

Pride and prejudice: how “cool” capital challenges neighborhood imaginary among working-class underdogs

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2023, Vol.10, No7

<https://carnetsdeconso.com/papier/les-clients-derriere-le-masque-strategies-de-coping-et-ajustements-non-verbaux-des-consommateurs-en-espaces-marchands-clos/>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.48748/4HDT-9A68>

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The first decades of the 21st century have been proved a time of paradoxes (Jha, 2007). Fueled by antagonism aspirations, divisive tendencies fragmented the contemporary society into multifaceted, paradoxical and eclectic subcultures constructed through the combination of ideology, tailored uniqueness and taste (Bennett, 1999; Ulusoy and Firat, 2018). As cultural taste became more fragmented, style-oriented subcultures became forged by a growing tolerance for multiplicities and an ongoing desire for resistance and alternative modes of life.

The mainstream modern culture institutionalized the market (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) and as a reaction, subcultures emerged seeking agency, ideology, presentation heterogeneity and collectivity (Ulusoy and Firat, 2018). The construction of an alternative culture with specific modes of being and living based on personal/collective choices, preferences and ideological orientations (Haenfler, 2006; Hebdige, 1979; Williams, 2011) defined social class as a distinguishing factor and therefore considered the working-class youth as an antagonist subculture, resistive to hegemonic dominant mainstream through styles and rituals with subversive qualities (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979).

Nowadays, consumer culture seems to be questioning the conventional working-class imaginary as an undesirable subculture presenting a threat to normative structure and considers it as a politically and culturally significant segment whose creative individuals aim to transcend predetermined boundaries and construct crafted cultural identities to overcome dominant social structure. Majors and Billson (1993) consider “coolness” as one -among other- survival strategies of working class youth, yet with an “enormous price”, referring to the aggressive and harmful consequences.

“Cool” derives from West African *Itutu* and refers to composure in the heat of battle and a personal stance associated with dignity under pressure in oppressive circumstances. Passing from Africa to the Americas through the Atlantic slave trade, it carried meanings of resistance and rebelliousness (Belk et al., 2010) forming the distinctive cool culture of disaffection among marginalized US black people (Gilroy, 1993; Thompson, 1976). It became later on a global antagonist expression and resistive cultural phenomenon traced to hip-hop subcultures mainly and dominantly found in working-class neighborhoods (McGuigan, 2007). These latter are thus argued to be a site for struggle over existence, recognition and power (Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007) and a venue to claim genuine democracy and public voice. As one way to achieve this would be through coolness, recent literature argues however that cool became a sign of compliance rather than resistance, fitting in rather than standing out (Belk, 2019), and a fundamental cultural and symbolic capital at the heart of mainstream culture (McGuigan, 2007).

This research arises from the interest of examining the role of cool, between a sign of divergence and/or conformity, in reimagining the social structure in working-class neighborhoods. The post revolutionary cultural context deconstructed the narrative of the Tunisian society portrayed mainly as middle class and reconstructed it as a representation of the youth, especially the ones inhabiting disadvantaged quarters (Barone, 2017). We thus focus on these latter referred to as “underdogs”² and draw from their encoded styles and neighborhood narratives to investigate cool as an alternate status system to money and economic capital. Drawing from a qualitative ethnographic research through unstructured interviews and field notes, data was collected, analyzed and interpreted while adopting a progressively internal position as researchers, inquiring into coolness’ manifestations in many forms and at many levels of the underdogs’ discourses.

Our findings demonstrate that cool has different perceptions yet is consensually defined as a differentiating superiority translated through various stylistic performances. Individuals rely on cool-based games of style as a way of self affirmation, modernity aspiration and compensation to their lack of economic capital. Several profiles can be identified within the “underdogs” and each is expected to adopt a related style expression: from the unemotional, silent and graceful to the revolting, rebellious hoodlum and bandit, similar to young small-time gangsters from Newell’s work in Cote d’Ivoire (2012). Interestingly, as each underdog anchors her/his understanding of cool into a particular cool display, she/he simultaneously favors plural, eclectic and heterogeneous style affiliations with implicit cool capitals cultivation process.

Underdogs play with, mix and match but also capitalize, reinforce, oscillate and make use of their cool capital attempting to broaden one’s horizon. Beyond “a stylistic game to be played” (Muggleton, 2000), they carry underneath deeper messages through cool capital cultivation process aiming to transcend predetermined boundaries and reach social mobility escaping the prejudice of their neighborhood imaginary. Paradoxically, this is coupled with flagrant pride of belonging to these hoods, and being able to win the underdog bet that placed them in an inferior position, against all odds.

This pride motivated the underdogs to construct therefore a subcultural “cool” capital as both an individualistic and collective project mirroring the real narration of the disadvantaged local community of working-class youth. Similar to *communitas* (Turner, 1969), the hood (Houma) is more than a purely physical space, but rather a locality for interpersonal proximity providing new dignity to many marginalized sectors of Tunisian society and glorifying the

²“*The beaten dog in a fight*”: a person or a group of people in an inferior situation hardly noticed by the rest of society and thus expected to lose; yet manage to beat these odds thanks to hard work, passion and determination to overcome an injustice and achieve victory. Popular in western cultures precisely in sports and hip-hop industries, it was the essence of the “American dream” national ethos illustrating struggling individuals in unfair circumstances of poverty and weakness.

underdogs as the true narrators of post-revolutionary Tunisia, a way to find “honor among thieves”. Cool is thus considered as a way of substituting global cultural capital with local subcultural capital and is therefore recognized as a sign of both mainstream antagonism and local conformism.

To conclude, the underdog show illustrates a performance of success and modern citizenship, regardless of the economic reality of the performers. In a society where money rules, the re-imagination of social narratives became possible as cool could be a symbolic element for social change. Considered as the “weapon of the weak”, it is seen as a product of ideologically conscious confrontational and propositional discourses of activism for working class youth. However, underdogs who represent the street carry its stigma as well. Their popularity and related symbolic capital growth is counterbalanced by an atmosphere of social suspicion and moral panic outside of –and sometimes inside- their community. Cool capital recognition is thus limited by local boundaries and although building a local/subcultural cool capital is believed to alternate and diminish global cultural capital, its potential is seen inferior to overcome the dominant social structure.

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