's emotional involvement with local places.

During a research project in China about young people and social media representations in urban settings, Peng (2019) has investigated the online sharing practices of geotagged food-related content photographs. The research reveals that such young people's sharing practices are part of the middle-class urbanites' daily contemporary lifestyles. In addition, particularly interesting is the work of Boy and Uitermark (2017) on Instagram who argue that representations on social networking sites reproduce and enhance the phenomenon of gentrification from the moment that people engage in multiple ways of the aestheticisation of the routine and the banal reinforcing the places of consumption. Based on their research, they argue that Instagram is a unique way of presenting and consuming the city as it creates an image of the urban setting that is fully perfect and without any significant elements of negative emotions. They articulate it like this:

> The feeds are full of desirable items, attractive bodies, beautiful faces, healthy foods, witty remarks and impressive sceneries. The messiness and occasional gloom and doom of the city have no place there. Instagram users are acutely aware of the images' selectivity; it is what excites them about the platform and it is also what, occasionally, causes them stress as they feel they have to follow suit and produce images that their followers will appreciate (Boy and Uitermark, 2017: 622).

This reminds us the discussion of Leurs and Georgiou (2016) about the significance of socio-cultural practices in relation to young people's connection and belonging between the local urban and the global. On the one hand, media, and in particular social media, practices sometimes might reflect the adoption and reproduction of dominant narratives and cultures, on the other hand, disadvantaged youth might use such mediated ways to oppose national boundaries in their quest to engage with more respectful global spaces.

Methodology

Following the above theoretical discussion about young people, social media consumption and urban space, for the purposes of the research project *LOCUS* we are mostly interested in cultural spaces. In the context of the pilot study, the main research question is about the role of social media consumption in the relationship between youth identities and cultural spaces. One of the aims of the *LOCUS* study is to understand the meanings of youth everyday experiences in the current socio-economic context. In addition, we are interested in analysing the social media usage from the cultural institutions' perspective. In this way, we try to shed light on what

individuals who work in the communication, marketing and content creation departments of cultural organisations consider about the continuous digital transformations in relation to young people's engagement with cultural aspects.

In this context and in order to answer our questions, we investigate the aforementioned themes through our qualitative pilot research. In this way, we focus on social relations and we are interested in-depth understanding of human behaviour. It is considered that the issues explored in this study are part of wider socio-cultural processes (Crotty, 1998). In other words, in order to be able to understand the socio-cultural everyday context, we need to apply research method and techniques that help us answer the questions of *how* and *why*. Through a qualitative thematic analysis, we try to interpret the meaning of the data beyond the surface, as well as to understand processes which are not widely known (Braun and Clarke, 2013, Strauss and Corbin, 1990). More specifically, in the project *LOCUS* we focus on three cultural institutions in Athens, Greece as our case studies: the Public Benefit Onassis Foundation; the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC); and the Acropolis Museum.

The analysis and the presentation of data that follows is based on some preliminary findings from the pilot study of the research. The pilot study has mainly two parts: the first is related to the cultural institutions and the second to young people. About the former, we have selected to proceed with semi-structured interviews with two individuals who work in the cultural institutions and they are considered specialists within the communication and social media sections in their organisations. Our intention was to have a larger number of participants in the pilot study coming from the cultural organisations. However, this could not be achieved in practice as the number of participants in this pilot study was impacted by the relatively limited number of experts working in the communication and social media teams in each case study. Our participants were one male (45) and one female (34). After contacting, explaining in-depth about the research project and requesting the consent of the organisations, the PI came in contact with the specific employees in order to arrange the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in convenient time for the participants and in the premises of each institution and more specifically in quiet offices. All semi-structured and photo-elicitation interviews were conducted by the PI and author of this paper.

Regarding the latter, we have conducted four photo-elicitation interviews with young people using their Instagram profiles. The interviews with young people took place in relatively quiet spaces, such as cafés. In the context of this research, semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to researchers explore young people's experiences and perceive the socio-cultural processes in the modern world (Back, 2007). In addition, the interviews with young people based on their photos shared (in relation to cultural institutions) on their Instagram profiles, can help us engage with visual elements which are particularly effective to highlight significant aspects of the collected data (Rose, 2016). Young participants were identified and recruited both from personal networks of the researcher and during visits in the cultural spaces. Our young respondents were two male (22 years old, both of them) and two female (22 and 30 years old).

The data in this pilot study comes mainly from young people with a middle-class background and all of them being either students or graduates from Institutions in Higher Education. All the people participated in the research project voluntarily and we took into account research ethics, for instance by providing a detailed information sheet about the project and receiving participants' permission through consent forms to record our discussions.

Findings

In this part, we present some of the preliminary findings based on the analysis of the pilot study. In general, it is an initial categorisation and thematic analysis of youth experiences in relation to cultural spaces. In the second part, we are interested in the perceptions and views of individuals who work in the cultural institutions' communication and marketing departments.

