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## **Commodifying Self: A Grounded Theory Study**

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### **Abstract**

Classic grounded theory was used to identify the main concern of students in their senior year of undergraduate study. This concern was conceptualized as responding to the pressure to commodify self. The pressure to commodify self refers to pressure to turn oneself into a valuable product for the knowledge-based economy. There are three responses to this pressure: complying with commodification, resisting commodification, and humanizing commodification. Seven interrelated factors influence the response employed. The theory of commodifying self integrates much existing research on university students and demonstrates that important insights can be gained from alternative approaches to studying students' experiences. The theory provides a direct examination of the consequences of macro level social and economic pressure on students and their learning and can be used to understand and enhance campus environments, curricula, and student services.

**Key words:** classic grounded theory, senior year experience, post-secondary education, graduating students, commodification.

### **Introduction**

Decreased government spending, high tuition fees, demands for accountability and workforce-relevant education are some of the many forces characterizing the contemporary post-secondary education context in Canada. Since the 1980s, government funding for Canadian universities has decreased by thirty percent (Junor & Usher, 2002). This shift in funding has resulted in a downloading of university education costs to institutions and in particular to individuals. In the last decade, on average, tuition fees in Canadian undergraduate programs have almost doubled (McMullen, 2006). Having to shoulder more of the financial burden for a university education, students and their parents are demanding accountability and programs that lead directly to employment upon graduation. Government and the private

sector, facing the increasing pressures of the global economy, demand that university graduates be workforce-ready.

Universities have responded to these forces by paying increasing attention to the quality and workforce relevance of student experiences and learning outcomes. Dissatisfied with the information gleaned through media rankings such as *MacLean's Guide to Canadian Universities* and *The Globe & Mail's University Report Card*, many universities have started participating in the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium [CUSC] (Pedro & Belcastro, 2006) and the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE] (Tamburri, 2003) to understand and improve student satisfaction, student engagement, and student learning outcomes. There are also a growing number of qualitative research studies that focus on students' experiences in post-secondary education (i.e. Andres and Finlay, 2004; Gardner, Van der Veer & Associates, 1998; Perrone & Vickers, 2003).

Despite increasing interest in students' experiences, actual understanding remains limited. While the *Maclean's, Globe & Mail*, CUSC, and NSSE surveys highlight general trends, they yield predominantly quantitative data and the questions asked may not reflect the concerns of students themselves. Researchers, assuming that they know what needs to be asked, often come to data collection with fixed questions and therefore omit alternative questions that they might have selected (Benjamin, 1994). Measures within these surveys may also miss the more complex and meaningful aspects of students' experiences that explain how students reflect, integrate, and apply what they learn (Brown & Greene, 2006). Furthermore, the qualitative studies have centered primarily on the transition and retention of first-year students. The experiences of graduating students have rarely been examined directly or in depth (Magolda, 2003).

Ideally, the graduating year should be a time of integration and reflection on the undergraduate experience, as well as preparing for life after graduation (Gardner et al., 1998). The limited research focused on the senior year, however, suggests that the transition out of university is stressful and anxiety-filled (Gardner et al., 1998; Wildansky, 1997). Many students report that their graduating year lacks focus and that they receive insufficient support (Benjamin, 1994). Graduating students may experience unanticipated feelings of ambiguity, disorientation, instability, and depression (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1998;

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Gardner et al., 1998; Polach, 2004; Wildansky, 1997). Some students report disrupted sleep patterns, weight gain or weight loss, difficulty meeting academic obligations, and increased use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs (Zucker, 1997). In the semester prior to graduation, students' stress levels rise dramatically (Owens, 1998). Although the specific sources of stress associated with the graduating student experience are not clear, many graduating students are confronted with career decisions, overwhelming student debt, and reduced support networks (Brown & Greene, 2006; McCoy, 2003; Wildansky, 1997).

It is clear the final year of undergraduate study is fraught with difficulties and challenges for students, yet few studies directly examine these students' experiences. The current study attempted to address this gap through the use of classic grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to uncover a main concern of students as they approach graduation and explain how these students attempt to process or resolve this concern. The result is a substantive grounded theory of students' experiences in their senior year of undergraduate study.

