

The Jack Wills crowd

We explore a recent study of class advantage and consumer culture

British sociologists have had a longstanding interest in youth subcultures. However, they have tended to focus very much on working-class subcultures and avoided engagement with more exclusive subcultures of elite social groups. Recent sociological research (King and Smith 2018), however, has tried to address this omission by looking at how the high street clothing brand Jack Wills serves to mediate connections with elite social networks for young people drawn from the English public schools.

Method

The researchers developed 'close connections' with their subjects using ethnographic techniques with 40 prominent individuals in this young 'Jack Wills crowd' at colleges and universities (interactions were recorded in fieldnotes), 18 of whom were formally interviewed.

How Jack Wills targets elite students

Crucially, they argue, the Jack Wills business model does not confine its activities to the UK high street. In addition, it strategically targets exclusive sub-groups within public schools and the top UK universities using gifts and sponsorship. This is particularly the case at high points of the social calendar when members of this exclusive Jack Wills subculture might gather together, for example at events such as Oxford and Cambridge University skiing and polo matches.

Jack Wills has also organised a summer programme in which groups of elite university students were hired by the brand to live temporarily in affluent coastal towns (Rock in Cornwall, Salcombe in Devon, Abersoch in North Wales, Burnham Market in Norfolk and Aldeburgh in Suffolk), where they made promotional films, put on beach and store parties, and took part in class-appropriate lifestyle activities, such as boating, fishing or

simply taking in the sun. Additionally, Jack Wills used social media and viral marketing to send signature hoodies to the head boys and head girls of British public schools and the polo and ski teams at Oxford and Cambridge University.

Maintaining group identity

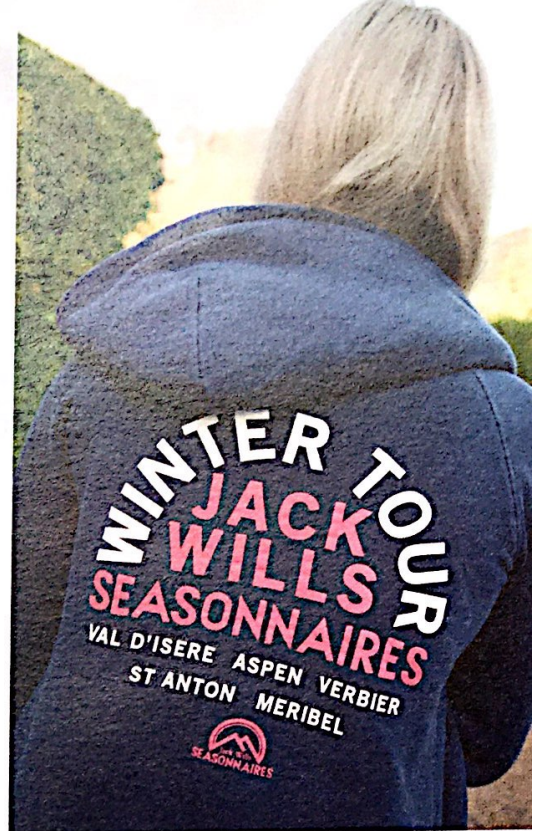
The authors argue that the internationalisation of the elite UK university market and demands for places at Oxford and Cambridge for non-public school children from Britain, have threatened the position of such social elites. But exclusive sporting and social events, shaped around the Jack Wills brand and subculture, have become a means by which the children of higher professionals in the UK have been able to reassert their collective group identity at a time of wider dislocation. The Jack Wills brand has also been able to establish itself as an important way for undergraduates from these social elites to maintain, and indeed widen, social relations with each other, including across elite British universities outside Oxbridge.

Logo and colours

The Jack Wills symbol must work efficiently to mobilise public school memories among students in order to bind them together; it must be recognised on merchandise in order to code it with this significance. As a company logo, Jack Wills adopted a strutting pheasant, a game bird emblem which signifies the aristocratic and rural background of its core constituency.

The Jack Wills colour-scheme is also explicitly drawn from elite culture, specifically from the house colours at dominant English public schools. It is therefore cleverly drawn from a colour palate which the key student target group will recognise and experience as already deeply meaningful. As King and Smith put it:

By mimicking public school colours established in the nineteenth century,



Jack Wills has invented a heritage for itself while attracting students who instinctively respond to the company's colour schemes. They remind these individuals of school.

Dressing for success

The authors claim that the 'Jack Wills crowd' is an example of how privileged young people in the UK can form exclusive social networks around consumer products and lifestyles. These extensive networks of connections and patrons also provide them with advantages in the job market. This subculture suggests important ways in which members of this group will be able to ensure that they reproduce their parents' position and also pass on advantage to their own children. It therefore contributes directly to the socioeconomic reproduction of the higher professional middle classes.

So, you see, sociology can show us that buying clothes is about more than just looking good.

References

King, A. and Smith, D. (2018) 'The Jack Wills crowd: towards a sociology of an elite subculture', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 69, No. 1, pp. 44–66.

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