Young people's experiences in relation to cultural spaces

Based on the analysis and the data collected during the discussion with our young participants, we have identified three main thematic categories: the significance of inclusion for young people in their relationship with cultural spaces; the importance of the sense of belonging in such spaces; and the role of social networking sites in their connection with cultural spaces. In this specific context, we are going to focus in the digitally mediated relationship of youth with cultural organisations. As it is expressed by young people who participated in this pilot study, the relationship between urban spaces and social media is complicated and directly related to technological changes. What is particularly interesting here is that young participants are influenced by the social media posts that receive when they scroll their Instagram feed. In other words, they are exposed in many posts which are related to cultural events that take place in urban settings. In a way, they are 'obliged' to follow continuously the latest spectacles in the city. As Dimitra (22 years old) explains:

> *I had followed them [the cultural institutions] because they were places, I visited, so I wanted to be informed about what was going on… To be honest there is the FOMO [Fear of Missing Out] let's say, that I have to follow it. I've felt this too, that is, I may not be so much interested in the Athens Festival this period of time, but I will follow it because I have to follow it.*

Both the physical and digital presence in cultural and artistic events create the preconditions for intense youth experiences and emotions. In effect, this discussion must be considered in the wider context of youth lifestyles. As Featherstone (2007) highlights, there are individuals (and institutions) which manifest their "superiority" of their lifestyles in order others to adopt and incorporate their styles, expressions and fashions. He goes on to discuss about the symbolic power that is (re)produced through signs that can easily recognised, celebrated and located in the social space. It could be argued here that Featherstone's contribution can direct us towards understanding better the symbolic power of tastes and aesthetic characteristics that are digitally mediated in the digital era. Thus, our young participants are to an extent influenced by cultural

intermediaries in the social media terrain. In a sense, individuals and cultural institutions educate and promote lifestyles to (young) audiences (even what to follow and/or unfollow online). It is the combination of Instagram with cultural spaces' visual characteristics that might function as a background to young people's photos. Petros (22 years old) says:

> *[I took the] photo purely due to the Christmas lighting in the back, from the steps, the panoramic ones, purely "Instagramic" the lighting, the colours…*

As Boy and Uitermark (2017) argue, there pressures that users might experience during their decision to post and engage with the specific platform. In their analysis, they acknowledge the importance of different platform affordances. However, they take also into consideration the significance of relationships cultivated within Instagram. Their work helps us understand better the ways symbolic elements and pressures which might be incorporated in the Instagram sphere are related with the specific functions as well as the affordances that it offers. Based on their analysis, individuals on Instagram curate images and they choose what to show in their profiles. This is something that relates to the discussions with our young participants as the specific platform provides the means to create and curate an image of cultural space that is desirable, attractive and without negative elements. In essence, cultural spaces seem to provide young people a sensory delight. They constitute both a beautiful landscape to visit during their leisure time and also a landscape ready to be used as the basis for content creation in their social media profiles. In this way, cultural spaces are about to be consumed by young people's audiences in this digital environment.

Perceptions and views of communication professionals working in cultural institutions

Some of the themes that emerged after the analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the marketing and communication professionals working in the cultural organisations are: the technological advancements and the platformisation of cultural communication; the cultural spaces of everyday life and spectacle; and finally, young people and inclusion. As it was discussed earlier, it is really important to consider the digitally mediated relationship of youth with cultural institutions. However, it is interesting to the same extent to focus on individuals' perceptions and views regarding cultural organisations' relationship with the local community and neighbourhood on a daily basis.

According to the communication professionals participating in our pilot study, it was evident that they have realised to a great extent the role of social media platforms in young people's entertainment. From their point of view, they have expressed the importance of the relationship between the role of space to young people's personal profiles on Instagram. They highlighted how young people make good use of cultural space for their social media goals. For instance, Christos (45 years old) mentions that:

> *I think the youth has not escaped from making this real time 'waggishness'. And because [the space] has some photogenic elements that are a kind of social media 'traps'… let's say, it has these things that function to an extent like a landmark of the city. I mean, it's*

even the colours. This is functioning and they want to make a statement that they are here.

Our discussions indicate that the symbolic universe of Instagram shapes the image of the city as well as young people's Instagram feed. In a way, this is aligned with the argument that the styles which are reproduced and visualised in this specific platform indicate that some particular places are at the centre of the audiences' attention, while others are somehow indifferent (Boy and Uitermark, 2017; Hatuka et al., 2020). It is interesting how specialists and experts who work in the cultural institutions are fully aware of the mechanisms of social media platforms. In accordance with this theoretical discussion, our participants reflected on the multiple ways Instagram might serve to young users as a means to demonstrate a sense of uniqueness as well as their status by taking photos in specific moments and places. It could be argued that there has been an increasing recognition of the value both of the young people and the social media platforms to the development of cultural institutions and their wider activities. The production and consumption of social media content and youth digital choices have an effect on the lived youth interactions with cultural spaces. In this way, it is possible that youth experiences and engagement with aspects of cultural institutions in the online environment may be considered as a modern source of symbolic legitimacy.

Conclusion

The process of digitalisation is of interest because it not only affects youth everyday experiences, it also has an impact on young people's consumer culture. It provides us with a lens to understand youth cultural processes in relation to the city, and in particular cultural spaces. In this context, young people are the producers and consumers of lifestyles which are directly linked nowadays with the 'digitalisation of life'. They have developed their own ways to engage with cultural institutions. Hence, it could be argued that such processes make them receptive to digitalised cultural goods and experiences. As a result, young people are interested in the utilisation of their social media profiles in order to connect with new forms of culture and the wider urban setting.

What is interesting is the rise of the significance of the digital in the relationship between cultural organisations and young people. This is further based on the fact the communication and marketing professionals realise the potential for creating positive connections between cultural spaces' images and young people's social media profiles. In a sense, cultural spaces are perceived by young people as an interesting place to visit and engage with. Cultural organisations have an appreciation and fascination for youth lifestyles and an interest in the digitalisation processes of their lives. It is about a lifestyle which is related to identity formation and self-presentation that provides them with a sense of uniqueness in an era when digital elements have proliferated within contemporary consumer culture.

Acknowledgements

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