Data for this study were derived from interviews and the analysis of related literature. I began by interviewing 30 students who were completing their final year of undergraduate study. I then theoretically sampled additional students, parents of graduating students, faculty members, and student affairs and services professionals. Literature was accessed later in the study, once I was sure of the theory and knew which literature was relevant. Rather than approaching this research with hypotheses, specific research questions, or a defined sample size, I attempted to understand the core concern of graduating students and how they attempted to process or resolve this concern. My data collection was directed towards developing and validating emerging hypotheses (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I ceased data collection when the theory's variables and interrelations were saturated, and I was not finding any new data (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2007).

Field notes were created from the interviews and coded. Initial coding was substantive but gradually moved to a theoretical level during the integration and sorting of memos. Memos were written concurrently with data collection and analysis to keep track of my ideas about the connections between

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concepts. Constant comparison was applied to generate, validate, and correct hypotheses that emerged during analysis. When hypotheses emerged, they were written down in memos and checked against incoming data through further comparison.

In time I found that the memos became saturated, and the pattern in the data was conceptualized. When this occurred, I began sorting the memos and linking concepts with theoretical codes (Glaser, 1992, 1998). This allowed me to put the data back together and integrate the theory. While sorting I tried to consistently relate conceptual categories and properties to each other to stay on a conceptual level rather than a descriptive level. Once the memos were sorted, the outline of the theory was in place. The theory is not the voice of participants, but rather an abstraction generated from the doings and meanings of individuals in the substantive area (Glaser, 2003).

### **Main Theoretical Propositions.**

Students in their senior year of undergraduate study encounter considerable pressure to commodify themselves. Individuals respond to this pressure by complying with commodification, resisting commodification, or humanizing commodification. Seven interrelated factors impact students' responses to this pressure, including 1) communication of the pressure to commodify self, 2) prior experience with self commodification, 3) awareness context, 4) assistance sought and received, 5) availability of time, 6) self-knowledge, and 7) availability of finances.

### **The Pressure to Commodify Self**

The key concern uncovered in this study is the pressure to commodify oneself. As young people prepare to transition from undergraduate study they are under enormous pressure, pressure to transform themselves into marketable products capable of high levels of economic productivity and the acquisition of social status and material goods. The pressure to commodify self is observable as pressure to excel academically, to have well-formed career goals and post-graduation plans, to pursue further education, to be oriented towards material career achievement, and to fulfil parental and societal expectations. The pressure to commodify self is pervasive, persistent, and ideological.

The transmission and reinforcement of the pressure to commodify self pervades social relations, the media, education,

and government policy. The pressure extends through students' relationships with their parents, faculty, peers, and society. For example, it is well documented that students are frequently pushed by their parents to pursue further education (Aronowitz, 2000; Côté & Allahar, 2007; Ercegovic & Richardson, 2004; Pope, 2001; Rybak, 2007). The media frequently echo government policy and rhetoric on the importance of a university education for jobs of the future (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Hersh, 2005). In terms of education, as early as kindergarten students are encouraged to explore potentially suitable careers, set goals, develop employability skills, and to anticipate what their lives will be like five and ten years from now.

The pressure to commodify self is persistent. It is not limited to the final year of undergraduate study; rather, it has acted on students up to this point in their lives and continues through and beyond graduation. Reflecting on their reasons for attending university, many of the students interviewed explained how attending university was not a choice among alternatives, but simply the next step after high school. Furthermore, it was what 'everyone else is doing.' Similarly, literature focusing on recent graduates reveals an expectation that young adults secure personally and financially satisfying employment (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

The pressure to commodify self is ideological and students become convinced that commodifying themselves is in their best interests. The good citizen in our society is portrayed as hard working, educated, employed, and productive (Grace, 2007; Hyslop-Margison, 2000). A university education is perceived to be an economic necessity (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005), a rite of passage to white collar jobs and the exclusive path to success (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Rybak, 2007). It is not surprising that parents communicating this pressure believe that they have their child's best interests at heart.

### **Responses to the pressure to commodify self**

There are three responses to the pressure to commodify self: complying with commodification, resisting commodification, and humanizing commodification. While an individual may respond to a situational stressor using any one of these responses, their overall future planning tends to reflect the use of one predominant response.

