

cool stores bad jobs



by yasemin besen-cassino

“I just came in to get coffee one day, but got a job with it.” Josh, a 19-year-old college student, had settled into his dorm room and headed into town, figuring he might like to work where he usually hangs out. He wanted to make some money and hopefully some friends. After chatting with the shift manager about music and movies, he was offered a job—just like that.

Josh’s new job at the Coffee Bean, a pseudonym for a national coffee chain, is typical of a part-time student job: it offers low pay, limited hours, no benefits, and non-standard shifts involving nights and weekends, but it’s a job. You’d expect his coworkers would be other struggling students or “adults” who can’t do any better. Instead, Josh is pretty much the norm. Affluent students like Josh, with his fashionable clothes, stylish haircut, and brand-new cell phone, are becoming typical workers in places like Coffee Bean.

According to the 2000 Department of Labor’s Report on the Youth Labor Force, youth from higher socio-economic status backgrounds are *more* likely to work than their less affluent counterparts (40 percent of higher income 15-year-olds, compared to 32 percent from the lowest income quartile). According to the Current Population Survey, among older teenagers, those from the lowest income groups are the ones least likely to work.

Illustrations by Amanda Lanzone

We wouldn’t be surprised to see that poor students must work to put themselves through school or to help with basic expenses. But why do affluent students like Josh choose to give up their free time to work in part-time jobs they don’t really need?



To answer that question, I hung out at the Coffee Bean, interviewing current and former student workers—40 in all. I also interviewed dozens of college students about their work experiences, perception of brands and consumption habits, and experiences in the aftermath of the recent economic recession.

What I found is that young people see low-paid chain stores as places to socialize with friends away from watchful parental eyes. They can try on adult roles and be associated with their favorite brands. Corporations like Starbucks and Old Navy, in turn, target such kids, marketing their jobs as cool, fashionable, and desirable. Soon, their workers match their desired consumers.

“every shift was like a party”

Jamie, a 19-year-old full-time student and the employee at the Coffee Bean, told me his work “is not something you do for money or experience, you know. It’s where I hang out. And my parents are okay with it.” Since he lives at home, work provides a central space to socialize and see friends without adult supervision, and his parents encourage his employment (though Jamie admits to using work as an excuse to get out of family obligations and house chores).

Not all parents are oblivious to such motives, however. Sarah started working at the Coffee Bean when she turned 18. Her mother knows she works at the coffee shop so that she can see her friends. Wiping dirty tables, washing dishes, carrying trash bags, and dealing with needy and annoying customers was not how she thought her daughter would develop her skills and utilize her knowledge. She characterized her daughter’s time at the shop as a “waste of time,” even as she admitted that the job kept Sarah “busy” and “out of trouble.”

Suburbs are social wastelands for many young people, offering little public transportation and limited chances to hang out with friends or meet new people. Many young people turn to malls and shopping centers, socializing in front of stores and



“counter-productive activity” which can encourage illegal behavior, drug use, or alcohol consumption. It’s closed off the few public spaces young people had for socializing outside of school.

Given limited public space for socializing in the suburbs, more and more young people are turning to work as a safe, central place to socialize, free of parental supervision and adult scrutiny.

Sarah loved the people she worked with and thought her job was fun. She scheduled her shifts so that she could work with her friends, and many acquaintances

trickled in over the course of the day. She spent so much time at the coffee shop that she felt as though she lived there. Where else could she go that would welcome both her and her friends?

Jules, who is now in college, remembers that the high-end clothing store where she worked part-time during high school didn’t even seem like a job. Instead, every shift was like a “party.” She would schedule her shifts to see her friends, who were also employees. Her workplace was the place to be.

representing the brand that represents you

Monica, the daughter of two doctors, grew up in an affluent suburb of a large city. When it came to getting a job, she said she wouldn’t work just anywhere. Individually owned, family businesses or “mom and pop” places were out of the question. They might offer more money and better working conditions, but in Monica’s words:

“[I]t’s not the same.” Her friends don’t work at such places, and those shops don’t have the right brand, the cool, desirable image she hoped she would gain by working at someplace hipper (like the one where she eventually did take a job).

