

A Study of American Yuppie Culture in the 1980s

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Abstract

Owing to the political, economic and cultural shifts during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, 1980s welcomed another group of trendsetters—yuppies, with the former tide of hippie movement gradually ebbing away. They characterized themselves by pursuing successful career, enjoying luxurious products and spiritual entertainment so as to deduct their materialism, pragmatism and hedonism in an alternative way.

Keywords: Yuppie, Ambitious Career, Good Life, Clear Political Opinions.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, yuppies prioritized personal luxurious life and financial success. Yuppies were a group of Americans, young in age, residing in urban areas and professional in education. They relish their jobs in corporations, enjoy financial affluence and lead conventional, materialistic and political conservative lives. The demographic yuppies only represented a tip of the iceberg, “one in seven baby-boomers is statistically classified as yuppies”, and “nearly half the baby-boomer population consists of psychographic yuppies, representing approximately 30 million people.” (Burnett & Bush 1986: 27) That is to say, a large number of American youth were psychological yuppies as they adhered to the same attitudes and values with the verifiable yuppies. If yuppies changed the world, it would be through the force and glamour of typical examples instead of big demographic numbers. In summary, yuppies in the 1980s had altered into being highly ambitious, career-oriented, pursuing hedonistic life, obsessive with materialism, etc.

1. Ambitious Career Orientation

1.1 Being Pragmatic and Career-Oriented

Yuppies were pretty pragmatic and career-oriented in perceptive of choosing college majors. Facing with the bitterly high unemployment rate, the runaway inflation of the 1970s and the depressing energy crisis, yuppies had become more and more practical and cautious in choosing their majors in college. One change in the early 1980s is a questioning of the permissive moral climate of recent years. More young people, while hesitant to preach or to condemn their peers, cite the

destructive effects of the drugs and alcohol that are so widely available in the schools. (Deng 1989: 129) It appeared that college students had changed dramatically in America over a 20-year period. For example, the reasons given by the freshmen for going to college had shifted, away from academic goals in favor of goals related to self-fulfillment and career advancement.

In the 1980s, many yuppies chose law and medicine as their college majors because they could have lucrative careers in those fields while the academic majors could not satisfy their financial fulfillment. The press had demonstrated that they swarmed with the country's labor, health clubs, and boutiques. At the same time, students also had turned away in large numbers from pursuing careers in education to choose business as a college major. Business as the most appealing major, no doubt, could be considered as the symbolic degree of yuppies. And immediately the enrollment in business boomed because they considered business as the place for people who want to make a difference. “Enrollment in business school, having been doubled in the 1970s, increased dramatically in each year in the 1980s. In 1980, 55,000 graduate business and management degrees were awarded. In 1985, there were 67,000, and by 1990 the number had risen to 77,000.” (Enroth 1984: 73-75) A short period later, the M.B.A glut appeared on the job market. However, many yuppies still viewed the degree as the path to prosperity and success, which made the M.B.A fever constantly lasting. In terms of the majors the youth had chosen in university or college, we could arrive at the conclusion that “the 1980s students were much more concerned about personal and financial

success than their predecessors had been in the 1960s.” (Braungart & Braungart 1990: 302) With the focusing of mass media, yuppies immediately became famous for their career-oriented trait throughout America.

1.2 Pursuing Success

Yuppies apparently had demonstrated boundless enthusiasm with which they pursued career success and made piles of money. Along with the shift of social milieu, most Americans wanted to “be ‘an eager conformist and aspiring professional’, and apply to gradual school, and learn how to make money in a professional career.” (Oates 1991: 426) As upwardly professionals, they affirmed career success and making piles of money as the symbol of yuppies. In the eyes of yuppies, income was first and ideal was second. The following are two examples:

The 29-year-old director of public service at Atlanta TV station says he wants it all. “I’ve started to live the American dream. I want a business. I want to be rich. I want to have more money than I can spend. I want a Jaguar and maybe a quarter-of-a million-dollar house. That’s not unrealistic to me, whereas my mother’s generation would say, ‘Ha-ha’.

Levies, 28, an attorney with Denver’s biggest law firm says that “Our professional have become very important to us, and if we’re willing to perhaps sacrifice other things for them—marriage, families, free time, relaxation.” And he has “gone through a number of important relationships which have failed because my commitment to my job was greater than my commitment to the relationship. If it was a tossup between getting the deal done or coming home for supper, the deal got done. (Andler 1984: 19-20)

The above mentioned descriptions of two yuppies were extracted from *The Year of the Yuppie* from *Newsweek* in 1984, and their values on life were manifested between the lines. Many yuppies seemed to regard personal relationship to be secondary to career success and they would rather defer marriage and child-birth. Some married couples without children were called dinks (double-income, no kids). They nearly approached sainthood when they were able to accomplish more things in a single day than was humanly possible. In order to make money they even did two or more jobs and worked more than 60 hours a week. To save time, they seldom cook by themselves and the restaurants were their preferences. Making great money and career success had constituted the main part of their efforts. The famous French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville (1956: 256) once in his classic book *Democracy in America* stated that “No Americans are devoid of a yearning desire to rise; but hardly any appear to entertain hopes of great magnitude, or to pursue very lofty aims. All are constantly seeking to acquire

property, power, and reputation.” Actually, yuppies as the college-educated professionals were much more infatuated with the rise in status, property, power, and reputation. To some extent, their ambitious career orientation made them stand out and be much more attractive than others.