### *Complying with commodification*

I'm basically consciously or not, following the pattern that I was told to follow. Maybe the next step is non verbal. They don't tell you what to do, but you've been sort of trained from birth to follow what they want you to do.

Students comply with commodification to achieve economic prosperity and gain social status. Complying with commodification is also employed out of fear of veering from expected behavioural norms, to avoid thinking critically in planning the future, to please others, or as the path of least resistance.

Complying involves making sacrifices, internalizing the pressure, and opportunizing (Christiansen, 2006) to gain a competitive edge. Making sacrifices includes flexing to meet the needs of the economy no matter the cost and pursuing paths that others expect rather than pursuing one's own interests. Individuals often model parental careers and career decision making rather than making independent decisions. In meeting the expectations of others, individuals often rationalize not pursuing their own interests, promising themselves that they will pursue them later. The pressure is frequently internalized as one student explained: "I have kind of adopted my parents' expectations to a degree and made them my own. I am putting the exact same pressure on myself. It is not like they are pushing me in a direction I don't want to go in, because that is what I want too."

Complying with commodification is frequently accompanied by opportunizing. Opportunizing is a set of strategies in which students engage to develop a competitive edge and increase the likelihood of securing a desirable future. For example, students may enrol in courses that are perceived to be 'easy' or plagiarize or cheat to boost their grade point average. Alternatively, some students cultivate relationships (Simmons, 1993) with faculty members by asking questions in class when they know the answer, requesting assistance when it is not needed, and e-mailing faculty at odd times all in an effort to create the impression of being a hard-working and dedicated student hoping to facilitate strong reference letters for graduate school or employment.

Complying can be dehumanizing, impacting both personal

relationships and well-being. When complying with commodification consumes available time, little time is left to participate in authentic interpersonal relationships and social activities. This can weaken relationships with family, high school friends, university friends, and a possible romantic partner. Romantic relationships may be avoided entirely to minimize any potential interference with career plans. Conversely, some individuals may feel pulled to commit to their current romantic partner to manage the tyranny of excessive future options. Individuals who invest less in their interpersonal relationships and communities are likely to feel lonely and disconnected from others, and their health and well-being may suffer (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Students may fear disappointing others, as well as slowing down to get to know themselves or exploring their interests. Some students increasingly see themselves only through their work and academic roles. Their identities become associated primarily with the education or employment they attain, rather than who they are as persons. They become alienated and estranged from whom they really are (Brookfield, 2005).

### *Resisting commodification*

You don't have to do what everybody else is doing, you don't have to go home or get a real job right away. I'm doing what I want to do right now, I need that.

Resisting commodification is the second response to the pressure to commodify self. Individuals resist commodification to seek happiness and self fulfillment no matter the cost and often without considering the economic consequences. Resisting commodification is not typically motivated by a desire to improve one's finances. Instead, resisting is motivated by a desire to buy time, to develop self-awareness, and to explore personal interests. Resisting can facilitate rehumanizing to restore hope and to recover from the dehumanizing aspects of complying with commodification. Rehumanizing through resisting represents an opportunity to slow down, reflect, reenergize, and reconnect with oneself and others (Holton, 2006). Resisting occurs through delaying, avoiding, and rebelling. While delaying, avoiding, and rebelling manifest themselves in similar ways, the underlying motivations differ. Delaying future planning may involve taking a year off from school after graduation to get to know oneself and rehumanize before deciding what to do next. In contrast,



delaying may also manifest itself as pursuing further education to keep living the student life and put off adult responsibilities for another few years. Avoiding manifests itself as limiting or avoiding discussing graduation or plans for the future with friends, roommates, peers, and family. Students may evade unwanted parental communication by not talking to their parents about certain topics, limiting length and frequency of communication, not answering phone messages or e-mail, etc. (Hofer, 2007). Similarly, students may attempt to separate themselves from sources of pressure when they graduate. Students may avoid by extending undergraduate study through one more course, another year of study, or deciding to switch programs before graduation. Students may even fail as an act of defiance (Arnett, 2004). Alternatively, students proceed into further education with minimal consideration of any overall life plans. Rebelling may appear as excessive partying or not completing academic work despite the consequences. Given the technology-savvy persona of the Millennial generation (Howe & Strauss, 2003), students might also be likely to engage in Internet-related excesses that lead to gambling and gaming addictions.