Just as consuming certain brands distinguishes young

Chains target affluent young people, marketing their jobs as cool, fashionable, and desirable.

congregating in mall parking lots.

In response, many malls, shopping centers, and movie theaters recently began to ban unattended teenagers, implementing a “parental escort policy.” While the owners seek out young customers, they see young people hanging out together as a

people from others, so, too, does choosing a workplace. In addition to social benefits, well-known chains can offer social distinction and function as identity markers. When asked why she prefers one store's job over the other, Brianna, a 19-year-old college student, said, "[I] shop there." Like Josh, her motto is "[I]f I shop there, I'll work there."

During the past few decades, as a result of unfettered markets, more and more aspects of life have become commodified, including social spaces in the suburbs. In late capitalism, young people search for identities through the brands of the products they buy—and sell. Many young affluent people also self-identify through the brands of the stores they work for: "I am a typical Coffee Bean guy." When working conditions are comparable, many young people gravitate toward those jobs they associate with better branding, or with their own "personal brand."

Employers use this hunt for social space and prestige to their advantage, advertising job openings so that they can target affluent young people. Companies can seek out workers to perform both basic tasks and aesthetic labor to represent their brand—workers who "look good and sound right," according to British scholars Dennis Nickson and Chris Warhurst. Many retail and service jobs now require their workers to embody the look of their brands.

For high-end clothing shops, sociologist Mary Gatta wrote in a 2011 article, the best workers are affluent, female workers who look and sound like potential consumers of the brand. Sociologist David Wright has described how bookstore employees are expected to seem like avid readers. The perfectly tailored workforce helps build authenticity and brand loyalty.



making bad jobs look good

"What is it like to work at Starbucks?" asks a 2012 advertisement. "It is a lot like working with friends. For one thing, the people, who work here are not employees, we're partners...." Instead of working conditions, pay, benefits, or advancement opportunities, the ad touts opportunity to work with friends. Spencer's, a store that specializes in retail and entertainment, in its jobs ads emphasizes fun: "Join the Party!"

It can be hard to recruit affluent, good looking, and social young people to work at relatively low-paying jobs that offer few advancement opportunities. So job ads

must frequently emphasize the coolness and desirability of the brand. A 2011 Old Navy recruitment ad proclaims: "Cool Jobs are in our jeans." A job at Old Navy must be as cool as their denim. Another Old Navy ad reads: "If you love fashion and fun, you're in the right place." A 2012 H&M job ad tells prospective

A store that specializes in retail and entertainment urges potential employees to "Join the Party!"

employees: "A great job is always in fashion." We're fashionable, the ad says, and if you work here, you can be, too.

Job advertisements market employment just as the stores market products. When Old Navy says "Try us on," they are suggesting young people can try on the job just as they try on the clothes in the store. Cotton On's 2012 ad compares the person and the product—"I Am Cotton On, Are You? Be a Part of the Crew! Join Us Today!"—explicitly reinforcing a link between the products and the workers: if you like to consume these goods,

you'll like selling them.

By working there, young people are entitled to discounts, which further bolsters consumption of the brand. A 2012 employment ad for Express reads, "We're looking for people with style, people who love fashion and people who want an Express discount. We're looking for people like you." By mentioning a store discount, stores show that they want to attract workers who already like and use their products. "Must Love Makeup," a 2012 Bare Escentuals ad reads, while H&M asks: "You Obviously Like Shopping Here, Why Not Work Here?"

Working for a retail shop often creates a high level of brand loyalty and insider status. If customers are trying to associate themselves with a desired brand (Ecko even offers additional discounts to customers if they can show off a tattoo—a real tattoo—of the company's logo), workers are associated with it even more strongly. As a 2012 Cache recruitment puts it: "Cache Careers: The only thing that is more amazing than shopping at Cache is working at Cache." By working at these stores, young people can become associated with a cool brand. Employee discounts create even greater brand loyalty.

Interviewing affluent young people, employers rarely ask about qualifications or talents, nor do they speak of the power or control these youth will enjoy on the job. Rather, they're asked about their favorite music and movies. It's all about the fun environment and the cool brand.

branding the self

Will, a 19-year-old white male, talks about Coffee Bean. "A typical employee," he says, "is usually a teenager or an adult in their early 20s, who feels they are more sophisticated for serving overpriced coffee." They did not see it as an opportunity to make money. They saw how popular Coffee Bean was and wanted to



be a part of the popular chain of coffee shops.