2. Pursuing a Good Life

2.1 Giving Priority to Appearance

Attire as the basic expression of the human beings’ status could sufficiently signify the unique feature of yuppies, therefore, they placed high importance on appearance. Yuppies abided the maxim “dress for success” and brand-awareness had become their norm for life. In street or in restaurants and some other public places, it was an easy job to distinguish the yuppies from others by their attires. To yuppies, attire signaled group identity, prestige and status.

If one studies the cover of *The Yuppie Handbook*, one could recognize that the attire was not something of marginal. On the front cover of the book a young male and female are pictured in brand uniform of their social status. The male is dressed in a Pin Stripe Suit with a Cross Pen attached to its jacket pocket; on his left wrist is attached a Rolex Watch and in his right hand is a Squash Racquet which indicates their favorite sport in leisure time; a Burberry Trench Coat is over his left arm; his L. L Bean duck hunting boots appears unmatchable with his attire, however, it is an indication of their brand loyalty when they choose shoes for recreational purposes. Additionally, some accessories, such as a Gucci briefcase and a Co-op offering prospectus, are next to him. The female wears a rather formal Ralph Lauren Suit and a pair of rather informal running shoes which are also the indication of a yuppie’s identity; on her left wrist is a Cartier Tank watch and over her head is a Sony Walkman; she carries a Coach bag and a shopping bag from a gourmet shop with fresh pasta in it.

The man and the women on the cover function as the mannequins that have been in appropriate dresses to signal their meanings. They represented the models of yuppies and demonstrated their preference on appearance. The exquisite dresses, Rolex watch, squash and gourmet food tell the readers their high status and professional roles they were playing in society. Apparently, all the items could function as shorthand of yuppies because they knew that the way one looks was rather important, and sometimes, it was more important than what one can do. In order to explicitly clarify the attire of yuppies, additional information about the specific brands is inserted through lines pointing to the items. By this way, the author made it clear to the readers that these famous brands were their favorite while buying outfits. Therefore, it is deluded that brands played a crucial role for yuppies and attire functioned as one of the obvious signaling devices of yuppiedom. Their creed

of “beauty is truth and truth is beauty” (Andler 1984: 19) has evidently showed their values on appearance.

2.2 Enjoying a Good Life

The “hot” demographic darlings were further distinguished by enjoying a good life. Generally speaking, yuppies were in the age bracket between 25 and 45. On the one hand, they worked hard and took

every chance to get their financial fulfillment; on the other hand, they pursued a lifestyle of their status. Compared with their peers, their success in career enabled them to have a gracious life after hard work during spare time. They showed off their status and prestige by living a gracious life. The following comparison in table 2 could further help us to understand their lifestyles.

Table 1: A Fast-Track Index: a look at how the elite ranks of the baby boomers compare with the adult population at large. (Andler 1984: 19)

	U.S. Adult Population	Yuppies*
Cigarette smokers	36%	20%
American Express credit card holders	6%	21%
Gold AmEx card holders	2%	3%
Used cards within last three months	38%	70%
Foreign travel within last three years	11%	33%
Moviegoer within last year	44%	75%
‘Involved in physical fitness’	31%	65%
*25-39 years old, earning more than \$40,000 in professional or managerial positions.		

Compared with 36% of the U.S. adult population smoking, the rate of cigarette smoking of yuppies declined to 20%, as medical evidence linked the habit to lung cancer, heart disease, and some other maladies. They were more than three times as likely as other Americans to have an American Express credit card, twice as likely as to involve in physical-fitness activities. The rate of foreign travel of yuppies was three times of other Americans. And yuppies took regular vocation to Europe and never went to the same place on vocation with their parents. They were still much more likely to watch movie than other Americans for entertainment.

2.3 Pursuing both Quality and Status Symbolism

More than anything else, yuppies were distinguished by pursuing both quality and status symbolism in selecting products and services. A vogue for “natural” food free of pesticide residues and chemical additives had spread among yuppies. Male yuppies preferred driving BMW, while female ones for Volvo. And more than 23% of yuppie families have Japanese or European models, twice the number owned by their age-group counterparts or the general population. (Marketing News 1985: 11) Jogging had become a fad among middle class. With the development of new technology, the videocassette recorder could enable yuppies to record TV shows for later viewing and to rent movies on cassette; the CD players provided remarkably high-

quality sound to Americans; personal computer quickly grabbed the large part of the market and by the late 1980s small computers had spawn business office and millions of Americans regularly use computers. All these goods enriched yuppies’ lives. They could appreciate TV shows or movies at home at night or enjoy music through CD players or entertain themselves on computer. It is apparent that yuppies paid much more attention to health and living quality. So, they really knew how to enjoy their lives.