There are both negative and positive consequences to resisting commodification. Resisting commodification may result in feeling stuck, having low self worth, or being excluded when others are commodifying. Students may feel alone in career indecision, depressed, and in emotional turmoil. Resisting commodification may induce guilt (Barber, 2002) because it is counter to what others are doing and what one is “supposed” to be doing. At the same time, resisting can facilitate rehumanizing, the exploration of personal interests, and the development of self knowledge. It may relieve the stress of planning for the future, thereby increasing students’ abilities to focus on the present. Through resisting, individuals may recognize that their personal values and goals are not congruent with the expectations of others and eventually pursue a path of humanizing commodification. Many students realize that they can only resist for so long without repercussions and, after resisting for a period, either comply or choose to humanize commodification.

### *Humanizing commodification*

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Does it really matter so much if I don't love my day job if everything else is just oozing happiness? (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 152)

The third response to the pressure to commodify self is humanizing commodification. Humanizing commodification is deliberately attempting to pursue one's interests and maintaining a sense of self, while attaining a certain level of financial prosperity. Individuals respond by humanizing commodification to achieve success and happiness and to humanize career development and choice.

Humanizing commodification involves reflecting, attempting to live authentically, and conscious decision making. Individuals reflect to determine areas of negotiation and non negotiation in their future planning. They recognize and respect external opinions as well as their own voice before deciding how to act. For example, students employing this response would think carefully about their future plans to ensure a personal alignment despite scholarship or lucrative employment offers.

Living authentically means acting in accordance with one's values. Students pursue courses that reflect their interests and complete assignments to reflect their own thoughts rather than what a professor might expect, despite risking low marks. Relationships formed with peers and faculty members are based on care and respect rather than being solely a means of gaining a competitive advantage. Humanizing commodification involves continuous conscious decision making. In future planning students consider factors such as fit with interests, personality, goals, location of support network, and economic outcomes. Career is seen as one part of a whole life that contains other aspects as well. Alternatively, students may seek to combine interests and lifestyle desires of a family and children with career aspirations that provide a comfortable economic situation but may not reflect their passions exactly.

Responding by humanizing commodification results in being energized and confident about academic tasks and future planning. It is associated with increased intrinsic academic motivation - learning is valued and sought for its own sake - and an increased sense of agency. Humanizing commodification, however, is not wholly positive. Individuals may struggle with the fear of being unable to obtain economic well-being and employment that align with their interests. Struggling against

the pressure to comply is a continuous challenge and continual decision making can become burdensome. Furthermore, there is intense pressure to prove to oneself and others that humanizing commodification is the best response by attaining a high level of economic productivity while being true to oneself. Securing such a future relieves this stress and concern.

### **Factors influencing students' responses**

There are several factors that influence responses to the pressure to commodify self, including: communication of the pressure, prior experience with self commodification, awareness context, assistance sought and received for future planning, availability of finances, self-knowledge, and availability of time.

#### *Communication of the pressure*

Communication of the pressure influences response selection according to how overtly the pressure is communicated, and the level of care and concern communicated simultaneously. Indirect or covert communication combined with displays of care and concern increases the propensity to comply with commodification and to humanize commodification. Conversely, overt or direct transmission with no or minimal displays of care and concern encourages resisting commodification.

#### *Prior experience with self commodification*

Prior experience with self commodification also influences response selection. Prior experience with a particular response seems to have fostered the confidence and skill to continue with that response. For example, prior experience with complying with commodification, which has been positively rewarded, increases the likelihood of continued compliance. Similarly, prior experience with resisting commodification or humanizing commodification that has been positively rewarded also facilitates continued use of these responses. Breaking free from the pressure to comply with commodification is not easy. Involvement in activities that stimulate self-knowledge and career exploration may assist. These activities may include experiential learning, internships, part time work, summer employment, work placements. One student explained how a period of work after two years of academic study fostered ability to choose not to comply as he approached graduation: "until that point, it was push me here, push me there. So I got that push that way. ... And when I got out I stopped worrying about what other people will

think. You just become your own person.”