A marker of identity, the job can help define the person—something many young people struggle to do. Ashley, a 19-year-old white female, notices that people working at the coffee shop have a certain look and personality. "They are artsy, somewhat nerdy. The guys that work there usually play the guitar. Smart people usually work at Coffee Bean." For Ashley and other workers, this "vibe" is a social marker that says a lot about their own personalities as employees. Eric says the other Coffee Bean baristas "are classy

hippies, who listen to the Grateful Dead and memorize the script to *Rent* and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*." And for Mike, Coffee Bean workers are, "liberal, artsy, upper- to middle class, earring, tattoos, drives a green car, hates the war and loves trees." Employees' interests, social and political preferences, and other consumption habits are all deduced from where they work.

"fast food employees are dumb"

Of course not all working students are affluent. Mason is a 21-year-old social science major who resides in a predominantly African-American, low-income city. When he applied for jobs, he had difficulty finding a job in the stores affluent kids could work—he didn't have the "right" look. More economically disadvantaged youth like Mason often end up in fast food jobs. Keeping up with aesthetic demands alongside bills can require a hefty investment.

In fact, many students who work at the Coffee Bean and similar business do so to put themselves through school or help their families—they're not all like the young people I've described above, even though that is a growing segment of workers. But many employers prefer to hire the affluent

students because they “look good and sound right.”

Sociologists Christine Williams and Catherine Connell, in a 2010 article, reported that employers intentionally locate affluent workers by shutting less affluent workers out: they offer part-time jobs that pay too little to live on. They construct long interview processes (remember Josh’s “interview-over-coffee,” a wandering conversation that determined he would get a job at the Coffee Bean?) designed to weed out those who don’t have time to wait.

So, even as more affluent young people use certain jobs to accumulate social prestige and see their friends, less affluent young people who really need these jobs are less likely to get them. More often, the lower-SES students will have to settle for the less desirable fast food jobs.

In the words of Sean, an affluent, white, 20-year-old male, “a typical [fast food] employee is a teenage student or an adult with problems and no education. Most [fast food] employees are dumb.” When working at a particular store, however badly paid, is seen as a status marker, those who work in food service are believed to be inferior, lacking in requisite skills and intelligence. But even affluent workers report having trouble keeping up with the aesthetic requirements of their jobs, and sometimes chasing that cool factor plunges them into high levels of debt.

Jules, a white, 20-year-old female, remembers that the upscale clothing store where she worked during her high school years was the place to be seen. Working there meant that she was a part of an exclusive club. However, trying to keep up with the aesthetic requirements—she needed to look fashionable and put-together, and wearing the store’s latest looks made them easier to sell (Oh, you like this shirt? We have it in green...) meant she would buy new clothes from the shop every week. Despite the employee discount, by the time she left the job, she had



accumulated credit card debt that rivaled her student loans.

Affluent young workers, who think of their jobs as an extension of their social lives, are less likely to speak up when their jobs are problematic, when they experience sexual harassment, or when they see gender or racial discrimination. Viewing them as just “part-time jobs,” as ways of associating themselves with a cool brand rather than support themselves or families, this growing group of affluent young workers is also less likely to complain about how little they’re paid. These days, it’s hip workers and their disdain for fast-food employees that are tilting the labor market in unexpected ways.

recommended resources

Grugulis, Irena and Odul Bozkurt (eds.). *Retail Work* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). A collection of research on the new face of the retail industry.

Liebel, Manfred. *A Will of their Own: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Working Children* (Zed Books, 2004). Advocates understanding the agency of young workers.

Newman, Katherine S. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner-City* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1999). Focuses on the lived experience of workers in fast-food jobs in the inner city and shows the social benefits of these jobs.

Williams, Christine and Catherine Connell. “Looking Good and Sounding Right: Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality in the Retail Industry,” *Work and Occupations* (2010), 37: 349-377. Shows the mismatch between the low pay of retail jobs and the aesthetic demands of these jobs, as well as how retailers use discounts to attract workers.

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