3. Showing Clear Political Opinions

Though demographic yuppies account for a small portion in American population, they still were influential on American politics. They showed distinctive political opinions, required special appeals from candidates and parties and they were increasingly credited to be a voting bloc. In 1984, yuppies as a political force received much attention from the media and the Newsweek magazine proclaimed that year as the year of the yuppie in a cover story. During the campaign for presidency in 1984, yuppies’ supports to democratic candidate Gary Hart were largely responsible for his success during the primary. Generally speaking, people considered yuppies as being liberal on politics and conservative on economy out of their career orientation. In accordance with the research conducted by John L. Hammond, we could further understand some of their political opinions in table 2.

Table 2: Differences between Yuppies and Non-yuppies on Selected Political Opinions. (Carpini & Sigelman 1986: 505)

	Yuppies	Non-yuppies
Independence	44%	34%
Liberal	49	27
Vote Democratic	63	45
Taxes too high	70	69
Favor capital punishment	56	69

	Yuppies	Non-yuppies
Favor gun control	83	72
Courts too harsh	8	4
Approve of wiretaps	13	19
Legalize marijuana	55	23
U.S. stay in U.N.	92	78
Communism worst form of government	28	55

The figures demonstrate that there were substantial differences between yuppies and non-yuppies on some selected political opinions. Yuppies were more independent, liberal than other Americans. In accordance with their conservatism, they were more likely to vote democratic party in presidential campaign. They were less approving of the capital punishment, wiretaps, the legalization of marijuana and communism as the worst form of government; they gave more supports to gun control; they considered the court too harsh. However, as to the taxes, most yuppies and non-yuppies viewed the taxes too high and showed little difference on it. Their distinctiveness on politics made yuppies stand out and caught much attention of the media.

From the analysis of the differences between yuppies and non-yuppies on some selected political opinions, we could further understand yuppies' political attitudes and preferences. In fact, "their social and political views are described as liberal, and expressed in a high degree of tolerance, emphasis on personal freedom and autonomy, sexual permissiveness, support for equal rights and opportunities for men and women, and a rejection of authoritarianism." (Dekker & Ester 1990: 310) They pursued personal freedom and autonomy by enjoying good life; supported the equal rights between men and women in achieving career success. Their upwardly social status and career success played a determinative role in forming their political opinions. High salaries and gracious status had satisfied their ambition, and in order to keep the status quo, they were liberal on politics and conservative on economy. What's more, their reputation of being conservative may be largely due to the absence of radical politics so visible among the youth of the 1960s. Though they showed clear opinions on politics, their political significance became more ephemeral as they became less amorphous.

4. The Waning of the Yuppie Culture

In the late 1980s, the yuppie phenomenon waned, particularly after the stock-market crash in 1987. The layoffs in the financial industry following economic recession hit the yuppies hard, and their way of life to pursue materialistic and spiritual enjoyment became gradually to be outdated.

In the mist of economic decline, American social environment changed dramatically. The lifestyles of pursuing simple instead of luxurious life and worshipping happy family life instead of making great money became more pervasive and popular. Yet,

yuppies continued to be attractive to the mass media. To many, their lifestyles were usually poked fun at, owing to their materialism and career obsession, which were presumed to be a sign of shallowness. However, American youth had eminently lowered their debts from banks and the fashion of spending the future money for luxurious goods had been no longer popular with them. As to the real consumption, the per capita annual growth rate has declined to 1.9% in 1988 from 3.5% in the middle of 1980s; people has deposited more disposable money they have earned in the banks, and the annual rate has increased to 5.2% in 1989 from 3.2% in 1987; and the personal debt for consumption has fall to 3.2% in 1988 from 5.2% in 1985. (亨考夫 1990: 29-30) By contrast, many yuppies devoted themselves in voluntary works and donated some money on charity.

As to the criticism that yuppies were dedicated to the twin goals of making piles of money and achieving perfection through physical fitness therapy, they also showed their contempt toward their values. A related investigation made among the yuppies in 1986 indicated that 81% of the yuppies are distain of their behaviors, 90% of them consider their egoism dishonorable and 72% of them concur that it is unworthy to speak well of the behavior of buying luxurious and fashionable clothes and cars. (哈里斯 1990: 103) Along with the change of the general social morality, yuppies become more and more mature, and some of them moved to suburbs for living. It was reported by *America Today* that many yuppies started to return to their homelands after winning success in career, get marriage and alter their extravagant lifestyles to educate their children. On April 8, 1991, *Time* magazine proclaimed the death of yuppies in a mocking obituary.

Later, the word "yuppie" lost its political connotations and gained the negative social-economic connotations that it shows today. Television, radio, magazine advertisement and newspapers were filled with products for good life of 1980s style. With the widely propaganda of mass media, the images of yuppies were immediately fashionable. Yuppies became popular among retailers and some marketing schemes were exclusively scheduled for them. The fad of materialism, consumerism for luxurious products and hedonism became popular among the public both at home and aboard. Besides their pursuing materialism and hedonism, they were also featured by optimism towards life, competitive and whole-hearted dedication in work, voluntary work and donation on charity. Though it was

merely a flash in the pan for the yuppie phenomenon, its impact was still there as yet.

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