### *Awareness context*

Awareness context refers to the degree to which individuals are aware of the pressure to commodify self. The concept of awareness context arose from emergent fit with Glaser and Strauss' (1965) study examining the influence of awareness on interactions with dying patients in hospitals. Awareness of the pressure (open awareness context) encourages resisting commodification and humanizing commodification. In contrast a lack of awareness of the pressure (closed context) increases the likelihood of complying with commodification. Lacking awareness can lead to self-blame and 'psychologizing' (Feldman, 1972) where some students feel the need to seek therapy because they think something is wrong with them when, in actuality, they are struggling to manage external pressures. Resisting commodification may allow individuals to shift from a closed to an open awareness context as it facilitates critical reflection and assessment of the undergraduate experience, and questioning past time use, goals, and motivation. To illustrate, one student described how through resisting commodification she recognized that what she thought were her goals were really an internalization of the pressure from her parents and that these goals may not have reflected her actual desires. This shift in awareness prepared her to pursue her own interests and explore a range of potential careers reflecting her interests.

### *Assistance sought and received*

Assistance sought and received refers to seeking help to plan the future. Individuals may seek help from formally structured assistance providers, such as career counselling centres, as well as from informal assistance providers such as family, friends, and faculty. They may also seek assistance through their religious and spiritual beliefs or from self-help books.

Whether or not assistance is sought and obtained is determined by its availability, its accessibility, the degree of match between perceived need and perceived usefulness of the assistance, and the degree of connectedness with assistance providers. The availability of assistance impacts whether it is sought and received. For example, employers in applied fields and in fields where there is a high workforce demand may have recruitment campaigns and resources to attend career fairs that

are not available in fields of academic study with less direct relevance or workforce demand. Also, in terms of informal assistance, many first generation university students may not have the same parental support available to them as do students whose parents have themselves pursued undergraduate degrees. In addition to their provision, accessibility of assistance also determines whether it is sought and received. For example, if services are not situated in a central convenient location on campus it is unlikely that students will access them. The match between the perceived need and perceived usefulness of available assistance impacts whether or not it is sought. A good match encourages assistance seeking, while a poor match limits assistance seeking. Many students in this study indicated that they experienced such a mismatch with campus career services, for example: "I don't need to know how to interview, I can write a cover letter; I can do all these things. What I need from them is places to apply. I need to know where I can find jobs. I don't need help with my résumé. They are starting from too low a level." The degree of connectedness between students and assistance providers impacts whether assistance is sought. A high level of connection is associated with assistance seeking, while decreasing levels of connectedness lower the likelihood of seeking assistance. Since students tend to be more connected with informal assistance providers, including friends and family, than with formal providers, such as career counsellors and advisors, they are more likely to turn to informal providers for assistance.

The quality of assistance provided is in part determined by the assistance provider's experience, education, and knowledge of career development. Those who seek assistance from informal providers are more likely to be directed towards complying with commodification than are those individuals who seek assistance from formal providers.

### *Availability of time*

Availability of time for planning life after graduation impacts students' responses to the pressure to commodify self. Time constraints increase propensity to comply and decrease likelihood of resisting or humanizing commodification. Full schedules, routine structures, employment, and heavy academic workloads constrain students' time, keeping them focused on present achievement, limiting self exploration, reflection, and future planning. Additional demands in the graduating year such

as grad photos, applying for graduation, senior class events, and other graduation related logistics add to these constraints, leaving little time to engage in futures planning. Juggling the many demands may leave students feeling scattered and unsure of where to devote their attention. Planning the future can induce guilt and stress when it competes with other current demands. To plan life after graduation, some students create time through opportunizing, carefully scheduling and organizing activities, sacrificing sleep, or planning to take time off after graduation to devote to planning the next phase in their lives. Creating time increases the possibility of developing an awareness of the pressure to commodify self, consequently allowing students to respond to the pressure in a more informed manner.

