

## Exploring the political agency of students as consumers

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### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

Guided by Foucault and Stiegler, this paper starts by unpacking the concept of student-as-consumer and the ways in which the dominant higher education and societal discourses produce the transactional idea of higher education. While higher education research would commonly perceive the student-as-consumer as a passive product, this paper aims to challenge such scholarly understandings, and question the extent to which consumerist positioning might empower students with new types of political agency that can trigger positive change in universities and society more broadly. This paper is a conceptual contribution, drawing on a wide range of poststructuralist ideas to critically interrogate the limitations but also the unrecognised potentials of the student-as-consumer positioning and how we understand students' political agency.

### Full paper

#### Context

In contexts where higher education (HE) is marketed as an investment into one's future, the student-as-consumer positioning becomes inevitable. Consumerism in HE may be brutally explicit as in the UK context where students are protected by the Consumer Rights Act 2015 (see CMA, 2015), or more subtly in systems where laws and regulations do not treat students as consumers, but the transactional idea of HE and human capital development still imply similar understandings of students. I further argue that consumerism in HE does not exist in isolation from consumerism in our wider societies where the prevailing belief is that individuals obtain gratification and social standing through their purchase of commodities and consumption of products (Kaye et al., 2006, Stiegler, 2015, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). If young people are raised to self-actualise themselves through consumption, it can be expected that these habits travel with them to HE. This paper will problematise the notion of student-as-consumer but also explores its agentic features, in particular, the extent to which the student-as-consumer is an agentic being with new types of political agency?

#### Theoretical approach

Taking a poststructuralist approach in this paper, particularly influenced by the works of Michel Foucault and Bernard Stiegler, the student identity and agency need to be seen as in constant production while being shaped by societal forces. The student as subject from a Foucauldian perspective is always 'subject to someone else by control and dependence [and tied to their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982, 331). This means that students, like everyone else, are influenced by a network of social practices and values that characterise the society at a particular time. Stiegler is further concerned with human becoming which in his work relates to the processes of individuation and transindividuation. Individuation refers to how identity is formed – becoming of oneself in a Foucauldian sense – and transindividuation refers to how identity is formed intersubjectively across generations and communities (Stiegler, 2010, 2019). The latter is particularly important contribution to consider when addressing students as young people. Stiegler's concern is that the current consumer capitalism individuates by radical innovation, economic interests and market forces rather than through inter-relational practices, the so called transindividuation process (Bradley, 2020; Stiegler, 2019). Stiegler argues that the breakdown of transindividuation can result in a situation where young people struggle to find meaning, belonging and purpose in life beyond immediate consumer gratifications and instrumental desires. From such problematic positioning of students, emerges a question: what type of political agency is available to students-as-consumers?

Using Häkli and Kallio's (2014) approach, political agency is not restricted to participation in social movements or electoral politics, but 'it refers to a variety of individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and human and non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting politically' (Häkli & Kallio, 2014, 181). Political agency is 'the subject's action when in a state of becoming prompted by future-oriented demands and contingencies of social life' (Häkli & Kallio, 2018, 57). When applied to students, political agency can be aimed at challenging or transforming the conditions of student experience, HE or society more broadly. It includes what Klemenčič (2015) explains as agentic possibility ('power') and agentic orientation ('will'); the two need to come together to produce action.

### **Emerging findings**

In this paper, I explore how the poststructuralist lens can help us understand the changing nature of students' political agency. I will cover the themes of activism, representation and consumer complaints, with a particular focus on following lines of arguments:

- Student protest has become less visible; however, when it occurs, it is more commonly related to identity-based and single-issue campaigns (e.g. pro-Palestinian protests).

- Student activism takes place in diverse spaces: university bureaucracies is pushing student out of campus.
- Student representation and unionism is an incredible infrastructure for students' political agency.
- Consumer complaints reflect new forms of political agency.

When discussing these themes, I argue that the market forces and consumerist discourses that brutally shape students are also what trigger, enable and disable certain new and altered forms of political agency. Such understanding invites us to move away from the prevailing assumption that contemporary students are becoming apolitical, and instead shift the normative understanding of what count as political agency.

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