### *Self-knowledge*

Self-knowledge, how well an individual can identify his or her own interests, desires, values, and beliefs, influences responses to the pressure to commodify self. Self-knowledge influences response selection according to the degree of current self-knowledge, the degree to which the need for self-knowledge is recognized, and the desire to acquire self-knowledge. A limited current self-knowledge with a low perceived need for self-knowledge or low desire to develop self-knowledge facilitates complying with commodification. Some students expressed a lack of interest or even resistance to reflecting upon their interests. Others felt that competing demands left them with little time to develop self-knowledge. A low level of current self-knowledge combined with a recognition of the need for self-knowledge and a desire to know self is associated with resisting commodification. Finally, high self-knowledge, combined with recognition of its importance and the desire to further develop self-knowledge is associated with humanizing commodification. Students who had a high level of self-knowledge felt they had developed this through independence gained by pursuing their undergraduate study away from their home town or by experiencing new ways of being and establishing new support networks during their studies.

### *Availability of finances*

The accessibility of finances influences students' responses. Financial stress is linked with complying with commodification, whereas financial comfort is associated with resisting

commodification and humanizing commodification. Furthermore, when commodifying self, the availability of finances facilitates opportunities to better commodify self than does limited financial resources. Availability of finances does not necessarily equate with socio-economic status of parents or guardians. Some students whose parents may be able to assist them financially choose not to do so, and some students who may be considered to have a low socio-economic status may be able to access finances through bursaries, low interest loans, and scholarships.

Students with financial stress such as debt, student loans, or low cash flow are often under increased pressure to comply. They can often only pursue their interests if they are congruent with the need to become economically productive. Complying may be the safest route financially, and resisting the most risky. Financial stress also limits the ability to commodify self. Meeting current financial needs can negatively impact well-being, interpersonal relationships, and detract from academic performance. Time spent working can detract from the time available for extra-curricular activities, planning the future, and studying. Poor performance in these areas can impact the ability to secure scholarships or competitive positions in further education or the workforce.

Having minimal financial constraints frees students to resist commodification or humanize commodification. A period of resisting commodification by taking a year off after graduation may even be funded by a student's parents. Availability of finances provides a wider range of more prestigious opportunities than if finances are limited. Sufficient financial resources reduces the need for part-time work and frees time that could be used to pursue activities that enhance a résumé, explore personal interests, and focus on academic performance, thereby potentially increasing grades and time for self care.

### **Interaction of influencing factors**

The seven factors that impact response selection are related and often build upon each other. In other words, if one factor is directing students towards a particular response, it is likely that additional factors are also encouraging students towards the same response. For example, students who have limited financial resources may be holding one or more part-time jobs and may be less able to adjust their hours of employment when their academic workload fluctuates. This may reduce the time they

have to complete academic work, which negatively influences their overall academic performance. Poor academic performance can hinder the ability to commodify and limit student awareness of assistance available and their likelihood of seeking this assistance. Having insufficient time may limit self-knowledge, as well as the ability to respond to the pressure to commodify self in an informed manner.

### **Discussion**

This research has both practical and theoretical implications. The theory of commodifying self is relevant to university administration interested in understanding and enhancing campus environments, curricula, and student services so that they are more responsive to student needs as well as to students, faculty, and student affairs and services professionals who work with university students. The substantive theory can assist students in making sense of their undergraduate experiences and in preparing for life after graduation. It can help faculty and student affairs and services professionals to understand student behaviour within the context in which it occurs. For example, issues such as student disengagement and academic dishonesty may be understood as systemic social problems rather than flaws within an individual's character. The theory also provides faculty and student affairs and services professionals with the capacity to evaluate practices and to develop desirable goals for the final year of undergraduate study. The theory provides institutional and policy stakeholders with insight into how current changes in post-secondary education are impacting students. A key theoretical contribution of this research is that the substantive theory links, integrates, and organizes much existing research about university students. The theory brings together theories and research related to the student experience, academic dishonesty, help seeking, student change within university, student well-being, emerging adulthood, the quarter life crisis, the Millennial generation, and materialism. It helps to raise the conceptual level of this research by contributing new perspectives and understanding. The theory also forms a conceptual framework that can be used to guide future studies in these areas. For example, literature related to student change within university frequently guides student affairs and services practice. This literature is derived largely from social psychology, and is dominated by a positivist quantitative paradigm as well as a developmental framework that maps out various progressions of



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learning, growth, and development during the college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). The theory of commodifying self raises the conceptual level of this research by situating student development within a social and economic context, a context that profoundly impacts the development of autonomy, identity, and critical thinking. Future studies of student development can apply the theory of commodifying self to obtain a nuanced and contextualized understanding of the factors influencing student change and development. The theory aligns with and builds upon previous critiques of the extensive focus on a developmental perspective: Not all of the changes that students encounter while studying are necessarily developmental. Individuals who veer from what is considered to be normal development may be seen as being deficient or abnormal, and this deficit perspective minimizes the role of social forces in mediating student development (Andres & Finlay, 2004; Dannefer, 1984).

This theory offers a shift in perspective from much of the literature and the dominant approaches to studying university students. Current literature does not address the pressure to commodify self, how students respond to it, or the factors that influence students' responses. In fact, the impact of macro level social forces upon students remains minimally explored. By focusing primarily on student satisfaction, student engagement, and students' performance of curriculum objectives via learning outcomes, researchers may be neglecting to ask more meaningful questions, including: What should be the goals of undergraduate education? To what extent is undergraduate education currently meeting these goals? And, what does it mean to be an educated person?

The substantive theory of commodifying self is of particular relevance to the literature concerning the impact of social and economic forces on post-secondary education. Universities exist in a state of tension, struggling to maintain their more liberal or traditional roles that focus on intellectual development, critical thinking, and creating well-informed responsible concerned citizens, while facing mounting pressure to adopt corporate business models that focus more on technical and instrumental learning, and producing sufficient human capital for the knowledge-based economy (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Hersh & Mellow, 2005; Hyslop-Margison, 2005; Jones, McCarney & Skolnick, 2005; Turk, 2000). This research predominantly examines the impact of these forces at an institutional level,

rather than the impact on individual students. While questions are raised in this literature as to the potential impact of social and economic forces on student learning, the impacts are not explored directly or in depth. My research highlights the consequences of these pressures on students and their learning.

The pressure to commodify self represents a power relationship wherein the dominance of larger systemic social and economic interests frequently results in subtle oppression of individual students' lives. This oppression has its implications: alienation, low self worth, lack of self-knowledge, little time to reflect or conceive of alternative ways of being in the world, lack of autonomy, shallow engagement in human relations and community, compromised human dignity, and suffering well-being. Furthermore, when facing the demands to commodify self, students who choose to engage in non-market oriented activities such as self care, exploration of personal interests, and development of self-knowledge, are made to feel that these pursuits are indulgent and frivolous. These social and economic interests also work to constrain individuals' thinking and ability to make decisions that are more than instrumental. As Friere (2004) explains, students' abilities to think critically, to read, and rewrite the world, are reduced. This has severe consequences; as Noddings (2006) points out, "to neglect critical thinking on topics central to everyday life is to make the word *education* meaningless" (p. 4). Democracy may be also undermined if citizens are forced to accept society as it is and adapt themselves to it rather than being able to critically assess society's strengths and weaknesses and work for its betterment (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2008).

Uncovering the pressure to commodify self highlights how deeply the current social and economic pressures have infiltrated the university system. The pressure to commodify self has been largely internalized and accepted as normal. The balance between the competing demands on universities has been disrupted in favour of economic pressures. This is highly problematic as the more liberal functions of universities risk not being met.

### Limitations

I attempted to employ the full classic grounded theory methodology for this research. When I began this study I was trained in qualitative methodologies and had a limited understanding of classic grounded theory. This caused my initial

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data collection and analysis to stray from the methodological package, however, as the research progressed, I engaged in “a set of double-back steps” (Glaser, 1978, p. 16) that allowed me to revise my previous work in concert with my developing understanding of the methodology. I cycled through the various procedures “learning from each attempt and developing clarity and confidence in their application” (Holton, 2007, p. 266). I participated in several grounded theory seminars that provided me with access to mentoring from leading grounded theorists and helped ensure that my work was consistent with the methodology. The sampling in this study was limited to those who are part of the Millennial generation (born 1982-2002) as this generation of students has very high expectations of their university experience, and tend to be more prone to periods of burnout, insomnia, and other stress-related health issues than previous generations of students (Howe & Strauss, 2003). These students are also challenging existing knowledge about effective learning and service strategies, student development theories, and beneficial educational environments (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).

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